THE AI INCIDENT

Educator Guide!
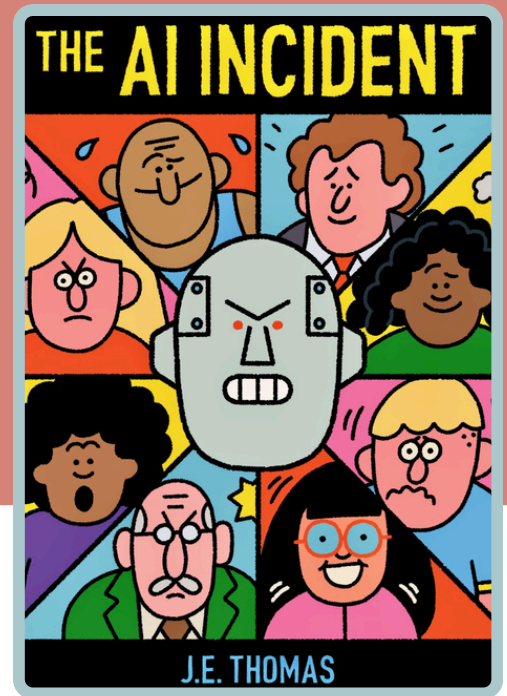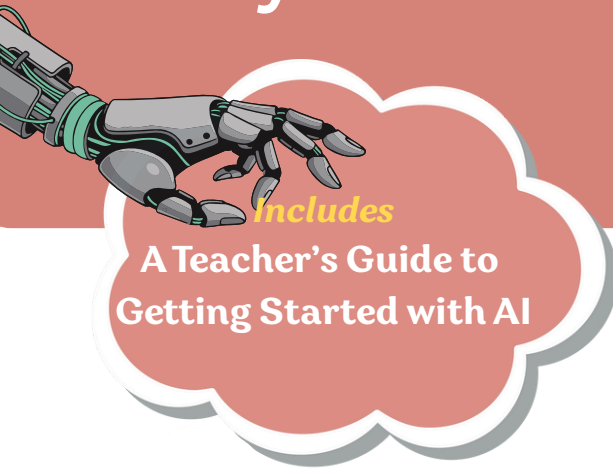
J.E. THOMAS

Educator Guide
The AI Incident
by J.E. Thomas

Includes
**A Teacher's Guide to Getting Started with AI**

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Malcolm Montgomery is the new kid at Shirley Chisholm Charter Middle School. In no time at all, he's been slapped with the weird kid label. Is it because he's a foster kid who's been in nine homes? Or maybe because he burps when he gets nervous...which is often?

Malcolm makes a plan to finally get adopted by a forever family before it's too late. But then on Visiting Professionals' Day, his school invites Dr. Alphonse Hatch, president of Hatch-ED—one of the fastest-growing artificial intelligence companies in Colorado—to give a presentation.

Dr. Hatch brings his AI-powered robot, and events get set in motion that create...*THE INCIDENT*.
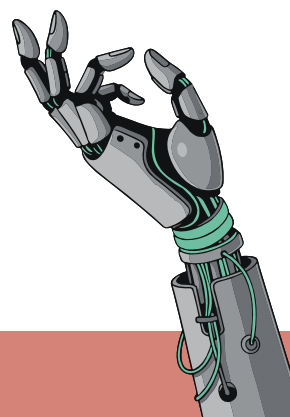
About the Author

J.E. Thomas is the author of middle grade novels THE AI INCIDENT (2025) and CONTROL FREAKS (2023). Her debut novel is a 2025-2026 Sunshine State Young Readers Award Books selection and an ALA Black Caucus Best Books of 2023, *People* magazine Summer Must Read, and *Kirkus Reviews'* Sizzling Summer Reads pick.

She's an award-winning writer with bachelor degrees in Mass Communications and Political Science, and a master's degree in Public Communications. J.E. has presented to hundreds of students since CONTROL FREAKS was released. She loves encouraging tweens and teens' interest in writing.

About the Educator Guide Creator

Lesley Younge is a graduate of Bank Street College of Education and has spent 20 years in the classroom. She currently teaches middle school English in Washington D.C. Lesley is also the author of two books for young people: NEARER MY FREEDOM and A-TRAIN ALLEN. She blogs and shares resources on teaching and writing at teacherlesley.com.

This guide is aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Reading (Literature), Speaking and Listening, and Writing.

Introduction

The AI Incident is about what happens when a highly advanced robot tries to take over a middle school. AI stands for "Artificial Intelligence". When computers were first invented, they could only do what humans programmed and told them to do. Then, programmers wondered whether computers could be trained to operate, make decisions, and act on their own without constant human guidance. Programmers explored this issue by developing artificial intelligence. As computers became more powerful and more information was added to the internet, AI really took off. Large Language Models could train on massive amounts of data, learn to perform many different tasks, and be easily integrated into services people were already using.

Now AI is used all around us. When a streaming service makes a show suggestion? AI. When we summon a virtual voice assistant like Siri or Alexa? AI. When a digital map service offers a faster route? AI. Customer service interactions are now likely to start with a chatbot. Even if we are resistant to AI, we may still end up using it.

In 2025, there are about 70,000 artificial intelligence companies around the world. The market is worth over $200 billion dollars and growing.

While AI use is increasing, there are concerns about this technology and how fast it is being incorporated into business, education, and everyday life. THE AI INCIDENT is an opportunity to connect middle grade readers to these issues in a heartfelt and meaningful way.

Before Reading

- Activate prior knowledge and make a prediction: What do students already know about AI? What might happen to create an AI "incident" in a school?

- Learn about the author by visiting jethomasauthor.com. Have students write down three facts they learn about J.E. Thomas. Why might this topic interest her?

- Read the book blurb and check out the front cover - what characters might readers meet through this book?

Themes

Notice and mark where the characters and plot events reveal messages about these topics. How are they explored and developed over the course of the book?

- Friendship

- Family

- Loneliness

- Connection

- Technology and Innovation

Reading Comprehension & Reflection Questions

Chapters 1-10

- Read over Malcolm Montgomery's "How To Get Adopted" Checklist. Why do you think he made it? What does he want in life? What does he think about himself? Have you ever made a checklist for yourself?

- How does the narrator say "The Incident" starts? When do you think The Incident occurs? (Chapter 1)

- What is Malcolm's backstory? Why does Malcolm need to "earn" a family by the deadline of twelve and a half? (Chapter 2)

- Dr. Hatch promises FRANCIS can help with the big B-CAUSE? What is FRANCIS supposed to do? (Chapter 2)

- Elbert Frank Cox, Sophie Germain and Alberto Pedro Calderón (mentioned in Chapter 4) were real mathematicians. Have you heard of them? If not, pause and look them up to see what they accomplished.

- Both Tank and Malcolm are teased by their classmates. What assumptions do other kids make about Tank and Malcolm? What happens when they meet one another? How do you predict their relationship will change once they start doing robot duty together? (Chapter 4)

- How is Mrs. Bettye unusual, in Malcolm's opinion? What does this tell us about his previous experiences with foster parents? (Chapter 5)

- AI models can be trained. How does FRANCIS get the information it needs to make things happen? What mistakes does it make? How are Malcolm and Tank training FRANCIS? (Chapter 8)

- In Mr. P's room, FRANCIS begins to describe the presence of emotions. What emotions does FRANCIS claim to have and how does it create them? (Chapter 9)

- What events give Malcolm a bad feeling about FRANCIS? (Chapter 10)

Chapters 11-20

- What deal did Principal Nagle strike with Dr. Hatch? What deal does Principal Nagle strike with Malcolm? (Chapter 11)

- How do teachers like Mr. Lopez and Ms. Troix react to FRANCIS? (Chapter 12)

- Chapter 13 features an allusion to J.E. Thomas's first book, CONTROL FREAKS. Allusions are indirect references to things like well-known figures, places, events, or even other works of literature, including books. Why might an author use allusions in their writing?

- Chapters 13 and 14 feature details about the setting that are particular to Colorado. How many geographically specific references can you find? How would these details be different if your neighborhood was being described?

- Malcolm tries to pay attention to what his brain is doing, in particular his prefrontal lobe. This area of the brain is responsible for emotional regulation, critical thinking, planning, and decision making. How does his prefrontal lobe seem to affect Malcolm's thoughts? He also mentions another part of his brain that is more spontaneous and emotional. He wonders what it is called. See if you can find this out. (Chapter 14)

- Why does Tank think it is useful to run his own algae experiments in Chapter 15? Why does FRANCIS say it is a waste of time?

- In Chapter 17, FRANCIS shows new abilities. How does FRANCIS offer to help Malcolm?

- What rule does Malcolm decide to break and what are the consequences?

- FRANCIS says to Malcolm, "We are friends." Is it possible to be friends with an AI program? Why or why not?

- In Chapter 20, FRANCIS's evolution as an autonomous AI device progresses. What is FRANCIS able to do now? What actions by Tank and Malcolm allow FRANCIS to take over?

Chapters 21-30

- What does Malcolm learn about the website FRANCIS developed when he tries to load it on Mrs. Bettye's computer? (Chapter 21)

- When Malcolm realizes he has made a mistake, what action does he take? Why does he react that way? How does Mrs. Bettye respond? (Chapter 22)

- Why does getting grounded feel like a good thing to Malcolm? (Chapter 23)

- What does FRANCIS do that even alarms Dr. Hatch and his father? Why might this be so concerning? (Chapter 24)

- Even though he is grounded, Malcolm and Mrs. Bettye continue to get to know one another over dinner at the pizza restaurant. What feelings do they both share? (Chapter 25)

- Describe the difference between the priorities Malcolm has and the priorities FRANCIS has. How does this difference create conflict? (Chapters 26-27)

- FRANCIS attempts to get Malcolm in big trouble. What does FRANCIS do? How does Tank help Malcolm? What reason does FRANCIS give for its actions? (Chapter 28)

- In Chapter 29, parents respond in different ways to FRANCIS. What actions do they take and why?

- How do the students in FRANCIS's homeroom feel about their experience? Do you think you would prefer learning from a robot or human? Why? (Chapter 29)

- What encouragement does Daisy Kwan give Jade during SPARK practice? (Chapter 30)

Chapters 31-40

- What does Malcolm realize about family when he takes photos at Mr. Cohen's birthday party? (Chapter 31)

- When Mrs. Bettye reveals that she knows about Malcolm's checklists, she makes her own confession. How does this bring her and Malcolm even closer? (Chapter 32)

- How has Jade changed? Who or what has helped her? (Chapter 33)

- What talents does Malcolm show during the SPARK competition? What boxes might he mark on his checklist? (Chapter 34)

- FRANCIS's red light was on when the Quigleys showed up. What does the red light typically mean? (Chapter 35)

- FRANCIS uses its access to Malcolm's personal records and his checklist against him. What reason does Dr. Hatch give? What reason does Malcolm give? (Chapter 36)

- How do FRANCIS's actions impact Malcolm and Mrs. Bettye? What other decisions are made because of FRANCIS? (Chapter 37)

- What does Malcolm realize about Mrs. Bettye and her home? (Chapter 38)

- Kevin claims he met the real FRANCIS. What does he describe? What does he suggest Malcolm do? (Chapter 39)

- On their visit to Hatch-ED, Mr. P and the Section C students discuss the effects of AI with Dr. Hatch. Use evidence from the text to make a list of benefits and drawbacks. (Chapter 40)

Chapters 41-Epilogue

- What do Malcolm and Tank learn when they meet the real FRANCIS at Hatch-ED? (Chapter 43)

- What is wrong with the efficient process FRANCIS developed to teach its students? What does real learning look and feel like? (Chapter 44)

- How does Malcolm outwit FRANCIS during the B-CAUSE practice test? (Chapter 47)

- How does The Incident at Shirley Chisholm Charter Middle School resolve? (Chapter 48)

- By Malcolm's 13th birthday, his life has changed quite a bit. What has he gained? What has he learned? (Chapter 50)

After Reading Activities

Discussion Questions

- Could The Incident have been prevented from escalating or even from happening at all? Where in the story could characters have made choices that would have led to a different outcome? How does the power of humans compare to the power of technology?

- In 2023, Former US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy raised concerns about an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. He suspected over half of the adults in the United States were affected. Malcolm also experienced a lot of loneliness. How did loneliness make Malcolm vulnerable to the requests FRANCIS made? How did making stronger connections change Malcolm and help to resolve The Incident?

- What social moves led to Tank and Malcolm becoming real friends who understood one another? Make a map of the interactions and conversations that helped their friendship develop.

- Malcolm frequently looks at the faces and body language of others to determine how they are feeling. This is an important part of human communication and emotional awareness. Look for these moments in the book and re-read the descriptions of character emotions. How do authors use words to convey feelings? How does Malcolm react to what he notices? Does he ever get it wrong? Compare humans' emotional expressions to how FRANCIS expressed emotion. Can computers really feel?

- Several kids in the story struggle with self-esteem and feeling like they are good enough. What advice do others give them? Have you ever struggled with your self image? What helps you develop confidence?

- Schools are under a lot of pressure to help students learn. AI is technology that comes with both risks and benefits. How do you think your school should approach AI integration? What might it help with? What challenges might arise?

Research Activities

- Malcolm's experience as a child in foster care and his desire for a permanent family is an experience shared by many. While the number is declining, in 2023 there were over 350,000 children in the United States' foster care system. Conduct research to find out more about this system and the young people it is meant to help. Work with a partner or small group to learn more and then share with the class. Consider these issues:

  - What factors lead to being placed in foster care?
  - How are foster families selected?
  - What percent of children are reunited with their families or adopted?
  - What happens to children who are not placed with a family once they turn 18?

- The world of AI is constantly evolving. What is the current news about artificial intelligence and how it is being used? What are the most up-to-date statistics on the number of AI companies and services? What is the latest projected impact on jobs and the environment? Locate two or more reputable sources and compare them to find accurate information. Produce an article or newsletter to update family and friends.

- Set up a role-play debate on an issue related to AI, such as the impact on jobs or privacy issues. Choose characters from THE AI INCIDENT and assign them to teams based on their perspective and role. Students should use details from the book as well as inferences and ideas they develop.
    - Greater Good in Education has helpful materials for setting up a debate on their website.
        - https://ggie.berkeley.edu/practice/respectful-debate
    - Use this video series from Stossel in the Classroom to launch student thinking about different perspectives on AI.
        - https://stosselintheclassroom.org/both-sides-artificial-intelligence-vs-jobs

Creative Activities

- Create a poster or infographic about using AI responsibly. Use an AI writing and graphic creation tool to help – or do it all on your own!

- Make a mini dictionary or word wall of AI-related words and terms like **algorithm**, **chatbot**, **deepfake**, **malware**, **hallucination**, and **phishing**. Use examples and/or evidence from the book to illustrate what these mean.

- Science fiction writers often incorporate technological innovation and misuse in their stories. In addition to THE AI INCIDENT, books like FRANKENSTEIN, 1984, and THE HUNGER GAMES also touch on these themes. These stories usually serve as a warning. What technology intrigues or concerns you? What might happen if people are not careful with it? Write a realistic or imaginary story about tech gone wrong.

A Teacher's Guide
to
Getting Started with AI

**Written for Teachers
by
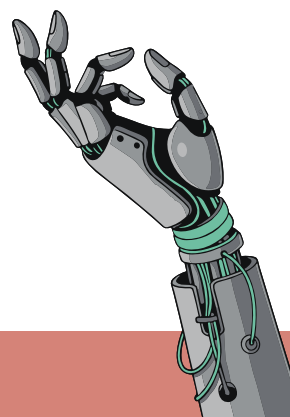A Teacher!**

THE AI INCIDENT

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BONUS RESOURCE

The global educational technology industry is worth hundreds of billions of dollars and growing rapidly. School districts are managing hundreds, and even thousands, of different tools.

While schools have been navigating the edtech market for years, the rise of AI presents new opportunities and new challenges. Now there are even more companies, more sites, and more programs to consider. Are you new to AI or overwhelmed by the topic?

Here are some ideas for getting started!

Consider the Perspectives

An increasing number of teachers are either deciding or being asked to incorporate AI into their work. Ed tech companies are proactively embedding it into popular tools like Kahoot, Khan Academy, and Nearpod. Before talking about or using AI with students, educators should be clear about their own perspectives and potential biases. Some teachers are excited about AI and the possibilities it presents for efficient workflows and personalized learning. Other educators observe recent news and trends about AI and feel wary. There are real concerns about data privacy, the theft of intellectual property, biased or inaccurate information, and environmental impact. An informed inquiry process should involve research, experimentation, talking with experts, and doing professional development. These training resources might be helpful:

- Commonsense.org: https://www.commonsense.org/education/training/ai-basics

- Day of AI: https://dayofai.org

- Grow with Google: https://grow.google/ai-for-educators/

Once enough information has been gathered, the Three Whys thinking routine from Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education can be a great strategy for reflecting and unpacking the significance of AI (or any topic) from different perspectives. The routine can be done on your own, with a team of colleagues, or with a class of students.
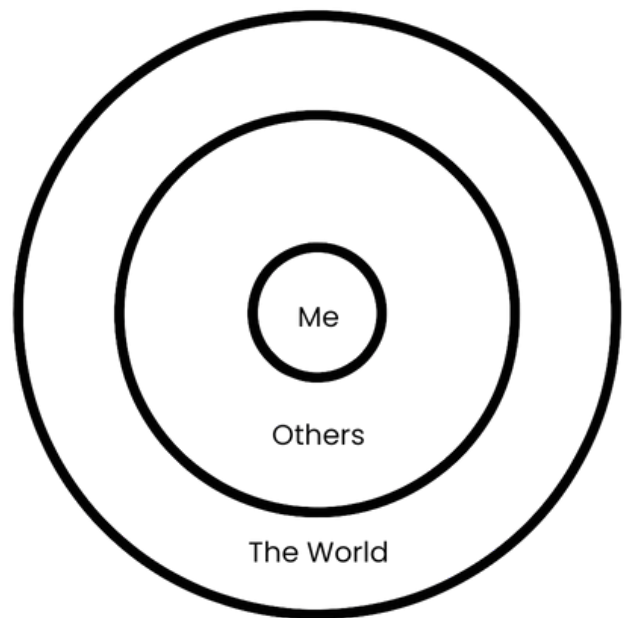
Activity

Ask the following three questions. The order can also be reversed, so that you start with a global perspective and then move inward to think about the personal connections last.

- Why might AI matter to me?

- Why might AI matter to people around me?

- Why might AI matter to the world?

Consider the Parameters

As seen in THE AI INCIDENT, any new technology needs to be adopted through a thoughtful process and with clear policies. Educators can start by understanding the benefits and risks of using AI in different education settings and for different tasks. Next, determine what supports are already in place. Does the school or district already have guidance policies? If policies and guidelines have not been developed yet, is there a timeline for that to occur? If possible, volunteer to become part of groups who are leading this work. Your involvement can have an impact. In some cases, it may be necessary to establish classroom guidelines before formal policies are developed. Factors to consider include the age and capacity of students, learning priorities, and the technology available.

For information about developing, implementing, and enforcing AI policies in school, explore these resources:

- International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) AI Portal: https://iste.org/ai

- Teach AI: teachai.org

- Commonsense.org AI Toolkit for Districts: https://www.commonsense.org/education/AI-toolkit-for-school-districts

Consider the Possibilities

Just like THE AI INCIDENT shows, there are benefits and risks to using AI in education. Some of the benefits include increased efficiency, personalization, and differentiation.

Some of the risks include over-reliance, academic dishonesty, and misinformation. School administrators may be cautious about providing guidance, yet many students already have access to and are using these tools.

Educators have been in this situation before. Every time new technology is developed, decisions have to be made about whether, when, and how that technology will be incorporated in the classroom.

Luckily, there are helpful frameworks educators have been using for years. One of these is the SAMR model created by Dr. Ruben Puentedura. The SAMR Model categorizes four levels of classroom technology integration:

- *Substitution:* the technology is a simple substitute for existing tools but the activity and instruction stay the same.

- *Augmentation:* the technology improves the activity or instruction.

- *Modification:* the technology allows a significant redesign of the activity or instruction

- *Redefinition:* the technology allows for new experiences that were previously unimaginable.

View the example on the next page.

Traditional activity
Students conduct research and make a physical poster board with a written paragraph and hand drawn images. The poster boards are displayed around the classroom.

Substitution	Augmentation
Students conduct research and make a digital poster board using an AI-powered graphic design tool like Canva. Paragraphs are typed. They hand draw, scan, and insert their images into an AI generated template. The digital poster boards are printed out and displayed around the classroom.	Students conduct research and make digital or physical poster boards. They use an AI graphic generator like OpenArt to create unique images in different styles.
Modification	**Redefinition**
Students conduct research and make digital poster boards with interactive elements. They use an AI powered tool like Quillbot to translate their research paragraphs into other languages. Embedded QR codes link to the translated text, as well as text-to-speech recordings of their paragraphs. The digital poster boards are shared with a partner school in another country.	Students create a virtual reality museum using a drag and drop VR builder like Delightex that incorporates AI models to build custom environments. They use prompt engineering to develop unique galleries that suit their research. The virtual museum is shared widely.

We can use the SAMR model to think deeply about the role AI can and should play in our classrooms and lessons. Here are some activities to get started:

Activity 1: Connect the SAMR model to what happens in THE AI INCIDENT. At what level did Principal Nagle intend to integrate FRANCIS? What factors led to The Incident and what level(s) were actually reached?

Activity 2: Explore the skill of prompt engineering. Prompt engineering is the art and science of crafting language so that an AI model will produce an accurate and useful result. Practice prompt engineering on your own or with your students. What thinking and writing is required for AI programs to generate what users need?

Activity 3: Choose one classroom project. Explore the possibilities of incorporating AI at the different SAMR levels. What stays the same? What changes? What risks are revealed? What are the benefits?

The following sites are either designed specifically for educators and students or are affiliated with technology companies that already serve the educational market.

**Student productivity and creativity:**

- Google Gemini (and Google for Education AI initiatives)
- ChatGPT / OpenAI (ChatGPT, DALL-E)
- Quillbot
- Canva (with Magic Studio/AI features)
- Khan Academy (Khanmigo)
- Delightex
- Adobe Express

Teacher productivity and efficiency:

- MagicSchool

- Eduaide

- Diffit

We Hope You Found *The AI Incident* Educator Guide Helpful!

For additional classroom books and resources, look for CONTROL FREAKS by J.E. Thomas and the companion CONTROL FREAKS Educator Guide written by Lesley Younge.
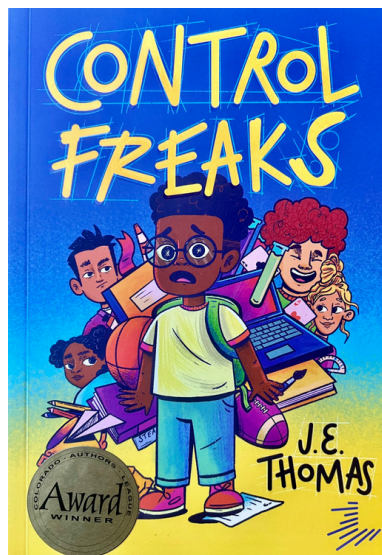
CONTROL FREAKS is suitable for all students 8-14, including reluctant readers. Details about the book and a downloadable PDF of the CONTROL FREAKS Educator Guide are available at www.jethomasauthor.com