

## Fade to Black Teacher Guide

*Fade to Black* by Alex Flinn  
Teacher Guide by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer

About the book:

Alex Crusan, an HIV-positive student, was attacked by an assailant who shattered the windows of his car with a baseball bat. Alex is in the hospital with multiple injuries but who committed the crime? Was it Clinton Cole, who was seen riding his bike in the vicinity and has already harassed him at school and home? Did the witness, Daria Bickell, see him do it or is she confused? Told through all three voices- victim, witness, and the accused learn who is telling the truth.

About the author:

Alex Flinn is a former attorney whose fascination with witness reliability and bias led her to write *Fade to Black*. She is the author of three previous books: *Breathing Underwater*, an ALA Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults; *Breaking Point*, an ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers; and *Nothing to Lose*, one of ALA Booklist's Top 10 Youth Mysteries. She lives in Miami with her husband and two daughters. Visit her on the web at [www.alexflinn.com](http://www.alexflinn.com)

Author Interview:

1. What have you learned about your writing process now that you've written four books?

I've learned that it's different for every book. I sort of bumbled through my first two books. With my third, *Nothing to Lose*, I approached the whole thing very logically and systematically. But with *Fade to Black*, it was very different. I felt like the characters were talking to me and wouldn't shut up until I wrote down what they said.

2. How did you decide to tell this story in three voices? What was the most difficult thing about this technique?

I wanted to write a book in three voices because I find the issue of viewpoint very fascinating. There is a saying that a villain is a hero in his own story. In law school, one of the first things they really drum into your head is that there are two sides to every story, and that's why we have lawyers. Someone has to represent each side. I have been fascinated with stories told from the "other" side since I heard the cast recording of the Broadway musical, *Sweeney Todd* (which is about a Victorian-era barber who kills his customers to get revenge on a society that allowed him to be severely punished for a crime he didn't commit), when I was in

eighth grade, and my first two books were told firmly from the unpopular viewpoint -- a school bomber in *Breaking Point* and a girlfriend unpopular viewpoint -- a school bomber in *Breaking Point* and a girlfriend abuser in *Breathing Underwater*. Someone once said to me, "Your books are in all the wrong viewpoints," because yeah, you are not supposed to feel sympathy for someone like Nick in *Breathing Underwater*. But he doesn't feel that way. Anyway, I thought it would be interesting to write a book in three viewpoints, where each character has a different spin on something, and each thinks they're right. I thought that AIDS would be a good subject for such a project because there are so many different attitudes toward AIDS in the United States, and also because it is a subject that we have forgotten in recent years, but there are still millions of new HIV cases every year in the U.S., mostly involving teens and young adults.

The hardest thing was probably making Alex and Clinton's voice sound sufficiently different from one another. I wanted to give Clinton a Southern accent because people in North Florida have one, and Alex a mild Cuban lilt, since he is Latino and from Miami. I hear Alex's accent all the time, but Clinton's was more difficult for me. Many people approximate Southern speech by leaving off ending consonants, etc., but I didn't want Clinton to sound unintelligent. Fortunately, I have a critique partner from Little Rock, Arkansas, so she was helpful, particularly as Arkansians (I think that is the right word!) have a similar accent to North Floridians -- not as heavy as some other Southern states, since Arkansas borders on the Midwest, while Florida has a lot of transplanted Northerners.

3. What advice would you give young adults who want to be writers?

Write what you really want to write without trying to copy someone else. For example, don't try to write a book like *Harry Potter* just because you heard that J.K. Rowling made a lot of money writing one because your heart won't be in it. Also, read a lot of books, both books on writing and regular books of the type you want to write.

4. How do you know if an idea has enough merit to warrant its own novel?

I try it out. I write a bit, and if I get to about page 50 without panicking and realizing I have absolutely no idea what is going to happen next, I can usually write the whole thing.

5. What are you working on next?

I just completed *Diva* which is a sequel to *Breathing Underwater*. I am working on something new now, which is very different from my other books, but which also has an unusual first person viewpoint character.

### Comprehension Check:

#### Knowledge:

1. Recall the setting of the story. How does it influence the events? Could this violence happen anywhere? Why or why not?
2. Name the main characters in the story and describe each of them.

#### Comprehension:

1. Explain how Clinton Cole feels about Alex.
2. Summarize the events on the morning in question.

#### Application:

1. Prepare an interview for both Clinton and Alex about the attack. Answer as they would.
2. Create a study guide of questions and answers about the book. Consider questions on characters, plot, theme and resolution.

#### Analysis:

1. Analyze the motivations of Jennifer. Why does Alex question her motivations? Do you agree with him?
2. Examine the poems of Daria. What do they reveal about her as a person?

#### Synthesis:

1. Rewrite three of Daria's entries in a letter format rather than a poem. Use the meaning of the original text but not the words.
2. Perform a scene between two of the characters that got cut from the original story. (Like a DVD extra at the end of films). Be sure it stays true to the integrity of the characters and plot.

#### Evaluations:

1. Which of Alex Flinn's novels is your favorite? Why?
2. What scene will you still be thinking about weeks after you have closed the book? Why?

### Multiple Intelligence Projects:

#### Verbal/Linguistic:

In small groups research one of the following topics from the novel and create a pamphlet or PowerPoint and give a presentation to the class about your findings:

HIV in teens

New treatments for HIV-AIDS

Down Syndrome

Witness reliability and bias

Hate crimes

#### Mathematical/Logical:

Create a graph about HIV based on statistics. Do not just copy a graph from another source. Be sure to label the information appropriately and explain its significance in a brief paragraph.

#### Visual/ Spatial:

Create a collage piece of art that represents the events of the novel. It can either be an abstract piece or realistic but explain your process in a short journal.

#### Kinesthetic:

Write and act a scene that exists for these characters either before the opening of the novel or after its close.

#### Intrapersonal:

Arrange for someone who students have never seen before to make a brief appearance in the classroom under the guise of some errand. Then, after he or she exits, have them try to describe the person in as much detail as possible in a short paragraph. Share the responses. Then have the stranger reappear and discuss the results of the experiment. Discuss these questions: How reliable is witness testimony? Would you want your own freedom based on a witness? Should witness testimony even be admitted in court or should it be corroborated by other facts?

#### Interpersonal:

In small groups discuss these issues from the novel:

1. If you were Alex would you keep the source of the disease a secret? Why or why not? Do you think his parents knew the truth?
2. Was Alex right to lash out at Jennifer's treatment of him?
3. How would this story be different if Alex had been gay?
4. How typical is Clinton Cole's attitudes and behavior?

5. Is Daria a hero as her mother tells her?
6. How can people with handicaps be more included into a school community?

Related websites: (use with discretion)

<http://www.thebody.com/whatis/children.html>

Great jump off point for many articles

<http://www.avert.org/young.htm>

Easy to understand Q/A format about HIV/AIDS

This teacher's guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and author of the poetry book *Sketches from a Spy Tree*. Visit her website to find many guides to other young adult books.

[AlexFlinn.com](http://AlexFlinn.com)