

# Penguin's Classroom Classics

## Making Curriculum Connections!



## An Educator's Guide to

# counting by 7s

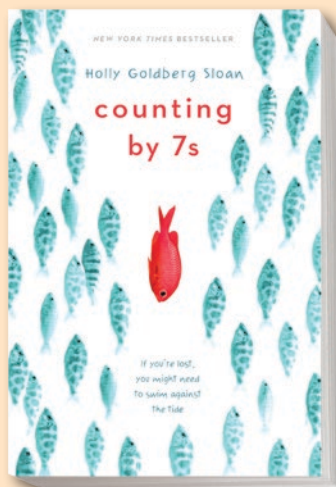


Holly Goldberg Sloan

INSPIRE • ENGAGE • EDUCATE

The materials in this guide are aligned to Common Core State Standards for grades 4–7

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



## Dear Educator:

Let us introduce you to Willow Chance, a twelve-year-old genius obsessed with nature and diagnosing medical conditions who finds it comforting to count by 7s. It has never been easy for her to connect with anyone other than her adoptive parents, but that hasn't kept her from leading a quietly happy life . . . until now.

Suddenly Willow's world is tragically changed when her parents both die in a car crash, leaving her alone in a baffling world. The triumph of this book is that it is not a tragedy. This extraordinarily odd but extraordinarily endearing girl manages to push through her grief. Her journey to find a fascinatingly diverse and fully believable surrogate family is a joy and a revelation for readers of all ages and an ideal choice for both guided and independent reading for fourth through seventh graders.

The lesson plans for *Counting by 7s* are designed for a six-week teaching unit; alternatively, the lessons are also divided by chapter sections so that the book can be read and taught at a pace that is most fitting of your learning environment. While teaching and sharing *Counting by 7s* with students, use the following week and chapter divisions as a guide for both independent and guided reading activities. Suggested activities are designed so that they may be completed independently, or activities and discussion/writing prompts can easily be restructured for small group or whole class discussion and completion. Extension activities provide the opportunity for students to explore the novel beyond essay prompts and discussion questions.

—Penguin Young Readers Group



## About the Author

**Holly Goldberg Sloan** was born in Michigan and spent her childhood living in Holland; Turkey; Washington, DC; California; and Eugene, Oregon. She has written and directed a number of successful feature films. The mother of two sons, Holly lives with her husband in Santa Monica, California.

A *New York Times* Bestseller  
 An Amazon Best Book of the Year 2013  
 A Kids' Indie Next List Top Ten Book  
 BEA Buzz Book 2013  
 A Texas Bluebonnet Award Nominee  
 2014–2015 Master List  
 A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year  
 An E.B. White Read Aloud Honor Book  
 A Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book  
 Award Nominee  
 A National Public Radio Best Book of the Year

Dr. Rose Brock teaches part time in the Library Science Department at Sam Houston State University and works as a school librarian in Coppell, Texas. She is the 2014 winner of the Siddle Jo Johnson Award for outstanding library services to children from the Texas Library Association and serves as an advisor to the national literacy initiative, Guys Listen, part of the Guys Read program. As a English/Language Arts teacher, Rose was named a Mandel Teaching Fellow by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and has served on the John Newbery Award committee, the Texas Library Association's Lone Star Reading List book committee, the International Reading Association's Young Adult Choices Project, and as well as serving as chair of the Texas State Reading Association's Golden Spur Book Awards committee.

## Praise for *Counting by 7s*

- ★ "A graceful, meaningful tale featuring a cast of charming, well-rounded characters who learn sweet—but never cloying—lessons about resourcefulness, community, and true resilience in the face of loss." — *Booklist*, starred review
- ★ "What sets this novel apart from the average orphan-finds-a-home book is its lack of sentimentality, its truly multicultural cast (Willow describes herself as a 'person of color'; Mai and Quang-ha are of mixed Vietnamese, African American, and Mexican ancestry), and its tone. . . . Poignant." — *The Horn Book*, starred review
- ★ "Willow's story is one of renewal, and her journey of rebuilding the ties that unite people as a family will stay in readers' hearts long after the last page." — *School Library Journal*, starred review



PenguinClassroom.com



PenguinClassroom



@PenguinClass

# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Counting by 7s*

## Week 1: Chapters 1–9: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts



As the novel opens, Willow Chance tells readers, “I do not like to exclude people (I’m the one who is always excluded, so I know how *that* feels).” With this statement, Willow offers readers some insight to her life. Why is she someone who is regularly left out? How does this experience shape how Willow chooses to respond to others?



What is it about the number 7 that Willow feels so connected to? In what ways does this and her other obsessions guide her life?



When it is discovered that Willow is “highly gifted.” She declares that “It’s possible that all labels are curses. Unless they are on cleaning products.” Do you agree with her assessment? Why or why not? Can you think of any advantages to having a label? What are the disadvantages?



What’s your earliest opinion of Dell Duke? Predict what role he will play in Willow’s life.



Willow states, “In my opinion it’s not really a great idea to see people as one thing. Every person has lots of ingredients to make them into what is always a one-of-a kind creation.”

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L. 7.1, 7.2.

### Extension Activities



Readers learn quickly that Willow is unlike most kids her age. She declares that she “has a passion for all things medical,” gardening, and the number 7. As she tells her adoption story, she shares that her parents named her after a “cold-climate tree.” Using library resources and the Internet, research willow trees to discover in what ways Willow is similar to the characteristics of willow trees. Complete a Venn diagram that details the similarities and differences between Willow and willows.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L. 7.1, 7.2. Writing: Production and Distribution C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. W.4.4; W.5.4; W.6.4; W.7.4



Ask students to describe one of the problems faced by a character in *Counting by 7s* and write advice to him/her. Students may choose to be serious or humorous. Use the letter format common to newspaper advice columns, where the person with the problem writes for advice and the advisor writes back. Often the person seeking advice “disguises” his or her name with a descriptive name associated with the problem.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L. 7.1, 7.2.

## Week 2: Chapters 10–20: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts



As Willow experiences her first cab ride with Jairo Hernandez, she thinks, “I had never been in a taxi before. And I had never ridden in a car with a complete stranger. I was suddenly an explorer and a risk-taker.” Why does embarking upon this adventure make Willow feel so good? How has a new experience made you feel?



In what ways is her newfound friendship with Mai so important to Willow? What does Mai get in return?



Describe the relationship between Willow’s parents, Roberta and Jimmy Chance. From what you discover in the novel, what makes their relationship such a close one?



After learning about the loss of her parents, Willow states, “I sit on the front steps. The tears will not stop. And I almost never cry. But I’m not myself. I will forever be someone else now.” Predict how you think Willow’s life will be forever changed.



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Counting by 7s*



Willow's parents help serve as a navigator to her by understanding her uniqueness and helping her feel confident to explore the world; in your opinion, will their absence make it more difficult for her to deal with others?

## Extension Activity



Ask students: Who are your 7 people that matter? Fill a bulletin board with their responses.



## Week 3: Chapters 21–30: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

Willow states, "I've never seen this person in my life. But her arms are around me. Tight. Because the woman is so strong, you'd think her hug would choke me. But instead, it's the first time I can get a full breath into my lungs since I heard what happened." Why do you think Mai's mother, Pattie, is able to get such a reaction from Willow? In what ways may Pattie be exactly what Willow needs?



Willow realizes that Mai's family lives very simply. How does the knowledge that they live in a garage affect her?



Willow recognizes similarities between herself and Pattie. What are some of these qualities?



Consider the list that Willow provides the caseworker assigned to her case. What does this list of requests by Willow tell us about what she believes to be important? How does Willow react to being taken to the Jamison Children's Center?



Why does Jairo believe Willow is a sort of angel sent his way? In what ways is his life made better because of her?

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L.7.1, 7.2

## Extension Activities



After the death of her parents, Willow is placed in a type of child protective services program run by the state. Ask students to learn more about the local and state institutions in your area. What are the primary functions of such programs? Are there additional services provided to children? What about their families?



Ask students to create a conversation between one of the characters in *Counting by 7s* and some intangible thing (justice, love, goodness, greed, etc.) or his/her conscience. Have them script the conversation for dialogue use making sure they appropriate punctuation.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L.7.1, 7.2



## Week 4: Chapters 31–40: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

Describe Quang-ha. What motivates him to behave the way he does? Do you think he has a valid reason for being so angry?



*Counting by 7s* is told in both third person and first person. How would the story be different if only Willow were telling it? Do you thinking changing the point of view would make the story better or worse? Why?



Willow's friendship with Mai sends her down a path where she learns what it means to have a friend and be a friend. What does Mai gain from this relationship? Consider your friendships—how do these relationships affect you? Can they make you a better person? If so, in what ways?





# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Counting by 7s*



As she spends more time at the nail salon and grows more fluent in Vietnamese, Willow realizes that the manicurists who whisper to each other aren't discussing customers; rather they are talking about their lives and families. How does this realization both comfort and hurt Willow?

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L.7.1, 7.2**

## Extension Activities



Willow's descriptions of Dell's apartment before and after Pattie's transformation of the space are pretty vivid. Have students use details from Chapters 32–37 to illustrate an image of Dell's apartment before and after. After sharing their images, ask students to discuss how transforming Dell's apartment changes the dynamics between the characters.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R.L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3; R.L.6.1, 6.2, 6.3; R.L. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.7, 4.9; R. L. 5.7, 5.9; R. L. 6.7, 6.9; R.L. 7.7, 7.9**



Have students select five or more gifts that would be perfect to give to one of the characters in *Counting by 7s*. While these gifts can be tangible or intangible, be sure for each gift, an explanation for the gift and why it is appropriate is attached.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L.7.1, 7.2**



## Week 5: Chapters 41–50: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

In what ways does Mai realize that life for her family is better now that Willow is a part of it?



What does Dell's apartment symbolize for each of the Nguyens? How does having a place to call home seem to change Quang-ha? In what ways do you see a shift in his behavior toward Willow?



How does Willow unknowingly inspire Jairo to move forward with a plan to attend college? Would you agree that she is an "angel" to him? Why or why not?



After Quang-ha refuses to follow Willow's planting instructions, she shares, "I feel moved because they aren't treating me like I'll break into a million pieces. Maybe that means I'm on my way back to some kind of new normal." Do you agree with her assessment?



In your opinion, what does creating an actual garden at the Gardens of Glenwood mean to Willow?

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L.7.1, 7.2**

## Extension Activities



Have students work with others to create a character trait silhouette about their favorite or least favorite character in *Counting by 7s*. Begin by tracing an appropriately sized member of the group onto butcher paper. The silhouette must be life size. The traced silhouette should reflect physical traits of the character, so modify as you draw. Next, cut out the silhouette and include ten values that the character possesses. These need to be the **most important** traits of your character. For each trait, a quote that supports the description needs to be included. Inside the silhouette, include symbols that represent your character's interests, personality, beliefs, skills, or profession.

**\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2; R.L. 7.1, 7.2 Writing: Production and Distribution C.C.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. W.4.4; W.5.4; W.6.4; W.7.4**



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Counting by 7s*

## Week 6: Chapters 51–61: Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts



What are some of the specific ways Willow impacts the lives of the people helping her? Consider how Dell, Pattie, Jairo, Mai, and Quang-ha have changed throughout the course of the story.



Considering Willow's perspective, in what ways is *Counting by 7s* a story about things that have been lost? What does she find along the way?



Using the phrase "This is a story about . . ." supply five words to describe *Counting by 7s*. Explain your choices.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; R. L. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4; R.L. 6.1, 6.2, 6.3; R.L.7.1, 7.2, 7.3 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. C.C.S.S.E.L.A. Literacy. R. L. 4.7, 4.9; R. L. 5.7, 5.9; R. L. 6.7, 6.9; R.L. 7.7, 7.9



If a reader were to describe *Counting by 7s*, he/she might say it's a book about family. Or friendships. Or oddballs. Or maybe even everyday miracles. Ask students to consider the book from their point of view—to them, what is this story about? Offer them the opportunity to capture their thoughts and feelings through writing, art, or music. Encourage them to be creative, using a variety of mixed and digital media.



Ask students to examine the ethical nature of a character's actions and choices in *Counting by 7s*. Have them set up a "report card" using a chart and include the following eight categories: respect, responsibility, cooperation, caring, integrity, self-control, honesty, and effort. In addition, include a teacher's comments section. In each category, give the character a letter grade that you believe he/she deserves based on actions and choices made in the book. In "comments," use two specific pieces of evidence from the novel to explain/support the grade.



For Willow, the loss of her parents is devastating, and it's a slow and painful process for her to work through her grief as she searches for healing and closure. Ask students to consider the following: Think about a time in your life where you lost someone or something you cared about deeply. How did you come to terms with the loss? What made the person or thing so special? How did that experience change you as a person? For Willow, giving back to the Nguyens and completing the apartment garden project allows her to really begin to heal. Create an original piece of art (a drawing, poem, sculpture, or other piece of creative artwork) that reflects your feelings for what you lost.

**"We are in this together. We are connected. Small things matter. I'm hoping to plant ideas. I want them to grow into acts of kindness."**

—Holly Goldberg Sloan on her best-selling novel *Counting by 7s*.




# MAD LIBS®

## World's Greatest Word Game

### Educators:

- First, reproduce this sheet for each student. Copy the parts of speech that students will need to provide for each blank space on the back of their sheets.
- Then, have them transfer their words to the story.
- Share your stories!

 *Counting by 7s* is a/an \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE novel about Willow Chance, who is quite a/an \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE young girl. A twelve-year-old who loves to \_\_\_\_\_ VERB by \_\_\_\_\_ NUMBER, Willow must find a \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE family. As Willow meets new \_\_\_\_\_ PLURAL NOUN, she picks up the pieces of her \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE life. The \_\_\_\_\_ NOUN of the book develops as Willow's \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE community forms in different ways. She makes new \_\_\_\_\_ PLURAL NOUN, takes up \_\_\_\_\_ PLURAL NOUN, and even finds hope in new and different \_\_\_\_\_ PLURAL NOUN. There are many things to learn from the book, from the character, and from the author's message, and it is \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE to choose just one central \_\_\_\_\_ NOUN. One of the most \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE ways to discuss the story is to think about the \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE people that affect your life daily. Willow finds her new \_\_\_\_\_ NOUN in unexpected places. Where will you find yours? The book, in one word, is \_\_\_\_\_ ADJECTIVE.

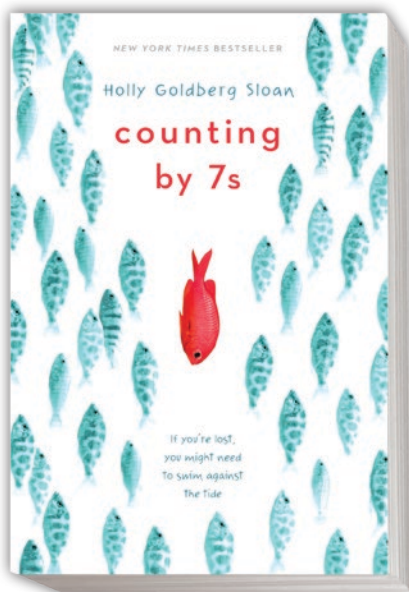


# A Q&A with *Counting by 7s* author HOLLY GOLDBERG SLOAN



**Q. Where did you get the ideas for *Counting by 7s*?**

**A:** The novel explores three themes that have long interested me. Gifted children. Personal loss. And adopted children/foster families. My own kids went to a school for gifted children, so I had a lot of exposure there. I lost several people very close to me in the last few years. And I have several dear friends who were themselves adopted as infants, and several others who have adopted children. Additionally, I went on a group trip to Cuba on a cultural exchange program and a fellow traveler had adopted two kids who were older. All of these things informed my writing in my book *Counting by 7s*. It was always going to be multi-ethnic. Additionally, my editor, when I started the book, was adopted as an infant. Her birth father was from Africa and her birth mother was white. I found her own story fascinating and compelling. Part of the theme of *Counting by 7s* involves the idea of recovery and the notion of moving on. It is about growth and understanding. I chose the Nguyen family because their personal struggle puts a spotlight on many things. Feeling like an outsider. Being displaced. The power of hard work and the importance of shared community. It's all supposed to connect to the bigger idea of the book.



**Q: How do you define “family”? Does your personal definition match the definition proposed in the novel?**

**A:** We are born into a family. And we make a larger family as we continue to grow. Love is a big concept. Feeling connected, appreciated, and needed is the secret to happiness. We are all part of the family of man, and the more we see ourselves as related to other people, the more empathy we will feel. In some ways the family we choose (versus the family we are given) is the biggest decision of our lives. I believe in choosing many.

978-0-14-242286-1 (PB) \$8.99  
978-0-8037-3855-3 (HC) \$16.99



Penguin Young Readers Group  
[PenguinClassroom.com](http://PenguinClassroom.com)



@PenguinClass



PenguinClassroom