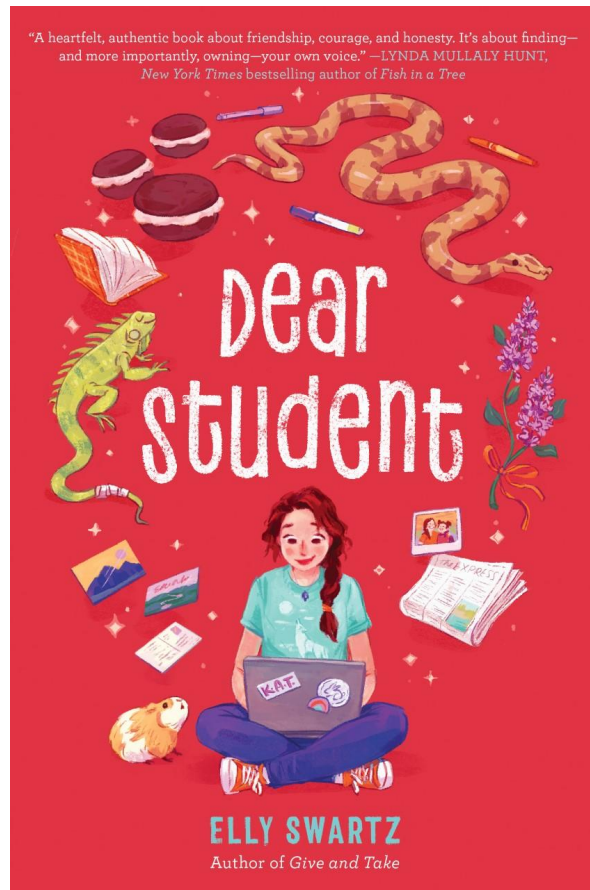


# Teachers' Guide

## DEAR STUDENT

By Elly Swartz



### About the Book

DEAR STUDENT is about Autumn, a girl with social anxiety and a pet guinea pig named Spud, who becomes the secret voice of her middle school's advice column. But when the advice she gives unknowingly puts her smack in the middle of those friends and the things they want, does Autumn have the courage to trust her voice? Can she keep her identity a secret? And what happens to those friendships if she can't?

Oh, and this story is also filled with lots of animals and delicious whoopie pies (recipes included, allergy-friendly ones, too!)

## About the Author

Elly Swartz loves writing for kids, Twizzlers, and anything with her family. She grew up in Yardley, Pennsylvania, studied psychology at Boston University, and received a law degree from Georgetown University Law Center. Elly is the author of 5 contemporary middle grade novels. *Finding Perfect*, *Smart Cookie*, *Give and Take*, *Dear Student (2/15/22)* and *Hidden Truths (coming 2023)*. Connect with Elly at [ellyswartz.com](http://ellyswartz.com), on Twitter @ellyswartz, on Instagram @ellyswartzbooks or on her webseries #BooksInTheKitchen with author Victoria J. Coe.

*To attain specific Common Core grade-level standards for your classroom, teachers are encouraged to adapt the activities in this guide to your students' needs. You know your kids best!*

## Pre-reading Questions and Activities

1. Advice: In DEAR STUDENT, Autumn's dad often says, "Seize the day!"
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. Do you think this is good advice?
    - ii. How do you know when advice is good advice and when it is not?
    - iii. Who do you ask for advice?
    - iv. Do you feel confident giving advice to others?
  - b. Digital Option
    - i. Make a copy of the [Advice slide deck](#) and distribute to students via Google Classroom.
    - ii. You can also make a PowerPoint version or PDF by going to File>Download as> and choose the best option for you.
    - iii. Students can complete the slides and decorate the slide deck, adding images or unique backgrounds.
2. Bravery:
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. Explain what you think the word 'bravery' means in the world.
    - ii. Describe in detail a time when you felt brave. What were you doing? How did it feel?
    - iii. How do you think someone would go about being brave or fearless?
  - b. Classroom Activity
    - i. Draw a picture or cartoon, write a paragraph or create a poem or song representing your idea of bravery.
  - c. Digital option

- i. Make a copy of the [Bravery slide deck](#) for students to complete.
  - ii. You can also make a PowerPoint version or PDF by going to File>Download as> and choose the best option for you.
  - iii. If students are creating a video, you can use tools like Screencastify, Screencastify Submit, or Flipgrid as a platform for the assignment.
- 3. Voice: In DEAR STUDENT, Autumn ultimately finds, owns, and uses her voice.
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. What do you think it means to find your voice?
    - ii. What does it mean to use your voice?
    - iii. What ways can you communicate to get others to listen? Are some ways better than others?
  - b. Digital option
    - i. Make a copy of the [Voice: A Graphic Organizer](#) Doc for students to complete.
    - ii. Distribute to students via Google Classroom.
    - iii. You can also make a Word Doc version or PDF by going to File>Download as> and choose the best option for you.

CCSS ELA - Language L6.1, L6.2, L6.3, L6.5  
 CCSS ELA - Reading: Literature RL6.2, RL6.4  
 CCSS ELA - Speaking and Listening SL 6.1, SL 6.2, SL 6.4, SL 6.5  
 CCSS ELA - Writing W6.2, W6.3

### **Post-reading Discussion Questions and Activities**

1. When Autumn is trying to understand why Logan is confiding in Dear Student and not her, Prisha says, “Sometimes I kind of want to walk up to some random person and tell them what’s going on and see what they say.” And when asked why, she says, “Because being anonymous is freeing. You can say anything. Be anyone.”
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. Do you agree or disagree with Prisha’s thoughts and why?
  - b. Digital Option
    - i. Students can respond to the question in a video format. If students are creating a video response, you can use tools like Screencastify, Screencastify Submit, or Flipgrid as a platform to create the assignment.
2. Explain how you think things would have been different for Autumn in the scenarios set out below.
  - a. Classroom Discussion (can be done with the whole class or in small groups)

- i. Autumn’s father had not left to volunteer for the Peace Corps.
    - ii. Prisha had not moved to California.
    - iii. Autumn had said no to becoming the secret voice of Dear Student.
  - b. Activity
    - i. Create 2 comic strips (either on paper or using digital tools). One that shows how things could have unfolded for Autumn in one of the scenarios above. The second that shows what actually happened in the book. Compare and contrast.
- 3. Forgiveness: In Chapter 51, p.272, Logan asks Autumn, “Are we okay?” The next line reads, “There’s still mad and hurt and empty space where trust used to be. But I look at my friend with the sparkly sneakers.” Then Autumn responds with one word, “Maybe.”
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. Do you think Autumn should forgive Logan?
    - ii. If you ran into Autumn and Logan today, do you think they would be friends? Why or why not?
- 4. Roles people play in your life
  - a. The Big Idea
    - i. Autumn has many people in her life who fill different needs; each one taking on their own unique role in her life. Some people are in her life to provide love and support, others offer fun and distraction, and still others to make her think and learn. Some are a catalyst for change and others the foundation for stability.
  - b. Thinking about the book
    - i. In DEAR STUDENT, Autumn reflects about her dad, “I’m glad he’s proud of me. But while he was saying it, I realized that I don’t need him to be proud of me anymore. I need him to be home” p. 231. At this point in the story, Autumn discovers the role she needs her dad to fill in her life.
  - c. Activity
    - i. Consider the people listed in the chart below, pick at least three and list what role(s) they play in Autumn’s life? Move beyond their title (parent, sibling, friend, camp counselor, pet) and consider the role they fill (teacher, advisor, challenger, confidant, distractor, supporter, energizer, thought provoker, bully) and how it impacts Autumn.
    - ii. List two people from your world, what role(s) do they play in your life and how does that impact you?

Character	Role(s) they play	How does this impact Autumn
Mom		
Prisha		
Pickle		
Mr. Baker		
Logan		
Cooper		
Spud		
Malcolm		
Logan's Mom		

5. Autumn struggles to share her feelings with Dad, Logan, and Cooper. On page 98, she says, "It's so much easier to find the words when they aren't for me. When I don't have to say them out loud." Why do you think Autumn feels this way? Do you ever have a difficult time sharing what's in your head or heart? Why or why not?

6. Autumn’s internal worries about what to say, what to wear, and how to act often repeat in her brain, cast doubt, and, at times, impede her ability to connect with others, and live her life to the fullest.
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. What do these worries reveal about Autumn?
    - ii. How does Autumn change as the story unfolds?
  - b. Activity
    - i. Find one example in the story where the reader witnesses Autumn’s internal struggle.
    - ii. Let’s help Autumn! Rewrite the scene so that Autumn’s inner doubts are replaced with positive thoughts and show how one's thoughts can change the moment.
  - c. Digital Option Extension
    - i. Create a video acting out the two scenes.
7. The idea of home is explored throughout DEAR STUDENT.
  - a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. How does Autumn’s relationship with her dad impact her definition of home?
    - ii. How does Autumn’s relationship with Cooper impact her definition of home?
  - b. Digital Option
    - i. Students can share their thoughts on what home means to them by creating a video. Teachers can partner with other classrooms or schools to discuss and share with students using Meet, Zoom, etc.
8. Weird: Prisha believes that Autumn is “good-weird.” The author agrees. And thinks we all have a bit of good-weird in us. It’s what makes us uniquely and wonderfully us!
  - a. Activity
    - i. On page 249, Autumn writes this about the idea of weird:

*Weird*  
*Like a neon yellow crayon*  
*In a sea of pale*

*Weird*  
*Like a jelly donut*  
*In a box of glazed*

*Weird*  
*Like a dumbo octopus*  
*In an ocean of fish*

*Weird*

*Like me*

- ii. Continue Autumn’s poem. Write at least 3 more stanzas in the format above. Use similes to highlight how weird can be a positive attribute.
9. Now that you’ve read DEAR STUDENT, has your definition of bravery changed? In what way(s) do the following characters display bravery in the story? Find textual evidence to support your findings.

Characters	Page #	Display of bravery
Autumn		
Logan		
Pickle		
Cooper		

10. Go back into the book and find three moments when Autumn feels torn between Logan and Cooper.
- a. Classroom Discussion
    - i. Why do you think Autumn feels torn?
    - ii. Do you think Autumn’s feelings change as the story unfolds? Explain why or why not?
  - b. Digital Option
    - i. Students can share their thoughts by creating a video. Teachers can partner with other classes or schools to discuss and share with students using Meet, Zoom, etc.

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CCSS ELA - Writing W6.1, W6.2, W6.2, W6.4

## Quotes to Discuss

“I’m not, however, a fan of Fearless Fred. That’s what Dad calls the part of each of us that fear can’t boss around.” p. 11

“But the more normal I pretend to be, the less normal I feel.” p. 28

“Look, Autumn, if you don’t want to do this thing, don’t do it. But don’t bail because you think you’re not good at it. Not brave enough. Or your new friends will be mad. Just do you. Whatever that is.” p. 198

“The truth is, no person or piece of advice will make everyone happy. It’s not possible. The best you can do is be yourself, share honestly from your heart, and hope people will listen. They don’t have to agree.” p. 200

“Whatever you decide, don’t do nothing.” p. 232

“I do know that being complicated is not a reason not to do something that matters to you.” p. 253

“As Dear Student, I’ve learned the most fearless (and frightening) thing I can do is be myself.” p. 256

“Doing the right thing doesn’t need an audience.” p. 258

“There are sacrifices you make when you commit to something bigger than yourself.” p. 272

“I know that I will be okay. Not because I am brave like you, but because I am brave like me.” p. 284

## Enrichment Activities

### 1. Writers’ Craft

The author uses words in unexpected and unusual ways. For instance, sometimes verbs become nouns. You often see this type of writing in poetry and song lyrics.



Here are some examples from Dear Student:

P. 11 *I took a giant breath of brave...*

P. 51 *My insides do the happy dance.*

P. 90 *My panic mode is tucked inside.*

P. 104 *I say nothing, hoping she can't see the bricks of disappointment filling my insides.*

P. 190 *I stare at my friends with her got-things-to-do excitement.*

P. 229 *All the missing landed in my heart.*

P. 243 *Filled with sunshine and big ideas.*

P. 253 *My worries ripple.*

P. 261 *That made my insides glow.*

P. 272 *Mad and hurt and empty space where trust used to be.*

Let's give it a try. Jazz up your writing and bring out your unique writer voice using words in unexpected ways.

For practice, use the word 'beautiful' as a noun instead of an adjective, use the word 'fog' to describe something other than the weather, and create a hyphenated adjective using at least three words.

## 2. Social Activism

- a. Come up with a working definition of activism.
- b. Think of a cause that is important to you. It can be something big that impacts many or something small that impacts one. Size doesn't matter. It simply has to mean something to you. Remember, even the smallest of actions can make a big difference.
- c. As a class, listen to [The Activators](#), a wonderful kids podcast about activism hosted by 8 year old actor and activist Leo Abelo Perry. This is a wonderful reminder that kids can make a difference.
- d. Then have students choose at least one of the following:
  - i. Make a video, Google Slide Deck, or Stop Motion Animation sharing your cause and how people can support it. If possible, implement your plan and be an ambassador for change.
  - ii. Design a t-shirt, poster, or button that reflects your cause.
  - iii. Write a letter to your local congress person as an advocate for change, sharing your cause and your plan.

## 3. Dear Student Letters

- a. Classroom Activity
  - i. Choose a Dear Student letter from the book and write a response.
  - ii. Write a letter to Dear Student.
  - iii. What do you think readers learn from the Dear Student letters in the story?
  - iv. Would you want a Dear Student column at your school? Why or why not?
- b. Digital Option
  - i. Use this [Dear Student slide](#) deck template to have students write and respond to Dear Student letters.

- ii. Students also have the option to create more than one letter and work collaboratively.
4. A Decision-Making Activity based on Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats Theory
- a. In DEAR STUDENT, Autumn has to make many difficult decisions. In our lives, we also have to make a lot of difficult decisions. So, what's the best way to make these decisions? And what parts of our hearts and heads do we use to decide?
  - b. Classroom activity: This activity can be done as a class or in small groups.
    - i. Ask the group how they make difficult decisions. Let students share their various thoughts.
    - ii. Introduce The 6 Hat Theory from Edward de Bono to the class - <https://www.debonogroup.com/services/core-programs/six-thinking-hats/>. According to the theory, there are 6 hats people wear when making decisions.



White hat = just the facts



Yellow hat = optimistic view, the bright side of things



Black hat = pessimistic view, what are the problems



Red hat = feelings and emotions, loves, fears, hates



Green hat = creativity, new ideas, what's possible



Blue hat = manages the process, ensures the rules are being followed

- iii. Read the following dilemma to the group:

*You are invited to a birthday party of the popular new kid at school and your bestfriend is not invited to join. The birthday party is across the street from your best friend's house. Do you go? Do you tell them you were invited? If they knew you were going, do you tell them you had a great time?*

- iv. Have each student roll the hat die and respond to the dilemma from the perspective of the color hat they roll. (You can make a hat die using any household die. Simply assign each number a color. For instance: 1=white, 2=red, 3=black, 4=yellow, 5=green, 6=blue)

- v. Ask students if their initial opinion has changed after listening to all 6 responses.
- vi. Repeat with any or all of the 4 dilemmas from DEAR STUDENT set out below.

***Dilemma 1, p. 113:***

*“In the well of my stomach where worries sprout like dandelions, I know I can’t tell her that I’m Dear Student. “I, um, guess. I mean, it could be Jules. But it’s a secret anyway. So maybe we’re not supposed to know.”*

*Logan sighs. “Yeah. I guess. But I’d totally tell you.”*

*I bite my lip and take another peek at the Dear Student email. Baker said it had to be a secret. I’m not allowed to tell. That’s the job. I swallow the truth and say nothing. She’ll never find out it’s me.”*

If you were Autumn, would you have told Logan that you were named the secret voice of Dear Student?

***Dilemma 2, p. 132:***

*“Cooper says, getting up. “Have fun at the dance.”*

*I wave goodbye to my friend.*

*Then race back upstairs to get ready for a dance I don’t want to go to.”*

Should Autumn have agreed to go to the dance?

***Dilemma 3, p. 216:***

*“How do I choose? What’s the right thing to do when both sides of something have good stuff and bad stuff.”*

Help Autumn choose a path. What do you do in that scenario?

***Dilemma 4, p. 284:***

*“I also realized that I can feel lots of different things at the same time. Like I can be kind of mad at you, love you, miss you huge, and know I’m going to be all right. Even if you stay in Ecuador. Even if the temporary house without the lilac*

*bushes is really my forever home. Not because I'm brave like you. But because I'm brave like me."*

Discuss Autumn's decision to share her feelings with her dad in this postcard.

c. Now that you've heard from multiple perspectives, pick one of the dilemmas set out above and write a thoughtful response.

5. Brave Like Me: At the end of the book, Autumn realizes she doesn't have to be brave like her dad or like Logan. In her last postcard to her father, Autumn says, "I know that I will be okay. Not because I am brave like you, but because I am brave like me."

- a. Classroom Discussion
  - i. What makes you brave? Unique? Different?
- b. Classroom Activities
  - i. Create a drawing, cartoon, list, or video sharing all the wonderful fearless things about you!
  - ii. Write a letter or a contract to yourself setting bravery goals.

***This is your reminder that being fearless and brave can look many different ways! It is not only for the popular, the loud, and the confident. Just be you!***

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CCSS ELA - Writing W6.1, W6.2, W6.4, W6.5, W6.6

This guide was written by author Elly Swartz and educators Anna Kontos and Dr. Rayna Freedman.

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