

WHAT COMES NEXT

Teacher / Facilitator Guide

CENTRAL IDEA

What does it actually take to heal from a loss so big that words stop working — and why might silence sometimes say more than speech?

Resource Information

Novel: What Comes Next by Rob Buyea

Setting: A present-day New England town, with the family relocating partway through the story

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

TEXT USE

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

A note on structure

This novel uses many very short chapters, and published sources do not agree on an exact chapter count. Align the five missions below to roughly equal fifths of your specific edition, or by the major plot movements listed here, rather than by fixed chapter numbers.

Resource Overview & Intended Use

A five-mission whole-novel inquiry for advanced readers, designed for seminar, compacted ELA, enrichment, or a mixed-readiness classroom. It emphasizes trauma-related mutism as an involuntary response, the real value of nonverbal communication, and the difference between “moving on” from grief and “moving forward” with it.

Text & Edition Information

- Novel: *What Comes Next* by Rob Buyea; published 2021 by Delacorte Press; a stand-alone novel by the author of the Mr. Terupt series.
- Told in short chapters from Thea Ettinger's first-person perspective.
- Record publisher, year, format, and ISBN locally; confirm total page or chapter count for your specific edition.
- This guide reproduces no novel quotations. Verify any teacher-added quotation against the exact classroom edition.

Content Care

This novel centers on the sudden accidental death of a child's best friend, witnessed by the protagonist, and her resulting trauma-related mutism and nightmares. None of this is depicted graphically, but it is real and serious. Preview this content, coordinate with a school counselor if students have experienced loss or trauma themselves, and avoid asking students to imagine or narrate their own experiences of loss as part of any activity. Do not use diagnostic language (like “selective mutism”) to describe any real student.

Learning Objectives & Conceptual Questions

- Track a developing claim across a complete novel and revise it with later evidence.
- Distinguish an involuntary trauma response from a deliberate choice to stay silent.
- Evaluate what a change of environment can and cannot heal.
- Recognize the real value of nonverbal communication, including sign language, on its own terms.
- Analyze narrative techniques: gradual revelation, contrast as characterization, and earned emotional payoff.
- Distinguish real psychological and Deaf-community facts from the novel's fictionalized version of them.

Conceptual spine

What does it actually take to heal from a loss so big that words stop working — and why might silence sometimes say more than speech?

Implementation Map

Phase	Reading	Core Work	Checkpoint
Launch	Before reading	Pre-assessment; norms; edition check	Initial profile
Mission 1	Opening section	Before Words Stopped	Why might someone stop speaking after a trauma, even though nothing is physically wrong with their voice?
Mission 2	Second section	Starting Over	Is moving to a new town actually a fresh start, or is it running away — and can it be both at once?
Mission 3	Third section	Jack-Jack Chooses Her	Why does it matter that Jack-Jack chooses Thea, rather than Thea choosing him?
Mission 4	Fourth section	Finding Her Voice Again	What does Rory's use of sign language teach Thea about communication that spoken words don't?
Mission 5	Final section	What Comes Next	What's the difference between “moving on” from grief and “moving forward” with it?
Synthesis	Complete novel	The Healing Report	Product + reflection

Suggested Timing

5–8 sessions: one launch, five mission seminars, one context lab, and one exhibition/reflection. This is a fast-paced, short-chapter novel; sessions may run shorter than with longer texts. Compact routine skill practice when pre-assessment evidence shows mastery.

Pre-Assessment Interpretation

- Score dimensions separately; do not total them into a fixed ability label.
- Advance quickly when a student already distinguishes an involuntary trauma response from a deliberate choice without prompting.
- Teach evidence-location and claim-reasoning links explicitly when needed.
- Offer oral, visual, or speech-to-text response modes without reducing conceptual demand — and without irony, given the novel's own themes.
- Reassess after Mission 3; profiles should change. Full dimensions and levels are in the companion Pre-Assessment & Interpretation Guide.

Facilitation Principles

- Ask “What makes you say that?” then “Is that a choice Thea is making, or something happening to her?”
- Treat sign language and silence as genuine communication, not lesser substitutes for speech.
- Never ask students to share their own experiences of loss as a class activity; keep the focus on the text.
- Avoid diagnosing any real student using terms from the novel or its context packet.
- Use wait time, written entry points, and structured turn-taking.

High-Level Presses

- What does the text actually show is involuntary about Thea's silence, versus a choice?
- What would count as evidence that Thea is healing, rather than simply “getting over” what happened?
- What does sign language let Rory and Thea communicate that speech alone might not?
- What can this story illuminate about real grief, trauma responses, or Deaf culture — and what needs outside checking?

Mission 1 Facilitation: Before Words Stopped

OPENING SECTION

Essential question

Why might someone stop speaking after a trauma, even though nothing is physically wrong with their voice?

Look-Fors

- Thea's life and friendship with Charlie before the accident
- the gradual, non-graphic way the accident and its aftermath are revealed
- Thea's withdrawal into silence and the nightmares that follow

Seminar Sequence: Silent Noticing + Turn-and-Talk

- Silent noticing (2–3 minutes): jot one detail suggesting Thea's silence is involuntary, not a choice.
- Turn-and-talk: compare notices before any whole-group claims.
- Whole-group seminar with the Healing Ledger visible.
- Exit line: “I used to think healing meant ... now I think ... because ...”

Misconception to Press

Do not accept “Thea is just being dramatic or stubborn.” Press students to consider the real, documented experience of trauma-related mutism as an involuntary response, distinct from a choice to be difficult.

Craft Focus: Gradual Revelation

The story reveals details about the accident gradually rather than all at once. What does this pacing choice do to how you experience Thea's grief, compared to learning everything up front?

Mission 2 Facilitation: Starting Over

SECOND SECTION

Essential question

Is moving to a new town actually a fresh start, or is it running away — and can it be both at once?

Look-Fors

- the family's decision to move and the reasons behind it
- the contrast between Thea's sisters' excitement and Thea's resistance
- small signs of the family adjusting to their new home and school

Seminar Sequence: Fishbowl

- Silent evidence sort (2–3 minutes).
- Fishbowl: an inner circle discusses what a change of location can and cannot fix; an outer circle tracks the reasoning moves used.
- Outer circle reports patterns before the whole group responds.
- Exit line: “I used to think healing meant ... now I think ... because ...”

Misconception to Press

Do not accept “the move will obviously fix things.” Press students to identify what specifically a fresh start can address, and what it cannot — since Thea's grief travels with her.

Craft Focus: Contrast as Characterization

Thea's sisters' excitement about the move is placed directly beside Thea's resistance. What does this contrast reveal about Thea that describing her alone wouldn't?

Mission 3 Facilitation: Jack-Jack Chooses Her

THIRD SECTION

Essential question

Why does it matter that Jack-Jack chooses Thea, rather than Thea choosing him?

Look-Fors

- the shelter visit and the moment the puppy picks Thea
- the detail connecting Jack-Jack's lazy eye to Charlie's
- early signs of Thea's bond with Jack-Jack forming

Seminar Sequence: Predict-and-Check

- Before discussing, each student writes one prediction for how Jack-Jack will change Thea, with a reason.
- Check predictions against the text as a group.
- Whole-group seminar with the Healing Ledger visible.
- Exit line: “I used to think healing meant ... now I think ... because ...”

Misconception to Press

Do not accept “a dog can just fix grief.” Press students to identify what specifically about steady companionship — not the dog's cuteness alone — creates space for healing to begin.

Craft Focus: Symbolic Detail

The lazy eye connecting Jack-Jack to Charlie could be read as coincidence or as something more. Find the moment this detail is introduced and explain how the text nudges you to interpret it.

Mission 4 Facilitation: Finding Her Voice Again

FOURTH SECTION

Essential question

What does Rory's use of sign language teach Thea about communication that spoken words don't?

Look-Fors

- the new friendships Thea forms, including with Rory and Simon
- sign language as a genuine alternative form of communication, not just a workaround
- small breakthroughs supported by Ms. Stacy and Thea's family

Seminar Sequence: Two-Column Contrast

- In pairs, build a two-column chart: “What spoken words can do” and “What silence or sign language can do that speech can't.”
- Compare charts across pairs before the whole-group seminar.
- Whole-group seminar tests whether nonverbal communication is a stepping stone or has its own real value.
- Exit line: “I used to think healing meant ... now I think ... because ...”

Misconception to Press

Do not accept “sign language is just a workaround until Thea talks again.” Press students to consider how nonverbal communication has genuine value of its own, not merely as a bridge back to speech.

Craft Focus: Parallel Communication Motif

Silence, sign language, and speech all appear as forms of communication in this section. Choose two and compare what each lets a character express that the other doesn't.

Mission 5 Facilitation: What Comes Next

FINAL SECTION

Essential question

What's the difference between “moving on” from grief and “moving forward” with it?

Look-Fors

- the accumulated small moments that lead to Thea's breakthrough
- how Thea's relationship to Charlie's memory changes without disappearing
- what the ending resolves, and what it leaves as an ongoing process

Seminar Sequence: Socratic Seminar

- Each student submits one genuine question about the ending.
- The group selects and pursues the most generative question together.
- Facilitator presses for textual evidence, not guesses — direct rehearsal for the culminating mission.
- Exit line: “I used to think healing meant ... now I think ... because ...”

Misconception to Press

Do not accept that the ending means Thea is entirely “over” losing Charlie. Press students to identify what the text suggests about carrying a loss forward rather than leaving it fully behind.

Craft Focus: Earned Emotional Payoff

Thea's breakthrough builds from many small, accumulated moments rather than one dramatic event. How does this pacing choice affect how believable or earned the ending feels?

Context Packet Integration

After Mission	Context File	Purpose
1	Trauma Responses and Mutism: What Real Psychology Says	Ground Thea's silence in real, documented, non-diagnostic terms.
2	Grief in Children: What Research Actually Shows	Support Mission 2's discussion of healing timelines.
3	Animal-Assisted Support: What the Research Says	Ground Jack-Jack's role in real, documented research and its limits.
4	American Sign Language and Deaf Culture	Treat Rory's sign language with real accuracy and respect.
5	The Real Psychology of Survivor's Guilt	Deepen understanding of Thea's nightmares and guilt.
6	Writing Grief for Young Readers: A Craft Lens	Support fair, evenhanded critique of the novel's own choices.

Culminating Mission Facilitation

Complete novel

Require evidence through the final section. A partial reading does not meet the task.

Students prepare The Healing Report: an analysis of what actually helps Thea heal across the novel, using evidence from all five missions, at least one context source, and an honest account of what remains an ongoing process rather than a finished resolution.

- Approve proposals only after checking novel evidence across all sections and at least one context source.
- Require students to distinguish “moving on” from “moving forward” using their own words.
- Allow varied products but hold one rubric.
- Assess the reasoning, not agreement with the facilitator.

Conference Questions

- What does your strongest piece of evidence establish — and not establish?
- Which moment in the book most complicates a simple “the dog fixed everything” reading?
- Where might your report use diagnostic language too casually?

Assessment & Differentiation

Need	Access Without Lowering Rigor	Extension
Decoding / fluency	Audio paired with text; short chapters support flexible pacing	Compare how each mission's section opens
Writing production	Oral rehearsal; speech-to-text; modular paragraphs	Persuasive closing paragraph
Executive function	Milestones; evidence cards; visible checklist	Student-managed reading calendar
Discussion entry	Questions in advance; written first turn	Seminar co-facilitation
Mastery shown	Compact repeated organizers	Independent source critique
Emotional access	Preview; pause; choice of response mode; counselor coordination	Compare to another story about grief or animal companionship

Implementation Checklist

- ☐ Confirm your edition's chapter or section structure and record bibliographic data.
- ☐ Read the complete novel before facilitating.
- ☐ Remove or verify every locally added quotation.
- ☐ Send content preview regarding the friend's death, trauma response, and grief depicted in the novel.
- ☐ Coordinate with a school counselor if students have personal experience with loss or trauma.
- ☐ Administer and interpret the pre-assessment dimensionally.
- ☐ Use aligned mission sections in every handout.
- ☐ Verify psychological and Deaf-culture facts against the context packet's sources.
- ☐ Require the complete novel for culmination.
- ☐ Collect student access feedback and revise.

Facilitator Reflection
