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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Speak
Laurie Rial Anderson



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 **Prestwick House**
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Speak
Laurie Halse Anderson



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Note to the Teacher

Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak* describes the struggle of a young girl to overcome the physical and emotional consequences of a rape that occurs before she enters ninth grade. The book contains an account of the rape scene, as well as depictions of high school students drinking. While the event takes place at a high school party where underage drinking occurs, alcohol is not glamorized in this book; it is clear that being under the influence placed Melinda in her situation. The rape scene, which takes place in a flashback, while not graphic, is still intense, and it is clear what has happened. When confronting her attacker, Melinda is told that she "wanted it," which may confuse students as to how and why rape occurs and whether or not a victim has the right to speak up. Teachers should be aware of these issues and prepared to objectively discuss with students the definition of rape, the effects of alcohol on impairing judgment, and steps to take to prevent or react to this type of situation.

Prewriting

1. The story *Speak* takes place during the main character's freshman year of high school. List some challenges that you believe all students face when they begin a new year of school.
2. On the back cover of *Speak*, Melinda introduces herself.

"I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with."

I am an outcast.

Melinda is very stressed, and, in *Speak*, we will learn why and what she does about it.

Speak

6. As “the first pickup of the day,” Melinda stands in the aisle of the moving bus, debating where she should sit. She tries to foresee the outcomes in sitting in different parts of the bus.

Write a short email to a classmate explaining why Melinda is hesitant about where to sit, and then recommend where you or your classmate should sit on your own school bus.

7. Mr. Neck, Melinda’s social studies teacher, doesn’t appear to like her, and he even tells her, “I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you.” He doesn’t give her the chance to prove that she is a good student. Have you ever experienced this sort of treatment from a stranger? How did it make you feel, and how did you handle the situation? Compose a letter to Mr. Neck, explaining how first impressions are misleading and how one shouldn’t judge people before he/she knows them.
8. Melinda’s ex-best friend, Rachel, mouths “I hate you” when she sees her in the auditorium. She has found a new group of friends and has left Melinda “clanless.”

Imagine this situation has happened to you, and write a journal entry explaining how it made you feel and how you responded to the situation.

9. When Melinda is introduced to some of Heather’s new friends, one of them asks her, “Aren’t you the girl who called the cops at Kyle Rodger’s party at the end of the summer?” Melinda describes this experience as numbing, and she tells the reader that she can’t feel her fingers or speak.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were being blamed or punished for something you felt you never had the chance to explain? How did you handle it, and what would you do differently? Compose your response in the form of a short essay.

S p e a k

14. At various points through the book, Melinda describes what she calls “clans” – groups or cliques – at her school. The Jocks, Country Clubbers, Idiot Savants, Cheerleaders, Suffering Artists, and the Martha Clan (which prides itself on doing good deeds for teachers) are all part of the unofficial student groups at Merryweather.

Do students at your school form “clans”? Write a newspaper editorial which describes the different ‘clans’ at your school and how they are defined.

15. At the end of the “First Marking Period” section of *Speak*, Melinda writes that she sees IT in the hallway and tells the reader that IT is her nightmare and she can’t wake up. Freewrite on what you think IT is and why Melinda calls IT her nightmare.

Part Two: SECOND MARKING PERIOD

16. Melinda creates a “secret place” in an old janitor’s closet which she begins to decorate with older posters. Compare and contrast her “secret place” to another character’s in any book/movie you’re familiar with. You may even compare it to a real-life “secret place” you, a friend, or a sibling once had. What do difference in “secret places” tell us about various people?
17. Melinda decorates her closet with old posters and classroom items, including a picture of Maya Angelou, whose books had been banned from the school. Melinda states that Maya Angelou “must be a great writer if the school board is afraid of her.”

Conduct some light research on Maya Angelou, either online or in your school library, and try to find something controversial in Maya Angelou’s works that could explain why the school is afraid of teaching her books.

S p e a k

30. Melinda and her classmates are subjected to a lecture by Hairwoman, their English teacher, on symbolism. Rachel tells the teacher that students should not be told that there is only one “right” answer to questions in English class, and the class gets in trouble for challenging their teacher.

Compose two paragraphs about this event, formatting them as newspaper editorials. One editorial (paragraph) should be from a teacher or faculty member’s point of view, while the other should be from a student’s point of view. You cannot change the facts, but you should present two different perspectives of the incident and whether or not the punishment was justified.

31. Melinda begins to skip school to avoid being around her classmates and to escape her traumatic memories. She thinks that it’s great because she doesn’t have anyone telling her what to do, read, or say. Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not? What effect do you think skipping school will have on Melinda?

Read the dialogue between Melinda, the principal, the guidance counselor, and Melinda’s parents, and rewrite the scene to include a new character: you. Make an argument in her defense, and interject comments on her behalf. While you may use some lines from the book in your scene, you should change most of the dialogue so that the other characters respond to you.

32. Throughout the story, Melinda describes the fear she experiences, which often results in paralysis, whenever she has an opportunity to discuss her experience with anyone. Why do you think Melinda has such a hard time speaking to her parents, guidance counselor, and principal when they confront her about her silence and poor school performance? What would motivate her to open up? Present at least two suggestions for how Melinda could feel more comfortable talking to people.