

ADVANCED ETHICAL LITERARY INQUIRY

THE FRIENDSHIP WAR

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

What can watching a fad spread through a whole school teach us about who actually holds the power in a friendship — and what does it take to fix one that was never quite equal to begin with?

Novel: The Friendship War by Andrew Clements

Setting: A present-day middle school

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 4–6, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete 28-chapter novel. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

These files provide lenses for interpreting a realistic story built around a real historical object (buttons), a real historical setting (a New England textile mill), and real social science (fads, economics, and grief). Read for source authority, purpose, and limits.

Accuracy safeguard

Grace's supply-and-demand plan uses a real economic idea, but the book itself shows that idea failing to fully predict how people behave. Treat the story as a case study in the limits of applying clean theories to messy social situations, not as proof the theory is wrong.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. Real Fads: How They Actually Spread

Researchers who study fads and trends point to social mechanisms — not just an object's inherent appeal — as the real engine of a fad's spread: seeing others adopt something (social proof), a sense that supply is limited (scarcity), and status gained by being an early or skilled participant. A fad can fade as quickly as it rises once the novelty or status value wears off.

Inquiry question

Which of these mechanisms shows up most clearly in how the button fad spreads through Grace's school?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. The Industrial Revolution and New England's Textile Mills

Beginning in the early 1800s, New England became a center of the American Industrial Revolution, with large textile mills (like those in Lowell, Massachusetts) employing many workers, including young women and, in earlier decades, children, to spin and weave cloth using new mechanized equipment. Many of these mill buildings still stand today, some restored as historical sites, others converted for modern use — much like the fictional mill Grace's grandfather buys.

Inquiry question
How does this real history deepen your understanding of the buttons Grace finds, and of why her class is studying the Industrial Revolution at the same time?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. The Real History and Craft of Buttons

Buttons have been made from many different materials across history — bone, shell, metal, glass, and later plastic — and antique or vintage buttons are genuinely collected by hobbyists today, valued for their materials, age, and craftsmanship rather than any monetary rarity alone.

Inquiry question

What makes an ordinary, mass-produced object like a button into something worth collecting, arguing over, and trading?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. Supply and Demand: The Real Economics Behind Grace's Plan

The economic principle of supply and demand holds that, all else being equal, increasing the available supply of something tends to lower its perceived value and price. This principle works well for describing many markets, but it assumes people are responding mainly to scarcity — not also to social status, competition, or attachment, which don't behave the same way as ordinary goods.

Inquiry question

Why might a plan based on solid, real economic theory still fail to predict what actually happens with the button fad?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. Grief and Sorting Through a Loved One's Belongings

Going through a deceased loved one's belongings is a real, common part of grieving for many people, and it can take much longer than others might expect — sometimes months or years — with no fixed timeline that counts as “normal.”

Inquiry question

How does this general pattern help explain why it takes Grandpa so long to begin sorting through his late wife's things?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Restorative vs. Punitive Responses in Schools

Many schools now use restorative approaches to discipline — focused on repairing harm (for example, through repayment or amends) — alongside or instead of purely punitive consequences. Advocates argue this better addresses the actual harm done; critics note it requires careful, consistent implementation to feel fair to everyone involved.

Inquiry question

Does the principal's decision at the end of the novel look more restorative or more punitive? What makes you say so?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
Lowell National Historical Park (National Park Service)	Real history of New England textile mills and the Industrial Revolution	Focused on one city; other mill towns had varied histories.
National Button Society	Background on real button collecting and history	A hobbyist organization; treat enthusiast claims as informal, not academic.
A reputable economics education source (e.g., a Federal Reserve education page) on supply and demand	Accurate explanation of the real economic principle	Describes markets generally; social status and scarcity don't always behave identically.
A reputable source on restorative justice practices in schools	Background on real school discipline approaches	Practices vary widely by school and district.

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I ground the mill and Industrial Revolution references in real regional history, not just the novel's fictional version.
- ☐ I explain supply and demand accurately, and I'm honest about where it fails to predict the fad's behavior.
- ☐ I treat grief as having no fixed timeline, without pathologizing Grandpa's pace.
- ☐ I present restorative discipline as one real approach among others, not the only correct one.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (how fads or markets behave) from ethical claims (how people should treat each other).
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your view of why the fad spread, or why the friendship broke down — and where does the story resist that lens?
