

Nick and Tesla's Secret Agent Gadget Battle Educators' Guide

About the Book

After foiling a gang of kidnapers and fending off an army of robots, 11-year-old siblings Nick and Tesla Holt could use a little rest! But as their third mystery opens, they discover there's a spy in their midst, searching for secrets in the home of their beloved (and slightly crazy) Uncle Newt. Is it the new laboratory assistant? The exterminator? The housekeepers? Or someone completely unexpected? To expose the mystery agent, Nick and Tesla must engineer all kinds of outrageous contraptions, from code wheels and fingerprint powder to spy cameras and burglar detectors. Best of all, instructions are included throughout the story, so you can build the projects, too!

About the Authors

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Pre-Reading Activities/Topics

1. The names of our two main characters are Nick and Tesla, an obvious reference to Nikola Tesla, an inventor and engineer best known for his work with electricity and electromagnetic energy. Teachers may wish to have students predict the significance of the characters' names, given the novel's title and relevant information about Nikola Tesla.
2. The genre of the novel is mystery. Teachers may wish to discuss traits of an effective mystery (problem or question, suspense, answer or resolution) and use a basic plot chart to identify the "parts" of the plot in which each trait is emphasized (introduce problem in exposition/intro; suspense increases in rising action to the climax; answer to the problem in resolution of plot).
3. Several characters are the victims of stereotyping. Teachers may wish to define this term prior to reading and either present or ask students to discuss real-life examples. Additionally, students should examine the effects of stereotyping in society.

Ongoing Activities

Several activities can be done throughout the novel study. Each activity is designed to help increase students' awareness of the development of various aspects of the novel. Any of these could also become part of a summative assessment.

1. Compare and contrast Nick and Tesla. What kind of kids are they? How are they alike and different? Use specific examples from the novel to support inferences.
2. Keep a log of quotations that are significant to the novel's plot. These quotations might be particularly revealing about a character, increase suspense, show the use of foreshadowing, etc. Students should copy the quote, note the page number, and then explain the quote's significance.
3. Keep a list of suspects and the evidence that Nick and Tesla use to "identify" each suspect.
4. Many "coincidences" take place throughout the narrative. Keep a list of the ones that add to the complexity of the conflict.

Chapter Questions

Teachers may wish to use these chapter questions to check for comprehension either on individually or through group (large or small) discussion. The questions range from those using basic recall skills to more complex, inferential questions.

CHAPTER ONE

1. What is the backstory to the twins' (Nick and Tesla) arrival in Half Moon Bay? In other words, why do they live with their uncle instead of their parents?
2. Compare/contrast Julie Casserly and Mr. Jones, Uncle Newt's two closest neighbors.
3. Why does Nick believe he and his sister Tesla are in danger? What is Uncle Newt's reaction to this information?
4. A narrative opens with an exposition, whose job it is to introduce the characters, setting, and conflict. What do we learn about each in this chapter?
5. How does Chapter 1 make the reader want to continue to read the story?

CHAPTER TWO

1. Who is Oli? How does his appearance at this time add to an increasing sense of suspense?
2. Oli's speech pattern is obviously different from Nick and Tesla's. Compare two sentences, one from Oli and one from Nick or Tesla, to illustrate the differences.

CHAPTER THREE

1. Using a Venn diagram, compare/contrast the descriptions of the exterminator in Chapters 2 and 3, focusing on specific word choices. In a few sentences, explain how the differences in the descriptions reflect how the kids' feelings toward the exterminator have changed.
2. Compare/contrast DeMarco and Silas, both their appearances and their personalities.
3. What does Tesla mean when she says on page 46: "Uncle Newt is, but he's...you know, Uncle Newt. So we're on our own."
4. Why is Tesla's missing pendant important?

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Why do Nick and Tesla rub together nail files and pencils?
2. Who do Nick and Tesla have to compare the print they found to their own?
3. What does the acronym CSI stand for?
4. Nick and Tesla have to "fingerprint" each of their suspects. How might they do that?

CHAPTER FIVE

1. How do the kids get their suspects' fingerprints?

2. Is Oli really from Australia? How do you know?
3. Is Uncle Newt neat and organized? How do you know?
4. Consider Oli as an apprentice, Gladys and Ethel as maids, or Skip as an exterminator. What evidence in this chapter indicates that none are who they say they are?
5. Identify one event in this chapter and explain how it complicates the main conflict of the narrative.
6. What does Tesla mean when she tells Nick that they are going to use Nick's pendant "as bait"?

CHAPTER SIX

1. Define *determined* and *perseverance* and explain how each word applies to Nick and Tesla, citing evidence specifically from their alarm project.
2. How was Silas making Tesla angry or nervous when they were getting a drink in Uncle Newt's kitchen?

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Using the drawing on page 111, explain what you think Silas's subtle plan might be.
2. Describe DeMarco's little sisters, citing evidence from the chapter.
3. How do DeMarco's little sisters end up helping Nick and Tesla?

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. "That guy is not from Australia," says Nick on page 125. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. What is the purpose of the simile the writer uses on page 129: "Nick...looking like a giant Hershey bar that had been left out in the sun..."
3. Make a list of action verbs used on pages 129–131 that can be used to show Nick's attitude about being dirty and jumping into the puddle.
4. Who are the "bad influences from up the street" that Mr. and Mrs. Davison refer to? Do you agree with the Davisons? Why or why not?

CHAPTER NINE

1. Make a prediction about the black square Tesla finds underneath her bike seat. What is it?
2. Describe Beetner's reaction to the children as they enter his store. How and when does his attitude toward them change?
3. Why does Nick destroy the black square they found under Tesla's bike seat?
4. Add the amount of money the kids have to pay for the pictures. How much do they need to pay the bill? How much more do they need?
5. Who has Nick's pendant? How do you know?
6. What else do the kids think the spy has been doing at Uncle Newt's?

CHAPTER TEN

1. DeMarco's and Silas's homes are used as safer places than Uncle Newt's, but for different reasons. Compare and contrast the boys' homes, using a Venn diagram.
2. Does Silas's mom believe Silas when he explains what they were doing during their "little club meeting"? How do you know?
3. What is different about the spider in the refrigerator today?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. How do the kids know the spider in the refrigerator is not a black widow?
2. Who do they initially think planted the spider at Uncle Newt's? Their opinion later changes. Whom do they suspect after Uncle Newt shares additional information. Why?

CHAPTER TWELVE

1. Whom do the kids run into in the woods while waiting to follow Skip?
2. According to Oli, what does he need to make his borscht?
3. Draw the Newtmobile, using the description in this chapter.
4. Nicks says the Newtmobile "isn't exactly inconspicuous" (p. 189). Would you agree? Why or why not?
5. Where does Skip go after leaving Uncle Newt's? Why?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. Do you believe it is "good luck" that the attic window was easy to open? Why or why not?
2. What evidence does Tesla hear that makes her think Uncle Newt isn't crazy? Do you agree? Cite evidence from previous chapters to support your opinion.
3. What is Skip after in the attic?
4. Who is Skip's "boss"?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. What do we learn about Julie Casserly? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
2. Nick and Tesla have long suspected they have not been told the truth about their parents' whereabouts. What suspicion about their parents does Julie Casserly unwittingly confirm?
3. What does Julie plan to do with Nick, Tesla, and Uncle Newt?
4. Why are Nick, Tesla, and Uncle Newt pleased to be locked in the basement?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1. What does Oli really want to be? How do you know?
2. What is Skip?
3. How do Nick, Tesla, and Uncle Newt contact help?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1. Uncle Newt decides not to press charges against Skip and Oli. Why? What would you have done and why?
2. Are the reaction and behavior of DeMarco's parents at the police station surprising? Why or why not?
3. What are Nick and Tesla's parents really working on? Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?

Targeted Vocabulary

Vocabulary instruction is often subjective; the methods for vocabulary instruction are varied. The targeted list below is organized by chapter, and the chapter lists are all related by concept. Some, for example, focus on characterization. Others focus on setting. Teachers can pick and choose, adding and/or deleting words based on their students' level and the teacher's school/district protocol for vocabulary instruction.

CHAPTER ONE

wary (8)
sarcastic
paunchy (10)
bulbous (11)
strained
eccentric (13)
intoned (14)
acquired (15)
ominously
gist
implied (16)
contend
mauling (17)
attributed (18)
immune
competent (19)
sinister
protruded (21)
justifiable (22)
distraction
drone (23)
scowled
glumly (24)

CHAPTER TWO

stubble (28)
puzzled
bulged
singed
smoldering
apprentice (29)
dismay (31)
indignantly
oblivious
gaped (32)
hacked
relish
reluctantly
grimaced (33)
miming
obvious
malevolently (36)

CHAPTER THREE

eased (38)
dubious (39)
recluse
assured
regain
thwart (42)
reinforcements
waggled (45)
understatement
potential
unenthused (46)
incredulous
diminutive
remotely (47)
intended (49)
albeit (50)
predecessor
apologetic (51)

CHAPTER FOUR

grouched (56)
critique (57)
emerging
glowered (58)
wilted (61)
forlornly (62)

CHAPTER FIVE

enticingly (64)
tremulous (67)
perched (68)
precariously
discarded (69)
grimaced
grimly (73)
brusque (74)

CHAPTER SIX

prematurely (93)
apparently
skulked (96)
gawked (98)
subtle
simultaneously (99)
pensively (101)
scowl

conned (77)
scuttled (79)
dismay (81)

CHAPTER SEVEN

lumbered (105)
confrontation (106)
defiant (114)
implacable
foes
provoke (115)
smirked
disposable
sheepish (116)

CHAPTER EIGHT

influences (130)
rendezvous
dour (131)

corpse (102)
trespassers (103)
prosecuted

CHAPTER NINE

exalted (132)
striding (133)
startled (134)
remnants (135)
intact
appropriated
somber (136)
flaccid (138)
profoundly (139)
diversify
unconvincingly (140)
quizzical (143)
pulverized (145)
chagrined (146)
lanky
obscene (148)
retreated
squirm (150)

CHAPTER TEN

translations (155)
synopsis (157)
unique (158)
decipher
hunkered
concede (159)
default
skeptical (162)
gloat
sauntered (164)
furtively

CHAPTER ELEVEN

anagrams (167)
furrowed (171)
obtuseness (176)
credibility (177)
puzzled
gruff (178)

CHAPTER TWELVE

indignity (181)
ferocious (182)
propaganda
perfunctory (185)
veered (186)
quarry
nondescript (187)
monstrosity (188)
wafting
dwindling (189)
fretted
disdainful (191)
careening (192)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

raved (195)
flamulated
improvise (196)
grated
resentful
parabolic (197)
recalibrated (199)
blatantly (201)
intently (202)
grappling (203)
taut
stealthy (204)
gingerly (205)
sneered (207)
corrosive
crestfallen

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

cryptic (249)
enigmatic
glum (252)
melancholy
brooding (253)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

radiated (212)
malicious
smug (213)
revealing (214)
scoffed (216)
minions
wistfully (217)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

compost (222)
siphon (228)
frantic (229)
nonchalant
railed
petulantly (230)
pathetic
glistening
concealed (231)
contemptuous
sinister (235)
inevitable (237)
suppress
diversion (239)
taunting (240)

Chapter Summaries

ONE

Nick and Tesla consider their parents' last message on the answering machine at their Uncle Newt's, telling them to be careful. They begin to consider people in the neighborhood as suspects, including Uncle Newt's crotchety neighbor, Julie Casserly. They are surprised by a newcomer to Uncle Newt's house.

TWO

Uncle Newt introduces Nick and Tesla to his new apprentice, Oli. The kids are suspicious because Oli doesn't sound or look like what they think an apprentice should; they are also suspicious of the new exterminator.

THREE

Nick and Tesla are still suspicious of both Oli and Skip, and they decide to share their suspicions with their friends DeMarco and Silas. After an afternoon of "fun," Tesla takes a shower, removing the pendant her parents had given to her. When she goes to put it back on, it's gone.

FOUR

Nick and Tesla begin to gather evidence that will help them identify the thief. They find a fingerprint and record it, and then decide they need to fingerprint everyone in the house to find the match.

FIVE

Using the ruse that she had made homemade lemonade for everyone, Tesla gathers the fingerprints left on the glass used by each person in the house. Except Skip, who figures out what she's up to. Tesla outsmarts him, too, and gets his prints. When the kids compare the prints with the ones on the index card, they can't find the index card and realize that it's been stolen. They then decide to set another trap, using Nick's pendant as bait.

SIX

Nick and Tesla set their plan in motion. Nick loudly shares that he and Tesla would be going to DeMarco's. Nick was going to ride the ramp. On the kids' return to Uncle Newt's, Nick makes a mess walking up to take a shower because he's covered in mud. After his shower, Nick leaves his pendant behind, setting the trap. While waiting "inconspicuously" outside, the kids hear that the alarm has been triggered.

SEVEN

Thinking they'd finally caught the spy in the act, the kids race upstairs, only to find Uncle Newt with Nick's pendant. Needing a new plan, the kids head to DeMarco's house. When they catch DeMarco's obnoxious twin sisters taking pictures of them, Tesla comes up with their next plan to catch the spy.

EIGHT

After hiding a camera in Nick's room and rigging it to take pictures, Nick leaves his pendant behind as he takes another shower after getting muddy for the second time that day. Tesla, DeMarco, and Silas wait for Nick at Silas's house. When Nick arrives, he explains that, although he's sure the camera worked, he isn't sure how they are going to get the pictures out of the disposable camera.

NINE

The kids take the film to be developed. The picture shows only a person in a tan jumpsuit. During the day Tesla also finds a microphone hidden under her bike seat. Believing the spy is Skip, the exterminator, and also that Uncle Newt's house is bugged, the kids devise a plan to communicate with one another using code wheels.

TEN

Using the code wheels, the kids return to Uncle Newt's to try to capture the spy, whom they believe is Skip.

ELEVEN

In an attempt to explain their suspicions to Uncle Newt without tipping off Skip, the kids lead Uncle Newt outside. Uncle Newt shares his indignation that apparently he's been hoodwinked, and he agrees to help the kids trap Skip.

TWELVE

When Skip leaves before the kids hear of Uncle Newt's plan, the kids follow Skip on foot. Uncle Newt picks up the kids in the Newtmobile, and they follow Skip around the neighborhood, only to arrive a short distance from Uncle Newt's house, where Skip sits in his car in the dark. Believing Skip to be listening to the bugs he's planted in Uncle Newt's house, the kids and Uncle Newt realize they are going to have to sneak back into the house.

THIRTEEN

After retrieving a pair of night-vision goggles, Uncle Newt and the kids head to the roof, where they plan to watch Skip surreptitiously. Skip gets out of the car and, using a grappling hook, climbs to the roof of the house, where, on entering the attic, he is caught by Uncle Newt and the kids. He explains that he's been looking for a skull that he can sell for big money, and he denies having anything to do with spying. Just as everyone realizes that the real spy is still on the loose, the maids arrive with Julie Casserly, Uncle Newt's next-door and very unfriendly neighbor

FOURTEEN

It's revealed that Oli, Gladys and Ethel, and Julie are all working together. When Julie leaves to get Tesla's pendant and to contact "control," Gladys and Ethel send Uncle Newt and the kids to the basement, where they lock them in.

FIFTEEN

Julie, Ethel, and Gladys are clobbered with compost-filled balloons when they attempt to go down the stairs, and, eventually, the police arrive.

SIXTEEN

After going down to the police station to make a report, the kids talk to Agent McIntyre and learn that their parents have been working on a laser beam project that, in the hands of the wrong people, could have disastrous consequences for earth.

EXTENDED WRITING/RESEARCH TOPICS/OPPORTUNITIES

The CCSS ask students to conduct basic research. The ability to formulate a question and use credible sources are two important components. A third is the ability to write unified informative and argumentative pieces. The following are several general topics that can be used as interdisciplinary writing assignments for English language arts and science objectives. Depending on how the topics are worded, they can be used as either informative writing topics or argumentative topics.

1. In Chapter 4, Nick and Tesla devise a DIY method to fingerprint their suspects. Write an informative essay explaining the methods of fingerprinting and the usefulness of keeping fingerprint records. What are these records used for? How accurate are they? Why?
2. In Chapter 9, Nick and Tesla take a disposable camera to have its film developed into pictures. Write an informative essay comparing film-based and digital cameras. Or write an informative essay on the process of chemically developing pictures.
3. In Chapter 9, Nick and Tesla and their friends create devices to communicate by code. Create your own. Or write an informative essay about a time in history when code was used (World War II, Vietnam War, etc.).
4. Oli is from Russia. Write an informative essay about Russia. Or write an essay comparing Russia to the United States, focusing on language, food, and one other cultural interest.
5. In Chapter 14, “reverse psychology” is used. Write an informative essay explaining this concept.