

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Nothing but the Truth by Avi

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## Book Information

Avi, Nothing but the Truth  
Quiz Number: 7014  
Orchard Books, 1991  
ISBN 0-531-05959-6; LCCN  
177 Pages  
Book Level: 3.6  
Interest Level: UG

A ninth-grader's suspension for humming "The Star-Spangled Banner" during homeroom becomes a national news story.

**Award:** BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Newbery Honor

**Topics:** Community Life, Freedoms; Community Life, School; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - High School (Theme: Tough Decisions); Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

## Main Characters

Allison Doresett a classmate of Philip's  
Anita Wigham Miss Narwin's sister  
Coach Jamison the track coach  
Dr. Albert Seymour school superintendent  
Dr. Gertrude Doane principal  
Dr. Joseph Palleni assistant principal  
Ken Barchet Philip's friend  
Margaret Narwin an English teacher for twenty-one years  
Mr. Malloy Philip's father  
Mrs. Malloy Philip's mother  
Philip Malloy a freshman at Harrison High School  
Ted Griffen the Malloy's neighbor who is running for school board

Todd Becker Philip's classmate and member of the track team

## Vocabulary

**counterproductive** bringing about results that are not intended  
**master teacher** a teacher who has met the requirements of years teaching and education  
**misconstrue** to interpret or understand incorrectly  
**sabbatical** a time spent studying, traveling or resting

## Synopsis

Philip Malloy, a ninth grader, wants to join the track team, but a low grade in English prevents him from doing so. He believes the solution to his problem is a transfer out of the English teacher's class and homeroom. Knowing that Miss Narwin is a strict disciplinarian, he hums along with the national anthem at a time when the students are supposed to stand at "respectful, silent attention."

After being sent to the office three times for his disruptive, disrespectful behavior, the assistant principal suspends Philip for two days. When the local paper prints a one-sided version of the story and a radio talk show host incites people to express their opinions, the story spreads across the country. The people, including Philip's parents, react solely on an emotional basis, and see Philip's punishment as an infringement on his right to freedom of speech and condemn Miss Narwin and the Harrison School District for being unpatriotic.

Miscommunication at all levels is the key to the continuation of the problem, but political maneuvering by the superintendent and a candidate for the school board help bring the controversy to a head. Nothing good comes from the situation. Miss Narwin is asked to take administrative leave, the school budget is voted down despite the superintendent's efforts, and Philip ends up in a school with no track team. In the end, Philip faces a final embarrassment when his new teacher asks him to lead the class in the national anthem, and he

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admits he does not know the words.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Literary Analysis

An antagonist is someone or something that creates the conflict in the story. Philip was obviously the main cause of the problem. What other characters contributed to or even fueled the controversy?

*Mr. and Mrs. Malloy did not take the time to find out the truth; they automatically took Philip's side. Problems between them and with Mr. Malloy's job may have contributed to their reaction. Mr. Palleni, the assistant principal, did not communicate the problem to Dr. Doane, the principal. Ted Griffen took up the cause as a means of being elected to the school board, and did not even mind compromising his so-called principles to do so. He was against the school budget until Superintendent Seymour sacrificed Miss Narwin in his attempt to win Griffen's support. Miss Narwin herself contributed to the misunderstanding by refusing to defend herself until it was too late. The radio talk show host was only interested in feeding the fires of emotion in his listeners by further sensationalizing the story.*

#### Literary Analysis

Which character might have been able to stop the situation from getting so out of hand? How or why?

*Some suggestions for answers: Philip, obviously, by taking Coach Jamison's suggestion and asking Miss Narwin for work to improve his grade. Philip's parents by going to the school and talking to the administrators and/or Miss Narwin. Allison, if she had truly cared for Philip as one of his friends had stated, might have been able to convince Philip to apologize. Coach Jamison by being more emphatic about Philip working to change his grade. Dr. Seymour by being as concerned about other individuals as he was about keeping his job and getting the budget passed. Jennifer Stewart by reporting both sides of the story initially or by choosing not to write the newspaper article in the first place.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What do you think is the truth in this story?

*Answers will vary but may include the following: Philip deliberately disobeyed the rule to get something he wanted. The superintendent willingly betrayed a good teacher for the sake of the school budget. Philip's parents should have looked at the teacher's side of the story. Media people were not really interested in the truth.*

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### Constructing Meaning

Do you think Philip will be happy at his new school? Why or why not?

*The students' first reaction will probably be that he will not be happy because the school has no track team, and the school day starts out with the national anthem. The administrators at Harrison High, however, had made references to problems at home that might have caused Philip's behavior. The book alluded to Mr. and Mrs. Malloy's arguments and Mr. Malloy's problems at work. Mr. Malloy had to drop out of college, which had ended his dream of being a track star. If these problems are not resolved, Philip may experience similar difficulties no matter where he goes to school. On the other hand, the students might have arguments supporting the idea that Philip actually did not want to be on the track team contrary to statements in his diary. He may be perfectly happy starting over with a new teacher and a new sport. Without the pressure of Philip making the track team, Mr. Malloy might stop living vicariously through Philip and start focusing on his son's academic future.*

discuss situations the students have read about in the newspaper that are similar. Ask the students if they have ever regretted their actions and wished they could undo them.

**Identifying Reason** One of reason this story quickly escalates out of control is the lack of communication between all of the people involved. A meeting after Philip was first sent to the office might have cleared up some of the misunderstandings. Have students interview the principal or guidance counselor to find out how their school would respond to a similar situation. Have the student present this information to the class. Another choice would be to have the principal or guidance counselor speak to the class directly.

**Responding to Literature** The author felt that only the reader could discover the truth. Ask the students how they responded to this story. Do they feel they know the truth? Have the students write a paragraph explaining their understanding of the story. Have them include five specific reasons they think their interpretation is correct.

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** The characters in this story interpreted Philip's actions during the playing of the national anthem in very different ways. Each person reacted to the incident based on other events occurring at the time. Dr. Albert Seymour, the school superintendent, wanted the budget to be approved. Ted Griffen was trying to get voters to elect him to the school board. Miss Margaret Narwin, the English teacher, wanted the students to observe the rules and be respectful. Have the students select any character from the story and place themselves in that role. They should explain how their actions could result in a different ending for the story.

**Drawing Conclusions** Ask the students how they think Philip felt at the end of the story about his decision to hum during the national anthem. If Philip could go back and start over, what do they think he would do differently? Have the students write a paragraph explaining their conclusions, or