

English Language Arts (Grades 6–8)

Secret Path Language Activity: “The Stranger”

Name:

Date:

In Gord Downie’s “The Secret Path”, Chanie Wenjack repeats “I am a stranger. Do you know what I mean?” But he has trouble explaining how he feels, so he just keeps walking. Like thousands of other kids who were sent to live at residential schools across Canada, Chanie’s language was taken away from him. They left him without the right words to say what was in his head and heart.

Language helps us talk about how we feel, tell stories, and connect to each other. This activity will help you and your class see what it might feel like to lose language - and how powerful it feels to get it back.

Instructions:

Part One

1. Write a 1 page letter addressed to a make-believe stranger. Tell them your name, where you live, your favourite subjects in school, and what you like to do in your free time. End the letter by asking them three questions about themselves.
2. Give your letter to a classmate to read. Your partner will use a pen or marker to cross out **every third word**. They will also cross out **every word that appears in the list below**:

I	Like
Me	Love
My	To
And	Do
The	Talk

3. These words are now **forbidden**. Re-write the letter without using any of the words that were crossed out. Can you find different language to tell your stranger the same things?

Part Two

1. Give your new letter to a different classmate to read. Do they understand what it says? Do they have any questions for you?
2. When your classmate is finished reading your letter, they will tear the paper up into tiny pieces. Tear up the letter with all the crossed-out words. This means that all of the word-rules are gone. All language is allowed again.
3. Think about what your first letter said. Using any words you want, try to re-write the letter from your memory. If you can't remember what you wrote, write a new letter to your stranger. Tell them what your classmates did to your letters. How did it make you feel?
4. Sit down with the rest of your class in a talking circle to share about the activity. Have your teacher or a volunteer remind the group of your classroom's usual discussion rules. Remember to listen when it's someone else's turn to share, and that all personal opinions should be respected. Any group member can choose to be silent. Try to answer these questions:
 - *What was it like to lose your words? What did you want to tell your stranger, but had trouble saying?*
 - *How did kids like Chanie feel when they were so far away from home?*
 - *Why did Chanie's teachers try to take away his language?*
 - *Do you know anyone who went through a real experience like this?*