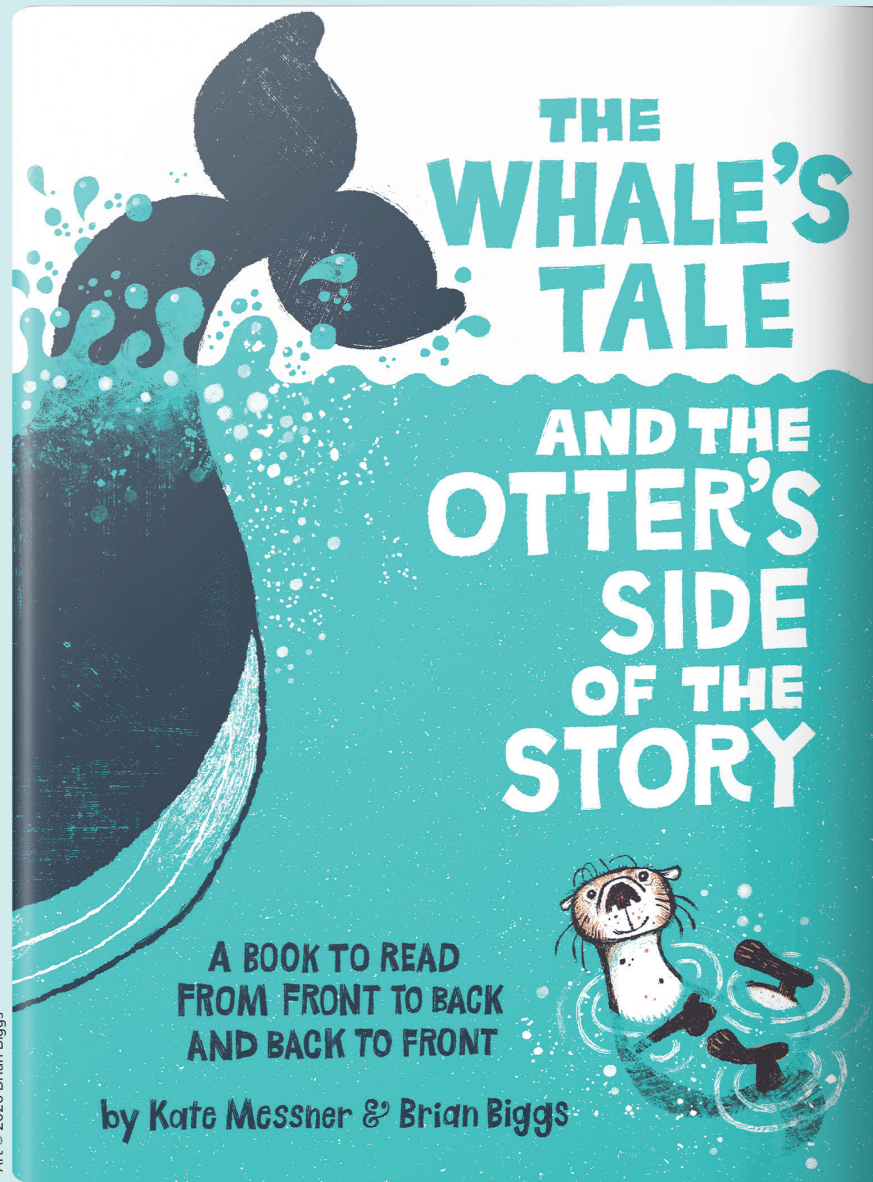



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



About the Book

A boastful whale and a showboating otter compete in a battle of words to prove that each is the greatest animal ever to swim the seas. Read one way, the first-person text brags about whales' superiority; read the other way, it extols how much better otters are. Using true information about the two marine species to make both arguments, Kate Messner's clever text and Brian Biggs's giggle-worthy artwork brilliantly illustrate how the same words can be used to express contradictory opinions when speakers have a one-sided view of the world.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



The Whale's Tale and the Otter's Side of the Story is unusual because it can be read in more than one way! We are used to reading books from front to back, but this book can also be read from back to front. Since this is stated on the cover, you can discuss it before reading, or you can read through Whale's argument first and allow the discovery of Otter's side of the story to happen when you reach the last page that prompts you to read back to front.

This book is also informational, but it is not nonfiction. The whale and the otter, our talking sea mammal friends (fiction), root their opinions in scientific facts (informational). For this reason, *The Whale's Tail and the Otter's Side of the Story* can be classified as "informational fiction."

Authors write for many purposes, often categorized as to entertain, to inform, or to persuade. What does it mean to persuade? While this book informs readers about the whale and the otter, the big goal of each narrator is to convince the reader that their opinion is correct. To persuade, or be persuasive, means to influence the way another person thinks about a subject, often to change their thinking or feelings.

This book is a great support for opinion writing with young writers. It offers a great opportunity to discuss how to state a clear opinion, support an opinion with evidence, and use word choice to impact the reader/listener. Listen to how Whale and Otter try to convince you to think like they do.



photo by Anjali DiBacco

KATE MESSNER is the *New York Times* best-selling author of numerous picture and middle grade books. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a TV news reporter as well as an educator who spent fifteen years teaching middle school English. She lives on Lake Champlain.



photo by Jonathan Biggs

BRIAN BIGGS is an illustrator, designer, educator, and author who has written and/or illustrated more than seventy-five children's books, including his own *Everything Goes* series. He lives in Philadelphia.

BEFORE READING

Open the book to show both the front and back covers. Who will the characters be? What do you think you know about whales and/or otters? Both Whale and Otter are enjoying the water. What can you already tell these two animals have in common?

Take a look at the title page. Try to read the body language and expressions of Whale and Otter as they stand at their microphones. What do their eyes say? What do Otter's paws say? What do you think we might hear?

The title *The Whale's Tale and the Otter's Side of the Story* is a play on words because "the otter's side" sounds like "the other side." What does it mean to hear "the other side" of a story? Have you ever had to tell "the other side" of a story to your grown-ups or teachers? Are the first story and "the other side" usually the same or different?



Art © 2026 Brian Biggs

THE WHALE'S TALE

What does Whale want you to think?
What does Whale do to persuade you to think this way?

Facts are information that can be verified or proven. Opinions are based on someone's thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. What parts of Whale's tale are facts? What parts are a matter of opinion?



How does Whale downplay what is special about otters?

THE OTTER'S SIDE OF THE STORY

What does Otter want you to think? What does Otter do to persuade you to think this way?

Facts are information that can be verified or proven. Opinions are based on someone's thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. What parts of Otter's tale are facts? What parts are a matter of opinion?

How does Otter downplay what is special about whales?

AFTER READING

Which animal—the whale or the otter—do you think is better? Why? Do we have to choose one to be the best? Is it possible for both animals to be right about why they are amazing? Does one have to be better than the other?

What do you think would happen if Whale and Otter listen more carefully to what each other is saying? Do you think it's possible for them to change their opinions?

What kind of book is this, and where would you put it in the library? Is this book fiction or nonfiction, and why? Hint: Although there are a lot of interesting facts, there are talking animals. (Refer to the How to Use this Book section for more.)

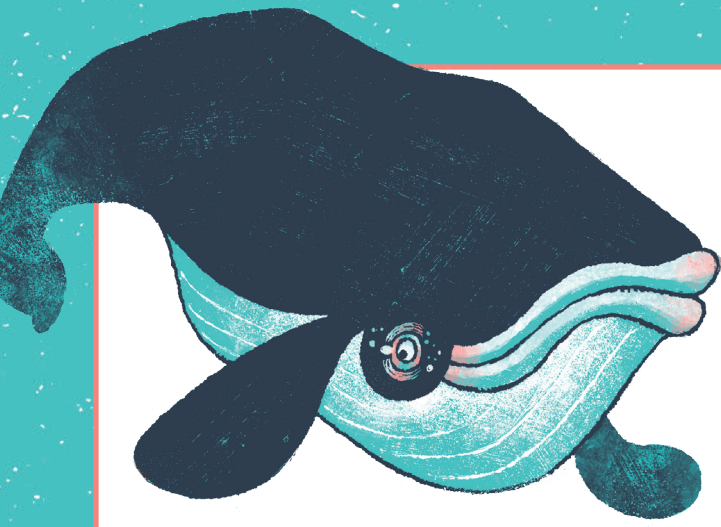
TEACH WITH BACK MATTER

In the Author's Note, Kate Messner explains that the whale and otter are both important to the ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean. What other species live in the ocean? An ecosystem is a community of living and non-living things in a particular area. Locate the Pacific Ocean on a map. How do whales and otters impact the ocean ecosystem? Look at the Impact section of the back matter for more information!

A bias is a strong opinion or a preference for one side, usually in a way that is unfair or does not consider all sides. How does bias impact what matters most to you? How does bias impact the way you hear what other people say? Can you think of any real examples of when having a bias might slow down respectful conversation or decision-making?

Where could you go to do research about whales, otters, or other marine animals? Notice how the back matter of this book includes a "Further Reading" section that gives you a head start about some other places to read more about these animals, including books and websites. Which would you check out first?





EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

WHO IS THE BEST?

While rereading the book, build a Venn diagram or a T-chart comparing whales and otters. Then, using your Venn diagram or T-chart, build your own argument about which creature is better, providing evidence to support your thinking. Once everyone has made their decision, take a class poll and graph the results.

DEAR WHALE, DEAR OTTER

Have you ever given advice to a friend or family member? What advice would you give to either Whale or Otter? Write a letter to either Whale or Otter with advice about how to handle their differences of opinion with the other animal. Consider how Whale was feeling and how their feelings might have made Otter feel, or vice versa. How could Whale or Otter handle their emotions differently? What is preventing Whale and Otter from having a respectful relationship? How could they work past their differences?

SIZING IT UP

In the back matter, the author points out that even though Whale and Otter share a single page in this book, there would be a much bigger difference in their size in real life. Using the information provided, facilitate a scale activity that would help students visualize the difference between the typical length of a whale (60 feet) and the typical length of an otter (4 feet). For example, you can try using a very long hallway, borrow the gymnasium, or take the learning outdoors with chalk or cones.

WORDS MATTER

Make a list of the strong word choices and phrases used by Whale and Otter. Your list might include (but should not be limited to):

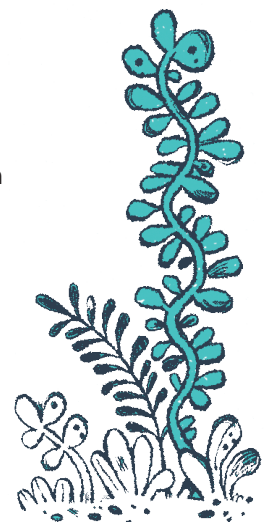
- “there’s no way”
- “everybody knows”
- “no one cares that”
- “silly to suggest”
- “one-hundred-percent scientific fact”



Look closely at what these words and phrases have in common. The language in these phrases is extreme or exaggerated. How do these words feel in your head and in your heart? When and why do writers or speakers use these words?

SOUND OFF

What animal do YOU think is “the best”? Do some reading and research about another animal that is not a whale or an otter. Create a list of facts you believe makes your chosen animal “the best.” Practice using strong language choices to be convincing. Share your opinion with your readers or listeners. Can you persuade them to think like you?



Educator’s Guide prepared by Melissa Guerrette, M.Ed., NBCT, a teacher at Oxford Elementary School in Oxford, Maine.