

**Teacher Guide**

**Grades 5–6**

# **Chasing Vermeer**

**Blue Balliett**



**NEW WAYS TO LEARN READING,  
WRITING, & CRITICAL THINKING**



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# CHASING VERMEER

by  
Blue Balliett

## Teacher Guide

Written by  
Linda Herman

### Note

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## Skills and Strategies

### Comprehension

Creative thinking, problem solving, identifying attributes, inferring, predicting, sequencing, compare/contrast, supporting judgments, concept map

### Literary Elements

Story mapping, characterization, setting, conflict, theme, mystery genre

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions, synonyms and antonyms, root words, homophones

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, debate, dramatizing, oral presentation

### Writing

Creative writing, reader's journal, letters, dialogue, journalism, personal narrative

### Critical Thinking

Compare/contrast, brainstorming, research, analysis, evaluation

### Across the Curriculum

Art History—Elements and Principles of Art, appreciation, comparison, meaning; Art—color, line, shape and form, texture, space, emphasis, pattern, light, contour, emotion; Math—pentominoes, codes, patterns, calculation; Science—unexplained phenomena, coincidence, biology; Social Studies—history, culture; Geography—maps

## Chapters One–Three, pp. 1–34

An unsigned letter asking for help in solving a crime against one of the world's greatest painters is delivered to a man and two women in a Chicago neighborhood. They are disturbed by the letter's warnings and wonder why they received it, yet they are intrigued enough to participate in the mystery.

Calder Pillay and Petra Andalee are fascinated by their teacher, Ms. Hussey, and her unconventional teaching methods. Ms. Hussey encourages the class to explore and think as shown in their latest assignment: find an adult who has received a letter that has changed his or her life and then write an unforgettable letter to Ms. Hussey. Calder and Petra are brought together at the bookstore, Petra's private library, and where Calder works since his friend Tommy Segovia moved away. Calder and Petra spy on their teacher, who is buying books about murder and art.

Petra overhears her parents arguing about a forgotten letter but is unable to find the letter. On the field trip to the Art Institute, Calder follows Petra until she disappears. Petra's sudden reappearance from a storeroom results in a museum guard's attention. Instead of being angry with her unruly students, Ms. Hussey is pleased with their creative thinking.

### Vocabulary

discriminating (1)  
convention (1)  
pretext (2)  
agitated (3)  
coincidence (3)  
gullible (3)  
relevant (6)  
papyrus (7)  
petroglyphs (7)  
brutal (9)  
exceptionally (10)  
collaborations (11)  
mediocre (11)  
labyrinth (14)  
pathetic (20)  
sophisticated (21)  
stupendous (23)  
hybrid (23)  
restricted (32)  
tittered (32)

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do the letter's recipients have in common? Why does the letter writer choose them? (*Each has a discriminating eye, intelligence, and the ability to think outside of convention. p. 1*)
2. How would you summarize the contents of the letter? (*The letter writer asks for help correcting a centuries-old crime against a great painter. He wants the truth revealed and promises a reward to the letter recipients—yet warns them of risks and dangers. pp. 1–2*)
3. How are the man and two women's reactions to the letter alike? How are they different? (*Answers will vary. The sender is, how the sender knows them, and if the letter is real. The man thinks about the reward while the women consider the dangers. The man knows he will say yes; one woman wants to say yes but wonders if she will be able to change her mind later; the other woman considers the writer say yes. p. 2–4*)
4. What options do the man and two women have after receiving the letter? (*Answers will vary. Suggestions: throw away the letter. Contact the police, a local museum, or a newspaper. Wait for further instructions. Discuss what to do with a friend.*)
5. Who started the University school? How does Ms. Hussey share this person's ideas about teaching? (*John Dewey; Dewey believed*

*in working on relevant projects to learn how to think. Ms. Hussey doesn't have preplanned lessons. She waits to see what interests the class. p. 6*)

6. How does Calder feel about Ms. Hussey's teaching methods? Do you think Calder's class should be studying regular subjects? Why or why not? (*He feels they are "doing real exploration, real thinking—not just finding out about what a bunch of dead, famous grown-ups believed." Answers will vary, but discussion should include comparing traditional and constructivist teaching methods. p. 7*)

7. Why did Calder's grandmother say he breathed patterns? (*Calder thinks by seeing patterns and making connections as shown by his pulling out the pentomino L. His thought process: L stands for letter; a letter is a rectangular shape; L is the twelfth letter of the alphabet, and one of the twelve pentominoes; the date is the 12th day of October. p. 9*)
8. Why does Petra ask questions that don't have answers? (*It's a game she plays. Petra thinks humans need questions more than answers. p. 10*)
9. What happens at Powell's Used Books to make Petra nervous with herself? (*The bookstore is Petra's hideaway until Calder joins her spying on the teacher. She doesn't know if the incident will change her experiences at Powell's or start a conversation with Calder. pp. 14–17*)
10. Why are Petra and Calder worn out by the time they walk to school? (*from trying to think of something to say while not saying what they are really thinking, p. 26*)
11. Why does Ms. Hussey let a student fail? (*Receiving an unforgettable letter rarely happens, and writing an unforgettable letter is difficult unless something important happens. pp. 26–27*)
12. How does Ms. Hussey react when the museum guard brings Calder and Petra to her? (*She thanks the guard, dismissing him, then compliments Calder and Petra for good thinking. She asks if they found anything. pp. 32–33*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Writing: Write a well-developed paragraph about what you would do if you received this letter (pp. 1–2).
2. Literary Analysis: Begin Character Webs (page 9 of this guide) for Calder, Petra, and Ms. Hussey. Add information as you read the story.
3. Art: Calder can't communicate for one day using words, but drawings (p. 7). Give a current event news story to your class using only drawings.
4. Abstract Reasoning: On pages 13 and 14 of the novel, Calder sees pentominoes in his kitchen. List pentomino shapes you see in your classroom.
5. Social Studies: Petra is a "clumsy mix of cultures" (p. 20) and Calder is a "hybrid kid" (p. 23). Define culture. Give examples of different cultures. List things common to all cultures. Explain the benefits of many cultures blending together. Explain any difficulties blending cultures may cause, and brainstorm possible solutions.
6. Art History: Read "Ways of Seeing" and "The Case of the Vanishing Vermeer" at the end of the book. Review the activity, Looking at Art, on page 10 of this guide. Discuss the Elements of Art in class.

## Character Web

**Directions:** Complete the attribute web below by filling in information specific to a character in the book.

The diagram is a character web consisting of a central circle and five surrounding circles, each connected to the center by a line. The surrounding circles are labeled as follows:

- Top:** His/her statements  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Top-Right:** His/her behavior  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Bottom-Right:** Others' behavior toward him/her  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Bottom:** Others' statements toward him/her  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Bottom-Left:** Others' statements about him/her  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Top-Left:** His/her thoughts  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

The central circle contains the label: \_\_\_\_\_