

# Strides Between Us

## Teacher Guide

This teacher guide is designed to support middle and high school educators in using *Strides Between Us* in the classroom. It provides learning outcomes, chapter-based discussion questions, writing prompts, and activities that connect the novel's themes of resilience, identity, empathy, and second chances to students' lives.

**Suggested Grade Levels:** 8–12

**Genres:** Contemporary realistic fiction, sports fiction, coming-of-age

**Major Themes:** Injury and identity, mental health, homelessness, grief, family, mentorship, redemption

## About the Novel

*Strides Between Us* follows Jake, a promising young runner whose life collapses after a devastating injury during his senior year. Lost, isolated, and unable to cope, he drifts into years of homelessness, severed from Paige, their daughter Emily, and the mentor who once believed in him, Coach Roberts.

Years later, a chance encounter and an upcoming charity race pull Jake back toward the world he abandoned. Through memory, grief, and the quiet power of human connection, he begins to rebuild himself, confronting the race that ended everything, the coach he never said goodbye to, and the family he lost along the way.

The novel invites students to ask: What happens when the thing that defines you is taken away? How do we live with regret? What does it mean to heal when there is no perfect ending?

## Big Questions for the Unit

- Who are we when the thing we're best at is taken away?
- What does 'success' mean when life doesn't follow the plan?
- How do grief and guilt shape the choices people make?
- What does it really mean to get a 'second chance'?
- In what ways do we carry the people who believed in us, even after they're gone?

## Learning Outcomes

Using this novel and guide, students will be able to:

- Analyze how characters evolve in response to conflict and loss.
- Trace how structure (past/present timelines) builds tension and reveals character.
- Cite textual evidence to support claims about motivation, theme, and point of view.
- Discuss trauma, resilience, and homelessness with empathy and maturity.
- Compare and contrast different models of masculinity, mentorship, and family.
- Write personal and analytical responses that connect the novel to their own experiences.
- Evaluate the impact of choices and turning points on a character's life path.

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## Suggested Unit Structure

Below is one possible way to structure a 3–4 week unit around *Strides Between Us*. Adjust pacing based on your students, schedule, and goals.

### Week 1: Introductions & Early Chapters

- Introduce the novel's premise, cover, and first-page hook (Jake in the park).
- Preview themes: identity, injury, homelessness, mentorship, family.
- Read Chapter 1 together; model close reading of key passages.
- Assign Chapters 2–6 for independent or shared reading.
- Use discussion to explore first impressions of Jake, Paige, and Coach Roberts.

### Week 2: Parallel Timelines & Turning Points

- Track the novel's shifting timelines (Jake's college years vs. present-day homelessness).
- Map key turning points: the pregnancy reveal, early races, the injury.
- Discuss Jake's coping strategies (and avoidance) after the injury.
- Introduce one writing assignment (personal narrative or analytical paragraph).

### Week 3: Consequences, Drift, and Recovery

- Explore Jake's drift into homelessness and emotional numbness.
- Discuss Coach Roberts' death and Jake's complicated grief.
- Follow the slow rebuilding: small acts of kindness, walking, running again.
- Introduce the charity race and its emotional stakes for Jake, Mitch, Paige, and Emily.

### Week 4: Resolution, Reflection, and Assessment

- Examine the race, the near-finish with Mitch, and the emotional reunion with Emily.
- Discuss the epilogue and what 'happy' looks like in a realistic story.
- Complete final essays, creative projects, or Socratic seminars.

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Invite students to reflect: What will stay with you from this story?

## Major Characters

**Jake:** A former college runner whose career-ending injury and unresolved grief lead to years of homelessness. The novel follows his journey from collapse to cautious rebuilding.

**Paige:** Jake's partner in college and mother of Emily. Practical, strong, and loving, she balances loyalty to Jake with protecting their daughter.

**Emily:** Jake and Paige's daughter. As a child, she is a symbol of hope; as a teen, she becomes a bridge between past and present.

**Coach Roberts:** Jake's college coach and quiet father figure. He sees Jake's potential and tries to teach him not just how to run, but how to last.

**Mitch:** Jake's talented teammate and eventual Olympian. Both rival and mirror, he embodies the life Jake might have had and eventually helps anchor a new version of family.

## Discussion Questions by Section

Use or adapt the following questions for whole-class discussion, small groups, or reading journals. They are organized roughly by the novel's progression rather than strict chapter numbers so you can adjust your pacing.

### Opening & Early Flashbacks (Jake in the park; first memories of Oregon and Coach)

- How does the opening scene in the park shape your first impression of Jake? What details hint at who he used to be?
- What do we learn about Jake's past life as a runner in the early flashbacks? How does that contrast with his present?
- How does Coach Roberts first 'see' Jake? Why might being seen in that way matter so much to him?
- Where do you already notice guilt or regret in Jake's thoughts, even before we know the full story?

### College Years, Injury, and Drift

- How do Jake's responsibilities as a young father change the way he approaches running and school?
- What messages does Jake receive from family, coaches, himself about toughness and 'pushing through' pain?
- When the injury happens, what hurts more for Jake: the physical damage or what it represents? Explain.

- How does Jake handle (or avoid) grief after Coach Roberts dies? What do you think he is most afraid of facing?  
What small choices lead to Jake drifting into homelessness instead of asking for help?

### **Homelessness, Remembering, and Slow Recovery**

- In what ways does Jake still show kindness and character even while homeless? Why do these details matter?
- How does seeing Mitch's success from a distance (article, posters, race promotion) affect Jake emotionally?
- What role do memories of Coach Roberts play in Jake's decision to start moving again?
- Why is it important that Jake's recovery begins with walking and short, honest runs, not a dramatic comeback?
- How does the charity race become more than just a race for Jake, Mitch, Paige, and Emily?

### **The Race, Reunion, and Epilogue**

- Why is Jake's near-finish with Mitch emotionally satisfying even though he doesn't 'win'?
- What does Emily's choice to run to Jake at the finish line tell you about their bond?
- How does the epilogue redefine what 'happily ever after' can look like in a realistic story?
- By the end of the novel, what has Jake gained that is more important than a medal or a record?

## **Writing & Project Ideas**

### **Short Analytical Responses**

- Choose one turning point in Jake's life (the injury, Coach's death, losing contact with Paige and Emily, seeing Mitch on the poster) and explain how it changes his identity.
- Compare Jake and Mitch's relationship at the beginning of the story versus at the charity race. How do both men grow?
- Explain how the novel portrays homelessness. What stereotypes does it challenge? What humanity does it highlight?

## **Personal/Reflective Writing**

- Write about a time something you cared deeply about changed or ended. How did it affect the way you saw yourself?
- Who is a ‘coach’ figure in your life (teacher, family member, friend, mentor)? What have they helped you see in yourself?
- If you could send a short message to Jake at his lowest point, what would you say and why?

## **Creative Options**

- Write a missing scene from Coach Roberts’ point of view (for example, him leaving the voicemail Jake never answered, or watching Jake at practice).
- Create a dual-voice poem from the perspectives of Jake and Mitch about the same race.
- Design a charity race poster that tells Jake’s story as a message of resilience and community support.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **1. Timeline of a Life**

Have students build a visual timeline of Jake’s life: youth, college, injury, drift, and rebuilding. Ask them to mark where key emotional shifts occur: hope, denial, anger, numbness, and gradual healing.

### **2. Character Circles**

Place Jake in the center of a page. Around him, add circles for Paige, Emily, Mitch, and Coach Roberts. Have students add quotes and moments that show how each character impacts him and how he impacts them.

### **3. Empathy & Homelessness**

Using short nonfiction articles or local resources (if available), have students learn about homelessness in their community. In small groups, discuss how Jake's story overlaps with real-life patterns and where his story is unique. Emphasize empathy and systems, not blame.

### **4. Sports, Pressure, and Identity**

Invite students who participate in sports, arts, or other intense commitments to share their experiences with pressure and identity. How does being 'the runner,' 'the artist,' or 'the smart one' shape expectations? How does the novel invite a more flexible idea of who we are?

## **Final Assessment Ideas**

- Literary Analysis Essay: Analyze how the novel uses parallel timelines to reveal who Jake is and who he becomes.
- Theme Essay: Explore how *Strides Between Us* portrays the idea of second chances. Who receives them? Who offers them? How are they accepted or refused?
- Character Study: Write a detailed character study of Jake, Mitch, Paige, or Coach Roberts, supported by textual evidence.
- Creative Portfolio: Combine a personal narrative, a creative piece (poem, letter, or scene), and a short reflection connecting the student's work to the novel's themes.

## **Note to Teachers**

This guide is meant as a flexible toolkit, not a script. Take what serves your students, adapt activities to your context, and feel free to slow down on the scenes and conversations that matter most to your readers. Above all, let the novel be an invitation for students to see that broken moments don't have to be the end of their story.

For additional materials, updates, and printable resources, visit the Strides Between Us teacher resources page.