

The Deadline Plate Educator and Library Guide

The Chronicle Keepers Book One by Eric Jourgensen

Four student journalists are pulled into 1887 New York, where Nellie Bly is preparing her Blackwell's Island investigation and someone is changing the historical record. This guide follows the novel's questions about witnesses, missing evidence, and what reporters owe the people they cover.

Use the discussion pages after reading. The stand-alone activities can be used without the novel. The final discussion section contains ending spoilers. Activities are suggestions, not a claim of alignment to any particular curriculum standard.

Choosing and preparing the reading

The publisher's stated audience is ages 12–18, grades 7–12. The protagonists are high-school journalists; teachers and librarians should preview the novel for their particular readers. Historical materials discuss confinement, institutional abuse, and discriminatory language. Introduce historical terminology as evidence of its period rather than acceptable present-day labels. Offer an alternative passage when needed. Do not ask students to simulate mental illness or disclose personal experiences of treatment or abuse.

Suggested sequence: begin with the mystery, read selected historical context, then use one reporting activity. Let students disagree about the characters' choices if they can support their readings.

Nellie Bly and the investigation

What is documented

In 1887, Nellie Bly reported on conditions inside the women's asylum on Blackwell's Island for the New York World. She entered undercover and later published her account as *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. The National Park Service describes overcrowding and the abusive conditions she exposed, including inadequate food and harsh treatment. Her investigation brought public attention to institutional treatment and pressure for reform. [1]

Bly's own opening chapter describes the assignment, her preparations, and the uncertainty about how she would get out. It is a firsthand published account, written for readers after the experience. A primary source can supply evidence while also reflecting its author's choices about what to include and how to present it. [2]

Where the novel invents

Lila, Zora, Benji, Quinn, the printing plate, and the Redactor belong to the novel. Their role in preserving records is fictional. Read scenes involving historical people as historical fiction, not as recovered conversations. The students do not replace Bly as the investigator.

Questions to take into the story

What could Bly observe herself? What did she have to learn from someone else? Who could dispute her account, and what records would help evaluate that dispute? Why does the novel place its students outside the institution for much of the investigation?

Reading: begin with Chapter I, "A Delicate Mission," in Bly's account. Compare a claim she makes about her assignment with the novel's treatment of the same problem. Record the chapter and paragraph you used. [2]

Blackwell's Island background

A place with more than one institution

Blackwell's Island is now Roosevelt Island in New York City's East River. The city purchased it in 1828. Its nineteenth-century institutions included a penitentiary, workhouses, hospitals, an almshouse, and an asylum that began receiving patients in 1839. The island was therefore not simply one building with one purpose. [1]

By the time of Bly's investigation, the asylum housed women after male patients had been moved to Ward's Island. Physical separation from the mainland is a useful starting point for discussing who could enter, leave, observe conditions, or bring information to a newspaper. Do not assume that geography alone explains the institution's failures. [1]

Read people as people

A historical institution's labels are not a complete account of the people living there. When reading a passage, distinguish what a patient says, what a staff member claims, what Bly observes, and what she infers. Avoid diagnosing historical people from a short excerpt.

A map question

Locate the East River island and lower Manhattan on a reputable map. Mark the island and the newspaper district discussed in the novel. Then list the information the map does not supply: admission procedures, transport schedules, who could visit, and how a person might contact an editor. Find a source before filling those gaps.

Extension: compare a present-day map with a historical one. Label the date of each; do not use a modern road, bridge, or neighborhood label as proof that it existed in 1887.

Discussion guide

Before reading

An old printing plate carries a report about an event that has not happened yet. What would convince you it was more than a prank? Write down two checks you would make before telling anyone else.

During reading

- 1 How does Lila's early correction affect your trust in her? Find the passage that most influenced your answer.
- 2 Choose a moment when the four reporters disagree. What is each person trying to protect? Which choice would you make with only the information available then?
- 3 How does unreliable technology change the investigation? Identify a scene in which a handwritten record helps and explain its limits.
- 4 What can the Redactor change? Keep a record of what the text establishes, and separate that from your predictions about the rules.
- 5 When does protecting a witness complicate preserving evidence? Explain the competing responsibilities without assuming one always wins.
- 6 How does Nellie act on her own judgment? What would be lost if the students took over her investigation?
- 7 Find a detail about the newspaper workplace that affects the plot. Explain what the story would have to change if that detail disappeared.
- 8 Where does a missing detail make an account misleading even when the remaining words are accurate?

Response format: a claim, a passage or scene reference, and an explanation of how that evidence supports your reading. Page numbers vary by edition, so include a chapter or scene description.

Journalism ethics activity

The correction that travels slowly

Time: 25–35 minutes. Materials: this page and writing paper. The following case is invented for classroom use; it is not an incident from the author's life or a quoted scene from the novel.

A student newspaper posts: "School ignores broken fountain for six weeks." A dated maintenance request confirms a complaint six weeks earlier. A repair log shows that the fountain worked after a repair, then failed again last week. The reporter interviewed two students who found it broken yesterday but left out the custodian's account because it complicated the story. A screenshot of the headline has already spread.

Work as an editorial team

Spend five minutes marking what each source establishes. Does the old request prove continuous failure? Does the repair log prove the fountain worked every day afterward? What still needs checking?

Write a replacement headline and a correction of 60–90 words. Identify what was wrong or misleading, state what the available evidence supports, and say what remains unknown. Decide where the correction belongs so readers who saw the original have a chance to find it.

Now draft two questions for the custodian and two for the administrator responsible for maintenance. Avoid a question that assumes the conclusion you are investigating.

Debrief

The strongest response distinguishes a documented complaint, a recorded repair, and a later observed failure. It does not treat any one of them as a complete timeline. Compare the team's correction with the SPJ Code's guidance on verification, context, and accountability. The Code is an ethical guide, not a classroom grading standard or a guarantee against error. [3]

Source protection activity

A name is only one identifying detail

Time: 25 minutes. This is an invented practice case. Use fictional names only.

A cafeteria worker shares a dated document suggesting that a safety inspection was postponed. The worker asks not to be identified because they fear retaliation. Your draft omits the name but calls the person “the only employee who opens the kitchen on Tuesdays” and includes a photograph with a staff badge visible. You have not independently confirmed why the inspection was postponed.

Make a publication decision

- 1 List the identifying details in the draft and image. Which could identify the source when combined?
- 2 Identify a way to corroborate the document or its meaning without naming the worker.
- 3 Write the questions you must resolve with the source before making any promise. Distinguish permission to talk from agreement about attribution and publication.
- 4 Draft a 40-word explanation to readers of why anonymity might be warranted. Do not imply that anonymity makes the information true.
- 5 Decide what you would withhold pending verification and how you would seek a response from the people responsible.

Facilitator notes

Removing the name alone does not protect this source. Strong responses notice the unique shift and badge, investigate the document independently, and avoid promising protection the newsroom cannot deliver. The SPJ Code asks journalists to consider motives and possible harm before granting anonymity. [3] Discuss newsroom policy with an adviser; this activity does not establish legal confidentiality or shield-law protection.

Novel connection: compare the case with the students' treatment of Mary Sullivan. Use the character's wishes and the evidence available in the scene, not only what the reporters want to publish.

Primary source and history activity

What does the evidence actually establish

Time: 35–45 minutes. Read Chapter I of Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* and the National Park Service history of Blackwell's Island. Links appear on the sources page. [1][2]

Choose one claim in the primary account. Write down its exact location, the date of the original publication, and whether it reports something Bly observed, something she was told, or her interpretation. Keep quotations exact and visibly separate from paraphrase.

Compare that claim with the later historical account. Do the two sources address the same question? A later account's silence is not automatically a contradiction. If both repeat a statement, investigate whether the second relies on the first before calling them independent corroboration.

Evidence record

On paper, create five columns: claim; source and location; direct observation or reported account; corroboration needed; confidence and reason. Complete three rows. Mark an unresolved question rather than filling it with a plausible guess.

Now select a scene involving Bly in *The Deadline Plate*. List one documented historical element and one fictional element. Explain which source supports the historical element. Do not cite the novel as independent proof of the historical event.

Extension

Compare a scan of a historical page with a transcription. Check one name and one punctuation mark against the scan. Explain why searchability helps discovery but does not make optical character recognition or a transcription infallible.

Facilitator assessment: reward precise attribution and honest uncertainty. More sources are useful only when they add evidence; several copies of one claim are still one underlying account.

Media literacy and classroom questions

An accurate sentence can leave a misleading impression

Choose an account from the novel and make two lists: what the account says and what a reader is likely to infer. Where do those lists diverge? What missing context would change the inference?

Discussion prompts:

- When a screenshot loses its date or source, what questions become harder to answer?
- Does a correction change the original claim, the reader's memory, or both? How could a newsroom check whether people saw it?
- What is the difference between evidence that something happened and evidence explaining why it happened?
- If a record disappears, what can you conclude? What would be an overclaim?
- What makes two witnesses independent? Could both be repeating the same rumor?
- How should a reporter describe uncertainty without making established facts sound doubtful?
- What is lost when a person becomes only a name in a record?

Short writing task

Write two versions of a 100-word report about the invented fountain case. The first must include only supported statements but omit an important piece of context. The second must repair the resulting impression. Label the first as intentionally misleading practice material; do not publish it as news.

Exchange the versions with a partner. Ask the partner to identify the inference created by the omission and the evidence that corrects it. End by revising the accurate version, not by trying to make the misleading one more persuasive.

Book club guide

A conversation about the whole novel

Ending spoilers follow. Suggested length: 45–60 minutes. Begin with the scene readers most wanted to discuss; the questions below need not be asked in order.

- 1 Did the contemporary school mystery and the 1887 investigation change how you understood each other? Where did the connection feel strongest?
- 2 Which of the four journalists changed your mind during the story? What did that character do to earn the change?
- 3 The students cannot resolve everything by keeping a copy. When does a record need a witness, context, or a chain of custody to become useful evidence?
- 4 How does Marisol's account complicate Lila's interpretation of the school's past? Why does Lila resist a satisfying parallel the evidence cannot fully support?
- 5 What does the return of the archive resolve? What responsibility remains after the records are recovered?
- 6 Did the Redactor work better for you as a threat to people, to documents, or to their connections? Point to a scene.
- 7 Which unresolved question would you carry into the next book? Distinguish a prediction from something the ending confirms.

Optional closing activity: choose a headline for the novel that preserves its tension without revealing the ending. Explain what your headline leaves out and whether that omission is fair to a new reader.

Cross curricular applications

Journalism and ELA

Compare a scene's point of view with the account a reporter in that scene could publish. A narrator may know or describe something the reporter cannot verify. Have students produce a short article and annotate the source for each factual assertion. In ELA, examine characterization, narrative tension, and the consequences of withholding information from readers.

History and social studies

Build a small timeline with separate markings for documented events and fictional events. Require source notes for the historical entries. Compare the New York of the novel with a historical map or contemporary primary account. Treat a mismatch as a research question before assuming either source is definitive.

Civics

Discuss institutional accountability: who has authority, who can investigate, who can complain, and whose account becomes public. Ask students to identify the difference between documenting harm and proving that a particular reform resulted from one report.

Media literacy and library learning

Compare an original source with a later summary. Trace one assertion back to its earliest accessible evidence. A librarian can extend the task by comparing catalog records, editions, publication dates, and subject terms. Why might a useful novel be shelved differently from a nonfiction book on the same person?

Suggested assessment

Assess whether students support claims, attribute sources, distinguish inference from observation, and revise conclusions when evidence changes. Evaluate the reasoning rather than requiring agreement with one interpretation. These applications are adaptable teaching ideas, not verified standards alignments.

Ordering visits and review copies

Book information

The Deadline Plate by Eric Jourgensen. The Chronicle Keepers Book One. Jourgensen Media. English. Paperback: 320 pages, 6 by 9 inches, ISBN 9798997931902, ASIN B0HHTKPCX1. Kindle: ASIN B0HHTH1KCK; the current listing displays 317 pages. Publisher's stated audience: ages 12–18, grades 7–12. Specifications and prices checked September 20, 2026.

Paperback ordering: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0HHTKPCX1>

Kindle ordering: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0HHTH1KCK>

US prices at this check: paperback \$18.99; Kindle \$6.99. Retail prices and availability can change. The paperback is available to the trade through Ingram at a 55% discount, returnable, so schools, libraries, and bookstores can order it through their usual wholesale channels. Contact the author with other ordering questions.

Contact and visits

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Ask about a virtual author conversation, a journalism and history discussion, or a workshop on evidence and reporting choices. Include the audience, approximate group size, preferred dates, time zone, length, and accessibility needs. Availability, format, and any fees are agreed individually; an inquiry is not a booking.

Review copies

Educators, librarians, reviewers, and media may request a complimentary review copy. Include your name, organization or publication, intended use, and preferred format. Ask about digital availability first; provide a mailing address only when arranging a print copy. Copies are subject to availability. There is no obligation to review, recommend, adopt, or purchase the book. Any review should reflect the reader's honest opinion and disclose receipt of a complimentary copy as appropriate.

Sources and facilitator notes

Historical and professional reading

[1] National Park Service. Blackwell's Island Roosevelt Island New York City. Historical background on the island and its institutions.

<https://www.nps.gov/places/blackwell-s-island-new-york-city.htm>

[2] Nellie Bly. Ten Days in a Mad-House, 1887. Project Gutenberg transcription, ebook 59899. Start with Chapter I, A Delicate Mission. A firsthand account, not an unmediated record of every event.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/59899>

[3] Society of Professional Journalists. SPJ Code of Ethics. Modern professional guidance used for comparison and discussion, not a claim that the 1887 newsroom followed this later code.

<https://www.spj.org/spj-code-of-ethics/>

Additional context: Library of Congress, Behind Asylum Bars Nellie Bly Reporting from Blackwell's Island, November 2022.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2022/11/nellie-bly-blackwells-island/>

Links checked September 15, 2026. Use the linked editions to check quotations and context. Historical sources may contain demeaning terminology. Discuss that language without making it the classroom's vocabulary for people today.

Reuse

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