

REFUGEE

Student Mission & Response Journal

CENTRAL IDEA

Three families, three eras, and the same decision made repeatedly by people who were not themselves in danger — what determines whether someone in flight gets seen as a person or handled as a problem?

Novel: Refugee by Alan Gratz

Setting: Three braided stories — Berlin and the Atlantic in 1938–39, Cuba and the Florida Straits in 1994, and Syria and Europe in 2015

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 6–8, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete novel, including the author's note and maps. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

Your Mission

You are auditing borders. Three families, sixty years apart, arrive at a line they are not permitted to cross. Your job across six missions is to build a ledger with three columns, one per storyline: what crossing was attempted, who controlled it, what rule was invoked, what the crossing cost, and who was left behind. Read across the columns, not down them. The argument of this book is in the repetition.

DRIVING QUESTION

When someone arrives at a border in flight, who decides whether they are a person in need or a problem to be managed — and what rule are they using?

Reading Care

This novel shows what makes people leave home and what happens to some of them on the way. It includes a night of organized violence against Jewish families, a father imprisoned and released, an attempt to drown, a bombed apartment building, a fatal shark attack, a drowning, a baby handed to strangers at sea, a family separated by a soldier, and a death at Auschwitz. Almost all of it is grounded in documented history, which is exactly what makes it heavy. Ask for a preview, a pause, or a different way to respond if you need one.

Use of the Novel

- Use a teacher-approved edition containing all three storylines and the author's note.
- Cite by character, place, and year — for example, Isabel, Florida Straits, 1994. That citation works in any edition.
- Do not copy long passages. Record brief location notes and paraphrase evidence.
- Every mission requires all three threads. Do not complete one on a single storyline.
- The culminating mission requires all three endings and the author's note.

Conceptual Questions

Borders

- Who controls each border in this book, and are they ever named?
- What does each rule claim to be protecting?

Repetition

- What happens in all three threads? What happens in only one?
- What is Gratz arguing by repeating rather than by explaining?

Cost

- What does each family lose, and at which point in the journey?
- Which losses were caused by the danger, and which by the refusal?

Evidence

- Where does the novel follow the historical record, and where does it invent?
- What can a novel prove about a policy, and what can it only make you feel?

Narrative Craft

- Why does Gratz cut between threads where he does?
- Why is the connection between the three stories hidden until the end?

Reading Route

Mission	Sections	Title	Transfer Question
1	Leaving	The Decision to Go	None of these three families wants to leave. What finally makes leaving less dangerous than staying, and who made that calculation for them?
2	Underway	In Motion	Each family is now in motion and not yet refused. What does each of them believe is going to happen, and what is that belief based on?
3	The Door Closes	Refused	Each family reaches a border and is stopped. Who stopped them, under what rule, and what did the rule say it was protecting?
4	What It Costs	The Price of the Crossing	Each family loses someone at almost exactly the same point in their journey. What is Gratz arguing by placing those losses together?
5	Arriving Somewhere	Landing, and What Landing Means	All three journeys end somewhere. Which of these arrivals is actually safety, and how do you know before the book tells you?
6	The Braid Closes	The Connection	The three storylines turn out to be connected. Does the connection strengthen the book's argument, or does it let the reader off?

RANGE ALIGNMENT

This novel is divided into short sections headed by character, place, and year rather than numbered chapters. Record your edition's page ranges for each mission on this table, and use the section headings as the stable reference in all citations.

Edition Record

Publisher / year: _____ Format: _____

All three storylines and the author's note present: ☐ Yes ☐ No Page-number citations required: ☐ Yes ☐ No

People & Roles

Person	Role to Track	Question
Josef Landau	A Jewish boy leaving Berlin in 1939	What is he being asked to become before he is ready?

Person	Role to Track	Question
Isabel Fernandez	A Cuban girl on a raft in 1994	What is she listening for, and when does she finally hear it?
Mahmoud Bishara	A Syrian boy leaving Aleppo in 2015	He begins by trying to be invisible. What changes that, and at what cost?
Josef's father	Released from Dachau before the voyage	What has been done to him, and what does the novel show rather than state?
Josef's mother	Faces an impossible instruction from a soldier	What is she given to choose between, and is it a choice?
Isabel's grandfather	Remembers what Cuba did in 1939	What does he know that the others do not, and what does he do with it?
Mahmoud's mother	Carries an infant across the Aegean	What does she decide on the water, and how does the novel judge it?
Ruthie	Josef's younger sister	What does her survival make possible sixty years later?

Discussion Toolkit

Move	Ask Yourself
Claim	What do I think is actually determining who gets through?
Evidence	Which action, detail, or moment supports it?
Reasoning	How does that evidence lead to that meaning?
Perspective	How would the official at that border describe the same events?
Revision	What later evidence changes my claim?

- Compare across the three threads, not within one.
- Name the rule and, if the text allows, the person applying it.
- Feeling strongly about a scene is not the same as having an argument about it.

Mission 1: The Decision to Go

JOSEF: BERLIN, 1938 • ISABEL: HAVANA, 1994 • MAHMOUD: ALEPPO, 2015

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

None of these three families wants to leave. What finally makes leaving less dangerous than staying, and who made that calculation for them?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

Gratz cuts between threads at points of maximum tension. Find one handoff and describe exactly where he cut. What does the interruption do to your reading of the thread you are forced to leave?

Mission 2: In Motion

THE ST. LOUIS AT SEA • THE RAFT LAUNCHED • THE ROAD TO THE TURKISH COAST

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Each family is now in motion and not yet refused. What does each of them believe is going to happen, and what is that belief based on?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

Each narrator carries something across their journey — an item, a skill, a rhythm they cannot yet hear. Track one across the whole novel and explain what Gratz uses it to measure.

Mission 3: Refused

HAVANA HARBOR • THE FLORIDA STRAITS • THE AEGEAN CROSSING

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Each family reaches a border and is stopped. Who stopped them, under what rule, and what did the rule say it was protecting?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

Gratz aligns the three refusals so they land close together in the reading even though they are decades apart. Explain what the alignment argues, and name one way it risks misleading you about history.

Mission 4: The Price of the Crossing

THE FATHER • THE GRANDFATHER • THE BABY

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Each family loses someone at almost exactly the same point in their journey. What is Gratz arguing by placing those losses together?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

Three losses, three generations, three positions in a family. Compare how each is written — what the narrator sees, what the narrator is told, and what the reader knows that the narrator does not.

Mission 5: Landing, and What Landing Means

FOUR COUNTRIES • MIAMI • THE WALK NORTH

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

All three journeys end somewhere. Which of these arrivals is actually safety, and how do you know before the book tells you?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

The reader of Josef's thread knows what is coming to Europe and he does not. Find the moment where that gap is widest, and explain what Gratz is doing to you rather than to Josef.

Mission 6: The Connection

THE THREE ENDINGS AND THE AUTHOR'S NOTE

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

The three storylines turn out to be connected. Does the connection strengthen the book's argument, or does it let the reader off?

Notice

What happened in all three threads at this stage — and what happened in only one?

Evidence from the Text

Record two references and paraphrase the relevant actions or craft choices.

Crossing Ledger

For each of the three storylines: crossing attempted / who controlled it / rule invoked / what it cost / who was left behind.

Current Claim

Write a defensible answer to the essential question.

Complication

What evidence resists or limits your claim?

Craft Lens

Gratz hides the link between the threads until the last pages. Reread one earlier section knowing what you now know. What was already there that you could not see, and what does the rereading change?

Crossing Ledger: Whole-Book Pattern

Looking back across all six missions and all three threads, what repeats — and what does the repetition let Gratz argue that any single story could not?

Historical & Ethical Inquiry

Use the companion context packet. Choose one question that helps you interpret the novel — not replace it.

- What does the documented record of the MS St. Louis establish that the novel dramatizes?
- What did U.S. immigration law actually require in 1939, and who wrote those rules?
- How did U.S. policy toward Cuban rafters change, and what did reaching land legally accomplish?
- What does the 1951 Refugee Convention define, and which of these three families would meet the definition?

Research Plan

Culminating Mission: The Crossing Ledger Case

COMPLETE-NOVEL REQUIREMENT

Read all three storylines to their endings, plus the author's note, before completing this mission. The three stories do not connect until the last pages.

Build an argued case about the borders in this novel: who controlled each one, what rule was invoked, what the rule claimed to protect, what crossing cost, and who was left behind. Use evidence from all three storylines and at least two context sources.

Required Evidence

- Evidence from all three storylines, not two.
- At least two credible context sources, with fact, inference, and judgment distinguished.
- A named rule for each closed border, and a decision-maker wherever the record supplies one.
- The strongest honest case for national control of borders, stated before you answer it.
- A reflection on what this novel can and cannot prove about real refugee policy.

Product Options

☐ Written case file ☐ Three-column annotated ledger with commentary ☐ Short podcast script ☐
Policy brief addressed to a decision-maker in one of the three eras ☐ Approved design

Culminating Planner

My claim about what actually determines who gets through, in one sentence

Evidence plan (which stage, which thread, which moment)

Context source plan (at least two)

The strongest case against my position, stated fairly

Student Rubric

Criterion	4 — Advanced	3 — Secure	2 — Developing	1 — Beginning
Interpretation	Nuanced, conditional, revisable	Clear and defensible	Broad or uneven	Summary or opinion
Text Evidence	Precise, drawn from across the whole novel	Relevant and accurate	Uneven or incomplete	Little or inaccurate
Context Evidence	Credible sources deepen the interpretation	Accurate and connected	Mostly background	Unverified or absent
Cross-Thread Comparison	Argues from all three threads and explains the differences	Uses all three threads	Uses two threads	Relies on one thread
Rule Identification	Names the rule and its author for each border	Names the rule	Refers to policy generally	Treats refusal as inevitable
Opposing Case	States the strongest opposing view fairly, then answers it	States a real objection	States a weak version	None offered
Communication	Audience-shaped and clear	Clear and appropriate	Sometimes unclear	Incomplete
Reflection	Specific revision and a next question	Explains growth	General process	Completion only

Reflection & Access

How did your understanding of what a border is change?

Which evidence most disrupted your first idea?

What remains unresolved — and is it unresolved because you lack evidence, or because the book refuses to settle it?

What support helped you show your best thinking?

Useful supports: ☐ preview questions ☐ audio + text ☐ writing before speaking ☐ speech-to-text ☐
visual organizer ☐ compacted practice ☐ independent extension