About the Book

In WORDS WITH WINGS, author Nikki Grimes uses poetry to trace a girl’s journey from daydreamer to writer. Over seventy prose poems serve as chapters in the life of Gabriella, and they chronicle everything from her struggles with her parents’ divorce and her move to a new school, to her joy at finding a new friend and her flourishing with the help of an understanding teacher.

This guide will help students explore the book’s themes, characters, and structure. Connections to the Common Core State Standards are noted with each activity. For complete Common Core State Standards, visit corestandards.org/the-standards.

Common Core abbreviations used in this guide:

RL—Reading: Literature
L—Language
SL—Speaking & Listening
W—Writing

Pre-Reading Activity

What is a prose poem? How are poems that don’t rhyme similar to poems that do? [RL 4.5]

Discussion Questions

In “Prologue,” the author describes how the main character received her name. What does this poem tell the reader about Gabriella’s father? [RL 4.1]

In the second poem, “Two of a Kind,” we find out that Gabriella and her father are dreamers. What else do we learn in this poem? [RL 4.2]

In “Summer Shift,” Gabby opens a dictionary and finds a word that takes her away. Where does she go, and how does the daydream help her deal with her fears about the changes going on her life? [RL 4.1]

In “Cheri” and “Hope,” Gabriella remembers her best friend from her old school. Cheri encouraged Gabby’s imagination, and the poem uses a beautiful simile to describe Gabriella’s daydreaming. What is a simile? How does it make the poem “Cheri” more vivid? [RL 4.4, 4.5; L4.5a]

Gabby’s daydreams are images, but her words craft those images. In “First Day” and “Words with Wings,” Gabby uses happy imagery to describe the way her mind takes her away. However, in the next two poems, “Getting Started” and “Gone,” the author
shows how Gabby’s daydreams don’t always spring from a joyful place. Sometimes she
daydreams to escape the sad reality of her parents’ struggles. What do words mean to
Gabby? Why does she daydream? [RL 4.1]

Oftentimes, authors give information about characters between the lines. In the
poems “Adjusting,” “Setting the Table,” “Washing Dishes,” and “Laundry,” the author
gives clues about Gabby’s mother. What do these poems reveal about her? What does
the author reveal about Gabby’s father in “Arabesque” and “A Trip to Thailand?” [RL 4.3]

What do the poems “Maybe,” “Mom,” and “Favorite Words” say about Gabby’s
careracter and her relationship with her mother? [RL 4.1]

The transition to a new school is difficult for Gabby. She decides to abandon her
daydreaming. Her teacher, Mr. Spicer, notices a change in her right away. Why does he tell
her to keep daydreaming in “Persistent?” What does the word “persistent” mean? [RL 4.4]

Who is David? Why does Gabby think she’s found another Cheri? How does
David express himself? What do David and Gabby have in common? [RL 4.1, 4.3]

In the poem “Sand,” Gabby decides to write down one of her daydreams. What
does Mr. Spicer do? What kind of teacher is Mr. Spicer? [RL 4.1, 4.3]

At the end of the book, Gabby is filling her notebook with daydreams and
discovers her mother has some daydreams of her own. How has Gabby changed from
the beginning of the book? How has her mother changed? [RL 4.2]

Post-Reading Activities

A single word, a song, even a smell can remind people of things that happened
to them in the past. In “Concert,” “Games,” “Macaroni Memory,” and “Tent,” words
bring back memories for Gabby. Make a list of several random words (for example:
camping, apples, bicycle, toothpick, etc.). Give the list to a partner and ask them to
share a memory triggered by one of the words. [SL 4.1, 4.4, 4.6]

This book is a novel, but it’s different from most novels because each chapter is
a poem. Imagine if this book were written like most other novels. How would it be
different? How would it be the same? Would the characters come across differently? If
so, how and why would they seem different? [RL 4.5; SL 4.1]

Prose poems use vivid and colorful language to create clear pictures. In the
poem “Idea,” Gabby leaves the classroom on “giggly knees.” Find other examples of
unexpected phrases in the book. Share your examples with the class. What pictures do
these phrases paint in your mind? [RL 4.4; SL 4.3; L4.5]

Words have wings—they fly thoughts to different places. Reread the poems
“Snowflake,” “Waterfall,” “Spring,” Butterfly,” “Dragon,” “Comet,” and “Firefly.” Write
your own descriptive poem based on a single word. [W 4.3]

In the poems “Sled,” “Stilts,” and “Canyon,” the author uses words to make actual
pictures. This is sometimes called concrete poetry or shape poetry. Do some research and
find other examples of this type of poetry. Then write your own shape poem. [W 4.3]
The poem “Explain This, Please” is short (in fact, it’s only fifteen words long!), but it says a lot. Write an autobiographical prose poem. Think about how much you can say about yourself in very few words. [W 4.3]

Nikki Grimes honors a teacher named Ed Spicer in the book’s acknowledgements. Think about someone who has been an inspiration to you. Write a book proposal with that person as a main character. [W 4.1]

There are many books that explore how a child handles major changes in his or her life. Think of a book you have read that depicts a character dealing with life changes. Compare and contrast that character with Gabby. [RL 4.6]

Further Reading

Here are some other books about children who like words and writing:

* Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown
  Maud Hart Lovelace

* The School Story
  Andrew Clements

  …children whose parents are going through a divorce:

* Dear Mr. Henshaw
  Beverly Cleary

* It’s Not the End of the World
  Judy Blume

  …and children adjusting to a new school:

* Drita, My Homegirl
  Jenny Lombard

* The Green Glass Sea
  Ellen Klages

* Schooled
  Gordon Korman

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