

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin

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## Book Information

Ellen Raskin, The Westing Game

Quiz Number: 144

Penguin Putnam, 1997

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216 Pages

Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: MG

Sixteen game players, heirs to Sam Westing's fabulous fortune, are all suspected of his murder. This book is part mystery story, part play-along game, and part do-it-yourself puzzle.

**Award:** ABA Children's Book Council; ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Newbery Medal; SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Mysteries, Murder; Mysteries, Who-dun-it; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

## Main Characters

Angela Wexler engaged daughter of Jake and Grace, who is praised only for her beauty

Barney Northrup fictitious name used by a salesman to rent out luxury apartments in Sunset Towers, and one of the identities of Windy Windkloppel

Chris Theodorakis a disabled tenant confined to a wheelchair, who uses binoculars to keep track of neighborhood goings-on

Doug Hoo a champion runner and son of James Hoo

Dr. Denton Deere an intern who is engaged to Angela and enables Chris to get help for his illness

Flora Baumbach a dressmaker who befriends Turtle Wexler

Grace Windsor Wexler a social climber who claims to be a direct heir of Sam Westing

J.J. Ford a judge who was educated with Sam Westing's assistance

Jake Wexler an affable podiatrist and bookie

James Shin Hoo a Chinese restaurant owner

Julian Eastman the latest chairman of Westing Paper Products, and the last identity of Windy Windkloppel

Otis Amber older delivery man who tells gruesome tales of the Westing place

Sam Westing a millionaire whose "dead body" is discovered on Halloween, and one of Windkloppel's identities

Sandy McSouthers a likeable doorman, and one of Windkloppel's identities

Sydelle Pulaski a secretary who fabricates an illness and disability to get attention

Theo Theodorakis high-school aged boy who was the son of George Theodorakis

Turtle Wexler the less pretty, but clever daughter of Jake and Grace, who eventually solves the Westing Game

## Vocabulary

**bigot** a narrow-minded or prejudiced person

**bookie** a person who makes a business of accepting bets on horse races or other contests at odds fixed by the taker

**derelict** a bum or outcast

**hodgepodge** a jumble or mess

**pyrotechnic display** a display of fireworks

**trousseau** a bride's outfit of clothes

## Synopsis

When Sam Westing dangles a \$200 million "carrot" in front of sixteen hand-picked "heirs," they each bite, and the Westing game is on!

Sam Westing, a paper company businessman and millionaire, stages his own death in order to gather together a group of sixteen potential recipients of his fortune for the reading of his will. Instead of a large inheritance, they are challenged to piece together clues to win his game and a \$200 million-dollar jackpot. Needless to say, all sixteen succumb to the

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lure of the money and submit themselves to the rules of the Westing Game.

The group of "players" includes old and young, athletic and clumsy, the physically and emotionally challenged, and the beautiful and the less beautiful. They are paired up by Westing and each given a different set of clues. Each pair sets out to solve the mystery in a different way. Turtle and Flora, for example, are convinced that in order to win the inheritance they must invest in the stock market. They do so and initially lose, but then they gain a considerable amount.

Various strategies are used, and in the end, it appears that no one will win. But, without letting anyone know, Turtle figures out the mystery. Finally, in a fitting manner, Turtle easily assumes the life of a successful businesswoman, just like her relative, Sam Westing.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Which clue helped you the most in solving the Westing Game? If you were the author, what would you have added as a clue(s) to help the reader?

*Answers will vary, but might include the words to a very familiar patriotic song, "America, the Beautiful," as a helpful clue.*

### Literary Analysis

Choose three characters. Examine the author's attitude toward each character. Based on what is said about each, does the author view them with sympathy, distaste, pity, etc.?

*Turtle: seen as less attractive than her beautiful sister, she is less favored by her mother, but other characters like her; Angela: although she's beautiful, she is seen as somewhat pathetic since her beauty is all anyone sees; Chris: he is shown as quite capable despite his physical handicap.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why does the author make a child the winner of the Westing Game? How would the story have been different if one of the adults had solved the mystery?

*Children seem to be more daring and less worried about what is practical or acceptable. The story would have been less entertaining if, for instance, the judge had solved the mystery.*

### Constructing Meaning

Which character in *The Westing Game* do you relate to the most? Explain your answer.

*Answers will vary. An example might be: Flora Baumbach because she treated people kindly, especially Turtle, who needed to hear some positive words from someone.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Plot** *The Westing Game*, with its game/mystery scenario, offers many clues and takes a few surprising twists and turns as it plays out for the reader. To help your students keep track of the plot and characters, ask them to make a story map while they are in the process of reading the book. Their map should include all the characters, and lines should be drawn to link characters to show how they are connected by the clues and information given in the story. When the students have finished their individual story maps, make one large story map as a class. This can serve as a good review of the book.

**Understanding Characterization** In *The Westing Game*, Sydelle Pulaski, a somewhat insecure secretary, is described by her doctor as using crutches because they afford her some security and bring her needed attention. Have your students review Sydelle's character. Then have them come up with a list of three other memorable characters from literature, the comics, television, or movies (such as Linus and his blanket) who also had some sort of "crutch" on which they depended. They should also explain in a short report how each character was

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dependent.

**Extending Meaning** The author of *The Westing Game* "spared no expense" with the elaborate game Sam Westing concocted. Have your students imagine that they are millionaires and masters at creating mysteries. Ask them to create a game with a unique set of rules and with a prize for the clever winner. Have students volunteer to try out their game on their classmates. Students can then vote for the best and most creative game.

**Making Predictions** Two of the prominent characters in *The Westing Game* get involved with investing in the stock market because they believe doing so will win them the inheritance they seek. Have your students do some research into the stock market to give them a cursory knowledge of how it works. Then have them form teams of investors. Give each team an equal amount of "play money" to be used to "invest" in the market. Students make deals through a "broker"--you--and make profits or suffer losses according to how the actual stock market is going. To conclude, have each team prepare a short written report on how they did, why, and what they learned from the experience.