Unit 4

Title: *from* Knots in My Yo-Yo String by Jerry Spinelli

Suggested Time: 4 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RI.7.1, RI.7.3, RI.7.4, RI.7.5, RI.7.6; W.7.2, W.7.4, W.7.9; SL.7.1; L.7.1, L.7.2, L.7.4

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

Perfection may be an obstacle to success.

Synopsis

This autobiographical piece tells what a neat, tidy rule-follower this author was in his youth. Once he was unfairly given a detention, which he disregarded. As punishment, he was dropped from every school activity. He then apologized to the teacher and was reinstated. Everything in his life was neat and tidy—except for his yo-yo, which despite his best intentions kept developing knots in the string. Sometimes the boy even fantasized about neatness. Because he was afraid to take risks and fail, he did not excel at some things, such as coloring contests or basketball. On reflection, he realizes that, when he apologized to his teacher after a false accusation, he caved in; he should have fought for what he knew was right. While outwardly conforming, though, he was also developing an interior life. He replayed events in his head that were sometimes better than the real ones. His fantasies were the beginnings of developing “an aptitude that thrives on disorder”: imagination, a gift that awaited him later.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic

vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Students read the entire selection independently.
2. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other. Depending on the text length and student need, the teacher may choose to read the full text or a passage aloud. For a particularly complex text, the teacher may choose to reverse the order of steps 1 and 2.
3. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| Why does the narrator begin with “I was neat"? | His descriptions show how meticulous he is.  “But not just cut it out. I would cut precisely along the right edge of the pencil line, or precisely along the left edge, or I would split the line in half and cut precisely right down the middle.” |
| What other examples of being neat and precise does the narrator give? | He shares that he “astonished my shop teacher, Mr. Rohn, with the precision of my mechanical drawings and the perfection of my hand-lettering.”  He won “numerous Palmer Method penmanship certificates and was declared the outstanding boy penmeister.”  He had to use colored pencils, not crayons. His “frequently sharpened points never—never—strayed outside the lines.” |
| What does the author mean by “For me, staying inside the lines was more than a color-the-picture matter”? | The author was elaborating on his attention to detail. His purpose for competing in the coloring contest is not just about winning. It is more about striving for perfection.  “Unlike most kids, I did not use crayons. I used colored pencils.”  My frequently sharpened points never—never—strayed outside the lines.”  “Give me a direction, I followed it. Put a rule in front of me, I obeyed it.” |
| Spinelli uses dashes to set off phrases. What is the effect of using the dashes for the reader? Support your answer with evidence from the text. | “Every Eastertime the merchants of the West End Shopping district---three blocks on Marshall Street---sponsored a coloring contest.”  “Every day for two weeks line drawings---coloring-book-type pictures---were printed in the *Times Herald*.”  “My frequently sharpened points never---never---strayed outside the lines.”  “I stepped inside and stayed there---cozy, safe.”  The author seems to use the dash as an interruption or a quick pause for the reader to emphasize the phrase. It also contributes to the sense that the author is meticulous and precise. |
| What “happened in the spring of ninth grade”? How did the author respond to the situation, and what were the results? | During homeroom, Miss Busch announced a locker check for neatness. Since the narrator “kept his locker neat at all times,” he never looked at his locker.  The next day the narrator walked into class to find that his name was on the board because he was assigned detention for having an untidy locker. He told Miss Busch that there must have been a mistake and that he wouldn’t show up for detention. However, the next day he found out that he was “no longer on the team, no longer homeroom president and was stripped of every office and association.” |
| Spinelli apologizes to Miss Busch. Why does he decide to do this? What does this decision reveal about the author? Use text evidence to support your answer. | He wanted to get his life back in order and return to the baseball team.  “One day of watching my backup shortstop was enough. I couldn’t stand it. I apologized to Miss Busch, and the picture of my life fell back into place.”  The author does not want to be out of his comfort zone. He likes to follow the rules because he feels safe there.  “Give me a direction, I followed it. Put a rule in front of me, I obeyed it.”  “I stepped inside and stayed there---cozy, safe.” |
| Spinelli describes “Summer Saturdays.” Why does the author do this? | The author shares his typical summer Saturdays to point out that they were “cozy, safe.”  He was also offering examples of how much he “loved routine, repeatedness.”  In the mornings he would go the YMCA to play ping pong with the same guys and then watch a movie. After the movie, he would always get a wiener at Texas Hot Wieners. He would then go to the “Garrick Theater and the Saturday matinee double feature—cowboy movies plus a Flash Gordon or Captain Midnight serial.” Later, he would walk home always the same way. “Every summer Saturday. The same thing.”  Teacher Note: Spinelli uses this descriptive passage to show his ideas are beginning to change. The author is beginning to realize the monotony of his life. |
| Explain how the author “fantasized about neatness”. Identify one or two scenarios and explain their significance. | * “I even fantasized about neatness.” * “I set out to tidy up the world.” * “I spread my peanut butter evenly over my bread.” * “I never said bad words (unless you count “poop”).” * “I hardly ever laughed out loud.” * He figured out that he was trying to become perfect. “Funny thing; For all my neatness, my sharp pencil points, my devotion to the right side of the line, I never won the West End Shopping District coloring contest.”   He continued to try harder and be neater, and still he lost. Neatness and perfection were not enough. |
| What do the “knots in my yo-yo string” represent? Provide text evidence to support your response. | For much of the narrator’s life, he was able to control the outcome. “100 on a spelling test, winning touchdown in a pickup game, a new haircut…”  However, when he comes home, he sees “knots in my yo-yo string.” The knots in his yo-yo string represent “a mess” and the loss of control that he is not used to.    He imagines the yo-yo “waiting until I wasn’t looking, then rising up like a cobra and looping itself into knots.” This adds to his loss of control. |
| Why does Spinelli include the anecdote about Biddy basketball? What does he learn from his experience with basketball? | When the narrator was eleven or twelve, he played on the Biddy Basketball Team. He played the guard position, but only dribbled and passed a lot. Each time he returned home, he would “neatly enter into a notebook his statistics: assists, shots taken, shots made, fouls.” He never had the chance to find out how good a basketball player he could have become, because he rarely took shots. “Shooting was where the risk was…”  The anecdote about Biddy Basketball further develops the author’s unwillingness to take risks: “A willingness to take risks, to color outside the lines, was slow in coming to me.”  He is further realizing that his obsession with perfection is getting in his way. “Looking back, I can see now that that’s what the school-locker incident was: an opportunity to grow beyond my own self-imposed limits.” |
| How does the narrator now feel about his decision to apologize to Miss Busch for the locker incident?  What has he learned? | He feels he caved in, because of his need for order. “Looking back, I can see now that that’s what the school-locker incident was: an opportunity to grow beyond my own self-imposed limits.”  He recognizes not that he “didn’t appreciate the value of a mess.” |
| The author states, “even as I publicly conformed…a contrary tendency was forming within me”. Explain and give examples of what he means by “contrary tendency.” | Although the author seemed to follow the directions, rules, and order, he would do the opposite in many other areas.   * He wrote the “unassigned poem on Mexico.” * “swooning wonderment over the endlessness of the sky at night.” * He references having his “own version of the Garrick Theater’s double feature.” * He couldn’t wait for an event to be over so he could play it over in his head at bedtime. “For that night, I would relive it in my head. I would again see the vivid colors and hear the voices and feel the feelings, and the reliving would be, in its own way, as real to me as the first time around.” * The author began to fantasize about things other than neatness. He began to use his imagination. |
| How does the final paragraph serve the author’s purpose? | He now understands that his imperfections have truly led to his successes. He realizes “to write a poem, to daydream, to ruminate, to wonder…are all components of a bearing that he never would have guessed would fit him so well…an aptitude that thrives on disorder.” “Now he can see the vivid colors, hear the voices, and feel the feelings. It shows in his…swooning wonderment over the endlessness of the sky at night.”  The author ends with “imagination—a gift that, like my Roadmaster on that Christmas morning, waited in another room for my discovery.” |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | astonished, mechanical, penmanship, penmeister, stripped  hedge  deed, wonderment, thrived, disorder | precisely  consistently, precision, numerous, routine, association  spunk, merchants, emerged, spanned, splayed  equivalent, ventures  injustice, verdict, reinstated, committed, defied  conformed, components, conformed |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | matinee  capitulate  swooning, hickory, ruminate | serial  devotion, paranoia  endeavors, deterred, consequences, banishment  contrary, tendency, tolerate, solitude, aptitude, bearing |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt

*In this autobiographical piece Jerry Spinelli, the author, shares his attention to neatness. Write an essay in which you analyze the author’s experiences with neatness as a boy, and discuss the influence those events have on Jerry as he grows up. Be sure to use text evidence to support your response.*

* Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should remind students to use any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions.

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Justification of Events’ Placements*** |
| “First I would measure a perfect shape with my ruler, then draw it with a sharp pencil. Then with my scissors I would cut it out. But not just cut it out. I would cut precisely along the right edge of the pencil line…”  He shares that he “…astonished my shop teacher, Mr. Rohn, with the precision of my mechanical drawings and the perfection of my hand-lettering.”  He won “…numerous Palmer Method penmanship certificates and was declared the outstanding boy penmeister.”  He had to use colored pencils, not crayons. His “…frequently sharpened points never—never—strayed outside the lines.”  “One day of watching my backup shortstop was enough. I couldn’t stand it. I loved routine, repeatedness” | The author uses multiple examples of how he was “neat” and a perfectionist. |
| “Every Eastertime the merchants of the West End Shopping district---three blocks on Marshall Street---sponsored a coloring contest.”  “Every day for two weeks line drawings---coloring-book-type pictures---were printed in the *Times Herald*.”  “My frequently sharpened points never---never---strayed outside the lines.”  “I stepped inside and stayed there---cozy, safe.” | Spinelli uses dashes to set off phrases. The author seems to use the dash as an interruption or a quick pause for the reader to emphasize the phrase. His use of dashes also emphasizes his attention to precision. |
| “I even fantasized about neatness.”  “…I set out to tidy up the world.”  “I spread my peanut butter evenly over my bread.”  “I never said bad words (unless you count “poop”).”  “I hardly ever laughed out loud.”  “Funny thing; For all my neatness, my sharp pencil points, my devotion to the right side of the line, I never won the West End Shopping District coloring contest.  “Often I had what seemed to be a perfect day—100 on a spelling test, winning touchdown in a pickup game, a new haircut—only to come home and find knots in my yo-yo string.” | The author lists several scenarios fantasizing about his perfection. He figured out that he was trying to become perfect.  He continued to try harder and be neater, and still he lost. Neatness and perfection were not enough. |
| “…neatly enter into a notebook his statistics: assists, shots taken, shots made, fouls.” “Shooting was where the risk was…”.  “A willingness to take risks, to color outside the lines, was slow in coming to me”.  “I learned that neatness does not serve all endeavors equally well, that what is good for penmanship is not necessarily good for basketball”. | When the narrator was eleven or twelve, he played on the Biddy Basketball Team. He played the guard position, but only dribbled and passed a lot. Each time he returned home, he would enter the statistics into his notebook. He never had the chance to find out how good a basketball player he could have become, because he rarely took shots. |
| “Looking back, I can see now that that’s what the school-locker incident was: an opportunity to grow beyond my own self-imposed limits.”  “I did not appreciate the value of a mess.” | He is further realizing that his obsession with perfection is getting in his way. |
| “…to write a poem, to daydream, to ruminate, to wonder…are all components of a bearing that he never would have guessed would fit him so well…an aptitude that thrives on disorder.” “Now he can see the vivid colors, hear the voices, and feel the feelings. It shows in his…swooning wonderment over the endlessness of the sky at night.”  “imagination—a gift that, like my Roadmaster on that Christmas morning, waited in another room for my discovery.”  “I was back inside the lines. Once again I was the old familiar me.” | He now understands that his imperfections have truly led to his successes. He realizes that to be a great writer he must use his imagination.  This is the moment Jerry realizes he gave in to his desire for perfection, and that being his “old familiar” self was not necessarily good. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

“Knots in My Yo-Yo String” is an autobiographical piece about the evolution of a tidy, rule-following author. Jerry Spinelli’s quest for perfection and neatness consumed his thoughts and made him feel safe, but more importantly, limited his imagination.

Jerry’s pursuit of precision was his lone want and need in the seventh grade. He didn’t just want to win contests; he was even obsessed with perfecting the processes he used to construct his products. For example, he had strict steps on how to cut a rectangle out of a piece of paper. “First I would measure a perfect shape with my ruler, then draw it with a sharp pencil. Then with my scissors I would cut it out. But not just cut it out. I would cut precisely along the right edge of the pencil line…”. Not only was Spinelli obsessed with his cutting skills, he was also obsessed with his hand drawing and writing. “I astonished my shop teacher, Mr. Rohn, with the precision of my mechanical drawings and the perfection of my hand-lettering”. This obsession guided Jerry to the Palmer Method penmanship certificates and an outstanding boy penmeister acknowledgment.

Eventually, Jerry’s quest for perfection led him to make an ill-advised decision. He apologized to Miss Busch for having an untidy locker when in fact his locker was clean. When Jerry was assigned detention, he refused to go and was stripped of every office he held and kicked off the baseball team. If a student knew he was right, he would have no problem confronting Miss Busch about the mistake and even taking the issue to the principal if he had to. Not Jerry. His rebellion didn’t last long though. “One day of watching my backup shortstop was enough. I couldn’t stand it. I loved routine, repeatedness”. Jerry’s pursuit of perfection enabled him to stay in his comfort zone. Arguing with a teacher would have caused Jerry to step outside of his “cozy, safe” surroundings which was where he wanted to be. “In other words, where there were no lines, I drew my own. I stepped inside and stayed there—cozy, safe”.

Although Jerry spent his entire life striving for perfection, the yo-yo string incident finally showed him that neatness isn’t enough and perfection isn’t possible. Jerry continued to obsess about neatness. “At home after each game, I neatly entered into a notebook my statistics: assists, shots taken, shots made, fouls”. From these statistics, he ascertained that he rarely took more than five shots in a game. Jerry began to learn “that neatness does not serve all endeavors equally well, that what is good for penmanship is not necessarily good for basketball”. He didn’t take many shots because he did not have the willingness to take risks. Jerry was too afraid to fail, which made it impossible for him to reach his potential. The author states, “I did not appreciate the value of a mess”. The entanglement of his yo-yo string forced him to do just that. No matter how perfect his day was, the yo-yo string would contradict all of that perfection. “Often I had what seemed to be a perfect day—100 on a spelling test, winning touchdown in a pickup game, a new haircut—only to come home and find knots in my yo-yo string”.

As a result of the yo-yo string mess that Jerry couldn’t control, he thought about when he apologized to Miss Busch even though he knew he was right. He again realized that he apologized to restore the mess that was created and to get “back inside the lines” so he could feel safe again. From that day forward, Jerry was changed. He didn’t change drastically publicly, but a change began to grow inside of him. For example, he began to relive events from the day. Baseball games were seen with vivid colors and strong feelings which in many cases were even better than the actual event. Jerry couldn’t wait to go home and get into bed to play the event over and over. More importantly, Jerry realized that his all-consuming journey toward perfection was lacking one thing, imagination. “I was unknowingly developing the tool of another trade. The urge to write a poem, to daydream, to ruminate, to wonder, even my tolerance of solitude—all became components of a bearing that I would never have guessed would fit me so well, an aptitude that thrives on disorder…”. Ultimately, the discovery of his imagination was essential to his future career as a writer.

Perfection is something for which many have strived and failed. Jerry Spinelli was no different. He was consumed by his quest for perfection and neatness. However, with failure came insight which urged him to daydream, allowed him to take risks, and more importantly, granted him an unlimited imagination.

Additional Tasks

* Imagine what Jerry Spinelli would say as an adult to Miss Busch about the locker incident. Write a letter to Miss Busch as Jerry sharing the lessons learned. Be sure to use evidence from the story to illustrate your points.

Dear Miss Busch,

As a child I had a deep-seeded problem with perfection and neatness. As you know, I received the Palmer Method penmanship certificate many times and was also named outstanding boy penmeister. Not only did I strive to win awards, I also tried my best to astonish Mr. Rohn “with the precision of my mechanical drawings and the perfection of my hand-lettering”. What kid does that? At the time, I had no idea how much this preciseness was affecting my ability to step outside of my “cozy, safe” surroundings to take risks. However, “looking back, I can see now that that’s what the school-locker incident was: an opportunity to grow beyond my own self-imposed limits”.

It may sound crazy, but a yo-yo string actually turned my life around. After you stripped me of all of my offices and kicked me off of the baseball team, I apologized and “the picture of my life fell back into place”. However, things quickly changed. Later, “I had what seemed to be a perfect day—100 on a spelling test, winning touchdown in a pickup game, and a new haircut—only to come home and find knots in my yo-yo string”. I spent my whole existence trying to control every aspect of my life with precision and for the first time, I lost that control. My first reaction was to try to fix it, but I began to think back about the locker room incident. I realized that I apologized to you to restore the mess that was created and to “get back inside the lines” so I can feel safe again. From that day on, I realized that my journey for perfection was lacking one thing, imagination. If it weren’t for you mistakenly accusing me of keeping an untidy locker, I would not have had an experience that caused me to question my routine. I want to thank you for being an inadvertent accomplice to my journey of enlightenment.

Sincerely,

Jerry

* Write a monologue for Miss Busch that describes the detention episode from her point of view. Use evidence from the text to support the incident. You may share this monologue with the class.

I will have to admit that I was pretty surprised that Jerry left his locker in such disarray. I was so surprised that I debated giving him a second chance and excusing him from getting detention. However, nobody is perfect and Jerry needs to understand that. He has won the Palmer Method penmanship certificate multiple times and he was named outstanding boy penmeister. Mr. Rohn even told me that Jerry was trying to impress him with the precision of his mechanical drawings and the perfection of his hand lettering. Maybe losing his offices and being dropped from the baseball team will teach Jerry that he cannot control everything in life. He can learn how to deal with change and maybe open his eyes to a whole new vision of himself.

Note to Teacher

* If students need support in organizing their thoughts for any of the writing tasks, utilize graphic organizers.

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**“Knots in My Yo-Yo String”**

1. Why does the narrator begin with “I was neat"?
2. What other examples of being neat and precise does the narrator give?
3. What does the author mean by “For me, staying inside the lines was more than a color-the-picture matter”?
4. Spinelli uses dashes to set off phrases. What is the effect of using the dashes for the reader? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
5. What “happened in the spring of ninth grade”? How did the author respond to the situation, and what were the results?
6. Spinelli apologizes to Miss Busch. Why does he decide to do this? What does this decision reveal about the author? Use text evidence to support your answer.
7. Spinelli describes “Summer Saturdays.” Why does the author do this?
8. Explain how the author “fantasized about neatness”. Identify one or two scenarios and explain their significance.
9. What do the “knots in my yo-yo string” represent? Provide text evidence to support your response.