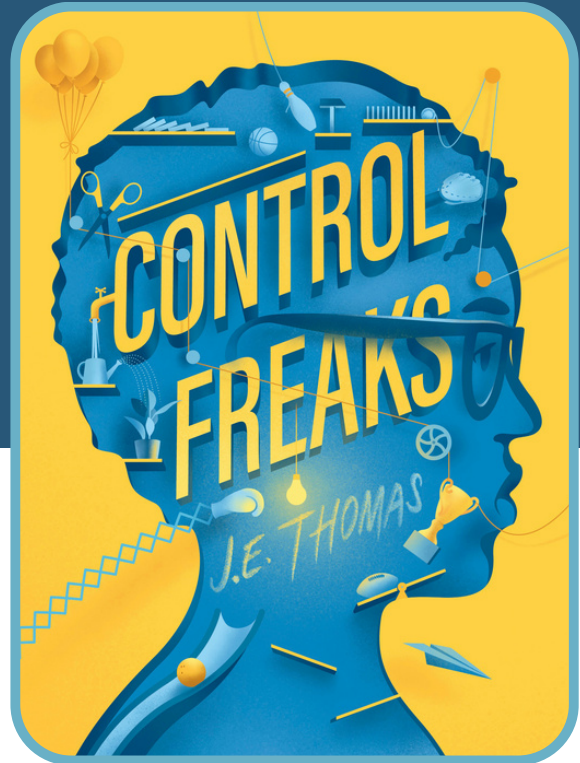


Educator Guide  
**Control Freaks**  
by J.E. Thomas



**Praise**

“Dorky fun of the highest order.”

—PEOPLE

★ “The cast, premise, and lightly delivered life lessons are reminiscent of E. L. Konigsburg’s *The View from Saturday*.”

—Booklist (starred)

“Creative and hilarious. An absorbing witty read about a kid learning that letting others in just might be more rewarding than winning.”

—Kirkus

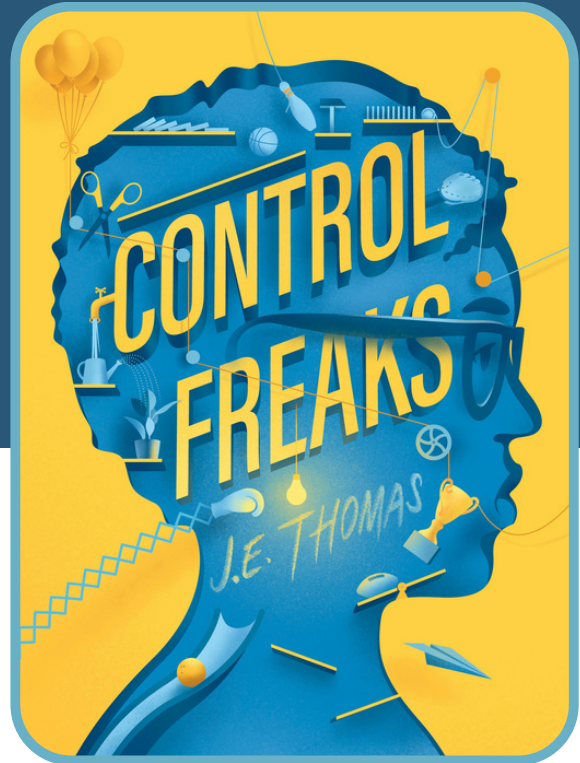
“A refreshing take on middle-school life— smart kids who know they are going places but learn to take care of one another along the way.”

—Horn Book

# Educator Guide

# Control Freaks

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## Synopsis

The kids at Benjamin Banneker College Prep are a little competitive. Okay. They're a LOT competitive. The minute Principal Yee announces an epic competition for the golden B-B trophy, seventh-grader Frederick Douglass Zezzmer knows he has to win. But it won't be easy. The competition doesn't just include science, technology, engineering and math. It also has arts and sports. Not Doug's best subjects.

Even worse, it's a TEAM competition. Instead of being in a superstar group, Doug gets paired with four middle school misfits no one else wants. Worst of all, Doug's dad has a horrible backup plan. If Doug doesn't win, he has to forget about becoming The World's Greatest Inventor and spend the summer in sports camp, with his scary stepbrother.

With only a week to go, Doug launches a quest to turn his team of outcasts into winners... and maybe even friends.

## About the Author



J.E. Thomas grew up near Colorado’s Front Range mountains. Her mother forged J.E.’s love of reading by recording Mother Goose stories on an old tape recorder then playing the recordings repeatedly when J.E. was a toddler. By the time she was in middle school, J.E. spent summers stuffing grocery bags with books at the local library, reading feverishly, then repeating the process week after week.

J.E. attended a small parochial elementary and middle school then transferred to an independent school for 9-12 grades. She has bachelor’s degrees in Mass Communications and Political Science, as well as a master’s degree in Public Communications. She wrote *Control Freaks* while working as an administrator at the same independent school she attended as a teen.

## About the Discussion Guide Creator

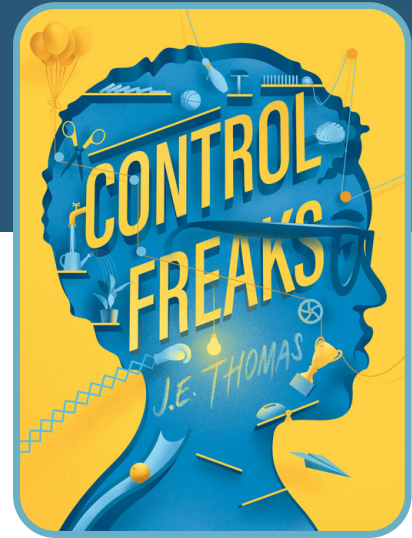
Lesley Younger is a graduate of Bank Street College of Education and has 18 years of classroom experience. She currently teaches middle school English in Washington D.C. Lesley is also a writer and the author of two books for young people: *Nearer My Freedom* and *A-Train Allen*. She blogs and shares resources on teaching and writing at [teacherlesley.com](http://teacherlesley.com).

This guide is aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Reading (Literature), Speaking and Listening, and Writing. Encourage students to support their claims with textual evidence.

## Before Reading

1. Look at the cover and make a list of what you see including colors, shapes, and objects. What does the image bring to mind?
2. Read the book blurb on the inside cover. What do you notice? Why are some words surrounded by the symbols <, >, and / ? What might that have to do with the subject matter of the book? Are you familiar with coding and coding languages?
3. This book features students who are passionate about different subjects in school. Would you identify as a “science head” “technovenger”, “engineerd”, “arts peep”, “mathatron”, or “sportster”? Why or why not? What experiences have shaped your interests so far?
4. Learn about the author by visiting [jethomasauthor.com](http://jethomasauthor.com). Write down three facts you learn about J.E. Thomas and/or Control Freaks. Present them on a poster or [Google Jamboard](#).
5. The author grew up near Colorado’s Front Range mountains. Where is the Front Range in relation to Denver, Colorado, where *Control Freaks* takes place? The novel references two communities—Park Hill and Highlands Ranch. What is the history of those areas?

# During Reading Comprehension and Reflection Questions



## Themes

As you read, notice and mark where the characters and plot events reveal messages about these topics. How are they explored and developed over the course of the book?

1. Friendship
2. Teamwork
3. Leadership
4. Integrity
5. Grief
6. Complicated Families
7. Diversity in S.T.E.M.
8. Pursuing Goals and Dreams

## Chapters 1-10

1. The main protagonist, Frederick Douglass “Doug” Zezzmer says that “B-B kids are like kids everywhere. We find our crew and stick with them.” Does this statement resonate with you? How is this statement like or unlike your experience?
2. Both Huey and Doug have parents who divorced and remarried. How do the boys describe their family structures? How do those family structures impact their lives?
3. The book is told from multiple perspectives. New chapters often offer a different point of view. Why do you think the author chose to write the story this way? What do different voices reveal that one voice might not? Give specific examples.
4. Huey writes backwards when he gets nervous. Look at his example. What does it say? Give his calming method a try. How does writing backwards make you feel?
5. Huey’s grandfather gave him a lot of advice before he passed away. What types of sayings does Huey remember? Collect examples as you read. How do these phrases help Huey with his grief?
6. On page 26, Dr. Yee quotes Albert Einstein. Do you agree with Einstein that, “Logic will get you from A to Z. Imagination will get you everywhere”?
7. Doug and Huey’s friendship is tested while the team selection is underway. What happens as students are trading cards? What does it reveal about Doug and Huey’s reputations? Their relationship?
8. What does T.W. secretly want? How does he plan to get it?
9. Describe Doug’s inventing workshop. What are some of the inventions he is working on?
10. The author switches from prose to poetry when introducing Travis Elizabeth Cod as a speaker in the story. What is the effect of this change? Why do you think the author made this choice?

## Chapters 11-20

1. Why does Doug feel apprehensive about his mom's possible career change? What does this reveal about his character?
2. The DougApp provides a variety of helpful services. What are some of the ways it is used in these chapters?
3. On page 99, there is a quote from Benjamin Banneker, which is engraved on the gates of B-B College Prep. What does this quote mean to Doug? What does it mean to you?
4. Which of the teams are eliminated on the first day? What reasons are given? Do you agree with the decisions?
5. Mrs. Jalil is ready to play her part in the competition, but Dr. Yee throws her a curveball. What is it and how does the change make her feel? How does this moment contribute to the development of the theme of teamwork, even among the adults?
6. What tool does Team TravLiUeyPadgeyZezz build for their engineering challenge? How does it work? Sketch a diagram of the tool based on the description.
7. What is Huey's favorite photo? Why does it make him both happy and sad?
8. Doug and Huey discuss whether using the DougApp to write T.W.'s paper is cheating. What do they think? What do you think? Explain your reasoning.
9. The author references Lord of the Flies, a classic story about what happens when a group of school boys are left to fend for themselves on an island. [Watch this Ted-Ed video](#) if you have not read this book. What kind of social environment is the author describing? What image of Benjamin Banneker College Prep does it give you?
10. In Chapter 17, Doug and Huey write a fake version of T.W.'s paper, just for fun, which causes a lot of trouble. What changes did they make? Why were those changes a problem?

## Chapters 21-30

1. What happens when Mrs. Jalil reads T.W.'s application essay?
2. What reasons does T.W. give for liking Science Fiction in Chapters 22 and 26?
3. What advice does Dr. Yee offer Doug about leadership as they walk to lunch?
4. In Chapter 24, Team TravLiUeyPadgeyZezz finds a word scramble. What key term proves to be helpful? Use it to find a special name for your favorite animal or plant.
5. What rumors are spread about Padgett Babineaux? What is the truth?
6. Julius Jordan and Elliott "EZ" Zezzmer have different approaches to parenting Doug. Make a list comparing and contrasting their interests, activities, and relationship with him. How does Doug seem to deal with these differences?
7. In what ways does the relationship between T.W. and Doug shift while rewriting the paper on Shakespeare? What leads to this shift?
8. What is Doug's punishment for helping T.W. cheat?
9. What are the Benjamin Banneker school values? How do they help Team TravLiUeyPadgeyZezz in the technology challenge?
10. Why is Dr. Yee worried about Doug?

## Chapters 31 - End

1. What important skill has Travis Elizabeth Cod learned through the competition? How does it help her dream?
2. On page 280, The DOM says, "middle school made me strong." Explain whether or not this is a positive description.
3. What surprising effect does the competition have on the B-B students? How do their interactions change? Why do you think this change takes place?
4. What does Doug finally get the courage to say to his Pops during their family talk? How does Pops react?
5. By the end of the book, some characters have achieved their goals and others have not. Was this a happy ending? Why or why not?



## After Reading

1. Through the STEAMS competition, all of the students grow and change. Use paper and pencil or a digital tool like [StoryboardThat](#) to create a [character development map](#). After choosing one of the characters in the book, illustrate how the character changes and grows over the course of the book using specific examples from the narration and that character's dialogue, thoughts, and actions.
2. Dr. Yee makes the STEAMS competition a team competition because he believes collaboration is important for scientific breakthroughs. [Read these real examples from the UNESCO website](#) of how teams of people have worked together to solve big problems. Which of these examples best supports Dr. Yee's idea?
3. On page 23, Doug references a Rube Goldberg machine. Who was Rube Goldberg? What kinds of machines did he create? How does this relate to Doug's plan to get chosen for the Rocky Mountain GadgetCon? Visit the [Rube Goldberg Institute website](#) or watch [this New York Times video](#) for context. Draw or make a Rube Goldberg machine of your own.
4. Several famous STEAM heroes are mentioned throughout the book including Benjamin Banneker, W. Porter Cromwell, John Glenn, Luiz Walter Alvarez, Chien-Shiung Wu, Patricia Bath, Charles Best, Marie Curie, Marie Van Brittan Brown, Granville Woods and Samuel E. Blum. Who are these famous STEAMsters? Why are they famous? Use reputable sources to do research and present findings in a paper, poster, infographic, podcast, or infographic.
5. Imagine B-B College Prep wants to engrave more pavers with famous STEAMsters. Who would you select? Why? Write an argumentative paragraph, essay, or podcast script explaining your choice and rationale.

## After Reading Continued

6. There are several references to the COVID-19 Pandemic. How did the Pandemic affect various characters in the story? In what ways are the experiences mentioned similar to or different from yours?
7. Several characters in the book have special relationships with an elder in their family or community. Compare and contrast these relationships and use that information to discuss why intergenerational relationships are important. If possible, connect with an elder in your family or community to continue exploring these ideas.
8. Several chapters are from the perspective of adults who look back on their middle school experience as they observe the students interacting during the competition. Interview an adult about their middle school experience. How is it similar or different from yours? What advice can they give as they look back on those years?
9. Choose your favorite scene from the book and create a script that you can act out. Incorporate appropriate narration, dialogue, and details. Perform it for an audience!
10. Plan a STEAMS competition of your own! See the resources below.

# Planning a STEAMS Competition?

## Here are resources to get you started!

### Science:

eCybermission.com by the US Army [offers all the materials needed](#) for a scientific inquiry challenge focused on answering questions.

### Technology:

Try a points based coding challenge using [MIT's Scratch website](#) or [Khan Academy's Computer Programming Course](#)

### Engineering:

eCybermission.com by the US Army [offers all the materials needed](#) for an engineering challenge focused on solving problems through design.

### Art:

Check out these [classroom based](#) and [virtual](#) art challenge examples.

### Math:

This [list of math contests](#) from Omega Learn includes formal competitions, free materials, and online options.

### Sports:

Youth Sports Trust offers a [free resource with dozens of fun 60 second physical challenges](#)

### Looking for more?

1. ISTE [offers a list of existing national and global STEM competitions](#) with a focus on real life application
2. The Society for Science offers [this guide for middle school educators](#) exploring ways to engage students in research.
3. The Inventors Hall of Fame offers educator resources and [free STEM activities](#) for all ages.