

EDUCATOR GUIDE

THE WORDS IN MY HANDS

by Asphyxia

Lesson plan originally created by Allen & Unwin

Updated for North American readers by Wanda Blackett

GENRE: fiction

THEMES: **Deafness:** oral communication (lipreading and speaking) and signed communication, Deaf culture and community, discrimination, the experience of deafness

Sustainability: peak oil, food growing, resilience, danger of dominance by big corporations.

Art: self-expression through art journaling, using emotions as a starting point for making art, presenting social issues as art, art as protest

Definition of “success” in work/life pathways: finding meaningful work, building community, discovering personal identity, studies of history, society and its environment, English and visual arts

SUITABLE FOR: Ages 13–16, Grades 7–11

GUIDED READING LEVEL: Fountas and Pinnell Z

LEXILE: AD510L

COMMON CORE STANDARDS: CCSS.ELA-Literacy Strand-Reading literature: RL.8.1,2,3,4,5,6,9
W.8.1,1a,1b,1c,1d,1e,3,3a,3b,3c,3d,3e,4,5,6,7,8,9,9a,10
SL.8.1,1a,1b,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6
L.8.1,1a,1b,1c,1d,2,2a,2b,2c,3,3a,4,4a,4b,4c,4d,5,5a,5b,5c,6

INTRODUCTION

The Words in My Hands is a forward-thinking vision around equal rights and the future of our world as we know it by Asphyxia: a trailblazing Australian Deaf activist, a prominent sustainability champion, passionate artist, and writer. She has been a popular speaker in schools and universities since 2000 and has inspired thousands of students to make permanent changes to their lives in response to her presentations about Deafness, sustainable living, and art journaling.

With this novel, presented as sixteen-year-old Piper’s stunning visual-art journal, Asphyxia deftly weaves her detailed insight into Deaf culture and what it feels like to be d/Deaf throughout a compelling story set in near-future Melbourne. *The Words in My Hands* combines these passions into a similarly moving book that will galvanize students into action.

Summary:

As peak oil hits and Melbourne collapses into environmental catastrophe, what does it look like to be a d/Deaf teenager already struggling to fit into a hearing world?

Piper’s mum wants Piper to be “normal”—to put up with the tension headaches, the constant misunderstandings, and the herculean daily effort it takes for her to pass as hearing so she can grow up to be “successful” like her scientist mother. But when disaster hits Melbourne, Piper has more important things to worry about, starting with her stomach. The personalized, ultra-processed meals from her mum’s company that used to land on their doorstep so reliably have halved in quantity. Transport costs skyrocket overnight, and businesses everywhere start to collapse.

Piper’s best friend and lifeline at school goes AWOL just as Piper and her mum lose everything. And then there’s Marley—a CODA (child of Deaf adult), who opens a door for Piper into a new world—a world where Deafness is something to celebrate, not to hide, and full of beautifully expressive Auslan (Australian sign language). As Piper begins to explore her love of art, discover a new passion for guerrilla gardening, and push back remorselessly against her mum—all while becoming more and more immersed in Deaf culture, she falls hard for Marley. But Marley is struggling with some big questions of his own . . .



AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

About the author

Asphyxia is an artist, writer, and public speaker. Author of the much-loved children’s series *The Grimstones*, Asphyxia has also been a circus performer and puppeteer. As an avid art-journal creator, she loves to share her process and help others benefit from this amazing tool for self-expression, problem-solving, planning, goal-tracking, and self-esteem.



Deaf since the age of three, Asphyxia learned to sign when she was eighteen, which changed her life. She is now a Deaf activist, sharing details of Deaf experience. She raises awareness of oppression of Deaf people and what we can do to change this. Her free on-line Auslan course (<https://helloasphyxia.wordpress.com/>) has had over 15,000 students.

Asphyxia is kept busy with her small farm where she combines food growing with art—creating a magical aesthetic with plants and natural elements. *The Words in My Hands* combines all these passions.

In the words of the author

I made Piper d/Deaf in *The Words in My Hands* because I realized how little most hearing people know about d/Deafness. When I first tried to write about Piper’s experience, I found myself stuck, as being Deaf is something I don’t think about a lot. I found I didn’t know how to articulate it. So I started jotting down my everyday experiences—the little annoyances, the benefits, confusion, the irritating things people say and do, and the complex feelings that arise when someone has tried to provide access but misses the mark.

For example, here’s a Deaf dilemma: Imagine you are standing with a group of hearing people who are laughing, but you have no idea what they are laughing about. Should you laugh along to be friendly (and if you do, are you somehow “lying” about having understood?), or stand there with a stony face even though it could seem rude and unfriendly?

I had never realized I was making these difficult decisions on the fly, every day, without analyzing how I wanted to approach them. My responses were automatic: I laughed along. But did I really want to do this? Perhaps it would be better to let people know that I felt left out.

If you are a hearing reader, I hope that reading about Piper’s experiences gives you some insight into what it can be like to be d/Deaf, and an understanding of what a huge difference it can make if you demonstrate inclusive, thoughtful behavior. If you are d/Deaf, I hope that you can relate to some of Piper’s experiences, and that seeing them written down makes it easier for you to explain your own experiences to other people. I hope it also helps you to build a sense of entitlement to ask for access.

BEFORE READING THE BOOK

These activities build the context, introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

1. Write down: What do you know about d/Deafness? Imagine a day in your life if you were d/Deaf. How would it affect your school experience, work life, home life, and your social life? If you are d/Deaf, write about your experience of d/Deafness—what it feels like, what barriers you face, and what benefits you enjoy.
2. Picture yourself as a “successful” adult fifteen years in the future. What are you doing with your days? What does your life look like?
3. Learn: What is peak oil? Look it up online and write a brief paragraph summarizing your understanding.

AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers’ reactions.

Cultural understanding

Revisit your notes showing what you imagined about d/Deafness before reading *The Words in My Hands*. What did you learn about d/Deafness that you didn’t know before? If you are d/Deaf, did you notice Piper describing some aspect of d/Deafness that you experience but hadn’t articulated before? Adjust your description of a day in your life if you were d/Deaf to make it more detailed/realistic, based on what you know now.

The concept of success

Having read *The Words in My Hands*, ask yourself if your image of what it means to be “successful” has changed. If Piper, prior to meeting Marley, had done this exercise, her image of herself as a “successful adult” would probably have mirrored her mum’s idea of success, though she couldn’t see how to get there. By the end of the book, Piper has found an entirely new path which offers a more meaningful experience for her. Was the “successful” life you imagined for yourself based on others’ ideas of success or your own internal success? Would that life actually feel meaningful to you? Write a new description of yourself as a “successful adult,” fifteen years in the future, that focuses on a life that feels rich with meaning and passion to you. What would your daily life look like?

Unsustainable energy

In *The Words in My Hands*, the price of petrol has suddenly risen dramatically, making it unaffordable to the average Australian.

- What are some of the reasons why this may have occurred?
- Is this a realistic, likely scenario that could happen to us some time in the future? Why/why not?
- Why would electricity and gas prices suddenly rise at the same time as petrol prices? What is the link?
- Why would there suddenly be shortages of food and consumer goods soon after? What is the link?
- If Piper had known that there was a high risk of oil prices rising, what might she have done beforehand to prepare?

CURRICULUM TOPICS

Sustainability

In the book, Kelsey runs a branch of an organization called Transition Towns. This is an actual organization whose aim is to help people become more resilient in the face of possible upcoming disasters like the one Piper faces.

- Look up Transition Towns—how did it start, and what are some of the ideas and initiatives undertaken by groups of members?
- What could you do as an individual, to become more resilient and to be prepared for scenarios such as suddenly rising petrol prices?
- What could happen at a community/council level to strengthen resilience?
- Are there other benefits to undertaking resilience measures, besides being prepared for a disaster? Discuss some of the benefits that Piper and others experience in *The Words in My Hands*, as well as benefits that could occur in your area/community.

Exploring viewpoints, ethics, and intercultural understanding

Asphyxia presents differing points of view through characters with extremely different values and opinions from each other. In *The Words in My Hands*, Marley talks about his anger/frustration with big corporations. Do you feel this is justified in the context of the story?

- Read *Fast Food Nation* for an insight into fast food companies such as McDonald's and their influence in today's world. Do you see a link between what is happening with processed food today and *The Words in My Hands*?
- Consider how Piper's mum, Irene, has a very different view of recon than Marley. Why does Irene believe recon is the answer to many of the world's problems? Why is Marley proud that he has never eaten recon in his life, and why doesn't he want to break this record? If recon were available now, what would be your attitude towards this food?
- Look up Monsanto on the internet—are there parallels between Monsanto's behavior and that of Organicore in *The Words in My Hands*?
- What are the risks/dangers of big corporations gaining too much power?
- Discuss the measures Organicore takes to gain power/profit and how ethical they are. For example, hiring someone to run as an "independent" candidate for prime minister, rolling out a kitchenless welfare program, and rolling out "Cesspool" (the nickname for QuestTool), the new Internet.
- Discuss the ramifications of the government rolling out Cesspool. What does this mean for the school curriculum and for access to a range of topics such as pornography, food growing, and organizing rallies?
- What does the book say about our corporate world today and where we may be heading? What might we do to change the course if we don't like the direction we are going in? What does Marley do to try to change course?

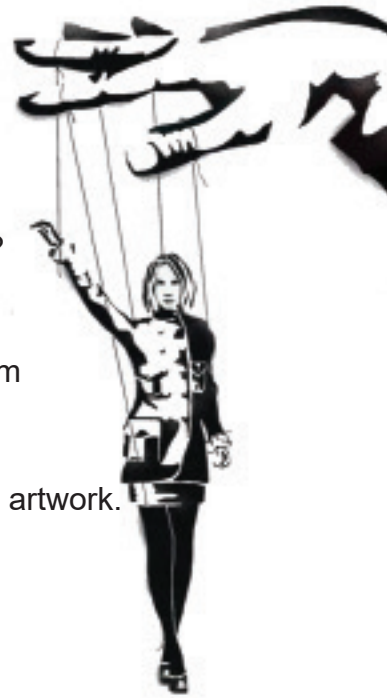
Examine the differing viewpoints held by characters in the book and your own responses on the following topics:

- Whether or not Piper should use sign language versus passing as hearing.
- What Piper should do for her vocation in the future.

English language and literacy

How has Asphyxia used language and imagery to bring Piper to life? Consider:

- How Piper’s “voice” contributes to an understanding of her character.
- What motivates Piper—do you understand why she does what she does? How does Asphyxia convey Piper’s motivations?
- What Piper’s artwork tells you about Piper which cannot be discerned from the text alone.
- How Asphyxia conveys Piper’s emotional world, through text and through artwork.
- What the handwritten words in the book tell you about Piper.



How has Asphyxia used language to give varying impressions of d/Deafness?

- Consider how the language chosen demonstrates Piper’s perspective of her d/Deafness. On page 239, Piper says “I thought that deafness was meant to be like having freckles—something that fades into the background so you don’t really notice it after a bit. Do people with freckles seek to spend time with other freckled people?” Note that she says that “deafness was meant to be like . . .”—she had an idea that there was a certain way that a person should be deaf, and that she should strive to be like that. What does the comparison of deafness with freckles suggest about deafness? Can you find other examples of language in *The Words in My Hands* that shows a similar perspective of d/Deafness?
- Look at how Marley talks about Deafness and the different impression he creates through the language he uses. Marley has grown up in the Deaf community where Deaf people have a higher status than hearing people, and his “passport” to the Deaf community is somewhat tenuous. How does Asphyxia show that through the language she chooses for Marley’s words? For an example, consider page 286. Can you find other examples of language in *The Words in My Hands* that show a similar perspective of Deafness?
- Towards the end of the book, Piper talks differently about Deafness—consider how her word choices reflect her changing attitude, such as on pages 347, 351–2, and 359.
- Go back to your own writing about a day in the life of a d/Deaf person—what does the language you used say about your own attitudes to d/Deafness? Does this reflect your actual attitude? If not, edit your writing to use language that does.
- If you were raising a d/Deaf child, what language choices could you make to ensure they grow up without feeling defective, as Piper does at the start of the book?

Consider these microaggressions (unconscious expressions of prejudice from other people) that Piper faces on a regular basis due to her d/Deafness:

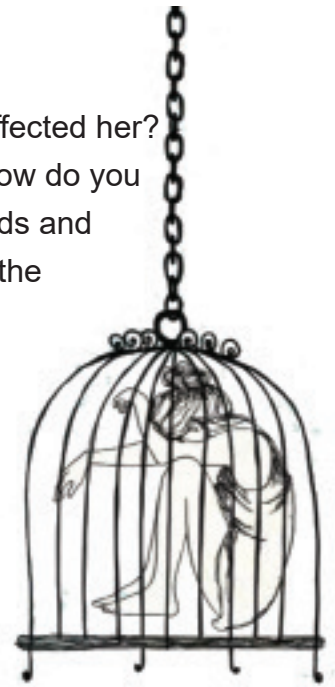
- People expecting her to lipread and shoulder the entire burden of communication
 - People slowing and exaggerating their speech after finding out Piper is d/Deaf
 - Gary making an assessment of her speech and patronizingly telling her that she speaks really well
 - Her mum throwing things at her to get her attention
 - A lack of accommodation for her deafness—she has no interpreters at school, her classmates chanting her name over and over to get her attention rather than finding a deaf-friendly way to communicate
 - Announcements made at the police station when Piper is waiting in line, with the assumption that everyone in the line is hearing
 - Cyclists riding past too close, ringing their bell, assuming that Piper will hear them and move out of their way
 - Being told she should get a bio-engineered ear even though it would not fix her deafness, by well-meaning people who are uneducated on the topic
 - People asking if she was born deaf
 - People asking if she ever considered getting a bionic ear to become hearing
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- In these instances, do you think the person involved is deliberately subjecting Piper to a microaggression?
 - What do you think is their point of view?
 - What microaggressions do you experience in your daily life?
 - Research microaggressions experienced by people with other forms of disability—a great starting point could be reading the blog of Carly Findlay (carlyfindlay.com.au).
 - Consider how microaggressions affect the person who receives them.

Censorship

In *The Words in My Hands*, there are several articles from News Melbourne, a heavily censored organization. When Piper meets journalist Amber, she learns of the challenges Amber faces in saying what she really wants to say, and witnesses Amber tweaking her stories to pass censorship while trying to retain some integrity. Imagine there was no censorship. Rewrite the various news articles expressing what you imagine to be the real views of the journalists.

Coping with frustration

- Piper has grown up without knowing other d/Deaf people. How has this affected her? What changes for her when she meets Robbie and other Deaf people? How do you think her upbringing might have been different if she had had d/Deaf friends and mentors? Consider how Piper's life changes after she meets Robbie and the influence Robbie has on her.
- Twice in the book, Piper starts crying because she is frustrated that she cannot hear what is happening around her. She writes that she has never cried about being deaf before and doesn't understand why this is happening now. Why do you think Piper is upset about her deafness now when she wasn't before? How do factors such as her age, upbringing, education, and desire to learn explain her reaction?
- Piper's mum regularly corrects her speech and behavior. Piper feels annoyed by this and says, "Does it really matter?" What do you think? Do you think Piper's mum is being helpful and that this is good education for Piper, or do you think it would be more respectful to leave her alone? Would your answer be the same if Piper were much younger and learning to speak? At what point do you think things need to change? If you were raising a d/Deaf child, how would you navigate this in a respectful way?



Applying learned knowledge

- Having read *The Words in My Hands*, if you had a deaf child, how would you raise them in terms of their deafness? Would you focus on oralism and passing as "normal"? Would you ensure your child learns to sign? Would you learn to sign yourself? Do you think it is important for your child to regularly see other d/Deaf people? Why/why not? In answering this, consider:
 - The role of Deaf adult mentors
 - The role of Deaf friends
 - The role of sign language
 - The role of the Deaf community and Deaf pride
 - The pressure created by a goal to be "normal." Is it really okay to be different? Who decides this, and who should decide this?
 - Learning how to ask for access, to get needs met to enable independence
 - What support might be necessary when transitioning to new hearing environments, e.g., consider what might have helped Piper transition to her new high school
- In the book, Piper learns that the Deaf community has a different culture than the hearing world. What are some examples of the way that the Deaf community is different from mainstream hearing culture? Draw knowledge both from the book and by researching further online. Why do you think Deaf communities have evolved to have their own distinct culture?

- Piper has the opportunity to change her identity from “deaf” to “Deaf.” What does this mean? Why might Piper want to do this? What are some potential benefits and drawbacks to identifying as Deaf? Prior to meeting Marley and Robbie, Piper has no idea that the Deaf community even exists, and doesn’t understand the option of a Deaf identity—how has this affected her? Do you think all deaf people should receive the exposure and information to make the choice as to whether they want to identify as Deaf, and if so, at what age?
- Although at the start of the book Piper does not identify as Deaf nor belong to the Deaf community, her deafness still shapes her life, her experiences, her values, and attitudes. How is Piper different from her hearing peers because of her deafness, and what strategies does she employ to survive in a hearing world?

The power of underlying messages

In *The Words in My Hands*, Asphyxia has used the story to communicate key messages about Deafness, the environment, art, big corporations, politics, and what it means to be “successful.” What do you think some of these messages are? As an example, consider the scene where Piper goes to a food-growing workshop and leaves crying. This scene could send a message about the importance of considering inclusion when presenting a workshop—the teacher has clearly not taken into account the possibility that a d/Deaf person might attend. It could send a message about the importance of teaching young d/Deaf people how to prepare for such events and ask for their needs to be met. Write a list of other messages conveyed in *The Words in My Hands*.

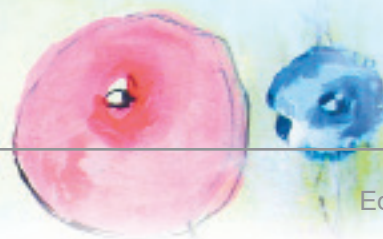
Consider the final paragraphs in *The Words in My Hands*:

Taylor nudges me and indicates the stew with her eyes. “YUM,” she fingerspells, and I’m thrilled to see her diving into this and making an effort. Not bad for a complete beginner!

I show her the sign for *delicious*, kissing my index finger and ending with my thumb up—a combination of the signs for *taste* and *good*. She copies me and laughs, doing the sign with a dramatic flourish.

Putting down her bowl, she concentrates hard to remember the right letters. “WI SHOILD HAVE DINE THIS YEARS AGO! OT’S FUN.”

And as I lean sideways and tuck my head onto Marley’s shoulder, chewing the last of my bread with my eyes closed, I have to agree.



- What message(s) does Asphyxia convey with this ending? Do you think she chose an effective way to do it? How else could she have conveyed this same message? How does the tone of these final moments influence the underlying message? Consider the tone of how various messages are imparted and how effective or ineffective the tone is in supporting the message.
- How do you think the messages in *The Words in My Hands* could be differently interpreted by different audiences? For example, consider how d/Deaf readers might receive very different messages than hearing readers. Do you think someone involved in the Transition Towns movement would receive different messages from *The Words in My Hands* than those who are not focused on developing resilience?
- What do you think of Asphyxia's messages? Pick a couple and do some online research to get a feel for more than one viewpoint about these messages. Create a personal critical response—in what way do you agree this message has merit and needs to be shared with the world, and/or in what way do you feel this message is wrong or inappropriate?
- How has Asphyxia used the story to get her messages across? In the above example of the food-growing workshop, Asphyxia gives us an intimate window into Piper's emotional experience as she realizes she cannot learn in this environment. For Piper, it is overwhelming and tragic. Throughout the story she mentions the experience multiple times, with a sense of trauma about it. In this way Asphyxia illustrates through emotional experience the ramifications of a non-inclusive society. What other ways does Asphyxia use the story to communicate her messages? How does the art journal format assist with or hinder the communication of Asphyxia's methods? What other formats could be used and how effective do you think they would be?



ENGLISH STUDIES AND ART JOURNALING

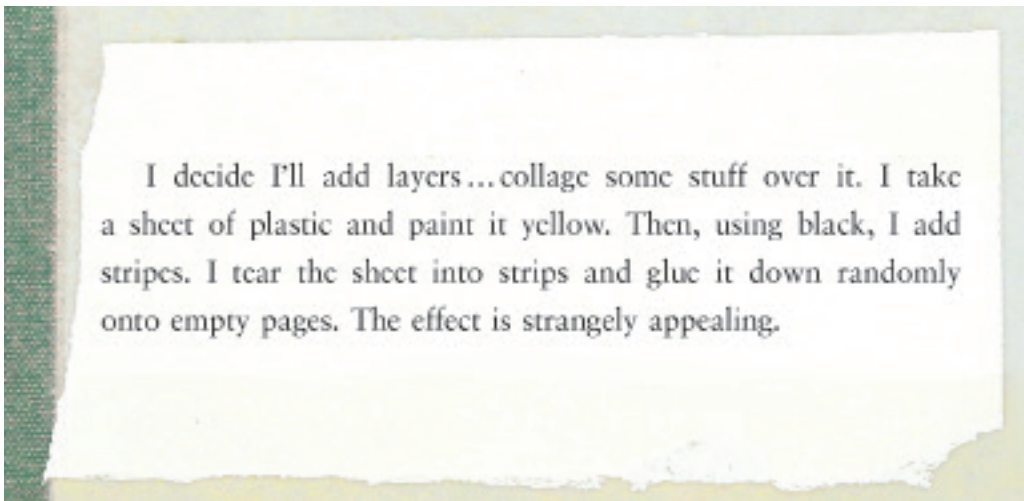
Before reading the book

Consider what you think an art journal is. What are some of the benefits to keeping an art journal?

After reading the book

Add to your notes about art journaling—did Piper experience any benefits to keeping an art journal that you did not already list? What are potential benefits for you if you establish an ongoing art journaling habit?

After spreading plaster over a page in her journal, Piper writes on page 24:



CREATING YOUR ART JOURNAL

1. Use Piper's process (or adapt your own) to create your own art journal. Here are some suggestions:
 - Create backgrounds on a number of different pages, using varying colours of paint, sticking down lined notepaper or other textured paper, and smearing on plaster or other textures.
 - Create some patterned papers by painting a background and adding stripes, dots, or other motifs. Tear these papers into strips or pieces and glue onto background pages you have already created. You might work randomly or make judgments about which patterns look good on which backgrounds.
 - Write about your day, your feelings, what's inspiring you, what you want, and what your goals are.
 - Draw or paint images that represent key aspects of what you have written. You could also print images sourced from the internet, cut them out and stick them in.
 - Add doodles and paint and play around to see what works.

2. Consider some of the ways you could adapt your art journal to benefit you personally. For example, do you have a specific skill that you could explore in your journal, resulting in your journal becoming a folio of sorts? Do you have a hobby or topic you are keen to learn more about, and if so, could your journal form a place to record all you have learned? Do you have lots of ideas that could be set down in your journal so that later you remember them? Would you like to capture parts of your life—things people say, milestones, important moments—as a treasury of memories? Write yourself a page of journal prompts to remind yourself and stick it in the front or back of your journal for easy reference.

SHARING YOUR MESSAGE

Through the process of writing *The Words in My Hands*, Asphyxia began to articulate aspects of Deafness she had never seen described before:

I found writing about Deaf experience challenging, because Deafness was such an ordinary part of my existence that I rarely thought about it. I began jotting down my daily Deaf encounters—the little annoyances, benefits, confusing moments, the irritating things people say, and the complex feelings that arise when someone has tried to provide access but missed the mark.

1. Identify some messages that are important to you. What would you like to say to the world, about things that matter to you? Consider parts of yourself that might feel unacceptable—is there a message that would sum up the importance of accepting these parts of yourself? Consider barriers faced by you or others in your life/community—what messages might help break through those barriers? Consider topics you are passionate about that others may not know much about—what messages might be valuable for others to learn?
2. Increase your capacity for articulating your message(s) through daily journaling. Keep a daily journal about key issues important to you and a message you would like to share.

USING ART JOURNALING TO CREATE A NARRATIVE

Consider the scene where Piper goes to a food-growing workshop and leaves crying. Here, the teacher has clearly not taken into account the possibility that a d/Deaf person might attend. This part of the narrative could send a message about the importance of teaching young d/Deaf people how to prepare for such events and ask for their needs to be met.

1. Using the art journal format, create a fictional story that communicates one or more of the key messages you identified that are important to you. Use some of the same methods Asphyxia used to communicate her messages, such as showing the emotional consequences of not following the message. Here are some guidelines to create a story using your art journal:

- In planning your story, first list the messages, then write ideas for how they could be shown in various scenes. Plan to influence your readers to believe your message.
- Consider the tone of your story and how that will work with the messages to make them more effective.
- Consider the language of your story. Brainstorm ideas for words, metaphors, and analogies that convey your message, and choose language that will present it powerfully.
- Add visual imagery to strengthen your messages, which may include artwork and stencils you have already created. You may wish to adapt them to suit your story.

GETTING IT RIGHT VS GETTING IT WRITTEN

1. A multi-layered story like this can be difficult to create, so do it in stages:

- Write a first draft, then go back and adjust the writing, thinking about the tone. Go back and adjust it again, this time thinking about language, metaphors, and analogies. Continue this process of refinement until you are happy with the story.

Asphyxia wrote *The Words in My Hands* three times from scratch as well as doing significant edits on each draft, in order to refine the story into the finished book. Expecting yourself to write a perfect story on the first go adds unnecessary pressure and stress to the writing process. For the first draft, write quickly and focus on getting down the key ideas without worrying if it is well-written. Relax and enjoy the process. Then polish.

SHINING UP YOUR DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH AND CREATING A COVER

1. When you have your ideas down on paper, edit your story so that the message is not actually stated directly anywhere in the text. How can you show the message through scenes without actually stating it?
2. Create the cover artwork for your story—it should give an indication of what to expect of the story in terms of content and mood.

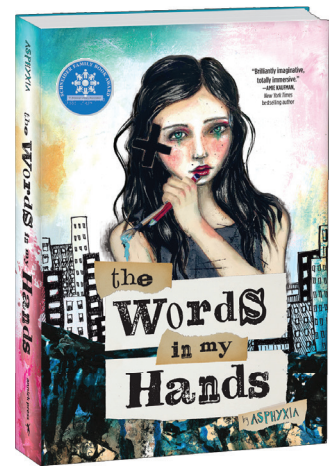
CREATING A PRESENTATION TO COMMUNICATE YOUR MESSAGE

1. Use the key message you've communicated in your story as the basis for a presentation. Focus on how you can inspire your audience to see that this message is important. It's fine to state the message explicitly here. Tell a personal story that illustrates the importance of your message. Afterwards, reflect—which medium was more effective for your message? The presentation? The art journal story? Do you think another medium would be more effective still?

VISUAL LITERACY

1. Look at the front cover of *The Words in My Hands*:

- How does the artwork tell you about what is inside the book? Consider the content of the artwork, and also the style and mood.



2. Consider the artwork on pages 178–9:



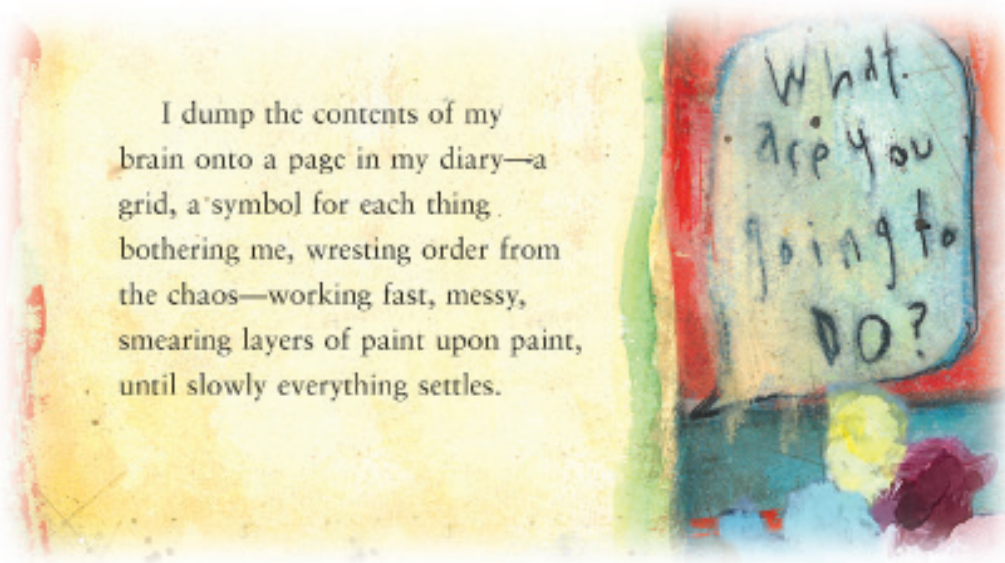
- What does the art tell you about Piper's mood and feelings that she doesn't explicitly state in the text on that page? Compare this to the artwork on pages 196–7. What does the artwork suggest about Piper's mood and feelings now? How has Asphyxia achieved the contrasting emotions/mood on these two pages? Consider the use of color, the materials used, the textures, and style of each artwork. Pick a few other pages and describe how the art adds to the mood and emotional experience of the book.



3. Think about the artwork and visual elements used throughout the book:

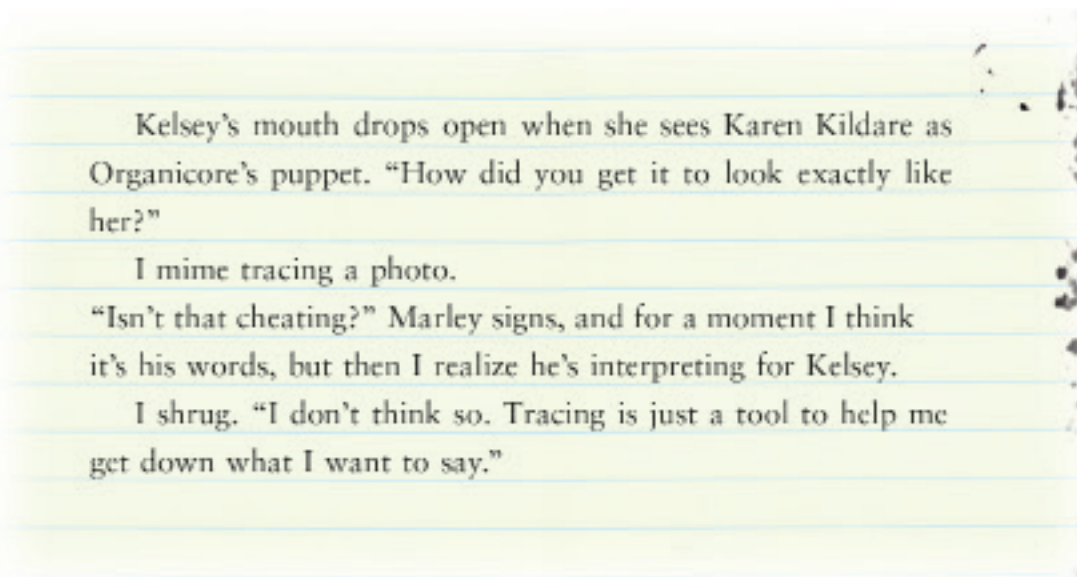
- How has Asphyxia used art, imagery, and color in other areas of the book to strengthen the underlying messages she conveys?
- Is there an artwork in *The Words in My Hands* that created an emotional response in you when you saw it? If there was nothing in *The Words in My Hands*, find an artwork elsewhere that elicits an emotional response and consider that instead. Why do you think it affected you emotionally? Was it the technique, the colors, the content, the idea behind it, and/or the underlying message?
- While most of the text is in a typed font, in some cases Asphyxia has chosen to use handwriting. Why do you think she chose handwriting? How does that change the feeling of those snippets of text?

- Look at the artwork on the pages 48–9 and analyse what is on Piper’s mind. Having read the text, do you feel the artwork accurately reflects what she is focused on at that point? Why/ why not?



- Follow Piper’s process to create an artwork in your journal to dump the contents of your brain. Use a loose grid format that has some elements breaking away from the grid, and a symbol for each thing you are focused on. Work fast and messy, using lots of layers of paint.

4. Consider the following passage in the book on page 233:



- Do you agree with Kelsey, that tracing is cheating? What do you think of Piper’s methods for creating stencils of people with an accurate likeness—should she be drawing them by hand?



ART AS EXPRESSION

After graffitiing on a public wall, Piper writes on page 72,

“I feel excited. Like I’ve finally found a voice. A tiny voice, but one that will be heard, at least, by anyone who walks past this wall.” If you were to find a public voice, what would you like to say? What do you feel is wrong with this world that you wish could be fixed?

1. Design an artwork that shares this or one of your other messages with the world.
2. Consider the text in your artwork, if any. How can you condense your message down to minimal text? Should you include text in your artwork, as in some of those created by Piper, such as *Grow Food Not Concrete* and *Don’t Delete My Voice*? If so, what imagery could go with it to most powerfully impart your message? Could you communicate it entirely visually, with no text at all? Another option is to have the text as the title of the artwork.

TECHNIQUES, MATERIALS, AND TECHNOLOGY

1. What techniques, materials, technologies, and art-making processes has Asphyxia used in *The Words in My Hands*? What techniques does Piper describe using in the book? Do you feel the multiple techniques work together as a cohesive whole? Compare the techniques used with those of other artists, including Indigenous artists.
2. In *The Words in My Hands*, how do various techniques used represent themes, concepts and ideas in the book? Consider how Piper’s artwork changes as her mood changes. Consider artworks in the book such as *Grow Food Not Concrete* or *Don’t Delete My Voice*, where the same idea is presented using more than one technique. How do these artworks change with the changed technique, and how do they remain the same? What is the value of each method of presentation, regarding the core idea Piper wanted to express? How effective do you think each method is? Is one method more suitable for some circumstances/audiences than others?
3. If you don’t already have an art journal, begin one. Experiment with using the same techniques used in *The Words in My Hands* and in a range of artworks that inspire you to express themes from your own life. How well do the various techniques express the meaning of what you want to say?

4. Create pages using a range of techniques. Start with a colored background (paint or paper), add patterns or text paper. Collage in images that inspire you. Add words that represent key issues on your mind right now. Add in a figure or animal or plant that represents you and your feelings. Add more layers of paint, doodle with pens and pencils and color in to integrate. Stand back and look at your page objectively. What does it say? Does it appeal visually? Does it express your emotions? How could you represent the same emotions more effectively? How could you increase the visual appeal of the page while keeping the message/emotions intact?

VISUAL CONVENTIONS

1. What visual conventions has Asphyxia used in *The Words in My Hands*? Do you feel they work? Do you like them? Why/why not? Check out Asphyxia's other work online at <https://helloasphyxia.wordpress.com/>. How is the art in *The Words in My Hands* similar to her other work? How is it different? What motifs has she repeated, and what value do you think the motifs have?
2. Pick an artwork in *The Words in My Hands*. Why did Piper create this piece? What does it represent about her life and emotions? What conventions are used in this piece? Do they help the piece more effectively represent Piper's life and emotions?
3. Write a review of Asphyxia's work, referring to *The Words in My Hands* and her other artworks—what is your personal opinion of her work, its messages, its effectiveness at communicating the messages, and the techniques used?
4. How does Asphyxia's culture influence her artwork? How does this differ from the cultural influences of other artists who inspire you?
5. How does Asphyxia's Deafness influence her artwork?
6. How does Piper's background influence her artwork in *The Words in My Hands*? Consider street art—look at examples of street art in *The Words in My Hands*, other art of the same style by Asphyxia, and street art by artists such as Banksy, or other artists in your local area. How does their culture influence their artworks?



REVIEW QUOTES

“A distressingly insightful vision of the future that also offers warmth and hope.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, ★starred review

“Fans of dystopian and realistic fiction will savor this engaging work, and the message will resonate with young activists seeking their own purpose. A standout must-read for teens and adults.”

—*School Library Journal*, ★starred review

“Asphyxia, herself Deaf and an artist, has done an outstanding job of relating the experience of being Deaf in this near-future story of a young woman grappling with her identity and finding her voice.”

—*Booklist*, ★starred review

“Offers an original and forceful vision of what the world may come to—as well as a vision for building a better future.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, ★starred review

“Young adult readers will surely find Asphyxia’s presentation of Piper’s challenges compelling . . . Highly recommended.”

—*CM Reviews*

“A blend of coming-of-age story, call to action, and a tale of wanting to belong, this title encapsulates feelings that all teenagers can relate to and understand.”

—School Library Connection

“Brilliantly imaginative, totally immersive—Asphyxia tilts the world sideways and invites you to see what was always there. Don’t miss this book.”

—Amie Kaufman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Illuminae*

“Asphyxia has achieved something extraordinary here.”

—Adam Pottle, author of *The Black Drum* and *Voice: Adam Pottle on Writing with Deafness*

“Beautiful, immersive . . . a sensory feast.”

—Jaclyn Moriarty, bestselling author of *Feeling Sorry for Celia*