

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**The Absolutely True Diary
of a Part-Time Indian**

by Sherman Alexie

written by Edward Ledford

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The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss ways the author uses images to accentuate the text, and vice versa.
2. define and explain the effects of *hyperbole* and provide examples from the text.
3. define *sarcasm* and provide examples from the text.
4. infer meaning from Ellen Forney's drawings.
5. write an autobiographical short story.
6. discuss the different ways narrative, dialogue, and images create meaning.
7. understand the differences among fiction, nonfiction, biography, and autobiography.
8. discuss how the author's choices in language affect the novel.
9. explain similarities and differences among Arnold Spirit's perception of himself, Sherman Alexie's perception of Arnold Spirit, and the student's own perception of Arnold Spirit.
10. explain differences and similarities between novels and graphic novels.
11. discuss the cultural differences apparent in the book.
12. explain the concept of being different and how it applies to the novel.
13. explain ethnic discrimination and how it functions in the novel.
14. understand the protagonist's changing view of himself.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In what ways might Forney's images contribute to the narrative, and how might they detract from the narrative?
2. Which images in the text communicate the most powerful meaning, and which images fail to achieve their apparent purpose?
3. How does Alexie's use of strong language and slang in the narrative enhance or detract from the story?
4. How successfully does Arnold Spirit navigate the divide between the world of the reservation and the world outside the reservation?
5. Discuss the differing views of life on the reservation that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* advances.
6. How does the concept of being different contribute to the action of the novel?
7. Identify two or three of the most powerful metaphors in the story and explain how they work and contribute to meaning in the narrative.
8. Which character(s) provide(s) the most inspiration and support for Arnold Spirit, and how?
9. In what ways do Arnold Spirit's judgments of other characters change over the course of the novel?
10. How does Arnold Spirit come to understand his own identity by the end of the novel?

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club

VOCABULARY

cerebral – related to the brain

epic – very large or impressive; overwhelming or beyond belief

impediment – a barrier or obstacle; something that interferes with movement or progress

lisp – a speech difficulty, usually involving *s* and *sh*

reservation – an area of land set aside for Native Americans to live on

stutter – speech that is interrupted or blocked involuntarily

susceptible – prone to or liable

1. What does the narrator, Arnold Spirit, mean by “brain grease”?

2. What literary term is Arnold Spirit using when he refers to “brain grease”?

3. Arnold reports that he was supposed to “croak” during surgery when he was an infant, which is a use of slang. What effect does the author’s choice to use slang terms have?

4. Arnold reports that “our white dentist believed that Indians only felt half as much pain as white people did....” Arnold seems to be accusing the dentist of what characteristic or characteristics?

5. Do you think that on the reservation there really was a “Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club”? If not, what does Arnold accomplish by telling us that there is such a club?

6. According to Arnold, what is the relationship between words and pictures? Which do you think are more effective?

7. Arnold explains, “I feel important with a pen in my hand. I feel like I might grow up to be somebody important.” Why do you think a simple pen might empower Arnold?

8. Pick either of the two images Arnold presents in this first chapter and explain how it communicates a meaning. In your opinion, would words have communicated the meaning just as well?

9. If *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is an autobiography, why is the narrator's name not the same as the author's name? What is the difference between an autobiography and something that is autobiographical?

10. What does the title, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, mean?

Why Chicken Means So Much to Me

VOCABULARY

outsource – to have some of a company’s work done by people outside the company
tsunami – a wave that causes great destruction when it reaches land

1. The title of the chapter is, “Why Chicken Means So Much to Me.” Why does it mean so much to Arnold Spirit?

2. According to Arnold, what is so hopeless about his parents?

3. Of what is Oscar, Arnold’s dog, a symbol?

Revenge Is My Middle Name

VOCABULARY

avalanche – a large mass of snow falling down a mountainside
hypothermia – subnormal temperature of the body
persistent – continuing or long-lasting despite difficulty
powwow – a social gathering of Native Americans
troll – a dwarf or giant living in caves or hills
vandalism – a destruction or ruining of public or private property

1. How does Rowdy’s family life compare to Arnold’s?

2. Traditionally, a powwow is a meeting among Native Americans where there is dancing and discussion, among other festivities. What are powwows like in Arnold’s world?

3. What is the nature of Rowdy and Arnold’s friendship?

Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France

VOCABULARY

- ambidextrous** – able to use both hands equally well
- compound** – a fenced or walled-in area containing buildings or houses
- hormonal** – affected by hormones, substances produced in the body that influence growth and development
- isosceles triangle** – a triangle with two equal sides
- liberal** – a person who believes that government should be active in supporting social and political change
- minion** – a follower
- perverted** – having or showing desires that are considered not normal or acceptable

1. Why does Arnold Spirit believe that he loves geometry?

2. What are some reasons Arnold is worried about high school?

3. What, to Arnold, “is absolutely the saddest thing in the world”?

4. Arnold writes that the book he threw at Mr. P hit his own heart with “the force of a nuclear bomb.” What literary term is used here, and what is Alexie attempting to show by it?

Historical Context of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Although Junior's story takes place in the present day, his experiences—particularly the hardships of life on the reservation—are very much informed by the historical oppression of Native Americans in the United States, and Junior and other characters make a few specific references to historical events. Alexie has explained his refusal to sell the movie rights of *Absolutely True Diary* by saying that it would be too hard to find a young Indian actor who could both act and play basketball well enough to portray Junior, who is essentially Alexie's younger self. Why is the novel called *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*? Junior says, "I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job." Examine the cartoon on p. 120. Analyze each of the pictures. Junior's community is very connected - 2,000 Indians show up for the grandmother's funeral. How does Junior cope with his grief? Takes a long time off school Keeps making lists of things that bring him joy Keeps drawing what makes him angry. What do Junior's cartoons (on pages 170 & 171) reveal about his emotions? Feels helpless; overwhelmed Angry - wants to lash out at the world Parents rely on him Underlying sense of humor - ridicules. Through his *absolutely true* diary, Arnold describes his impediments and vulnerabilities, the biggest of which is living on a reservation where he is a zero with a zero future. A pivotal conversation with a teacher spurs Arnold to make a daring life choice—to attend an all-white school miles from the reservation. Reading/Writing Connection Book Blog Would you recommend *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to other readers? Ask students to answer that question, supporting their opinions with reasons based on text evidence. Encourage students to participate in a classroom book blog, either online (if technology is in place) or on a class-room bulletin board. *The Absolutely True Diary* is true to Alexie's style, as we see how the reservation is a place of great beauty, but also a very destructive environment blighted with poverty, alcoholism, abuse, and senseless death. Still, as the novel teaches us, there is also plenty of joy—or, as one of the character calls joy, "metaphorical boners"—to be had. *The Absolutely True Diary* doesn't pull any punches, but it also offers readers a hilarious and hopeful read. Alexie Accepts National Book Award for Part-Time Indian Alexie's acceptance speech at the National Book Awards. Tip: he gets on stage after the 4:35 minute mark! Sherman Alexie Talk in Tulsa Sherman Alexie describes his real-life decision to switch schools as a teenager. Audio. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a first-person narrative novel by Sherman Alexie, from the perspective of a Native American teenager, Arnold Spirit Jr., also known as "Junior", a 14-year-old promising cartoonist. The book is about Junior's life on the Spokane Indian Reservation and his decision to go to an all-white public high school off of the reservation. The graphic novel includes 65 comic illustrations that help further the plot.