

THE DISASTER DAYS

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An Educator's Guide for *The Disaster Days* by Rebecca Behrens

Common Core State Standards Aligned for Grades 4–7

Note: The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts for Grades 4–7, but standards for other grades may also apply.

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About the Book

Hannah Steele loves living on Pelling, a tiny island near Seattle. It's a little disconnected from the outside world, but it's been her home forever, and she's always felt safe there.

Which is why when she's asked one day to babysit after school, she thinks it's no big deal. Zoe and Oscar are her next-door neighbors, and Hannah just took a babysitting class that practically made her an expert. She isn't even worried that she left her inhaler at home.

Then the shaking begins.

The terrifying earthquake only lasts four minutes but changes everything, damaging the house, knocking out the power, and making cell service nonexistent. Even worse, the ferry and the bridge connecting the kids to help and their parents—are both blocked. Which means they're stranded and alone. With Hannah in charge as things go from bad to worse.

About the Author

Rebecca Behrens is the author of three critically acclaimed middle-grade novels that explore famous historical figures and fascinating places. Rebecca grew up in Wisconsin, studied in Chicago, and now lives with her husband in New York City. You can visit her online at www.rebeccabehrens.com.

Praise for *The Disaster Days*

"Disaster-related action keeps pages flipping...A believable heroine finds her strength during a disaster."
—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Fans of survival thrillers in the vein of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* will enjoy this tense, honest tale of bravery...an excellent (and refreshingly not didactic) teaching tool on natural-disaster preparedness."
—**Booklist**

"The relentless progression of a variety of disaster scenarios will keep readers turning pages even as they learn, along with Hannah, vital information about earthquake safety and survival."
—**School Library Connection**

Prereading Questions and Scavenger Hunt Activity: Introducing *The Disaster Days*

When students first receive copies of *The Disaster Days*, ask them to follow the steps below to explore the text.

1. Look at the front and back covers. Based on the meanings of the words and images on the covers, what do you think this book will be about?
2. The title phrase *The Disaster Days* tells readers that in this text, a disaster is going to happen. Brainstorm at least two predictions about what will happen over the course of *The Disaster Days*.
3. The summary description of *The Disaster Days* inside the book's jacket states that during Hannah's babysitting gig, things will go from bad to worse. Flip through *The Disaster Days* and look for words and phrases that relate to natural disasters, emergencies, and first aid. According to the words you find, what kinds of problems do you think the characters will face? Have students cite text evidence in their responses.

The questions contained in this section particularly address the Common Core State Standards RL.4–7.1, RL.4–7.4.

Common Core State Standards RL.4–7.1, RL.4–7.4.

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension questions, comprehension activities, and enrichment activities for *The Disaster Days*

Comprehension Questions

Here are some ways in which the comprehension questions below could be integrated into a lesson:

- As an individual student “do now” & “bell-ringer” activity.
- As informal one-on-one discussion in pairs.
- As a formal small-group discussion, wherein students are assigned roles and/or questions.
- As an informal class discussion.
- As a formal written assignment; individual students could be assigned different questions to answer and share with the whole group.
- As part of a written quiz.
- As a written homework assignment.

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Questions (cont.)

Prologue

1. What does the prologue tell you about the book's setting?
2. What is the point of view of the prologue?
3. Based on the prologue, what do you predict will happen on Pelling Island?

Chapter One

1. What is Hannah's backstory in chapter one? What do we learn about her personality? What do we know about her family life?
2. How does Hannah feel about her upcoming babysitting job? Do her mother's comments change her feelings? Explain.
3. Why does Hannah compare her windbreaker to Neha's and Marley's puffy coats on page 14? Why do you think she refers to the girls afterward as "the puffy coats"?
4. How would you describe Hannah's relationship with her mother? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Chapter Two

1. How does Hannah feel about going home without Neha?
2. What do we learn about Hannah's neighborhood from the bus ride in chapter two?
3. How is Hannah's conversation with Andrew different from the ones she had with her mother?
4. How does Hannah feel after Andrea leaves the house? What does this tell you about her character?

Chapter Three

1. Why do you think the author included text messages between Hannah and Neha in this chapter?
2. How does Hannah describe Zoe and Oscar?
3. Do you think Hannah is doing a good job as a babysitter so far? Use text evidence to support your answer.
4. Make a prediction about what will happen after the shaking starts.

Chapter Four

1. How does the author use sensory language to describe the earthquake? Do you think this language is effective? Use details from the text to support your answer.
2. What effect does Mrs. Pinales's babysitting instruction have on Hannah?
3. The author frequently uses italics to share Hannah's thoughts in this chapter. What do they show you about her character?
4. How does Hannah feel at the end of this chapter?

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Questions (cont.)

Chapter Five

1. How is the experience of the aftershock different than the first shaking? Explain.
2. The kids listen to a radio broadcast in this chapter. How does the news make them feel?
3. Why do you think the author chose to include radio broadcasts in the text?
4. How does Hannah feel about being in charge after the earthquake? Use details from the text to support your answer.

Chapter Six

1. How does Hannah contrast her babysitting experience with Neha's at the beginning of this chapter? What effect does that, and Mrs. Pinales's advice, have on her actions?
2. Hannah makes s'mores and encourages the kids to tell stories to distract them and make them feel better. Do you think she's successful? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
3. How does Hannah feel about going to bed at the Matlocks' house?
4. This chapter ends Day 1. What do you predict will happen in Day 2?

Chapter Seven

1. What lie does Hannah tell on page 98? Why do you think she tells it? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
2. On pages 101–103, the author includes another radio broadcast. What do you learn from it? How does listening to it make the characters feel?
3. On page 107, Hannah tells Zoe, "I also think you're going to be fine." What do you predict will happen to Zoe? To Hannah and Oscar?

Chapter Eight

1. What do the kids eat for breakfast? How do they feel about it?
2. What decision does Hannah make on page 116? Do you think she made a good one? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
3. Hannah describes the backyard throughout this chapter. What are some details of the environment? How has it changed since the beginning of the book?
4. What do you predict will happen after Oscar falls at the end of the chapter?

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Questions (cont.)

Chapter Nine

1. Do you agree with the statement, “Sometimes the most responsible thing a babysitter can do is actually nothing”? Support your answer.
2. The author frequently uses italics to share Hannah’s thoughts in this chapter. How do they help you understand her character?
3. How does the author use similes to help the reader understand Oscar’s injury and Hannah’s experience of asthma?
4. What new type of text does the author include on page 136?

Chapter Ten

1. The kids eat another meal on pages 143–144. How have their feelings changed about their food choices?
2. What regrets does Hannah share on pages 149–150? Do you think they are justified? How do you think her feelings will affect her behavior?
3. How would this chapter be different if it were told from another character’s point of view, such as Zoe’s or Oscar’s?

Chapter Eleven

1. How does the author use humor in this chapter? Do you think it is effective? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
2. How does Hannah now feel about being in charge? Use evidence from this chapter to support your answer.
3. What do the games Neha and Hannah chose to play as kids tell you about their characters?
4. This chapter ends Day 2. What do you predict will happen in Day 3?

Chapter Twelve

1. Describe the setting at the beginning of chapter twelve. How has it changed over the course of the story so far?
2. What decision does Hannah make on pages 169–170?
3. On pages 170–171 Hannah has a realization about her friendship with Neha. How have her feelings changed since the beginning of the book?
4. What new information does the radio broadcast on pages 178–180 share? How does hearing it make Hannah feel?

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Questions (cont.)

Chapter Thirteen

1. Hannah shares her memory of learning the word utopia at the beginning of chapter thirteen. What does this tell you about the setting? How does it help you know Hannah's feelings about her home, both before the quake and after?
2. On page 189, Hannah announces another decision. How do Zoe and Oscar feel about it?
3. How does the aftershock affect the house and yard? How does it affect the characters?

Chapter Fourteen

1. What new types of text elements does the author include on page 204-205?
2. Hannah's reaction to Zoe starting the campfire makes Hannah feel sympathetic toward her mother. What does this tell you about Hannah's character?
3. What do you learn about Zoe in this chapter? Were you surprised by her actions? How would this chapter be different if it were told from Zoe's point of view?
4. How do the text messages in this chapter help you understand Hannah's relationships with both her parents and Neha?

Chapter Fifteen

1. The first line of this chapter is "There was a noise outside the tent." What do you think the noise will be? Make a prediction about what will happen.
2. How does the author use sensory details to create suspense in this chapter?
3. This chapter ends Day 3. What do you predict will happen in Day 4?

Chapter Sixteen

1. What text excerpt does the author include on page 237? How does it help you understand what is happening to the characters?
2. How does Hannah take action in this chapter? Do you think Hannah in chapter one would make the same decisions? Explain.
3. What do you predict will happen once the kids leave the Matlocks' house?

Chapter Seventeen

1. What do you learn about Forestview Drive at the start of this chapter? What effect has the earthquake had on the setting?
2. How does the author use figurative language in this chapter to help you understand the setting? Support your answer with details from the text.
3. How has Hannah and Zoe's relationship changed by this point in the story?
4. This chapter ends with a cliffhanger—what do you predict Hannah's house will be like?

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Questions (cont.)

Chapter Eighteen

1. How does Hannah describe her house at the start of this chapter?
2. How does the damage to Hannah's house affect her? What does this tell you about her character?
3. How does Zoe take action in this chapter?
4. At the end of the chapter, Hannah states, "We'd try to rescue ourselves." What do you predict the kids will do next?

Chapter Nineteen

1. How does Hannah describe the neighbor's house?
2. Why does Hannah go into the neighbor's house alone? Do you think she makes the right choice? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
3. What decision does Hannah make on pages 270–271?
4. The next chapter is the last. Make a prediction about what will happen.

Chapter Twenty

1. What figurative language does the author use to describe the aftershock on page 273–274?
2. On page 278, Hannah hears a faint noise. What do you predict the noise is?
3. How do Hannah's actions in this chapter help you understand her feelings? What do they show you about her character?
4. How have Hannah's feelings about herself changed from chapter one?

Transcript of "The Disaster Days"

1. An epilogue is a concluding section to a literary work. From which characters' points of view is the epilogue told? What is the narrative voice?
2. Why do you think the author chose this format for the epilogue?
3. How would this epilogue be different if it were told only from Hannah's point of view?

Author's Note

1. According to the Author's Note, which parts of the book are fact and which are fiction?
2. What does the Author's Note tell you about the Cascadia Subduction Zone?
3. What does the Author's Note tell you about natural disasters?
4. Why do you think the author shares information about emergency preparedness?

Common Core State Standards: (RL.4–7.1) (RL.4–6.3) (W.4.9a) (SL.4–7.1)

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Activities

Found Poems and Themes

One creative way to reinforce the meaning of key vocabulary words and ideas and to explore a literary work's theme(s) is by having students write found poems. Found poems can be made when students engage in collaborative discussions in which they identify, choose, and organize ideas, words, and phrases from a text, then compose them into a poem that reviews the text's ideas and synthesizes learning. This synthesis results in students finding a theme. Found poems allow students to practice their reading-literature, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Step one: Each individual student chooses and writes down at least ten words, phrases, and quotations from *The Disaster Days*. Students should cite this textual evidence with page numbers, although citations will not appear in completed found poems.

Step two: Students begin organizing those ten words, phrases, and quotations into an outline of a found poem. For this and each subsequent step, students could work individually or could engage in a collaborative discussion with a partner or small group to share or trade words, phrases, and quotations and then to organize them. Ideally, found poems will be tied to key words and important ideas in the text.

Step three: Students return to the text and collect additional words to fill in gaps in the outlined poem that they just wrote. Remember, in found poems students can only use words that come from the text!

Step four: Students resume and finish writing their found poems about *The Disaster Days*.

Step five: Students share their found poems with the class. Students may do so by volunteering to read their found poems to the whole class or by sharing them with another student. Another option for sharing is to ask all students to write their found poems on large posters, which can be hung up throughout the classroom. Afterward, students can walk around between found poems as if in a gallery.

Step six: Through reflection and paraphrasing, students review the key words and important ideas expressed in the shared found poems. In doing so, students are able to identify a literary work's theme(s). Students may do so through oral discussion or written reflection.

Common Core State Standards: (RL.4–7.1) (RL.4–6.3) (W.4.9a) (SL.4–7.1)

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Activities (cont.)

Point of View in *The Disaster Days*

The Disaster Days is written from Hannah's first-person point of view, and the book also contains an epilogue in the form of a radio transcript.

Step one: To establish understanding of point of view, discuss the following questions as a class:

1. What is point of view? From whose point(s) of view is most of *The Disaster Days* written?
2. What is narrative voice? Why do you think the author of *The Disaster Days* chose to write the book in first-person narrative voice?
3. Parts of *The Disaster Days* are written in the format of a radio broadcast (found in chapters five, seven, and twelve). The text also includes text messages and book or notebook entries throughout. Why do you think the author chose to include these other types of text with different points of view and narrative voices?
4. How does having Hannah as the narrator in *The Disaster Days* shape the story's content and style?
5. What is different about the point of view and narrative voice for the epilogue?

Step two: Encourage students to imagine and think aloud about how this book might be different if it all were told from another point of view (such as Zoe's, Oscar's, Neha's, or one of the parents'). As a class, select a part from one chapter of the book and brainstorm ideas about how it might look from a different character's point of view.

Step three: Have each student select a pivotal part of a chapter and rewrite it as seen through the eyes of a different character. (For example, Zoe's point of view in chapter fourteen is likely different from Hannah's point of view of the same actions. Think about how Zoe would see and describe the events from her own point of view.)

Step four: Ask students to share their rewritten pivotal parts of a chapter with one another.

Common Core State Standards: (RL.4–7.6)

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Activities (cont.)

Turning Point Discussion

An important literary concept is the turning point and an important reading-literature skill is to analyze how literary elements interact to produce a turning point. To help students to understand these concepts and practice reading-literature skills, engage them in a discussion about the turning point in *The Disaster Days*.

Step one: Define turning point and identify the general area where the turning point happens in *The Disaster Days* to students. A turning point is needed in literature to advance the plot and bring it close to its resolution. Turning point refers to actions taken by a character that change the direction of her or his life, affect the lives of others, and/or change the course of history. The *Disaster Days*' turning point occurs at the start of Day 3, when Hannah realizes that the kids need to leave the Matlocks' home to find safety elsewhere.

Step two: To check students' abilities to identify the turning point, ask students to look back at *The Disaster Days* and identify a sentence in chapter twelve that shows that the story is at a turning point. Ask two or three student volunteers to read the sentences that they identified. Write their possible turning-point sentences on the whiteboard or chalkboard. Discuss their possible turning-point sentences, and, as a whole class, make a conclusion about what the best turning-point sentence is.

Step three: Explain further to students how literary works build up to a turning point using literary elements. Numerous literary elements are used to make a turning point: for example, other chapters build up to the turning point, and a specific series of events leads to Hannah's decision to leave the house. In the chapters of *The Disaster Days* that follow the turning point, Hannah's actions change the lives of other characters—and change her own life. She's no longer simply reacting to their setting and circumstances. A simplified way to have students think about this structure is that books are made up of parts before, at, and after turning points.

Step four: To check for students' understanding of literary elements that help build up to the turning point of *The Disaster Days*, ask students to return to the book and identify the parts before, at, and after its turning point. To do so, students may want to skim earlier and later chapters. As they reread the text, ask students to look for and take notes about how chapters one through eleven build up before the turning point; how the specific series of events in chapters twelve through fifteen show Hannah at her turning point; and how the effects after the turning point are found in chapters sixteen through the epilogue.

(Continued on next page).

Teaching Strategies: Comprehension Activities (cont.)

Turning Point Discussion (cont).

Step five: Discuss students' notes as a whole class. On the whiteboard or chalkboard, draw a three-column chart with labels "before the turning point," "at the turning point," and "after the turning point" at the top of the columns. Ask student volunteers to share their notes and record them on the chart for the whole class. Afterward, ask students to use the details on the whole class's chart to answer comprehension questions related to turning point. Specific questions could include:

1. How did Hannah change over time in *The Disaster Days*?
2. How did chapters one through eleven lead up to the turning point in chapter twelve?
3. What happened in chapters twelve through the epilogue as a result of Hannah's turning point?

Step six: To further review turning points and allow for student reflection, ask students to think about their own lives and what turning points they have experienced so far. Ask students to draw a three-column chart labeled "before the turning point," "at the turning point," and "after the turning point" in their notebooks. Students should complete these charts about themselves.

Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.5) (RL.6.3, RL.6.5) (RL.7.3)

Teaching Strategies: Enrichment Activities

Earthquake Science Research

As stated in the Author's Note, Hannah's story of survival during and after the earthquake is fiction, but it is rooted in facts.

Major earthquakes have happened in the past along the Cascadia Subduction Zone and are expected to in the future. Post-quake threats that Hannah and the other characters face—such as liquefaction and seiches—are real phenomena. Students should research to learn more about the science of earthquakes and their effects on people and communities. To show their research results, students should create a small poster that shares the information they discovered and includes related photographs or illustrations.

Common Core State Standards: (W.4–7.7) (W.4–7.8) (W.4–7.10)

Teaching Strategies: Enrichment Activities (cont.)

Make a Pelling Island Landmark Map

Pelling Island is a fictional island community across Elliott Bay from Seattle, but many Seattle and Pacific Northwest landmarks are mentioned in the story. In addition, landmarks on Pelling Island—the shops on Main Street, the ferry terminal, the school, Forestview Drive, and the inlet bridge and forest preserve—are described throughout. In this activity, ask students to create their own map (on paper or digitally) of selected landmarks from *The Disaster Days*. They may use print and online resources to research the locations of the real landmarks, and they should use the book and their imagination as a resource for fictional island landmarks. When they have completed their maps, have students compare and contrast their maps, explaining why they chose the landmarks they did and why they are important places in the setting.

Common Core State Standards: (RH 6–8.7)

Writing a News Article or Radio Broadcast

Throughout *The Disaster Days*, Hannah listens to news broadcasts about the earthquake. The book also ends with a transcript of a special radio program about her experiences during the quake and its aftermath. A great activity is to ask students to write their own news articles or broadcasts further imagining how Hannah's adventure might be reported. Writing their own news articles allows students to practice their research and writing skills.

Step one: Explain to students that news articles are designed to be informative and should include basic information about who, what, where, when, and how. Most contain writing elements such as a hook to interest the reader at the beginning, an introduction, body paragraphs with quotations, and a conclusion. Next, show students a news article. Together with students, identify where the basic information and writing elements are in that news article.

Step two: Give students time to find a news article on their own. Ask them to find the following basic information in the articles that they find: who, what, where, when, and how. Ask them to find the following writing elements: a hook to interest the reader at the beginning, an introduction, body paragraphs with quotations, and a conclusion.

Step three: Students should write their own newspaper articles or radio broadcasts about Hannah's and her friends' and family's experiences that include elements of good news-article writing. Elements should include basic information about who, what, where, when, and how, as well as a hook to interest the reader at the beginning, an introduction, body paragraphs with quotations, and a conclusion. (Teachers may want to help scaffold weaker writers by providing a graphic organizer.)

Step four: Students should peer edit, revise, and share their newspaper articles.

Common Core State Standards: (W.4–7.1, W.4–7.2, W.4–7.3, W.4–7.4, W.4–7.5, W.4–7.7, W.4–7.8, W.4–7.9, W.4–7.10)

Recommended Online Resources

The following author-recommended resources about the Cascadia Subduction Zone, earthquake science, and emergency preparedness may help students to learn more about the context of *The Disaster Days*. Additional educator resources are available at: www.rebeccabehrens.com.

- **“The Really Big One”** [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-really-big-one>]
- **“How to Stay Safe When the Big One Comes”** [<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/how-to-stay-safe-when-the-big-one-comes>]
- **“Preparing for ‘The Big One’ in an Isolated Island Town”** [<https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/01/vashon-island-washington-seattle-earthquake-disaster-preparedness/581401/>]
- **Q&A about “The Really Big One”** [<https://www.washington.edu/boundless/earthquake-authority/>]
- **Cascadia Subduction Zone | Pacific Northwest Seismic Network**
[<https://pnsn.org/outreach/earthquakesources/csz>]
- **Ghost Forest of Copalis** [<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/ghost-forest-of-copalis>]
- **Natural Hazards | PBS LearningMedia**
[https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ess05.sci.ess.earthsys.lp_nathazards/natural-hazards/]
- **Earthquakes for Kids | USGS** [<https://earthquake.usgs.gov/learn/kids/>]
- **Earthquakes | Ready.gov** [<https://www.ready.gov/kids/know-the-facts/earthquakes>]
- **Earthquakes | PBS LearningMedia**
[https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/ess05.sci.ess.earthsys.lp_earthquakes/earthquakes/]
- **Living with Earthquakes in the Pacific Northwest**
[https://oregonstate.edu/instruct/oer/earthquake/10%20chapter%208_color.html]
- **Unprepared: Will We Be Ready for the Megaquake in Oregon**
[<https://www.opb.org/news/series/unprepared/>]
- **“We can’t prevent the Big One, but we can give our homes a fighting chance against earthquakes”** [<https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-lopez-quake-bolt-20170701-story.html>]
- **“How to survive the Cascadia Earthquake? Tips from seismologist Lucy Jones, ‘the Beyoncé of earthquakes’”** [<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/science/californias-celeb-quake-expert-says-preventing-damage-is-key-to-quick-recovery/>]
- **Youth Emergency Preparedness Curriculum–Ready Kids | FEMA** [<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/34411>]
- **Ready.gov’s Kids Home** [<https://www.ready.gov/kids>]

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