

This guide is aligned with the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR) for Literature, Writing, Language, and Speaking and Listening. The broad CCR standards are the foundation for the grade level–specific Common Core State Standards.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Like many ambitious New York City teenagers, Craig Gilner sees Manhattan's Executive Pre-Professional High School as the ticket to his future. Determined to succeed in life—which means getting into the right high school to get into the right college to get the right job—Craig studies night and day to ace the entrance exam, and he does. That's when things start to get crazy.

At his new school, Craig realizes that he isn't brilliant compared to the other kids; he's just average, and maybe not even that. He starts earning mediocre grades and sees his once-perfect future crumbling away. The competition escalates, the stress becomes unbearable, and Craig stops eating and sleeping—until one night, in a fit of desperation, he nearly kills himself.

Craig's suicidal episode gets him checked into a Brooklyn mental hospital, where his roommate is an Egyptian schoolteacher who refuses to get out of bed. Craig's neighbors include a transsexual sex addict, a girl who has scarred her own face with scissors, and "President" Armelio. Among his fellow patients, isolated from the crushing pressures of school and friends, Craig is finally able to confront the sources of his anxiety.

Ned Vizzini, who himself spent time in a psychiatric hospital, created a remarkably moving tale about the sometimes unexpected road to happiness. For a novel about depression, it's definitely a funny story.

ABOUT THE GUIDE

This guide includes discussion questions and projects intended to extend the use of the novel into classrooms, book clubs, and literature circles. It promotes discussion on the themes of the novel, including depression, friendship, teen relationships, stress, and hope.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Encourage students to refer to specific passages in Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* when discussing the following questions.

- 1** The novel opens with the sentence “It’s so hard to *talk* when you want to kill yourself.” How does this set the tone for the entire novel? What exactly does the narrator mean by this? Should you take this kind of language seriously?
- 2** What does Craig describe as his “Tentacles”? What types of things qualify as Tentacles? Do all teens have them? Why or why not? What are the opposite of Tentacles? Why are the Tentacles only temporary?
- 3** When do you think Craig’s slide into depression began? Do you think it was when he started attending the demanding high school, or did the beginning of his decline come with his near obsession with getting in? Defend your answer.
- 4** What did Craig enjoy creating when he was young? Why did he always crumple them up when he completed them? What does that show you about his personality and his intelligence? Do you think all people have some kind of gift?
- 5** What symptoms show that Craig’s depression is really serious? Is he able to function amid the demands of normal life? In what areas does he really have trouble? How would you feel if you had these symptoms? What would you do? To whom would you turn for help?
- 6** Describe the voice that Craig hears inside himself. Do you think this voice, the voice of an alter ego, is a good influence on his behavior? Why or why not? Why doesn’t he admit that he hears this voice? Do you think everyone has this type of dialogue with themselves or not?
- 7** Who is Aaron? Do you think he is a good friend for Craig? What types of things do they do together? What divides the two? Do you think Aaron is a true friend? Why or why not? What defines a true friend?

- 8 Reconstruct the steps that lead to Craig's decision to check himself into the hospital. How might things have turned out differently? What options was he considering? Do you, like his mom, think he is brave? What reasons does he use to convince himself not to commit suicide?
- 9 What's it like in Six North? Why is the physical description so important to Craig? What are the activities he is expected to participate in? Why? Do you think it would be frightening to be there? Does Craig seem frightened?
- 10 Describe Craig's relationship with his family. Do you think it is a typical relationship? Is he lucky to have such supportive parents and a sister who adores him? Do you think his story would be different if this were not his family? How can teens overcome a less than ideal family structure if they, too, are depressed?
- 11 Compare Nia and Noelle. How are they similar? How are they different? Who do you think is better for Craig? Do you think they have a chance on the outside? Why or why not? Do you think Craig is ready for any kind of relationship?
- 12 What do you think is the turning point for Craig? How does he decide to participate in his own recovery? What perspectives does he gain in the psychiatric ward that he couldn't get in the real world?
- 13 How has Craig changed by the end of the novel? Do you think he will always battle depression, or will he someday be completely cured? Predict what Craig will be doing in five years, and in ten.
- 14 What did you learn by reading Craig's story? Do you think teens today suffer more from depression and other psychological disorders than teenagers from previous generations, or are they just diagnosed more often? How can you tell if someone needs help? How does someone who is depressed get the help they need?
- 15 Did you find the ending of the novel hopeful? What creates a hopeful ending? Why do you think many young adult novels lack hope? Do we, as humans, need hope to survive? How can we build it?

PROJECTS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a scene that comes one year after the close of the novel. Where is Craig? What is he doing? How has he changed? Is he still in contact with Aaron? Nia? Noelle? Other people from Six North?

ART

Create a piece of art inspired by Craig's maps, or veer off into undiscovered territory of your own. Keep repeating at least five of your original themes, and see how the art develops over time. Turn in all your drafts, along with a brief journal about what you learned.

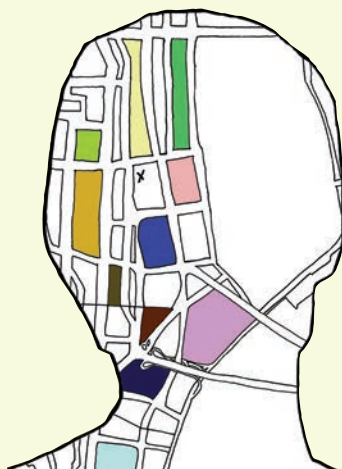
HEALTH

Research the symptoms, warning signs, and actions a person should take if he or she suspects someone close is depressed or suicidal. Create an emergency cheat sheet people in your area can keep near the phone so they don't have to dig through the municipal numbers the way Craig did. Create a poster or a presentation using PowerPoint or another digital media program to describe what you've learned.

MUSIC

Create a playlist that could be used for the soundtrack of *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. What songs would you include? Why?

Correlates to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details, RL.9-12.1, RL.9-2.2, RL.9-12.3; Reading Literature: Craft and Structure, RL.9-12.4, RL.9-12.5, RL.9-10.6; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration, SL.9-12.1; Writing: Text Types and Purposes, W.9-12.1, W.9-12.3; Production and Distribution of Writing, W.9-12.4, W.9-12.6.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ned Vizzini began writing for the *New York Press* at the age of fifteen, and at nineteen he had his first book, *Teen Angst? Naaah . . .*, published. He subsequently wrote *Be More Chill*, named one of *Entertainment Weekly's* Top Ten Books for 2004, and the first young adult novel ever chosen as a *Today* Book Club pick.



Next came *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, selected by the American Library Association for its list of the Best Books for Young Adults in 2007 and named one of the 100 Best-Ever Teen Novels by National Public Radio. It was adapted into a film released by Focus Features in 2010. The last novel published before his death, *House of Secrets*, was a middle-grade fantasy co-written with filmmaker Chris Columbus; it debuted on the *New York Times* Best Seller List.

Ned's stories often drew on his struggles with anxiety and depression, yet they had a strong comic bent. His fans appreciated his honesty and sense of humor; his writing provided solace to those who saw their feelings and experiences mirrored in the books. He was also very generous to other writers. In 2005 he started the Barnes & Noble Teen Writers Workshops, which he ran until 2012.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Why did you decide to be so open about your own experience in a psychiatric hospital?

How else am I supposed to be? Would it be healthy for me to hide my experience and get ashamed over it? The fact is, for me that hospital was a special place. I came in there because I didn't want to live. And I left—well, I left not wanting to live either. But a few days later, I kind of wanted to live

again. And I worked from there. I believe strongly that my experiences are common, and I feel that by sharing them, and by being honest about them, I will be able to connect with others who have been through them. It's as much for me as it is for anyone else. I need to connect with other people.

Do you think more teens today suffer with depression than ever before? Why?

It's not a matter of thought. It's been statistically shown that instances of clinical depression, which is a diagnosable illness marked by more than two weeks of feelings of worthlessness, changes in appetite, changes in sleep patterns, inability to take pleasure in everyday experience, and so on—is on the rise in adolescents. Teens are being prescribed antidepressants more than ever before, and children five to thirteen are increasingly being treated with them as well.

I believe that there are chemical reasons for this. It gets a little technical here, but bear with me—it makes sense.

The human nervous system is actually two-part: we use our *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic* nervous systems. The parasympathetic nervous system is the brain and spinal cord at rest, calmly controlling breathing, digestion, cognitive function, and sexual desire. The sympathetic nervous system is what takes over when our brains perceive a life-threatening situation—say, a bear attack. The sympathetic nervous system devotes all of its energy to getting ready for a physical fight: dilating the blood vessels so that more blood can reach the muscles (which also causes headaches), increasing heart rate, and shutting down nonnecessary functions like digestion.

So what happens when a teenage mind, which is still developing (the brain isn't fully developed until middle age, new studies show), is constantly exposed to the threats of homework, college, extracurricular activities, fierce competition, and parental expectation, not to mention an increasingly full planet with more people ready to take your job and future than ever before? These teenage brains are constantly operating in the sympathetic nervous

system. They are literally always looking over their shoulder. And since the brain reinforces the functionality that it uses most, these teenagers are chemically wired to constantly be under attack.

One day, when you can't handle closing door after door, scrambling from all-important responsibility to responsibility, you shut down. That's what depression is, and that why there is more of it now in teenagers.

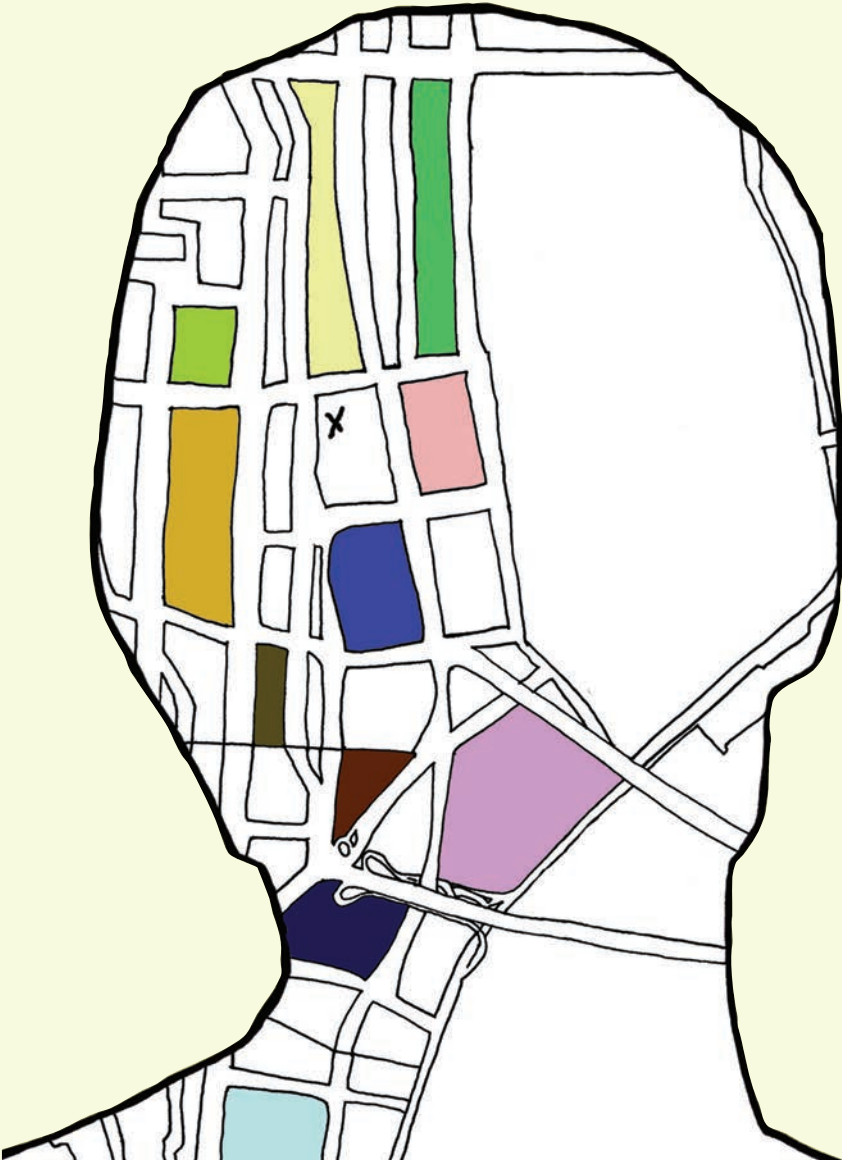
Was this a difficult book to write compared to your other novels? Why or why not?

From an objective standpoint, I can't say *It's Kind of a Funny Story* was hard to write, because I wrote it in about a month. It came out of me, and I really couldn't stop writing it; it was a wonderful feeling. That's not to say that it's pleasant to wake up, skip food, write and sweat and wonder if it's any good, and then keep going until the sun is down and you collapse back in bed, but it's better than hacking away at something for a year, knowing that it isn't all that good. So the speed made it easy. The topic and questioning ("Is this good enough?") made it hard.

What advice would you give to young people who want to pursue publishing early? Do you think, overall, it's a good idea?

Publishing early is not easy. It's irresistible, of course, in a culture without a lot of patience, to get your work out there early on. The problem is that, in an artistic life, there are a certain amount of dues that need to be paid. As a rock star, you're supposed to go through a few years of playing terrible clubs and eating dog food (well, maybe not literally, but that's what Henry Rollins of Black Flag did) before getting your big break. When you get it early, you find yourself scrambling to live up to early expectations—at the same time that a large group of people is waiting for you to fall, because they feel a little resentful that you haven't paid the dues that they have.

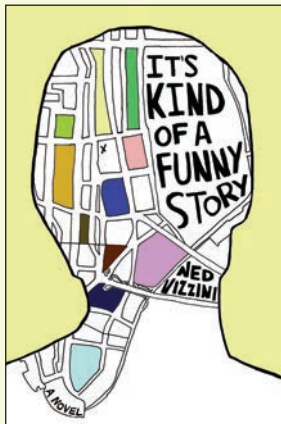
Overall, these are small complaints. Yes, it's a good idea to publish early. You get it out of the way, and you have something to build on. But don't think it'll keep you from paying those dues. They just come later. 😊



Tracie Vaughn, co-author of Disney's *The Second Guard* and an English teacher, created this guide.

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