

CCS / ELA / SS Alignment for *Too Perfect*

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Life Lessons –Striving Towards Excellence & Avoiding the Impossible Pursuit of Perfectionism

Should we pursue perfection or focus on appreciating our personalities and capacities as they are? If we hope to attain a measure of fulfillment in life as persons, friends, workers, and citizens, should time be spent aspiring to unattainable levels of performance, achievement, and success that elude almost everyone and, even if attained by a few, do not last?

Ludwig’s story of how Maisie initially envies and admires “perfect” Kayla’s looks, grades, and athletic skills resonates for anyone who has ever looked over at a peer who, on the surface, has it all together. The desire to be perfect goes beyond most individuals’ social, school and work circles to include multi-sector media personalities who are pitched as icons of physical, intellectual, and athletic perfection. Through the media’s presenting them as such, many adults and children consciously and unconsciously strive to emulate them. Given the fact that most of these icons are, in reality, far from perfect or, if they have attained a high level of perfection according to a set physical, intellectual, or academic criteria, it is usually a fleeting one. It is, therefore, crucial that impressionable students reflect on the price and authenticity of this perfection. Through this highly accessible school-centered story, Ludwig engages students in grades 3-12 to really look into what lies beyond what seems to be peer perfection and consider whether this ephemeral status is desirable or achievable.

As part of examining this crucial to fulfilled adulthood issue, teachers can tap into a full array of CCSS ELA Reading, Writing (including argument, short research, and explanatory writing), Speaking, Listening, and Language skills. By including an essay from a distinguished psychologist, Thomas S. Greenspon, the author’s note, discussion questions focused on using quotes (chunks of staircase of complexity reading texts) and recommended readings, Ludwig accesses this extremely approachable story to differentiated instruction for the full spectrum of learners in grades 3-12 and for family literacy.

FOR GRADES 3-6

Before reading *Too Perfect*

(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening- Comprehension and Collaboration)

1. Challenge children to name an activity or skill they want to be the best at or be perfect in. List their ideas on an experiential chart. Encourage those who can draw to come up to illustrate the list or draw their own cartoons and graphics communicating activities they want to be best at or perfect in. ***(CCSS ELA Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas use graphics and visual displays to clarify information)***
2. Have the students focus on this list to think about how they would feel or react if, after trying really hard, they were not able to be best at or perfect in their desired activity. Give them a chance to freely share their emotional responses to how they would react and what would be any practical next steps/actions they would take, if any, after not realizing their goals.

3. Ask the students if, in their own lives or those of close friends or family members, they know of someone who has tried being best at something or being perfect in something. Have them share that story (memoir) and its outcome. Allow others in the class to react to these shared true stories about trying to be perfect or the best at something.

4. Close the preview for the story by asking students to briefly describe a peer or an adult they know who they feel is perfect or best at something. Have a list compiled on a chart. Then, for older students (grades 4-6), ask students to name media personalities in sports, entertainment, government, or business who they feel are perfect or best at something. List the names they came up with on a chart. Make no comments about them.

During the class reading of *Too Perfect*

(ELA Language Nuances of words- ELA Reading Craft and Structure-determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text)

Questions to ask: (Pose this to students using this language:)

1. Is there anyone in this class or at home, you wish you were or you would like to trade places with? If you feel comfortable, tell who and why you would like to be that person?
2. (Grades 4-6) Is there anyone here who is totally comfortable with being who she or he is and does not want to trade places with anyone at all in the universe? If so, can you explain why you are satisfied with being you?
3. If someone is better than you at an activity or who you think is perfect in a certain skill, how do you react? Detail any actions you do or ways you try to find out from that person how to be like her or him.

BIG QUESTIONS: (For discussion and for taking a stand –opinion/persuasive writing or talking) - Some people say that to be the best in anything or to be perfect at something requires paying a heavy price. This does not mean in dollars and cents. Rather, it means not being a happy person who can enjoy life, friends, and family. Does Kayla appear to be “paying” a price for being or trying to be perfect? What details in the story demonstrate the price that she is paying? ***(CCSS ELA Reading Key Ideas and Details)***

BIG QUESTIONS: If, like Kayla, you could seem to be perfect or best at something, would you be willing to pay the “price” she does to achieve that or be seen as achieving that? Why would you pay the price to be the best or perfect? Or why would you not pay the price? Be prepared to list details supporting whatever choice you make? (CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening-delineate a speaker’s argument-CCSS ELA Writing Make an argument)

BIG QUESTIONS: Kayla is upset when she misses the goal during her soccer game. One of her teammates tells her they should think of it as “just a game. We’re supposed to be having fun.” Kayla reacts by saying: “I ‘m not here for fun . . . I’m here to win.” Have you ever been on a school or after school sports or competitive music/performance team? How did you react when your team lost a game or a competition or came in second or placed third? Do you agree with Kayla that one plays to “win” or do you participate on a team /competition to have fun and enjoy the game? Explain which one you agree with and why. Allow the students to speak and do not include your thoughts or ideas. ***(CCSS ELA***

Writing – Argument writing- CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening focusing on a specific topic in a collegial discussion with references, elaboration and supportive details)

BIG QUESTIONS: Have you ever done a drawing or a report which others have told you was great and which you tore up or threw out? If yes, why did you do that? In your own life, are you personally not satisfied with what you do? Explain why or why not. Do you think it is okay to throw out or rip up stuff you do that others friends, family, and adults tell you is great? Why or why not? If you are not certain, explain why you feel that way.

BIG QUESTIONS: Maisie’s mom tells her that she loves her for being Maisie. Maisie’s mom says, “Life isn’t perfect. We aren’t perfect . . .but by trying new things and learning from our mistakes, we can become better at whatever we choose to do.” Can you give one example from what we are learning in class or in your personal life that you have tried that proves that what Maisie’s Mom says is correct. Think of some things we couldn’t do at first this school year and can do now or about the first time you rode a bike, played the recorder, tried out for a team, raced, or tried to stand on your head. Talk about it. What would have happened if you had never tried to improve but just quit because you were not perfect?

BIG QUESTIONS: What do you think Kayla is feeling because she cannot be completely perfect in all her school work and her soccer play? **(CCSS ELA Reading: Key Details and Structure)** Why do you think Trudy Ludwig told this story? What lesson /purpose did she have? **(CCSS ELA Reading: Author’s Purpose)** Do you agree or disagree with her? Why?

Activities after story reading:

For students to do at home or as part of a family literacy workshop:

1. Develop a speech with illustrations or photographs or gift coupons for at least two family members as part of your “Appreciation Time.” **(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening-Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas- using graphics, images in presentations to clarify information)**
2. Cultivate a classroom community by having students celebrate and appreciate one another once a week and include all members of the school community including secretarial, custodial, cafeteria, and security staff plus guidance.
3. Develop an outline of a conversation Ms. Kim and the school counselor might have with Kayla and her mother. **(CCSS ELA Writing a Narrative)** Make sure to include references from the details in the story to explain why Kayla needs help.

Culminating Activities:

(CCSS ELA Reading Craft and Structure) As Trudy Ludwig tells the story, it focuses on a girl , Kayla, who wants to be absolutely perfect in all she does in school, on the athletic field, and in life. If the two key characters of this story were named Manuel and Kareem, would the story plot, focus, and message be different or the same? Whatever your answer, retell or rewrite the story from that point of view. **(CCSS ELA Writing Narratives)**

(CCSS ELA Range of Reading) Check out Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” poem or Jamie Lee Curtis’s books. How would those authors and the characters they create react to Kayla and her desire for perfection? Explain your answer by using at least three quotes from their works or from any of the books listed in Ludwig’s booklist or recommended by the librarian.

(CCSS ELA Writing-Short Research Paper) Kayla is very upset about having missed a goal in soccer. Take a single sport played by you or one you love or a single performance art form- singing, acting, directing, broadcasting and find at least three for mistakes made by famous artists in those fields. For example, many famous singers have messed up their singing of the National Anthem at various games. Report on these mistakes.

FOR GRADES 7 & BEYOND

Too Perfect is just right to engage “mature” middle and high school students in CCSS ELA Reading Craft and Structure connotative, pejorative, and denotative word meaning analysis.

Before the students review *Too Perfect*:

1. Ask students to brainstorm, as a whole class, their associations with the word *perfect*: including the topic, theme, or activity they associate *perfect* with and also as an opposing T- Chart their verbal associations with the term *imperfect*. Have the associations whether of positive connotation or negative connotation listed on a chart. Encourage those who are artists to come up and draw the images or make little graphic caricatures or cartoon commentaries for the word associations given. Encourage the students to comment on the class compilation of positive connotations and negative ones. **(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening Comprehension and Collaboration , Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas)**
2. Tell the students that they will be reviewing a book titled *Too Perfect*. Ask them to write down how they initially feel about perfection. Do they want to be perfect as persons in skills, looks, tasks, or in some other way? Do they aspire to be athletes aiming toward a very high level of sport skill? Do they need to be number one or have all A’s in any competitive activity or are they satisfied to enjoy learning, performing, or playing for the fun of it and not care about their rank rating, or grade? Caution them that this is a very broad issue with many different reactions and responses, so they can answer as they wish. Allow for a conversation owned by them. **(CCSS ELA- Speaking and Listening- Comprehension and Collaboration discussion)**
3. Have each student write down, prior to reviewing the Ludwig story, whether they personally feel anyone can or should be “too perfect.” Again, caution them that there is no single correct answer to this, but, as maturing individuals, this is a chance to express how they feel at this particular time.

(Activities 1 -3 address Language Standards –Vocabulary Acquisition and Use particularly with a focus on nuances in word meanings.)

4. Read or have the students read Ludwig’s book. Focus them on her purpose in writing it and whether this story, which takes place in elementary school with two girls, is relevant to them in middle and in high school and even there relevant to males. Challenge this to create either a written argument **(CCSS ELA Argument Writing)** or a Persuasive essay/review advocating this

book for students beyond grade school (**CCSS ELA Persuasive Narrative/Opinion Writing**). Remind them again that there is no single correct answer to this question, but that they must get details from Ludwig's text and perhaps from their own lives or other fiction/informational works they have read to support their argument. Allow them to also argue using a rap format, a lyric, or even a graphic novel. Emphasize, without forcing them to focus on whether this issue is relevant to males, if they attend an inner city, crowded ethnically diverse school with immigrant and other populations, whether the issue of perfection would be covered or relevant in the way Ludwig approaches it. Allow time for reading, reading, and peer critiquing their perspectives on this work which certainly has a younger student look to it.

5. Focus their attention on a set of books which are located in their school library and in book stores called "self help" books, also considered in CCSS ELA terms- informational books. Ask which of the students have ever scanned or read such a book and why. If desirable, reference some of the works for tweens or teens from the "Recommended Readings" or have the students themselves find "self help" age-appropriate web sources or blogs. Have them react to these and agree or disagree with their advice. (**CCSS ELA Writing Research to Build Digital and print Knowledge-gathering relevant information from digital and print resources**)
6. Have them role play "big brother or sister" to either Kayla or Maisie. What would they advise her? Which of them would they have found most simpatico and why? Do they agree with how Trudy developed and resolved her plot? If yes, why? If no, why not? Have them author a comment to Trudy about this work and its relevance to "mature" readers in Middle and High School. This can be sent to the author (trudy@trudyludwig.com). (**CCSS ELA Writing-Production and Distribution of Writing using technology to produce and publish writing**)
7. Have the students read Thomas S. Greenspon's Essay as a reflective and persuasive piece. First ask them to list at least three points he has made about perfectionism. Among them might be: Perfectionism is never healthy. We need to appreciate one another as we are. The pursuit of perfectionism can lead to sadness, anxiety, and discouragement. Ask the students to provide details he offers to support his ideas and then write a reflection or poem detailing whether they agree or disagree with him. (**CCSS ELA Writing Argument Writing/Reflections**)
8. Trudy Ludwig titles her author's note: "The Impossible Pursuit of Perfection." She argues for parents and students to use her life coping strategies toward excellence and away from perfection. Have the students review that list and either react to it or write a list on their own for their peers. (**CCSS ELA Explanatory Writing**)
9. In the media various teen stars in sports, music, films, TV, and other arenas are literally photo shopped and "fed" to teens as "perfect" talents or "looks" models. Have them evaluate whether this helps them strive to excellence or provides them with unattainable goals. Have them bring in visuals of these individuals from their magazines or web sources. (**CCSS ELA Reading and Writing Short Research to Build Knowledge Projects**)

10. Is winning everything? What do school guidance counselors and support staff, including psychologists, deans, and administrators, think about the issue of perfectionism and winning as the only goal on a middle and high school level? Are these issues relevant to these levels in their perspectives? Have students interview at least one school staffer on these issues and two to three peers. They might also interview the team coaches and physical education teachers at the school. **(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening Collaborative Discussions)**
11. Finally have students return to their initial reactions to the words *Perfect*, *Imperfect* and *Too perfect*. Have them share the ways in which their reactions have been changed by this book.
12. Challenge students to find at least 5 stories online or in print about peers dealing with winning and the pursuit of physical, academic or relationship perfection. They might start with the Olympics 2014 or various bloggers who are anorexics. **(CCSS ELA Range of Reading, Writing)**

The impossible pursuit of perfection is sadly, not just one attempted by elementary students. *Too Perfect* provides grade, age and maturity portals for students in grades 3 and beyond, parents and educators to tap CCSS skills in service of a very necessary intervention to enrich and to enhance students' joy in them and in playing, learning and living. That is "perfect" for their needs as evolving citizens and caring community members.