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"I.R.L." Lesson Plan Guide

by Jenny Goebel

Unit Overview

Duration: 1 week

Grade Level: 6–8

Subject Integration: ELA, Media Literacy, Social-Emotional Learning

Essential Question: *How do we build trust and recognize truth in online relationships—and what happens when we get it wrong?*

Learning Objectives — Students will be able to:

- Analyze how Goebel builds suspense and uses the unreliable-situation structure to drive the novel
 - Explore themes of online connection, vulnerability, and digital identity
 - Examine how Lucy's longing to belong shapes her judgment and increases her risk
 - Develop critical thinking skills around digital safety and online relationship red flags
 - Express understanding through analytical writing and media literacy projects
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ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN

Day 1: Lucy's Fresh Start — Hope, Escape, and Online Connection

Objective: Establish Lucy's situation, her motivations, and the conditions that make online connection both necessary and risky

Materials: Book, character motivation chart

Opening (10 min):

- Quick-write: "Have you ever wanted to leave somewhere and start completely fresh? What were you hoping to leave behind—and what were you hoping to find?"
- Partner share

Main Activity (35 min):

- Introduce Lucy: her bullying history, her Alaska move, and the remote school situation
- Discuss: Lucy has to make friends online before she can meet anyone in person. What does she do? What does she want?
- Explore the emotional stakes: Why does Lucy's desire to belong make her especially vulnerable to being misled?
- Map her online friendships: What details make them feel real and warm to her?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "What does Lucy hope these online friendships will give her? What is she risking?"

Assessment: Character motivation analysis, emotional stakes identification, comprehension

Day 2: Building Suspense — What Does Goebel Want Us to Notice?

Objective: Analyze the novel's suspense structure and how Goebel embeds clues before the revelation

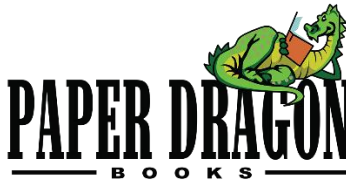
Materials: Book, suspense/foreshadowing tracking chart, selected passages

Opening (10 min):

- Think-pair-share: "What details in the story have made you feel slightly uneasy, even before anything goes wrong?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Close reading: Examine 2–3 passages for potential warning signs or moments of unease that Lucy overlooks



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- Discuss Goebel's craft: How does she make the online community feel warm and real while also embedding doubt?
- Track the arc of suspense: Identify the moments when something felt slightly "off"—and discuss why Lucy missed them
- Literary analysis: What is the effect of experiencing events entirely through Lucy's (limited) perspective?

Closing (5 min):

- Quick-write: "What warning signs, if any, did you notice that Lucy didn't? What does that tell us about her state of mind?"

Assessment: Close reading skill, suspense analysis, limited narrator perspective understanding

Day 3: The Revelation — What It Means and What It Asks of Readers

Objective: Analyze the novel's central twist and its implications for theme and reader response

Materials: Book, theme analysis chart

Opening (10 min):

- Discussion: "Without spoiling it for anyone who isn't there yet—what was your emotional response to the revelation? Were you surprised?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Discuss the revelation as a narrative event: How does it recontextualize everything that came before?
- Theme analysis: What is the book saying about online connection, vulnerability, and the limits of what we can know about another person?
- Explore the moral dimension: Who or what is responsible for what happens to Lucy? Where does the fault lie?
- Connect to real life: Is this story a warning? A tragedy? A lesson? What genre does it belong to—and does genre matter here?

Closing (5 min):

- Exit ticket: "Complete this sentence: 'I.R.L.' is really a story about ____, not just online safety."

Assessment: Thematic analysis, moral reasoning, genre awareness

Day 4: Media Literacy — Digital Safety and Critical Thinking Online

Objective: Connect the novel's themes to practical media literacy skills

Materials: Book, media literacy resource materials, red flags discussion guide

Opening (10 min):

- Partner discussion: "What questions could Lucy have asked that might have revealed the truth sooner—without being paranoid?"

Main Activity (35 min):

- Read and discuss brief resource material on digital literacy and online relationship safety
- Identify specific red flags from the novel: Which of these are recognizable warning signs?
- Discuss the tension between healthy skepticism and the paranoia that shuts down all connection
- Small group activity: Create a "Critical Thinking Online" guide—what questions should you ask about a new online friend?

Closing (5 min):

- Groups share one key question from their guide and explain why it matters

Assessment: Media literacy application, critical thinking articulation, practical digital safety awareness

Day 5: Analytical and Creative Response

Objective: Synthesize themes through writing and share understanding with the class

Materials: Writing materials, project choice cards

Opening (10 min):

- Preview project options; students select and begin

Main Activity (35 min):



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- Option A: Write an analytical paragraph — "How does Goebel use Lucy's longing to belong as both an emotional hook and a narrative vulnerability?"
- Option B: Rewrite one online exchange from the novel with what was actually happening on the other side
- Option C: Write Lucy's journal entry the day after the revelation—what does she feel? What does she believe now?
- Share in pairs or with the class

Closing (5 min):

- Class closing: "One thing this book changed about how I think about online connection is..."

Assessment: Writing quality, thematic synthesis, personal and analytical connection

Differentiation

- **Advanced learners:** Write a comparative essay connecting "I.R.L." to another text dealing with online identity or digital safety
 - **Students needing support:** Graphic organizers for suspense tracking and thematic analysis; sentence starters for writing
 - **Sensitive support note:** Some students may have personal experiences with online deception or bullying—create space for optional private journaling if needed
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Materials List

- Class set of "I.R.L."
- Character motivation chart (Day 1)
- Suspense/foreshadowing tracking chart (Day 2)
- Theme analysis chart (Day 3)
- Brief digital literacy/online safety resource for Day 4
- Project choice cards and writing materials (Day 5)