

THE BOY WHO COUNTS

Some kids don't use words.
But that doesn't mean they have nothing to say.



CHRISTINA CARLSEN

IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

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EDUCATOR RESOURCE PACKET

By Christina Carlsen

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This guide was created to support educators, families, and reading groups exploring stories about neurodiversity, communication, and belonging. The In Our Own Words series is written for readers in grades 4-8.

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IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

TEACHER GUIDE

Free Educator Resource · Grades 4–8

Teacher Guide: Max, the Boy Who Counts

In Our Own Words — Book One

By Christina Carlsen

“I know exactly what I want to say. That part has never been the problem. The problem is the distance between what I know and what comes out.” — Max

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed for classroom teachers in grades 4–8. It can support whole-class read-alouds, small-group literature circles, independent reading units, or interdisciplinary units touching on social-emotional learning, disability studies, and language arts. You do not need to be an expert on autism to teach this book well. What you need is exactly what the book asks of everyone: the willingness to presume that the person in front of you has something to say.

Use the sections that serve your students. Skip what doesn’t fit. Not every discussion question needs to be used — they are offered as options, not a checklist.

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1. Book Overview

Summary

Eleven-year-old Max has a full, rich inner life. He notices everything — the smell of lemon tea on his aide’s jacket, the way his brother Theo’s drumsticks move, the exact number of steps between the bus stop and the classroom door. What Max cannot do, at least not yet, is translate all of that into words other people can hear.

Max, the Boy Who Counts is narrated entirely from Max’s perspective. He is minimally verbal and autistic, and the novel makes clear from its first pages that his intelligence and emotional depth are fully intact. The gap is not in his mind. As Max puts it: “The voice is fine. The door is the problem.”

The story moves through three parts. In “Before,” we meet Max’s family — his twin brother Theo, his younger sister Ellie (also minimally verbal), his question-asking little brother Danny, and his fiercely devoted mother and steady, quiet father. We watch Max navigate fifth grade with a caring aide and an unhelpful speech pathologist. In “The Breaking Point,” things deteriorate: a hostile bus monitor, worsening substitute teacher incidents, a physical restraint on the playground. And in “Starting Again,” Max’s mother fights back through legal channels, and Max begins again at a new school, where a teacher named Mr. Ruiz asks him where he wants to sit on the very first day, and where Max finds something he wasn’t sure existed for someone like him: a friend.

Grade Level Recommendation

Grades 4–8 (ages 9–13). The prose is accessible for strong fourth-grade readers; the emotional complexity and themes reward older middle-grade students. The book works well as a read-aloud for grades 4–5 and as independent or small-group reading in grades 6–8.

Themes Overview

- Presuming competence
- Communication beyond spoken words
- Advocacy and systems — IEPs, legal rights, institutional failure
- Family love in a complex household
- Belonging and autonomy
- Routine and predictability as safety
- Power, control, and reclaiming agency
- Disability rights
- Sensory experience
- Friendship in unexpected forms

Content Notes

The novel contains scenes of physical restraint of a disabled child, a school employee who is verbally hostile and ultimately physically abusive, and institutional indifference (falsified safety reports, a broken surveillance camera). These scenes are handled with care and without graphic detail, but they are present. See **Section 12** of this guide for specific guidance on how to approach these moments with students.

2. About the Author

Christina Carlsen writes in the tradition of autistic and disability-forward children’s literature — books that center a disabled child’s interior life without apology or sentimentality. *Max, the Boy Who Counts* is the first book in the *In Our Own Words* series. Carlsen’s approach is notable for its narrative choice: the entire novel is told in Max’s voice, which insists from page one that readers grant him the same full personhood they would any narrator. The author’s notes at the end of the book address autism, AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), restraint and seclusion in schools, and the principle of presuming competence — making clear that the story is grounded in the real experiences of autistic people and their families.

Note to teachers: If you find additional biographical information about the author in publisher materials or on the author’s website, consider sharing it with students as part of the “Before You Read” discussion.

3. Before You Read

Background for Teachers

You don’t need to lecture on any of these topics before reading the book — in many cases, the book itself introduces and explains them beautifully. But the following background will help you anticipate questions, facilitate discussion, and respond with confidence.

Autism

Autism (autism spectrum disorder, or ASD) is a neurological difference, not a disease or a tragedy. Autistic people experience the world differently — often with heightened sensory sensitivity, different communication styles, and strong preferences for routine and predictability. “Minimally verbal” or “non-speaking” autistic people may have limited or no functional spoken language, but this is a communication difference, not an indication of cognitive ability. Many minimally verbal autistic people are fully literate, highly intelligent, and have rich inner lives — exactly as Max demonstrates throughout this novel.

Autism presents very differently across individuals. Max’s sister Ellie is also minimally verbal but communicates and experiences the world differently from him. The novel is careful not to flatten autistic experience into a single type.

AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)

AAC refers to any method of communicating other than spoken speech. This includes:

- **Low-tech AAC:** Picture boards, communication cards, alphabet boards
- **Mid-tech AAC:** Recorded-message devices
- **High-tech AAC:** Speech-generating devices (SGDs), tablets with communication apps

In the novel, Max uses sounds (“bah,” “dah”), counting, lining things up, facial expressions, and eventually recorded movie lines as his communication. These are all valid forms of AAC. A key finding from research — mentioned in the author’s notes — is that using AAC does not prevent speech development; in fact, it supports it.

Dr. Holt, Max’s speech pathologist, uses picture cards for a year without ever asking Max about himself. This is a meaningful contrast with the approaches used by people who actually help Max: Ms. Fogarty gives him a stone; Mr. Ruiz asks where he wants to sit; his mother collects movie lines with him. The difference is about relationship, attention, and genuine curiosity.

Presuming Competence

“Presuming competence” is the practice of treating every person as a full human being capable of understanding, regardless of how they communicate. It means not assuming that a child who cannot speak also cannot understand. In practice, it means:

- Talking to a nonverbal child, not just about them in their presence
- Offering choices and waiting for responses
- Not simplifying your language or your expectations without cause
- Assuming understanding until proven otherwise

Max hears everything. He understands everything. He is also in many rooms where people discuss him as if he isn’t there. The gap between how Max is treated and what Max actually knows is one of the central tensions of the book.

Restraint and Seclusion in Schools

Physical restraint — holding a student down or immobilizing them — is used in schools, disproportionately on students with disabilities. The subject is covered in the author’s notes and depicted in the novel. Laws governing restraint and seclusion vary by state, and oversight is often limited. In the novel, Max is placed in a five-point harness on the school bus and later physically held down by five adults for fifteen minutes on a playground. Neither incident is depicted with graphic detail, but both are depicted honestly. See Section 12 for guidance on classroom conversations about these events.

Vocabulary to Pre-Teach

These words and concepts appear in the novel or are central to discussing it:

Term	Definition
minimally verbal	Having very limited functional spoken language; does not indicate cognitive ability
AAC (augmentative and alternative communication)	Any communication method other than spoken speech
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	A legally binding education plan for students who receive special education services
sensory sensitivity	Heightened awareness of or reaction to sensory input (sound, touch, light, smell, etc.)
predictability	Knowing what will happen next; a source of safety for many autistic people
restraint	Physically holding or restricting a person's movement
advocate	Someone who speaks up on behalf of another person's rights or needs
neurotypical	A term for people whose neurological development follows patterns considered typical
nonverbal / nonspeaking	Not using spoken words to communicate
presuming competence	Assuming a person understands, regardless of how they communicate

Discussion Prompts to Activate Prior Knowledge

Use these before beginning the novel. There are no wrong answers — the goal is to open thinking, not to assess knowledge.

- Think about a time you knew exactly what you wanted to say but couldn't get the words out. What did that feel like?
- Have you ever been in a situation where someone talked about you as if you weren't there, or assumed you didn't understand something? How did that feel?
- What are some ways people communicate without words? Make a list with a partner — see how many you can think of.
- What do you think it means to be someone's friend if you can't talk to each other in the usual way?
- What do you already know about autism? (Hold this question lightly — encourage curiosity rather than certainty, and note that students will learn a lot from Max himself.)

4. Character Guide

Max

Eleven years old, autistic, minimally verbal, and the narrator of this story. Max thinks in complete, precise, often beautiful sentences. He counts things (steps, tiles, sounds) as a way of keeping himself steady. He lines objects up. He uses sounds — “bah,” “dah” — and later recorded movie lines to communicate. He has a twin brother, a complicated school history, and a very clear sense of what he wants and needs. He is not a symbol. He is a person.

What to watch for: The gap between what Max understands and what the adults around him assume he understands. Also: the moments when someone actually sees him.

Theo

Max’s twin brother, neurotypical in presentation, Max’s best friend and most fluent translator. Theo loves drumming and has a way of reading Max that no one else fully matches. He sits with Max on the bus, interprets for him, and is his anchor in unfamiliar situations. When they are separated on the bus, the loss is felt by both of them.

What to watch for: The weight Theo carries as Max’s interpreter and protector, and what it costs him.

Danny

Max’s younger brother, age six, full of unstoppable questions. Danny asks things no one else asks — not because he doesn’t notice Max is different, but because he’s not troubled by it. He accepts the family’s reality as simply the way things are.

What to watch for: Danny’s question-asking as its own form of curiosity and love.

Ellie

Max’s younger sister, age eight, also minimally verbal. Ellie is obsessed with water — the sound and feel of it. She has her own three-note hum. The novel is careful to show that Ellie and Max are not the same: they share a communication difference, but they experience the world in their own distinct ways.

What to watch for: How Ellie’s presence both connects to and complicates Max’s story. She is not a mirror of Max but a separate person.

Mom

Max's mother works from home and is the engine of advocacy in the family. She learns sign language. She fights through legal channels. She shares a facial-expression "language" with Max. She collects movie lines with him as a communication system. She is not perfect — the book doesn't pretend any of this is easy for her — but she is fiercely, practically devoted.

What to watch for: The ways she communicates with Max (not just about him), and the moments her effort breaks through.

Dad

Max's father works long hours and communicates through presence more than words. He drives Max to school every day once the transportation situation is resolved — forty minutes each way, twice a day. Sunday morning walks with Max. He is steady and quiet in the way Max himself is quiet.

What to watch for: The parallel between Max's kind of communication and his father's.

Ms. Fogarty

Max's school aide at the original school. She is quiet. She gives Max a smooth gray stone when things are hard. She smells like lemon tea. She respects his need for predictability. She is one of the people who actually helps.

What to watch for: The contrast between Ms. Fogarty's instinct to support Max and Dr. Holt's clinical, one-size-fits-all approach.

Mr. Ruiz

The teacher at Max's new school (the New England Center for Children). On the first day, he asks Max where he wants to sit. He remembers that Max likes horses. He treats Max as a full person. He doesn't make a production of it — it is simply the way he operates.

What to watch for: What it means to be treated as a full person after a long stretch of not being treated that way.

Mrs. Crane

The bus monitor who is polite to Max's parents but privately hostile to Max. She says "Don't start anything today" to Max each morning. She files fifty safety reports — none of which are shared with Max's mother. She claims the bus camera is broken. She eventually grabs Max in anger, leaving bruises. She is not a cartoon villain; she is a recognizable failure of a system that did not require her to be accountable.

What to watch for: The gap between how she presents to parents and how she treats Max — and the institutional structures that allowed this to continue.

Dr. Holt

Max's speech pathologist. Uses picture cards for a year. Never asks Max about himself. Is not curious about who Max is. Her work with Max is technically competent and entirely beside the point.

What to watch for: What is missing in her approach, and how it contrasts with the people who do reach Max.

Jonah

A boy at the new school who also doesn't speak. Max and Jonah find each other in the hallway, communicate with small sounds, and eat lunch the same way. Max calls him a friend. The friendship is quiet and real and doesn't require explanation.

What to watch for: The way this friendship is rendered — not as a dramatic breakthrough, but as a quiet recognition.

5. Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion Questions

This section groups discussion questions by the novel's three-part structure. Not every chapter is covered individually — select the questions that fit your classroom's reading pace and focus.

Part One: “Before”

Opening Chapters (First day of school; meeting the family)

- Max describes himself through his inner voice on the very first page. What do we learn about him immediately? What surprised you?
- Max says: “I know exactly what I want to say. That part has never been the problem. The problem is the distance between what I know and what comes out.” What do you think he means? Have you ever felt something like this distance yourself?
- How does Theo act as Max's interpreter and anchor? What does this relationship cost Theo? What does it give him?
- Ellie is also minimally verbal, but the novel makes clear she and Max are not the same. What details does the author include to show they are distinct people?
- Max counts things — steps, tiles, sounds — as a way of staying steady. What other routines or habits does Max use to manage his day? Why do you think these matter so much to him?

The Trampoline Park Incident

- Why is the trampoline park incident so difficult for Max, beyond just the sensory experience? What does it reveal about how he is seen by people outside his family?
- How does the family respond in the aftermath? What does each family member's response tell us about them?

Ms. Fogarty and Dr. Holt

- Compare how Ms. Fogarty and Dr. Holt approach Max. What does each person assume about him? What does each person actually do?
- Dr. Holt uses picture cards for a year and never asks Max about himself. Why might this approach fail, even if the individual techniques are standard practice?

Part Two: “The Breaking Point”

The Bus — Mrs. Crane and the Escalation

- Mrs. Crane tells Max “Don’t start anything today” every morning. What effect does this have on Max? What does it communicate to him about how she sees him?
- The fifty safety reports were never shared with Max’s mother. What systems were supposed to prevent this from happening? Where did they fail?
- The bus camera was reported as “broken.” What do you think about this detail?
- Max is separated from Theo on the bus. Why is this separation significant? It’s not just logistical — what does Theo’s presence mean to Max?
- Max is placed in a five-point harness. He learns to escape it as a form of protest. What does this tell us about Max? About what control means to him?

The Playground Incident

- Max takes his clothes off on the playground when told to come inside on the first sunny day in weeks. Some adults might describe this as “behavior.” How does Max describe his own experience? What was he communicating?
- Max is held down by five adults for fifteen minutes. The author does not describe this in graphic detail, but she doesn’t skip it either. Why do you think she included this scene?
- Max reflects: “When you cannot say stop, you find another way to say it.” What does this mean? In what other moments in the book has Max found another way to say something?

The Substitutes; Ms. Fogarty’s Absence

- Things worsen when there are substitute teachers and when Ms. Fogarty is out sick. Why does unpredictability feel dangerous — not just uncomfortable — to Max?

- Ms. Fogarty gives Max a smooth gray stone. Why this, and why now? What does the stone represent?

Part Three: “Starting Again”

The Lawyer; the Florida Trip

- Max’s mother gets a lawyer. What does this moment mean for the family? Why is this portrayed as a victory, even though it represents a failure by the school?
- In Florida, Max’s cousin Lily says he is “easy to be with.” Max has never been told this before. Why does it matter so much? What does it tell us about what the rest of his world has communicated to him?

The New School; Mr. Ruiz

- On Max’s first day at the new school, Mr. Ruiz asks: “Where do you want to sit?” Why is this question significant? What does it assume about Max that other adults haven’t assumed?
- Max says there is “always one person.” What does he mean? Who have been the “one person” at different points in his life?

Transportation; Dad

- The transportation situation at the new school is chaotic for months — vans, strange aides who don’t acknowledge Max. How does Max manage this period? What finally resolves it?
- Dad drives Max to school every day — forty minutes each way. He doesn’t make a speech about it. What does this choice communicate? How does the author show love through action rather than words?

Jonah; the Library; Movie Lines

- Max and Jonah’s friendship develops through small sounds and parallel routines at lunch. Why doesn’t the novel make more of this — no dramatic scene, no big conversation? Is something lost by that choice, or gained?
- Max’s mother takes him to the library and they build a communication system from recorded movie lines. Why movies specifically? What does this system give Max that picture cards didn’t?

The Ending

- The novel ends with Max imagining what he would say to each family member if he could. What does he choose to say? What do these choices reveal about what he values most?
- Max says: “I am not done. I am eleven.” What does this mean to you? What kind of ending is this?

6. Major Themes

Theme 1: Presuming Competence

The core idea: Max is always in the room. He always understands. The question is whether the people around him know this.

The novel is structured around this principle — the reader is inside Max’s head from the first page, so we are never in doubt about his intelligence or his understanding. The dramatic tension comes from the contrast between what we know (that Max understands everything) and what many characters in the book assume (that he does not).

Key quotes:

“I know exactly what I want to say. That part has never been the problem.”

“The voice is fine. The door is the problem.”

Discussion questions:

- Dr. Holt talks about Max in his presence as if he cannot hear or understand. How does the novel make the reader feel about this, without telling us what to feel?
- What does it cost a person — over time — to be consistently assumed not to understand?
- What would it look like to presume competence in your own classroom, your own lunch table, your own family?

Theme 2: Communication Beyond Words

The core idea: Communication is not the same as speech. The novel catalogs an enormous range of ways Max communicates and is communicated with.

Max uses: sounds (“bah,” “dah”), counting, lining things up, taking his clothes off (protest), escaping the harness (protest), a smooth gray stone (comfort, connection), movie lines (eventually, as a flexible vocabulary), body language, silence. His mother uses: facial expressions (a whole language between them), patience, fighting through legal channels as a form of love. Mr. Ruiz uses: a question (“Where do you want to sit?”). Jonah uses: small sounds, presence.

Key quotes:

“When you cannot say stop, you find another way to say it.”

“That is what I think love looks like when nobody is watching.”

Discussion questions:

- What forms of communication does your family use that don’t involve words?
- The picture cards Dr. Holt uses are a recognized AAC strategy. Why do they fail with Max? What is missing?

- Movie lines become Max’s vocabulary. Why might this be more powerful than a picture board? What does it let Max do that a picture board doesn’t?

Theme 3: Advocacy and Systems

The core idea: The school system was supposed to protect Max. It didn’t. His mother had to fight to make it work.

This theme runs through the entire middle section of the novel. The IEP, the bus safety system, the substitute teacher protocols, the camera on the bus — all of these are structures that were supposed to support Max. Most of them fail. The fifty safety reports that were never shared. The camera that was “broken.” The substitutes who had no instructions. The novel doesn’t lecture about this — it simply shows it, through Max’s eyes.

Mom’s response is to fight back through legal channels. This is portrayed not as exceptional heroism but as something she had to do. The fact that a lawyer is required is itself a comment on the system.

Discussion questions:

- What systems were in place that should have protected Max? Where did each one fail?
- Mom gets a lawyer. What does this require — in terms of time, knowledge, resources? What happens to families who don’t have those things?
- What is an IEP, and what does it mean for a school to not follow one?

Theme 4: Family Love in a Complex Household

The core idea: Love in this family is real and complicated. Everyone in it has needs. Not everyone’s needs are compatible. Love shows up differently in each person.

Mom is fierce and attentive. Dad is steady and quiet. Theo is Max’s translator and closest friend. Danny asks every question. Ellie has her own world, her own hum, her own water. This is not a simple household, and the novel doesn’t pretend it is. But it is a household where Max is loved, not in spite of who he is, but as who he is.

Key quotes:

“That is what I think love looks like when nobody is watching.” (about his father, driving)

“Maybe you just hear the song differently.” (Danny, echoing Mom)

Discussion questions:

- How does each family member show love to Max? Make a list — include small moments as well as large ones.
- Theo carries a lot. How does the novel show the weight and the reward of being Max’s twin and translator?
- Lily, Max’s cousin in Florida, tells him he is ‘easy to be with’ — the first time anyone has said this to him. What does it mean to be told you are easy to be with?

Theme 5: Belonging and Autonomy

The core idea: Max wants what every person wants: to be in a place where he belongs, and to make his own choices.

At the end of the novel, Max imagines walking the school hallway alone someday. Not being escorted. Just walking. He imagines being “just a kid at lunch” — eating lunch without it being a therapeutic goal or a monitored activity. These are not dramatic desires. They are small and ordinary, and the fact that they feel large says something about how much has been denied.

Key quotes:

“There is always one person. I have learned to wait for them.”

“I am not done. I am eleven. I have a green star and a stone and a folder with the word horse in it and a family that fought for me and won.”

Discussion questions:

- What does it mean to belong somewhere? What would Max need in order to belong at his new school?
- Max imagines walking the hallway alone. Why is this so meaningful? What would it mean for him to do this?
- Think about the small choices Max is denied throughout the book — where to sit, when to come inside, who sits next to him on the bus. What happens to a person when they lose control of small things?

Theme 6: Routine and Predictability as Safety

The core idea: For Max, knowing what comes next is not a preference — it is a form of safety. Disrupting his routine is not a neutral act.

Counting, lining things up, knowing the exact layout of a classroom — these are the tools Max uses to keep himself steady. When desks are moved without warning, when substitute teachers arrive without instructions, when his aide is absent for three days, the disruption is physical and emotional, not just inconvenient. The novel takes this seriously without explaining it to death.

Discussion questions:

- Think of something in your own life that you rely on for predictability. What happens when it changes without warning?
- Why might knowing what comes next be especially important for someone who cannot easily ask questions or express distress?
- What could Max’s original school have done differently to minimize unpredictability in his day?

Theme 7: Power, Control, and Reclaiming Agency

The core idea: Max has very little control over his physical environment. He finds ways to reclaim small pieces of it.

The harness is the most powerful symbol in this section of the novel. Max cannot remove it in the usual way. He learns to escape it. The novel frames this not as “bad behavior” but as exactly what it is: a person finding the one available way to say no.

Similarly, taking his clothes off on the playground is not random. It is a protest — the clearest, most direct “I am not going inside” available to him when every other form of saying so has failed.

Key quotes:

| *“When you cannot say stop, you find another way to say it.”*

Discussion questions:

- Max escapes the harness as a form of protest. How does the novel frame this? What does it ask us to think about who holds power in this situation?
- Think about the adults in Part Two who have power over Max’s body. What are they responsible for? What do they fail at?
- Mr. Ruiz asks Max where he wants to sit. Why is this — a small question — a meaningful act of returning control?

Theme 8: Friendship

The core idea: Friendship does not require conversation.

Max has two significant friendships in this novel: with Theo (deep, long-established, inseparable) and with Jonah (new, quiet, built on parallel presence). Both friendships are real. Neither requires the friendship to look like what most people imagine friendship to look like.

Key quotes:

| *“There is always one person. I have learned to wait for them.”*

Discussion questions:

- What makes Theo a good friend to Max? What does Max give back to Theo?
- Max and Jonah become friends through sounds in the hallway and eating lunch the same way. Is this friendship? What makes something a friendship?
- Have you ever had a friendship that didn’t involve a lot of talking? What made it real?

7. Activity Ideas

Activity 1: Inner Voice Journal (ELA / SEL)

Grades 4–8 | Individual | 1–2 class periods

Max's inner voice is articulate, precise, and often wry. After reading Part One, ask students to write a short journal entry in the voice of a character who cannot easily communicate — but who has a full inner life. This could be Max himself or a character of their own invention. The goal: make the reader understand what the character knows and feels, without ever letting the character say it out loud.

- **Differentiation:** Students who are reluctant writers can record their entry as audio or draw a visual representation of their character's inner world.

Activity 2: The Many Languages of This Family (ELA / Drama)

Grades 4–8 | Small groups | 1 class period

Max's family communicates in many ways: facial expressions (Mom and Max), presence and driving (Dad), drumming (Theo), questions (Danny), humming (Ellie). In small groups, students create a short scene — written or performed — showing a family communicating primarily through non-verbal means. Debrief: What is gained? What is lost? What surprised you?

Activity 3: AAC Design Challenge (Technology / Science / ELA)

Grades 5–8 | Pairs or small groups | 2–3 class periods

Students research one real AAC system (PECS, a speech-generating device, a letter board, a symbol-based app) and design a “communication profile” for a fictional person. The profile should include: what forms of communication the person already uses, what the new system adds, and how communication partners can support it. Present to the class.

- **Connection:** Discuss the author's note on AAC. Why does research show that AAC supports, rather than prevents, speech development?

Activity 4: Safety Report Investigation (Social Studies / Research)

Grades 6–8 | Individual or pairs | 2 class periods

Fifty safety reports were filed about Max — and none were shared with his mother. Students research how school incident reporting is supposed to work (what kinds of incidents must be reported, to whom, and by when) in their own state. They then write a short analysis: What happened in Max's case? What went wrong? What oversight was missing?

- **Extension:** Research current laws on restraint and seclusion in your state. Are they adequate? What would you change?

Activity 5: Mapping Max’s World (Art / ELA)

Grades 4–6 | Individual | 1–2 class periods

Max moves through the world with intense sensory awareness. He notices smells, textures, sounds, temperatures, the exact layout of rooms. Students create an illustrated “sensory map” of one of the locations in the book — the bus, the classroom, the playground, the new school hallway — drawn from Max’s point of view. What does he notice first? What is threatening? What is safe?

Activity 6: A Note Max Would Write (ELA)

Grades 4–8 | Individual | 1 class period

At the end of the book, Max imagines what he would say to each family member if he could. Students choose one character from the book and write the note Max imagines — or write the response that character might write back. Focus: What does Max value? What does this relationship mean to him?

- **Alternative:** Students write a letter to Max from a character of their choice.

Activity 7: Debate — Whose Responsibility? (Social Studies / ELA)

Grades 6–8 | Whole class | 1–2 class periods

Present this scenario: Max was harmed at school. The bus camera was “broken.” Fifty safety reports were never shared with his family. Mrs. Crane claimed she did nothing wrong.

Structured debate: Who bears responsibility for what happened to Max? What institutions failed? What individuals? What policies should exist to prevent this? Assign students to argue different perspectives (the school district, the transportation company, the IEP team, state policymakers) and then discuss as a class.

Activity 8: “Easy to Be With” — A Reflection (SEL / ELA)

Grades 4–8 | Individual | 30–45 minutes

Max’s cousin Lily tells him he is “easy to be with.” It is the first time anyone has said this to him. Students write or discuss:

- What does it feel like to be told you are easy to be with?
- Think of someone in your life who makes you feel easy to be with. What do they do (or not do)?
- What does it take to make someone else feel that way?

Activity 9: Alternative Communication Gallery Walk (SEL / Science)

Grades 4–8 | Small groups | 1–2 class periods

Create stations around the room, each featuring one form of communication that does not use spoken language: ASL, facial expressions, written notes, a picture board, body language, recorded audio phrases, drawing, music. Students rotate through stations, try each method, and then discuss: Which felt natural? Which felt limiting? What did you notice about how others interpreted you?

Activity 10: “The Voice Is Fine. The Door Is the Problem.” (Art / Writing)

Grades 4–8 | Individual | 1 class period

Students create a visual artwork (drawing, collage, mixed media) responding to this quote. The image can be literal, metaphorical, or abstract. Then students write a two-to-four sentence artist’s statement explaining their choices.

This works particularly well as a capstone activity after finishing the book.

8. Social-Emotional Learning Connections

Core SEL Competencies This Book Addresses

- **Self-awareness:** Understanding one’s own emotions, communication style, and identity
- **Social awareness:** Empathy, perspective-taking, recognizing diverse experiences
- **Relationship skills:** Building connections that cross typical communication barriers
- **Responsible decision-making:** Understanding the consequences of actions — including inaction — on vulnerable people

Discussion Prompts

On empathy and perspective:

- Max says the world often doesn’t presume he understands things. Have you ever felt like someone wasn’t really listening to you, or wasn’t taking you seriously? What did that feel like?
- Lily says Max is “easy to be with.” Who in your life makes you feel easy to be with? What do they do?
- Think about Danny, who asks every question without judgment. What makes his approach different from other characters in the book? What can we learn from it?

- How do you think Theo feels about being Max’s translator and protector? What does it mean to love someone whose needs are very different from your own?

On identity and belonging:

- Max wants to walk the school hallway alone. He wants to be “just a kid at lunch.” Why do these ordinary things feel like goals? Have you ever wanted something ordinary that wasn’t available to you?
- The book shows Max’s identity through his inner voice. What would people know about you if they could hear your inner voice — things that don’t always show in how you act or speak?
- What does it mean to belong somewhere? What conditions make someone feel like they belong?

On community and responsibility:

- The author says in her notes: treat people as full human beings regardless of how they communicate. What does that look like in practice — at school, at home, in your neighborhood?
- Mrs. Crane was unkind to Max when no one was watching. What does the book suggest about the relationship between accountability and how we treat people?
- What is one concrete thing you could do differently — in your classroom, your lunch table, your neighborhood — after reading this book?

SEL Activity: The Stone

Ms. Fogarty gives Max a smooth gray stone when things are difficult. She doesn’t explain it. He keeps it.

Ask students: What is your equivalent of the stone — a small object, a place, a routine that steadies you when things feel unsteady? Students can write about it, draw it, or simply share it in a circle. This is a low-stakes, high-trust activity that often generates surprisingly deep sharing.

9. Disability Awareness and Inclusion Connections

Key Principles This Book Demonstrates

- **Disability is part of human diversity:** Autism is not a tragedy in this novel. It is not framed as something to be fixed or cured. Max is autistic; the question is not how to make him less so, but how the world can meet him where he is.
- **“Minimally verbal” does not mean “minimally present”:** The entire novel is a demonstration of this. Max’s intelligence, humor, love, and self-awareness are rendered on every page.

- **Multiple forms of communication are valid:** The book catalogs an enormous range: sounds, counting, stone-holding, movie lines, facial expressions, body language, music. All of these are real. None is lesser than speech.
- **AAC supports communication — it does not replace or prevent it:** The author’s note cites research showing that AAC does not impede speech development. This is worth discussing with students.
- **Restraint and seclusion are serious issues:** The novel depicts physical restraint directly and honestly. These are not neutral interventions — they carry significant risk of psychological and physical harm, and they are used disproportionately on students with disabilities.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the word “disability” mean to you? After reading this book, has your thinking changed?
- What does the author mean by “presuming competence”? Why is this important? What’s the alternative?
- The novel shows two different schools: one that fails Max and one that begins to work for him. What is the difference? What specific things does the new school do differently?
- Why might it matter that the entire book is told from Max’s perspective — not his mother’s, not Theo’s, but Max’s?
- Think about the systems that were supposed to protect Max (the IEP, the bus safety protocol, the school reporting system). What did each one assume? Where did each one fail?

Classroom Connection: Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The new school in the novel practices something close to Universal Design for Learning — meeting students where they are, offering choice, presuming competence, building communication systems around each individual. Consider discussing with students: What does our classroom do well in this area? What could we do differently?

Disability Rights Context

The novel implicitly connects to the history of disability rights in the United States:

- **IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act):** The law that requires a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities, including an IEP. Max’s rights under this law are being violated.
- **The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act):** Broader civil rights protections for people with disabilities.
- **Self-advocacy movement:** The disability rights principle that disabled people should have a central role in decisions about their own lives. “Nothing about us without us.”

For older students (grades 6–8), brief research into any of these topics can deepen the legal and historical context of Mom’s decision to get a lawyer.

10. Extension Reading and Resources

Other Books Featuring Autistic or Nonspeaking Characters

Picture books / early chapter books:

- A Friend for Henry by Jenn Bailey — Finding friendship when connection feels difficult
- I Am Human: A Book of Empathy by Susan Verde — Empathy and connection
- The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Elizabeth Verdick & Elizabeth Reeve — Practical guide for young readers

Middle grade novels:

- Mockingbird by Kathryn Erskine — Caitlin, who is autistic, processes grief and friendship
- The Someday Birds by Sally J. Pla — Charlie navigates a road trip and sensory challenges
- Rain Reign by Ann M. Martin — Rose, who is autistic, faces a crisis involving her dog
- Planet Earth Is Blue by Nicole Panteleakos — A nonspeaking autistic girl in 1986

For older readers / teachers:

- The Reason I Jump by Naoki Higashida — An autistic teenager answers questions about autism in his own words (widely read; some caveats about translation — worth researching before assigning)
- Loud Hands: Autistic People Speaking — An anthology of writing by autistic authors

Resources on AAC

- ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association): Information on AAC for families and educators — asha.org
- Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA): Resources on AAC devices and apps — atia.org
- PrAACtical AAC (practicalaac.org) — Practitioner-focused blog and resource hub
- Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Institute — aacsinstitute.org

Resources on Autism

- Autism Society of America — autism-society.org
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) — autisticadvocacy.org — Run by autistic people, centering autistic voices
- AANE (Autism Asperger Network) — aane.org

Resources on Restraint and Seclusion

- Government Accountability Office (GAO) Reports on Restraint and Seclusion in Schools — Available at gao.gov; multiple reports over the past two decades document patterns of use
- National Disability Rights Network — ndrn.org — Advocacy and legal resources
- IDEA Partnership — ideapartnership.org — Information on IDEA implementation

Organizations Doing Related Work

- Disability Rights Advocates — dralegal.org
- National Center for Learning Disabilities — nclld.org
- The Arc — thearc.org

11. Assessment Ideas

Not every student will demonstrate their understanding best through a traditional written response. Below are options across modalities and formats.

Written Assessments

Literary Analysis Essay

Choose one of the major themes and analyze how the author develops it across the three parts of the novel. Use at least three specific textual examples. Suggested length: three to four paragraphs (grades 4–5) or five to six paragraphs (grades 6–8).

Character Analysis

Choose one adult character (Ms. Fogarty, Mr. Ruiz, Mrs. Crane, Dr. Holt, or Mom or Dad) and analyze how this character treats Max, what they assume about him, and what their choices reveal about the theme of presuming competence.

Comparative Essay

Compare the two schools Max attends. What specific differences in policy, personnel, or approach make one school safer and more effective for Max? Draw on specific details from the text.

Reflection Journal

Over the course of reading, students keep a journal responding to prompts. Assess on engagement, specificity of textual reference, and growth in thinking across entries.

Creative/Performance Assessments

Alternate Perspective Narrative

Rewrite one scene from Part Two from a different character's perspective — Theo, Mom, Ms. Fogarty, or even Mrs. Crane. Must remain faithful to the events of the novel while exploring new interiority.

Visual Project

Create a visual artwork (drawing, painting, collage, digital) responding to a key theme or quote from the book. Includes a written or verbal artist's statement (minimum four sentences) explaining the connection to the text.

Recorded Oral Response

Students respond to a discussion question via audio or video recording. This is a particularly meaningful option given the book's themes — it opens the conversation about different forms of valid communication.

Reader's Theater / Scene Adaptation

Small groups adapt a scene from the novel for performance. Must make deliberate choices about how to convey Max's inner voice — since he cannot speak it — through staging, narration, or other theatrical means.

Research Assessments

Systems Failure Report

Students investigate one of the systems that failed Max (bus safety protocols, IEP compliance, restraint and seclusion laws) and write a short report: What is this system supposed to do? What happened in the novel? What does real-world research show?

AAC Presentation

Students research one form of AAC and present it to the class, including: how it works, who uses it, what research says about its effectiveness, and a demonstration if possible.

Discussion-Based Assessments

Socratic Seminar

Students prepare by selecting and annotating three to five key passages from the book. Seminar focuses on one central question (suggested: What does this book say about what it means to be heard?). Assess on quality of contribution, use of textual evidence, and engagement with peers' ideas.

Fishbowl Discussion

Inner circle discusses; outer circle observes and takes notes. Rotate. Assess both discussion participation and observation quality.

Non-Written / Non-Verbal Options

Communication Map

Students create a visual map showing all the ways Max communicates and all the ways different characters communicate with him. Annotated with quotes. Assessed on completeness, accuracy, and visual organization.

Storyboard

Students storyboard a key scene from the novel, making deliberate choices about what to show, what to leave out, and how to convey inner experience visually.

Class Discussion Portfolio

Students receive credit for verbal contributions to class discussions, documented by the teacher. Particularly appropriate for students whose strengths are verbal rather than written.

12. A Note on Sensitive Content

This section is for teachers. It describes the difficult content in the novel and offers guidance for handling it in the classroom.

What Is in the Book

Physical restraint of a disabled child:

Max is placed in a five-point harness on the school bus. He is eventually held down by five adults for fifteen minutes on a playground after he removes his clothing in protest. These scenes are depicted without graphic detail but clearly and honestly.

Physical abuse by a school employee:

Mrs. Crane grabs Max in anger, leaving bruises. This is depicted from Max's perspective.

Institutional cover-up:

Fifty safety reports were filed and never shared with Max's mother. The bus camera was reported as broken.

Prolonged emotional harm:

Max cries in the driveway every morning. His distress is sustained and documented across many chapters.

How the Author Handles It

The author does not dwell on the violence or inflate it for emotional effect. She presents it as Max experiences it: clearly, factually, without drama. This is both appropriate for the age range and more powerful than sensationalism would be.

The novel does not resolve these incidents with punishment or justice in the traditional narrative sense. What resolves them is a lawyer, a new school, and a father who drives his son to school every day. This is realistic and worth discussing with students.

Guidance for Teachers

- Preview the book before teaching it. You know your students. Some may have personal experience with restraint, abuse, or institutional failure — as students themselves, or in their families. Be prepared for these connections to surface.
- Do not require students to discuss their own experiences. Invite reflection. Do not demand disclosure. Create clear norms that personal sharing is always voluntary.
- Name the scenes before students encounter them. Brief content warnings before a difficult passage help students regulate. “The next section includes a scene where Max is physically restrained. It is not described in graphic detail, but I want to give you a moment to prepare.” This is not avoidance — it is care.
- Frame the scenes in terms of rights, not just feelings. The question “How did Max feel?” is important. So is the question “What were Max’s rights in this situation, and were they protected?” Moving from individual empathy to systemic analysis is appropriate and meaningful for grades 5–8.
- Be honest about the complexity. Some students may want to know what happened to Mrs. Crane — the novel does not say. Some may feel frustrated by the lack of clear resolution. This is a meaningful conversation about how justice works (and often doesn’t) for disabled people.
- Reach out to families if appropriate. If a student in your class is disabled, has a sibling who is disabled, or is known to have had difficult school experiences, a brief heads-up to a family member before beginning the book can be a courtesy worth extending.

A Note on Language

The novel uses “autistic” as an identity-first descriptor (autistic boy, not boy with autism). Both “autistic person” and “person with autism” are used by different communities, and individuals have their own preferences. The Autistic Self Advocacy Network generally prefers identity-first language. When this comes up in class discussion, it is an opportunity to talk about why language choices matter — and to affirm that individual people’s preferences about their own identity labels deserve respect.

This guide was prepared for classroom teachers in grades 4–8. It is intended as a starting point, not a script. Your students will know things this guide doesn’t. Follow their lead.

End of Teacher Guide

Max, the Boy Who Counts (In Our Own Words — Book One) by Christina Carlsen

IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Free Educator Resource · Grades 4–8

Discussion Questions

Max, the Boy Who Counts (In Our Own Words — Book One)

By Christina Carlsen

These questions are organized by section and designed for classroom or book club discussion. They work best when students have time to think quietly before sharing. There are no wrong answers — the goal is honest thinking, careful listening, and genuine curiosity about Max’s world.

Before You Read

These questions help you think about what you already know and believe before you meet Max.

- Think about a time when you knew exactly what you wanted to say but couldn’t get the words out — maybe you were nervous, or upset, or just couldn’t find the right language. What did that feel like? What did you do instead? What did you wish someone had understood about you in that moment?
- When you meet someone new, what do you notice first? How do those first impressions shape what you expect from that person? Is it possible for first impressions to be completely wrong — and what would it take to change your mind?
- What does it mean to truly understand someone? Is it possible to understand a person without being able to have a conversation with them? What are all the ways people communicate that don’t involve spoken words?

Part One: Before

- Max tells us early on: “I know exactly what I want to say. That part has never been the problem. The problem is the distance between what I know and what comes out.” What do you think that distance feels like from the inside? How does it change the way you think about Max as a narrator — and as a person?
- Max’s twin brother Theo is his best friend and also, in some ways, his voice in the world. What do you think it’s like to be Theo — to love someone so well that you can speak for them, and to also be a kid with your own needs? How does their relationship feel different from other sibling relationships you’ve read about?
- Max describes his family as complex — a household with him, Theo, Danny, and Ellie, all with different needs, and two parents trying to hold everything together. How does Max understand his family’s love? What does he notice that tells him he is loved, even when things are hard?
- Max has a specific set of things that help him feel safe: routines, his green star, his stone, his folder with the word “horse.” Why do you think these objects and routines matter so much to him? Have you ever had

something — a habit, an object, a routine — that made you feel more steady? What happened when it was disrupted?

- Max’s mother collects movie lines with him as a form of AAC — a way for Max to communicate through language that already exists. Why do you think borrowed words from movies might feel safer or more available to Max than original words? What does it tell you about how communication can work differently for different people?
- Dr. Holt, the speech pathologist, uses only picture cards with Max. Max clearly finds this frustrating. Based on what you know about Max so far, why do you think picture cards alone feel insufficient to him? What is Dr. Holt missing about who Max is?
- Max describes himself noticing things other people don’t seem to notice — the sound of the lights, the way the air feels before a storm, the exact distance between two chairs. What do you think it would be like to move through the world with that level of sensory awareness? Would it be a gift, a burden, or both?

Part Two: The Breaking Point

- The school bus is described as a place where fifty safety incidents were suppressed — never reported, never acted on. Mrs. Crane is the bus monitor who treats Max as a problem to be managed rather than a child to be protected. Why do you think it was so easy for those fifty incidents to go unreported? Who had the power to stop them, and why didn’t they?
- Max says: “When you cannot say stop, you find another way to say it.” What are the “other ways” Max finds to say stop? How do the adults around him interpret those other ways — and why is that interpretation so dangerous?
- The camera on the bus was supposed to be broken — but it worked. Why do you think the people in charge believed it was broken without checking? What does that detail tell you about how systems sometimes fail the people they’re supposed to protect?
- The playground incident is a turning point in Part Two. Think about the moment from Max’s perspective and then try to imagine it from the perspective of someone who didn’t know Max at all. How different are those two versions of the same event? Why does it matter which version gets written down and believed?
- When Max is physically restrained at school, he is not given a way to communicate what is happening to him or how he feels. What do you think the experience of restraint means to someone who already struggles to communicate distress? How does this connect to the book’s larger ideas about power and who gets to be heard?
- Max’s mother keeps records — documents, dates, notes. Why do you think she does this? What does it mean to document something, and why does documentation matter when a child cannot speak for themselves in the ways a system expects?
- Ms. Fogarty is a good aide — someone who actually sees Max. What does she do differently from the other adults? Why do you think it’s so hard for good people like Ms. Fogarty to change a bad system from the inside?

- At the worst points of Part Two, Max still holds onto certain things: Theo, his objects, a movie line. What do you think it means that Max can find these anchors even during the hardest moments? What does that tell you about resilience?
- The title of this section is “The Breaking Point.” What do you think is breaking — and for whom? Is it just Max’s situation that breaks, or does something break open in a more complicated way?
- Toward the end of Part Two, Max says: “You did not do anything wrong.” Who do you think he is saying this to, or about? What does it mean for Max to arrive at this understanding while he is still in the middle of so much difficulty?

Part Three: Starting Again

- When Max begins at the New England Center for Children, everything feels different — but Max doesn’t immediately trust it. Why do you think trust is hard to rebuild after what he experienced? What does Mr. Ruiz do specifically that begins to earn it?
- Max meets Jonah at his new school and describes him as the first peer who has ever felt like a friend. What is it about their connection that works? What does their friendship suggest about what friendship can look like when two people communicate differently than the world expects?
- Max’s father now drives him to school instead of having him take the bus. This seems like a small logistical change, but it means something much larger. What does it mean to Max? What does it cost his father? Why does Max notice and track this sacrifice?
- Max’s cousin Lily tells him he is “easy to be with” — the first time anyone has ever said that to him. Why do you think this lands so hard for Max? What does it say about the difference between being accommodated and being genuinely enjoyed?
- Mr. Ruiz treats Max as someone with things to say and ideas worth hearing. How does that presumption of competence change the way Max moves through his school day? What specific moments show you this shift happening?
- By the end of the book, Max says: “I am not done. I am eleven. I have a green star and a stone and a folder with the word horse in it and a family that fought for me and won.” What does the word “won” mean here? What was won, and at what cost?
- Max’s favorite movie line is “Just keep swimming” — a line from a fish. Why do you think this particular line became the one he recorded for himself? What does it mean to keep swimming when the water itself has been the problem?

Themes and Big Ideas

These questions draw on the whole book and ask you to think about larger ideas.

- “Presuming competence” is the idea that every person, regardless of how they communicate, should be assumed to have intelligence, feelings, and something worth saying until proven otherwise. Looking back

at the whole book, which characters presume Max's competence and which don't? What difference does that presumption make — in individual moments and in the shape of Max's whole year?

- The book is narrated by Max in first person. What does telling this story from the inside make possible that an outside narrator couldn't? What responsibilities do authors take on when they choose to write as a character who belongs to a community that has historically been written about rather than with? What questions does this raise for you about whose stories get told, and how?
- Max says: "There is always one person. I have learned to wait for them." By the end of the book, who has been that person for Max at different moments? What do all those people have in common? And what does it mean that Max has had to wait — that the right person doesn't always arrive immediately?

Questions developed for classroom and book club use. Reproducible for educational purposes.

IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

READING GROUP GUIDE

Free Educator Resource · Grades 4–8

Reading Group Guide

Max, the Boy Who Counts (In Our Own Words — Book One)

By Christina Carlsen

For parent-led book clubs, homeschool groups, and community reading circles

About This Book

Max is eleven years old, and he knows exactly what he wants to say. The problem, as he puts it, is the distance between what he knows and what comes out. Max is minimally verbal and autistic, and he narrates this novel entirely from the inside — giving readers access to a rich, precise, often funny inner world that the people around him rarely get to see.

Max, the Boy Who Counts follows Max through one of the hardest years of his life: a school year at an old placement where he is misunderstood, mishandled, and sometimes endangered — by a hostile bus monitor, by a system that buried fifty safety reports, by a speech pathologist who offers him picture cards when he is clearly capable of so much more. It also follows what comes after: a new school, a new aide, a teacher named Mr. Ruiz who looks at Max and sees someone worth knowing, and a peer named Jonah who becomes his first real friend. Through all of it, Max's family — his twin brother Theo, his younger siblings Danny and Ellie, his exhausted and ferociously devoted parents — holds him.

This is a book about communication, belonging, and what it means to be fully human in a world that keeps asking you to prove it. It is tender and specific and, in places, genuinely difficult. It is also one of the most hopeful books you will read, because Max's hope is not vague or wishful — it is earned, specific, and built on real things: a green star, a stone, a folder with the word horse in it, and a family that fought for him and won.

A Note to Group Facilitators

This book handles some hard material, and you should feel prepared for it.

The bus sections in Part Two describe a sustained pattern of mistreatment — a hostile adult, suppressed incident reports, and a restraint that Max has no way to consent to or escape from. These sections are not gratuitous, but they are uncomfortable in exactly the way they are meant to be. The discomfort is the point: Max could not say stop, and no one listened to the other ways he tried to say it.

For groups with younger readers (ages 9–11), you may want to read these sections together and pause to check in. It can help to frame the conversation around the systems that failed Max — the missing reports, the broken camera that wasn't actually broken — rather than dwelling on the details of the incidents themselves. The book invites outrage, but it channels that outrage toward change, not despair.

If anyone in your group has personal experience with schools, disability, or difficult institutional encounters — as a child, a parent, or a sibling — those experiences may surface during discussion. Create space for them. You don't need to have answers. Saying "that sounds hard, thank you for sharing that" is often the most important thing a facilitator can do.

Finally, a word about Max's narration. Max is autistic and minimally verbal, and he tells his own story with clarity and wit and complexity. Some readers may find this surprising — they may have assumptions about what a minimally verbal person can think or feel or notice. Let those assumptions become part of the conversation. That's exactly what the book is asking for.

Discussion Questions

These questions are designed so that a ten-year-old and an adult can both answer meaningfully. There are no right answers — the best discussions happen when everyone in the room disagrees a little.

- Before you started the book, what did you picture when you thought about someone who is "minimally verbal"? Did reading Max's story change that picture? How?
- Max says the problem is "the distance between what I know and what comes out." Has there ever been a time in your own life when you knew what you wanted to say but couldn't get it out — because you were scared, or upset, or just didn't have the words? What did that feel like?
- Theo is Max's twin and his best friend. What do you think their friendship looks like on a normal Tuesday — not a dramatic day, just a regular one? What makes twin relationships different from other sibling relationships?
- Max's mom collects movie lines with him as a way for Max to communicate. His favorite is "Just keep swimming," from a fish. Why do you think borrowed words from movies or books can sometimes say things that original words can't?
- Mrs. Crane is the bus monitor who treats Max as a problem. How do you think she would describe Max if you asked her? Do you think she thinks of herself as a bad person? What's the difference between someone who is cruel on purpose and someone who causes harm without realizing it?
- Fifty safety reports were filed and then suppressed — buried, never acted on. How does something like that happen? Who had the power to stop it, and why didn't they?
- The camera on the bus was supposed to be broken. It wasn't. What do you think it means that nobody bothered to check? Have you ever assumed something was true without verifying it, and been wrong?
- Ms. Fogarty is a good aide who actually sees Max. What does she do differently? What does it mean to truly see someone?
- When Max moves to the New England Center for Children, his father starts driving him instead of putting him on a bus. What do you think this sacrifice means to Max's dad? What do you think it means to Max?
- Jonah is Max's first real peer friend. What do you think makes their friendship work? What does Jonah do or not do that makes him different from other kids Max has met?

- Max’s cousin Lily tells him he is “easy to be with” — and this is the first time anyone has ever said this to him. Why do you think it lands so hard? What is the difference between being tolerated and being enjoyed?
- Mr. Ruiz looks at Max and sees someone with things worth saying. What does he do specifically to show this? How does being believed in change the way you show up?
- By the end of the book, Max says: “I am not done. I am eleven. I have a green star and a stone and a folder with the word horse in it and a family that fought for me and won.” What do you think “won” means here? Is winning always obvious from the outside?
- The book says: “There is always one person. I have learned to wait for them.” Who has been that person for different members of your own family or friend group at different moments? What made them the right person?
- If Max could send one message to every adult who works with kids — teachers, bus drivers, doctors, coaches — what do you think he would want them to know?

Things to Do Together

These activities work especially well for groups of mixed ages — younger and older readers can do them side by side.

- **Try It Yourself: Five Minutes Without Words:** Set a timer for five minutes. No one in the group is allowed to speak. You can use gestures, facial expressions, objects, drawing, or writing — but no spoken words. At the end, talk about what it was like. What was hardest? What surprised you about what you could communicate? What felt frustrating? What, if anything, felt freeing?
- **Look Up AAC Together:** Search online for “AAC apps for kids” or “augmentative and alternative communication.” Look at a few real systems — some use pictures, some use text, some use pre-recorded phrases. Watch a short video of someone using a device to communicate. Talk about: How is this different from what Dr. Holt was doing with Max? What would you want in a communication system if you needed one?
- **Write a Letter from Inside:** Each person writes a short letter (5–8 sentences) from Max’s perspective — not from a dramatic scene, but from a quiet moment. Maybe Max is watching his family eat breakfast. Maybe he is in the back seat while his dad drives him to school. What does he notice? What does he think? What does he want to say but can’t? Share what you wrote and notice how different everyone’s Max sounds.
- **Make a “Lines for Every Moment” Collection:** Like Max’s collection of movie lines he keeps ready for different situations, each person finds or remembers 3 quotes — from a book, a movie, a song, or a person they know — that they would want to have available in specific moments. Share them with the group and explain what each one is for.
- **Draw or Describe a Sensory Map:** Pick a space you know well — a classroom, a kitchen, a grocery store, a hallway. Describe or draw what that space is like for the five senses: What do you hear? Smell? See? Feel?

under your feet or hands? Then ask: if those sensory experiences were much more intense than usual, what would that space feel like? What would help?

What Max Taught Us

Before your group wraps up, take a few quiet minutes for this final reflection. You can write it down, share it out loud, or just sit with it.

Think about one thing Max taught you — not a fact, but a way of seeing. Maybe it's the way you'll think about a quiet kid in your school or neighborhood. Maybe it's something about communication, or patience, or what it means to fight for someone you love. Maybe it's something about yourself.

Finish this sentence, in whatever way feels true:

"After reading Max's story, I will never again _____."

Or: "What I want to remember most is _____."

There are no wrong answers. The only requirement is honesty.

*This guide was developed for parent-led book clubs, homeschool groups, and community reading circles.
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IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

ACTIVITY SHEETS

Free Educator Resource · Grades 4–8

Activity Sheets

Max, the Boy Who Counts (In Our Own Words — Book One)

By Christina Carlsen

Five independent activities for grades 4–8. Each activity can be done alone or with a partner.

Activity 1: The Voice and the Door

Grade Level: 4–8 | **Time:** 30–45 minutes

Background

Max tells us early in the book: “I know exactly what I want to say. That part has never been the problem. The problem is the distance between what I know and what comes out.”

He describes it another way, too: “The voice is fine. The door is the problem.”

Max has a rich, complex inner life — full of observations, opinions, humor, and longing. But the door between his inside world and the outside world doesn’t work the way most people’s doors do. What comes out is often not what he intended, or nothing comes out at all.

This activity asks you to imagine what that gap feels like from the inside.

What You’ll Need

- This activity sheet
- Paper or a notebook
- A pencil or pen
- A book you’ve read recently (or think of a character you know well from a movie, TV show, or your own life)

Instructions

Step 1: Choose a character.

Pick a character from a book, movie, TV show, or your own life who struggles to say what they mean. This doesn’t have to be someone autistic — it could be someone who is very shy, someone in a difficult social situation, someone afraid of getting in trouble, someone in a new country learning a new language, or someone dealing with grief. The key is that there is a gap between what they feel or think and what they’re able to express.

Write the character’s name and one sentence about why they struggle with the “door.”

Step 2: Pick a specific moment.

Choose one specific scene or moment for this character — ideally a tense or important one. A moment where what they say (or don't say) matters. Describe the moment in 2–3 sentences: Where are they? Who else is there? What's happening?

Step 3: Write the inner monologue.

Now write what is happening inside this character's mind during that moment. Write in first person, using "I." Be specific — not just emotions, but thoughts, observations, physical sensations. What do they notice? What do they want to say? What comes out instead, and how does it feel when it comes out wrong — or doesn't come out at all?

Aim for at least one full paragraph (6–10 sentences). The goal is to make the reader understand something about this character that isn't visible from the outside.

Step 4: Write what actually happens (from the outside).

Now write the same moment from an outside observer's perspective — just what someone watching could see and hear. Keep it brief (3–5 sentences). This is what the character looks like to the world.

Reflection Questions

- How different are the two versions of the moment you wrote? What gets lost when we can only see the outside?
- Max says the door is the problem, not the voice. After doing this activity, what do you think the "door" represents — and what would it mean for someone to help open it?
- Is there a character in the book you read (or in Max, the Boy Who Counts) who made the effort to get past someone else's door? What did they do?

Activity 2: My Ten Things

Grade Level: 4–8 | **Time:** 25–35 minutes

Background

Throughout the book, Max makes lists — of things he likes, things he doesn't like, things that help him feel safe, things that make a day bad before it even starts. These lists are specific and honest. They aren't vague ("I like music") — they're precise ("I like the way the third movement of that piece slows down right before it ends"). The specificity is the point. A generic list tells you almost nothing. A specific list tells you exactly who someone is.

What You'll Need

- This activity sheet
- A sheet of paper, folded in half lengthwise (to make two columns), OR a piece of paper with a line drawn down the middle
- Colored pencils or markers (optional)
- Quiet time to think

Instructions

Step 1: Set up your columns.

Label the left column “Things That Work for Me” and the right column “Things That Don’t Work for Me.”

These aren’t just likes and dislikes — think of them as things about the world that feel aligned with you, and things that feel misaligned. They can be sensory (certain sounds, textures, lighting), social (certain kinds of conversations, certain group sizes), environmental (certain rooms, times of day), or about tasks and learning.

Step 2: Fill in at least 5 items on each side.

The rules:

- Be specific. Not “I like being outside” — but what about outside? The smell? The light? A particular place? The feeling of wind or the absence of people?
- Be honest. Don’t write what you think sounds good. Write what’s actually true.
- Give brief reasons. After each item, write one sentence that starts with “because...” or “especially when...” — something that makes the item yours specifically.

Here’s an example of what not to write: “I like art.”

Here’s an example of what to write: “I like drawing things I’m trying to figure out — because making the lines helps me understand what I actually think.”

Step 3: Read back over your list.

Circle one item from each side that surprises you a little — something you didn’t know you believed until you wrote it down.

Step 4: Write a short reflection paragraph.

In 4–6 sentences, answer this: What does your list tell you about yourself that a stranger couldn’t know just by looking at you? What would it mean for a teacher, a friend, or a family member to actually know these things about you?

Reflection Questions

- Max’s lists help him feel safe — they are a map of himself that he can hold onto when things get chaotic. Do you think knowing yourself well makes hard situations easier? Why or why not?
- If you could hand your list to one person in your life without explaining it — just hand it over and have them read it — who would you choose, and why?
- Is there anything on your list that someone in your life gets wrong about you — something they assume that doesn’t match what you actually wrote?

Activity 3: A Line for Every Moment

Grade Level: 4–8 | **Time:** 30–40 minutes

Background

Max’s mother collects movie lines with him. His favorite is “Just keep swimming” — a line from a fish in a movie about finding someone lost in the ocean. Max keeps this line ready because it says exactly what he needs to say to himself when things get hard, and it says it in borrowed words that feel safe and available to him.

He has lines for other moments, too — little pre-loaded phrases that connect to specific feelings or situations. The lines are his, even if he didn’t write them first.

This activity asks you to build your own collection.

What You’ll Need

- This activity sheet
- Paper or index cards (one for each quote, if you prefer)
- A pencil or pen
- Time to think and, if you want, look things up

Instructions

Step 1: Think about the moments.

Before you look for quotes, identify 5 specific types of moments in your life that sometimes need a line. These should be real, specific situations — not just emotions in the abstract. For example:

- When I feel like I’m the only one who notices something is wrong
- When I’m in a new place and everything feels like too much

- When someone tells me I can't do something
- When I need to be patient but I don't have patience left
- When I did something I'm proud of but no one else understands why

Write down your 5 moments before you go looking for quotes.

Step 2: Find a line for each moment.

For each moment, find one quote — from a book, a movie, a song, a poem, a speech, a TV show, or a real person in your life — that could live in that moment with you. The quote doesn't have to be famous. It just has to be true.

For each quote, write:

- The quote itself (in quotation marks)
- Where it comes from (book title, movie, person's name, etc.)
- The moment it's for (from your Step 1 list)
- 2–3 sentences about why this particular quote works for this particular moment — what does it say that you couldn't say yourself?

Step 3: Design your collection.

Optional but encouraged: write or illustrate your 5 quotes in a way that makes them feel like yours. You could make a small zine, a folded card, a decorated list, or a simple chart. The goal is to make something you might actually want to keep.

Reflection Questions

- Was it harder to find the moments or harder to find the quotes? What does that difficulty tell you?
- Max records his favorite line — “Just keep swimming” — for himself, so he can hear it in a moment when he can't find any words at all. If you made a recording for yourself, which of your five quotes would you choose? Why that one?
- Are there any moments in your life where no quote feels right — where borrowed words aren't enough? What do you do in those moments instead?

Activity 4: The Bus Camera

Grade Level: 4–8 | **Time:** 40–50 minutes (or split into two sessions)

Background

The camera on Max’s school bus was supposed to be broken. It wasn’t. The footage exists — but no one thought to check.

If someone had reviewed that footage, they would have seen one version of events. If Mrs. Crane had written a report, she would have described something very different. Same moments, two completely different accounts.

This activity asks you to write both.

What You’ll Need

- This activity sheet
- The book *Max, the Boy Who Counts* (specifically the bus sections in Part Two)
- Paper or a computer
- Colored pens (optional — for marking the two perspectives differently)

Instructions

Step 1: Review the bus scenes.

Reread the sections of the book that take place on the school bus. Pay attention to what happens, who does what, and how Max experiences it. Take brief notes as you read.

Step 2: Write the incident report — from the camera’s perspective.

Imagine you are a safety investigator reviewing the bus footage for the first time. You can only report what you can see and hear on the video. You cannot interpret feelings or intentions — only actions and words.

Write a brief incident report (one page or less) that includes:

- Date and time (you can make these up)
- A factual description of the incident — what happened, in sequence
- What each person did and said
- The tone and body language you observed (without editorializing)
- A neutral closing sentence

Keep your language calm, precise, and as neutral as possible. This is not a place for your opinion — it is a record of what happened.

Step 3: Write Mrs. Crane’s report.

Now write a report from Mrs. Crane’s perspective — how she would describe the same event if she were filling out an incident form. Think carefully: Mrs. Crane doesn’t think she’s the bad guy. She has a story about what happened. Write from inside that story, as honestly as you can.

Step 4: Compare the two documents.

Read them side by side. Then answer these questions in writing:

- What is different? What language changed? What got left out?
- Which version sounds more “official” and why?
- If a principal only had Mrs. Crane’s report, what would they believe about Max?
- What does this activity show you about why documentation, language, and who gets to write the official account matters so much?

Reflection Questions

- Max’s mother kept her own records. Why do you think she did this? How does her record-keeping connect to the camera footage?
- Is there a situation in your own life — school, home, sports, anywhere — where two people would describe the same event completely differently? What makes those differences happen?
- What would need to be different about the system — the school, the bus company, the reporting process — for Max’s experience to have been caught and stopped earlier?

Activity 5: Write a Moment for the Record

Grade Level: 4–8 | **Time:** 30–40 minutes

Background

Throughout the book, Max says things like “I want that on the record.” He is aware that his version of events is often not the one that gets written down — that the official story, the documented story, often leaves him out entirely.

Writing something down is a form of saying: this happened, this mattered, I was here.

This activity asks you to do the same.

What You'll Need

- This activity sheet
- Paper or a computer
- A quiet place to think
- Optional: a pen that feels good to write with (Max would understand this)

Instructions

Step 1: Choose your moment.

Think of a moment from your own life that you want documented — something that happened, that was real, that you want to put on the record. It does not have to be dramatic. It can be:

- A moment when you were misunderstood
- A moment when someone did something kind that no one else noticed
- A moment when you figured something out
- A moment you are proud of that was never acknowledged
- A moment that still bothers you, and you've never had the words to say why
- A moment that was just quietly important, and you don't want to forget it

Write 1–2 sentences describing which moment you've chosen and why it feels worth documenting.

Step 2: Write the moment.

Write a clear, first-person account of what happened. This is not a story — it is a record. That means:

- Be specific about time and place
- Describe what happened in sequence
- Include how you felt, what you thought, and what you wanted but didn't say (Max would want you to include this)
- Keep it honest — this document is for you

Aim for at least one full paragraph (6–10 sentences), but there is no maximum length.

Step 3: Add the closing line.

End your record with a version of Max's phrase, adapted to your own moment. You might write:

- "I want that on the record."
- "This is what actually happened."
- "I was here, and I noticed this, and it mattered."
- Or write your own closing line that feels right.

Step 4: Seal it (optional).

Fold your document and address it to yourself, or to someone you trust, or to “Whoever Finds This.” You don’t have to share it. Some records are just for you.

Reflection Questions

- How did it feel to write something down just for the purpose of documenting it — not for a grade, not for an audience, just to say it happened? Did it feel different from other kinds of writing?
- Max is unable to tell people what happened to him in the ways the system expects. Writing is one of the few ways his story gets told at all. What other methods exist for people to tell their stories when the usual channels aren’t available?
- If you could add one moment from someone else’s life to the record — someone who couldn’t document it themselves — whose moment would you choose, and why?

Activity sheets developed for grades 4–8. Reproducible for educational use.

IN OUR OWN WORDS — BOOK ONE

The Boy Who Counts

ACTIVITY SHEETS

Free Educator Resource · Grades 4–8

Extension Activities

Max, the Boy Who Counts (In Our Own Words — Book One)

By Christina Carlsen

Eight enrichment activities for students who want to go deeper. All are optional. Choose what interests you.

1. AAC Research Project

Difficulty: Medium

Description

Augmentative and alternative communication — AAC — is the term for any method of communicating that supplements or replaces spoken speech. Max’s mother builds his AAC system partly around movie lines; Dr. Holt offers picture cards; a newer approach might use a speech-generating device, a tablet app, or a symbol-based board. The field of AAC is large, varied, and constantly evolving. For this project, you will research what AAC actually looks like in practice — the systems that exist, how they work, who uses them, and how access to the right system can change someone’s life.

Start by researching different categories of AAC: low-tech (picture boards, communication books), mid-tech (recorded voice output devices), and high-tech (dynamic display apps like Proloquo2Go, LAMP, or TouchChat). Then, if possible, go further: look for first-person accounts from AAC users — blogs, videos, or interviews from people who use these systems and talk about them openly. Organizations like ASHA (the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) or ISAAC (the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication) are good starting points.

What You’ll Create

A research presentation, poster, or written report (2–4 pages) that explains at least three different AAC systems, how they work, and what makes each one appropriate for different users. Include at least one first-person source — something an actual AAC user has said or written about their experience. Conclude with a short reflection: what did you learn that surprised you, and what would you want Dr. Holt to read?

2. Know Your Rights

Difficulty: Medium

Description

In the United States, students with disabilities have specific legal rights in public school settings. The most important law governing these rights is IDEA — the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act — which requires schools to provide a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, with a customized plan called an IEP (Individualized Education Program). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act also provide important protections. Max’s parents had to fight for him in part because knowing these laws exist is very different from knowing how to use them. For this project, you will research these laws and translate them into something clear and usable.

Start by looking up the key provisions of IDEA: What is an IEP? What is “least restrictive environment”? What rights do parents and students have to challenge decisions? What are the rules around seclusion and restraint? The US Department of Education’s website and resources from organizations like the National Center for Learning Disabilities or the Understood Foundation provide plain-language summaries.

What You’ll Create

An infographic, fact sheet, or illustrated guide — ideally one page, designed to be readable by a middle schooler — that explains the most important rights a student with a disability has in school. Include at least one specific right that was relevant to Max’s situation and one resource (website, hotline, or organization) where families can get help.

3. Presuming Competence Pledge

Difficulty: Easy

Description

“Presuming competence” means starting from the assumption that every person — regardless of how they communicate, how they move, or how they appear — has intelligence, feelings, opinions, and something worth saying. It means not requiring someone to prove their worth before you treat them with respect. It is a principle at the heart of the disability rights movement, and it is at the heart of Max, the Boy Who Counts.

For this project, you will write and design a pledge — a public commitment — that could be displayed in a classroom, a hallway, a school library, or a community space. Think carefully before you write: a pledge that is vague or generic (“we will be kind to everyone”) is easy to sign and easy to ignore. A pledge that is specific (“we will not finish someone’s sentence for them before they’ve had time to try”) is harder to sign and harder to forget. Aim for specificity. Think about the concrete behaviors that presuming competence actually requires.

What You'll Create

A written and visually designed pledge — formatted as a poster, a card, a banner, or a flyer — with 5 to 8 specific commitments that reflect what it really means to presume competence. Include a short introduction (2–4 sentences) explaining what presuming competence means and why it matters. If possible, share your pledge with at least one other person and discuss: Is there anything on this list that feels hard? What would it actually take to keep these commitments?

4. Letter to the School Board

Difficulty: Challenging

Description

Max's mother knows what happened on that bus. She has records — dates, incidents, the fifty reports that were suppressed. She also has a child who cannot testify on his own behalf in the ways institutions expect. Writing a formal persuasive letter to a school board requires a specific kind of skill: you must be factual without being cold, urgent without being dismissed as emotional, and specific enough that the board cannot look away. For this project, you will write that letter.

Put yourself in Max's mother's position. You have the documentation. You have a son who was harmed. You have a new school that is already doing things differently. What do you want the board to change — specifically, not vaguely? What policy around transportation safety needs to exist? What training does a bus monitor require? What should happen when an incident report is filed? What should happen when a camera is “broken”? Research real school district policies on transportation safety and restraint to ground your letter in the language of actual policy, not just feeling.

What You'll Create

A formal persuasive letter (1–2 pages) addressed to a fictional school board, written from Max's mother's perspective. The letter should open with a clear statement of purpose, present evidence (drawing on the book and your research), make at least three specific policy recommendations, and close with a strong call to action. Use formal letter format. Your letter should be the kind of letter that a real school board might actually read.

5. Sensory Mapping

Difficulty: Easy

Description

Max experiences the world with a level of sensory intensity that most people don't. The hum of fluorescent lights is not just a hum to him — it is a specific sound at a specific frequency that is present in his body in a way he can't turn off. The smell of a particular cleaning product can derail a whole morning. The feeling of a crowd in a cafeteria is not just “loud” — it is a specific constellation of sounds and movements and smells and the way the air pressure changes when seventy bodies are in the same room. Most school environments are not designed with this kind of experience in mind.

For this project, you will create a “sensory map” of a familiar space — a classroom, cafeteria, hallway, gymnasium, or any room you spend time in. Your map will describe that space across five sensory channels: sound, smell, light, texture/touch, and movement/vibration. First, you'll describe it as you usually experience it. Then you'll describe what it might be like for someone with heightened sensory sensitivity — someone for whom each channel is turned up significantly.

What You'll Create

A sensory map of your chosen space, presented as a visual diagram, an illustrated chart, or a descriptive written document. Include both versions: your experience and a heightened-sensitivity experience. Add a short reflection (4–6 sentences) at the end: What changes would make this space work better for more people? What would be lost or gained by making those changes?

6. The Other Side of the Desk

Difficulty: Medium

Description

Ms. Fogarty is one of the few adults in Max's old school who actually sees him. She is an aide — not a teacher, not an administrator, not someone with much institutional power — but she pays attention. She notices what Max notices. She doesn't talk over him or around him. She doesn't try to manage him into compliance. She is doing her job, and she is doing it with care, inside a system that is not doing its job at all.

What is it like to be Ms. Fogarty? She watches what happens to Max. She has feelings about it. She may have tried to say something and been ignored, or she may not have found the words, or the channels, or the moment. She goes home at the end of the day. She thinks about her students. For this project, you will step inside her perspective and write a short story — not from Max's point of view, but from hers.

What You'll Create

A short story or personal essay (2–4 pages) written from Ms. Fogarty's first-person perspective. Choose a specific moment or day from the book to anchor your story — a moment when Ms. Fogarty observes something she cannot change, or does something small that matters, or faces a decision about whether to speak up. What does she notice? What does she think? What does she wish she could say — to Max, to the administration, to Max's parents? Make her a fully realized person, not just a supporting character.

7. Finding the Right Fit

Difficulty: Challenging

Description

Max's old school is a general public school with a special education program. His new school — the New England Center for Children — is a specialized school designed specifically for students with autism and complex communication needs. Between those two options, there is a wide spectrum of educational settings for students with disabilities: inclusion classrooms, co-taught classrooms, resource rooms, self-contained special education classrooms, therapeutic day schools, and residential programs. Each model has genuine benefits and real drawbacks. No single model is right for every student, and the question of which setting best serves a particular child is one that families, educators, and advocates debate constantly.

For this project, you will research at least four different school models for students with disabilities. Use sources like the National Center for Learning Disabilities, state department of education websites, and first-person accounts from parents and self-advocates. Try to find perspectives from multiple sides — including people who are critical of specialized schools (because of separation from nondisabled peers) and people who are critical of full inclusion (because some students don't get what they need in general education settings).

What You'll Create

A comparison chart or research document (1–2 pages) that describes at least four educational models, with columns for: how it works, who it tends to work best for, key benefits, key concerns, and a real-world example (a real school or program you can name). Add a short reflection (4–6 sentences): Given what you know about Max specifically, what do you think made the New England Center for Children the right fit for him at this point in his life? Could the same fit have been achieved in a different kind of setting, or not? What would have needed to change?

8. Make Your Own Communication System

Difficulty: Easy to Medium

Description

Max communicates through a combination of methods: some spoken words, borrowed movie lines stored and played through his AAC device, a gesture system he and Theo have built together, and the way he positions his body or his objects to signal how he is feeling. No single system covers everything. Communication, for most people, is multimodal — it uses multiple channels at once.

For this project, you will design your own communication system from scratch — one that does not rely on spoken words. Your system can use pictures, symbols, color, gesture, technology, objects, written text, or anything else you can imagine. The only rule is that it cannot require the person using it to speak aloud. Think about: What kinds of messages does a person need to send most urgently? What kinds of emotions are hardest to communicate? What does your system do when the most important message — stop, I need help, I am in pain — needs to get through immediately?

What You'll Create

A presentation of your communication system — this can be a visual diagram, a physical prototype, a slideshow, a poster, or a short demonstration. Include: a name for your system, a description of how it works, examples of at least 8 messages it can convey, a brief explanation of why you made the design choices you did, and a short reflection on what you learned about communication by trying to build a system from the ground up. If you want, test your system with a partner: give them a message to send, without explaining how to use the system, and see what happens.

Extension activities developed for grades 4–8. All are optional. Choose what interests you most — or invent your own.