Kai and Leila are both finally having an adventure. For Leila, that means a globe-crossing journey to visit family in Pakistan for the summer; for Kai, it means being stuck with her crazy great-aunt in Texas while her mom looks for a job. In each of their temporary homes, they discover a copy of a blank, old book called The Exquisite Corpse. Kai writes three words on the first page—and suddenly, they magically appear in Leila’s copy on the other side of the planet. Kai’s words are soon followed by line after line of the long-ago, romantic tale of Ralph T. Flabbergast and his forever-love, Edwina Pickle. As the two take turns writing, the tale unfolds, connecting both girls to each other, and to the past, in a way they never could have imagined.
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Discussion Questions

Note: Refer to the pages cited in the book while discussing the following topics.

That was something none of her schoolmates understood: that Kai had something else that was more important than friends. She had a goal. Or at least, she thought, I used to (pp. 6-7).

- Define Kai’s goal. Determine why she seems to have lost her passion to achieve it.
- Explain why Kai doesn’t have time for friends.
- Consider how Kai must feel when she reads her name—Kai Grove—as the winner of the “Weirdest” category of The Cedar Creek Stealthy Awards. Examine what kind of “valuable lesson about life” winning this mock award did for Kai (p. 7).
- Discuss what Kai and Aunt Lavinia have in common. Explain why they are together.

Yes, that’s right. Doodle didn’t just want to find any old moth. She wanted a particular moth. A moth that didn’t exist: the Celestial Moth. That last recorded sighting in Falls River, Texas, was by a woman named Edwina Pickle (p. 33).

- Explain why Kai is willing to help Doodle catch the Celestial Moth.
- Consider Kai and Doodle’s characters. Tell why they are unlikely to become friends.
- Note that, following the mention of Edwina Pickle, the narrator presents the notion of extirpation (p. 33). Explain why this transition is significant.
- Discuss the narrator’s role in this story. Identify who is telling the story. Explore some of the narrator’s comical sidebars, such as (Don’t we all?) found on page 31 and (sigh) found on page 7. Tell what the sidebars and voice reveal about the narrator’s character.

Then again, Leila didn’t want to stand out as “The American Weirdo.” This is a strange fact: in The United States, people thought of Leila as Pakistani. But here, people thought of her as American. With a white mother and a Pakistani father, Leila used to think that she was both. But Leila was beginning to realize that, in some ways, she was also neither. In other people’s minds, at least (pp. 44–5).

- Leila does not want to stand out as being a weirdo. Tell how her concern about being perceived as a weirdo connects with Kai’s winning The Cedar Creek Stealthy Awards for being the weirdest. Explain your answer.
- List the similarities and differences Leila and Kai share.
- Describe Leila’s desires. What does she want?
- Discuss her concerns. What troubles Leila?
- On page 51, Zain smiles at Leila. The narrator states that the smile was caught “like a butterfly in a net.” Explain how the butterfly net serves as a literary device connecting Doodle, Kai, the Celestial Moth, and Leila together.
How strange that this man would list exactly the coins that Ralph had hidden behind the loose board at the back of the bread box. All of the money he had earned from doing odd jobs and helping his father at the store for the past two years (p. 60).

- Explain how the man in the hat is able to request the exact amount of money Ralph T. Flabbergast has hidden at home, bills and coins that no one else knows about but Ralph.
- On page 58, the narrator states that “the magic Ralph loved was fake.” Describe the difference between fake and real magic.
- The term fate is defined as destiny, future, and divine will. Consider how meeting the man in the hat may be Ralph’s fate.
- Explore the notion that finding the book—*The Exquisite Corpse*—may have been Kai and Leila’s fate, as well.

*The pale blue pearl in the net receded as Doodle stomped on. Kai wondered if it really was a cocoon.*

And, if so, she wondered what was inside (p. 76).

- To recede means to withdraw, diminish, or retract. Explain why the pale blue pearl recedes at the mention of Pettyfer’s name.
- The narrator states that Kai wondered what was inside of the pale blue pearl. Make a prediction. Tell what you think is inside and why.
- Consider the magic inside the vial Ralph receives from the man in the hat. Explore the symbolism between the two—the pale blue pearl and the magic residing inside the vial. Could they be connected in some way? How so?
- The narrator states that Kai’s love for the violin is *that thing that settled into a space inside you, and made you happy whenever you thought about it* (p. 111). Like the vial and the pale blue pearl, could music be magic that lives inside Kai? If so, explain how and why it has receded within her.

I won’t play the rest, *Kai thought*. I won’t. But—*almost against her will*—her violin nestled under her jaw and her bow traveled to the strings (p. 162).

- Explain why Kai has no trouble reading the tablature, that it is *as if she knew the notes already, as if her muscles remembered them from long ago* (p. 160).
- Note that, at the realization that Edwina Pickle was the *one who wrote a diary of moths and music and must be the same as the one in the magical book* (p. 162), Kai loses control of her will to play the violin, yet continues to play. Tell why this happens.
- The word illusion describes the unbelievable, invisible, and mysterious aspect of magic. Kai remembers that to play a violin is *to become a part of something so deeply that you became almost invisible* (pp. 160–161). Explore how the magic of *The Exquisite Corpse* and music are aspects of Kai’s fate.
In the silent moment that followed, an insect with dimly glowing wings jolted awkwardly between them, and flew on (p. 233).

- Consider the paragraph preceding the quote above. In it, Leila wishes she could drop right through to the other side of the earth, where things were simple and adventures never happened (p. 233). Explore the notion that the moth is linking Leila to Kai in Texas—on the other side of the earth. Discuss the connection between the two.
- Leila struggles to understand the nuances of the Pakistani culture. More specifically, she is confused when and how to reach out to those in need and have suffered great loss. Compare Leila’s struggles with those that Kai endures. Explore possible connection between the two.
- Does Leila choose to engage with The Exquisite Corpse or does the book choose her? If so, why? Explain your answer. Determine what the book wants from her.
- Explore the possibility that the voice of The Exquisite Corpse is also the narrator of the story.

She wrote: Unacceptable. I want a happy ending (p. 263).

- Observe the change that has taken place within Kai at this point in the story. Discuss how the statement above suggests that Kai is beginning to take control, rather than to be controlled by circumstances—and/or magic.
- Prior to this statement, Kai comes to the realization that her magic book had taught her something: she didn’t always need to understand what was happening in order to keep moving forward (p. 262). Discuss how the notion of fate and going forth (not receding) helps to clarify her realization.
- Review aspects of the magical puzzle Kai, Leila, and Doodle attempted to understand—the Lightning Tree, the Celestial Moth, The American Casket Company, the Scarlet Catsbane, Ralph, Edwina, and The Exquisite Corpse, to name a few. Trace how intricately—almost invisibly—these story threads and clues are woven together. Identify the ultimate purpose or message for the story.


- Consider the connection between the quote above and Kai’s declaration that she wants a happy ending (p. 263). In making the statement, is Kai referring to Ralph and Edwina’s story or her own? Discuss how the two stories are actually one.
- Prior to the discovery that she is the heir to the American Casket Company fortune, Kai’s adrenaline coursed through her body, causing her to stand up and sit down (p. 281). Juxtapose her actions with the pulsing of the Celestial Moth’s wings after it frees itself from the cocoon (p. 250). Discuss the symbolism between the two.
- Kai once thought of her father as being a myth, or maybe a magical creature (p. 61). Examine ways that her early perception of her father may be true. Tell how he embodied myth and magic, truth, and fate.
Night Music Character Creation

The she began to play the night music, the sounds of the crickets and rain on the leaves, the rattle and hum of the insects and worms as they burrowed into the earth (p. 197).

Objective: To write a narrative piece using real or imagined events, sensory details, and descriptive language.

Materials:
- Night Music Character Box Graphic Organizer (Guide, p. 7)
- A timer
- Pencil
- Paper
- Note: The first part of project is to be done outdoors.

Procedure - Part 1 (Night Song):
- Gather the pencil, paper, and the timer. Choose a spot to sit quietly outdoors.
- Set the timer for ten minutes. During the ten minutes, free write all of the sounds heard during that time. Cars. Bugs. People talking. Frogs. Anything at all.
- Save the list to be used later in Part 2.

Procedure - Part 2:
- Choose four of the sounds heard during the Part 1 (Night Song) session as subjects.
- Using the Night Music Character Box Graphic Organizer as a guide, develop the sensory aspects of the sounds in the following order:
  - choose a color to represent the sound
  - choose a scent to represent the color
  - choose a country to represent the scent
  - choose an action to represent the country
  - choose a type of person to represent the action
  - choose a job to represent the person
  - choose a secret to represent the job

Procedure - Part 3:
- Decide upon two of the Night Music Character Boxes to use as characterization foundation. Imagine that the two chosen boxes represent two distinctly different characters with varying desires, needs, and secrets.
- Write a scene in which the two characters meet. The characters must exchange a dialogue founded on the characterization created in the boxes. In the scene, the characters’ secrets are revealed and emotionally respond to the revelation.
- Share your written pieces with others.

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Kai & Leila - Character Analysis

*Her trip hadn’t been what she expected, but it had shown her where she belonged.*

*Everywhere* (pp. 293–4).

**Objective:** To compare and contrast two characters in the story drawing on specific details in the text.

**Materials:**
- *A Tale of Highly Unusual Magic*, the book
- The Kai & Leila - Character Analysis Graphic Organizer (Guide, p. 9)
- Pencil or pen

**Procedure - Part 1:**
- Print *Kai & Leila - Character Analysis Graphic Organizer* (note the sample graphic below).
- Use the graphic organizer as a template to compare and contrast Kai and Leila’s characterization. Explore their differing desires, strengths, and weaknesses. Consider the needs and obstacles that they share.
- Use the following character traits as a foundation for discussion:
  - friendships
  - talent
  - social status
  - frustrations
  - delights
  - family life
  - personal struggles
  - self-confidence
  - temperament
  - personality traits
  - goals
- Summarize Kai and Leila’s similarities and difference in the circles provided.

**Procedure - Part 2:**
- Write an exploratory essay examining one of the similar or differing character traits explored in Part 1.
- Develop the topic with details and citations from the text. Note how the chosen trait was affected by *The Exquisite Corpse*.
- State how Kai and Leila’s characterization changes throughout the story and the role *The Exquisite Corpse* play in that change.
Kai & Leila - Character Analysis Graphic Organizer

KAI

desire

strength

weakness

needs

obstacle

LEILA

desire

strength

weakness
The Exquisite Corpse

Edwina unfolded it inch by inch, slowly revealing the alternating handwriting—hers, then his, then hers, then his again (p. 163).

Objective: To collaborate with others in the crafting of a creative piece using real or imagined subjects and themes.

Materials:
- Pencils
- Paper
- Optional Story Starter Quotations

Procedure:
- Gather a group of three or more students to participate in the game.
- One student is to write an original line or phrase at the top of a sheet of paper. If desired, the student may choose from on the Optional Story Starter Quotations listed below.
- The student passes the sheet to another student who writes an original response below the first line. The student then folds the paper to conceal the opening line and passes the sheet to the next participant.
- Participants read only the last entry before writing their own responses. After each entry, the paper is folded to conceal prior entries.
- Students keep entries private until the sheet of paper is completely full. No talking is allowed while the game is underway. The game may last from ten to fifteen minutes until finished.
- Once Exquisite Corpse entries are completed, read the collaborative story aloud. Enjoy!

Optional Story Starter Quotations:

Almost magically so (p. 79).

“Looks like a fancy salt shaker” (p. 79).

“Like what?” (p. 153).

“He makes coffins” (p. 152).

“Can’t you cure her?” (p. 180).

“Voyage? Where?” (p. 204).

“It’s for her sake” (p. 205).

“Took you long enough to get here” (p. 220).

“You’re not watching?” (p. 226).

“How can you be so sure?” (p. 231).

“Don’t you think he’s scary?” (p. 231).

“She was dead?” (p. 238).

“Did it matter? She couldn’t decide” (p. 250).
Author Spotlight - Lisa Papademetriou

Stories make the magic of fate visible (p. xi).

New York Times bestselling author Lisa Papademetriou is the author of Middle School: Big, Fat Liar and Homeroom Diaries (both with James Patterson), the Confectionately Yours series, and many other novels for middle grade and young adult readers. Her books have appeared on the Bank Street Best Books of the Year list, the NYPL Books for the Teen Age, and the Texas Lone Star Reading List, among others. A former editor, Lisa has worked for Scholastic, HarperCollins, and Disney Press. She holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her website is www.lisapapa.com.

Questions & Answers:

A Tale of Highly Unusual Magic is a delightfully complex tale of life and death, love and loss, and marvelously mysterious magic. Explain the inspiration behind the story.

This book was inspired by my thoughts about stories, in general, and the idea of fate. Stories are the way we make sense of the world and the way we give meaning to the events of our lives. But this process of finding the meaning often feels mysterious, or magical. I wanted to write a story that explored the concept of fate and interconnectedness, the idea of magic, and one that was funny and fun to read. And then I had the idea of the magic book.

From the very beginning, I knew that I wanted to have two girls on opposite sides of the world connected by a magic book—that felt vital for my theme. But the first reader liked Kai’s story best, and tried to get me to get rid of Leila. I went back and worked with Leila’s story, and the next reader liked Leila’s story best. That reader wanted me to get rid of Kai. I knew that I could not tell the story I wanted to tell with only one girl, so I worked and worked until the last group of readers said that they loved both protagonists and felt they were both integral to the story. Whew, finally!
Which character do you most identify with—Leila, Kai, or Doodle? How so?

My husband and I actually make a sort of cameo appearance in the novel—Leila’s parents are loosely based on us. A couple of things Leila’s father says are based on actual quotes from my husband, who is from Lahore, Pakistan. But I would say that I identify most strongly with Leila. My family background is Greek, but I was raised as a suburban American girl. When I went to Greece, people would take one look at me, and say, “You’re Greek.” But I don’t speak Greek, and I don’t know much about Greece. Although my extended family is Greek, I am American.

Additionally, all of my in-laws are Pakistani or Pakistani-American. Whenever I visit Pakistan, I make embarrassing mistakes, and have even made gaffes that are VERY similar to the ones Leila makes. It’s a strange thing, to be included in a culture, but separate from it, as well.

The plotlines in *A Tale of Highly Unusual Magic* are intricately woven. It is incredible how you seamlessly braid two girls from opposite corners of the world together to solve a magical mystery. Tell how you managed to keep track of countless details this story that ultimately ends in such a satisfying way.

I always work with an outline! Coincidentally enough, when I teach plotting, I use a concept that I call “The Braid,” which is the word you used in your question. The technique is to start with at least three plotlines. Every scene should advance one major plotline AND one minor one. In my outlines, each scene is condensed to a single paragraph, which allows me to keep track of major action, dialog, and details. This makes it very easy to see if something important has been dropped, or if two scenes can be condensed into one. It makes cutting easy, because I don’t fall in love with all of my elegant or funny sentences. Personally, I could not possibly manage a plot this complex without an outline, but I know that some people can, and do.

Why moths and music? Do you have a particular interest in either of these topics? How so?

In the early drafts of the novel, Kai was visiting her two great-aunts, Lavinia and Olivia. She hears lovely, mournful music at night, and eventually discovers a third sister living the attic. The third sister was the most magical, and she played a cello strung with strands of her own silver hair. The three sisters and the silver cello strands were meant to echo the Greek Morai, the goddesses who weave the threads of fate. Olivia represented the past, Lavinia the present, and the mysterious third sister represented the future. I loved all of that and it was very magical, but—in the end—sometimes you can’t put every good idea you have into a single book. It gets overwhelming and confusing, and this was already a manuscript with a LOT in it. So I had to cut it, and only Lavinia remained. But there is something about music that is magical, that transcends time, space, and even consciousness, so I kept that element, too.

As for moths, magic—to my mind—seems strongest in the spaces that frighten us. Darkness, for example, or winter. Caves, water, forests, places where our senses seem weak. Moths are creatures of the night. I remember seeing a large luna moth on a camping trip once. It’s definitely a magical creature. But I wanted something that was not quite of this world, so I invented my own taxonomy.
Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the story is the magical book—*The Exquisite Corpse*. Where did you get the idea for this fascinating plot thread?

Well, I have a magic book! In 1917, my German great-grandfather was sent to France during WWI, where he bought an English book of fairy tales and brought them home as a gift for his daughter. Years later, when my grandmother immigrated to the United States, she brought the book with her. Eventually, she gave the book to me, as a present for my tenth birthday. I have always believed that the book is magical. It certainly looks magical, with its yellowed typeset pages and Victorian-style full-color illustrations. But the most amazing thing about it is the way it connects me to my great-grandfather, whom I never met, across years and continents.
# Common Core State Standards Alignment

**English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1</td>
<td>Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.2</td>
<td>Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3</td>
<td>Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions).</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.10</td>
<td>By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, in the grades 4-5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.</td>
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<td>Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.</td>
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<td>Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).</td>
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<td>Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3</td>
<td>Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.</td>
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<td>Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.10</td>
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### English Language Arts Standards » Writing

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<td>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.</td>
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<td>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.</td>
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<td>Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2</td>
<td>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3</td>
<td>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.9</td>
<td>Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2</td>
<td>Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.4.1</th>
<th>Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on <em>grade 4 topics and texts</em>, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.4.2</td>
<td>Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.4.4</td>
<td>Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.5.1</td>
<td>Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on <em>grade 5 topics and texts</em>, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.5.2</td>
<td>Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.5.4</td>
<td>Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.6.1</td>
<td>Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on <em>grade 6 topics, texts, and issues</em>, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.6.2</td>
<td>Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.6.4</td>
<td>Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.</td>
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<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.7.1</td>
<td>Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on <em>grade 7 topics, texts, and issues</em>, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.7.2</td>
<td>Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS,ELA-Literacy,SL.7.4</td>
<td>Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.</td>
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</tbody>
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