



# “Undercover Birthday”

## Teacher Guide



SEASON 4 EPISODE 8

### Undercover Birthday

by a 9 year-old from Ohio named Isaiah

### Overview

In the story “Undercover Birthday” by a 9 year-old from Ohio named Isaiah, a spy throws an unusually secretive birthday party. Birthday parties are typically in public places full of loud singing and bright balloons--an “Undercover Birthday” is much more stealthy. This lesson takes inspiration from the story and challenges students to describe a normal setting in a mysterious and secretive way worthy of a secret agent. Writers will pick a public place, and use sensory details to convey the “where” and the “what” in order for the reader to correctly guess the location and discover their “mission.” The result is a fun guessing game that motivates writers to pen detailed descriptions, and encourages readers to practice the skill of inference based on details in the text.

### Age Group

Best for 3rd through 5th grade readers and writers.

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

## Common Core Standards

For simplicity, here are relevant 4th grade standards; similar ones for 3rd and 5th apply.

1. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1](#) Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
2. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3](#) Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).
3. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3](#) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
4. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.d](#) Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.

## Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Write a detailed description of a public place without saying the name of the place
- Use sensory details to describe a setting
- Read setting descriptions and infer where the setting is based on details

## Materials

1. Story Pirates Podcast: Season 4 Episode 8 (story at approximately 5:00)
2. Writer's Notebook or other place to write down ideas

## Activity Steps

### 1. Intro:

Introduce the lesson to your students with a short discussion.

- To begin, you may want to engage students by telling them that today they'll get to pretend to be Secret Agents giving and receiving instructions for a secret mission! In fact, you have their first Mission Brief right here. If you'd like, you can even put on sunglasses and adopt the persona of a Mission Commander while you read the Mission Brief to students.
- **Do Now/Writer's Notebook:** Display the following Mission Brief for students, and ask them to respond to the associated questions:
  - *Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to identify the setting described by the following Mission Brief:*
  - *You will have to buy a ticket at the front to get in. If it is a sunny, warm day, there may be a line, but if it is raining, you should be able to get in quickly. There will be a kiosk near the gift shop at the front with maps. Open the crisp paper and find the picture of the snake. Follow the path indicated on the map past the roars of the Lion enclosure and the squawking of the Tropical Bird habitat. Resist the smell of french fries at the Tiger Cafe, and meet me*

*inside the herpetarium, where the snakes and amphibians are. I'll be standing by the tank containing the giant boa constrictor.*

- *Where is this Mission Brief telling you to go? What clues did you notice that helped you figure it out?*
- **Share:** Have students share some of their responses.
  - Students will hopefully guess that the setting described is a zoo. Some clues they might have noticed are:
    - It's a place that people like to go when it is sunny
    - There is a gift shop and maps of the place
    - There are lions and tropical birds
    - There is a restaurant named after an animal: Tiger Cafe
    - There is a special section just for reptiles and amphibians
- **Connect:** The Mission Brief told you exactly where to go without saying it was a zoo. It had lots of clues, and as Secret Agents, you had to *infer* what the setting was based on the clues. To *infer* means to make an educated guess using facts and observations. Today we are going to write Mission Briefs that describe public places in a secretive way. Then we'll get to share them and guess each other's missions, so we will be able to practice reading and writing skills.

## 2. Play the Story:

"Undercover Birthday" by a 9 year-old from Ohio named Isaiah. The story is at around the 5:00 mark on the episode.

- **Introduce the story to students:** Let's listen to a story from the Story Pirates Podcast called "Undercover Birthday" by a 9 year-old from Ohio named Isaiah.
- This story will send us into spy mode because it's about a spy having an unusual birthday party!
- **Active Listening:** You can ask students to come up with a secret "spy signal" either individually or as a class. Every time they hear the chorus ("It's an undercover birthday..."), they can do their secret spy signal.
- **Play the story:** Play the story for students.

## 3. Check for Understanding:

After listening, you might ask your students some questions.

- **Discuss:** *What kinds of spy details did you notice from the story?*
  - *The main character was Zack aka "Secret Agent Z", his mission was "to have an Undercover Birthday," his mom was the Mission Commander who gave him the mission, he did everything in secret, his friends were even secretly at the party!*
- **Explain:** One of the main features of the spy genre is sending and receiving secret messages. In the story, Secret Agent Z didn't have a regular birthday, he had a secret "undercover" birthday. The invitations were probably pretty secretive too, and didn't just tell the guests where to go, they were probably more like a secret Mission Brief!

#### 4. MiniLesson: Mission Brief setting descriptions

- **Explain:** We are going to practice being Secret Agents by sending and receiving secret messages today. We'll practice our writing and reading skills along the way.
- **Define a Mission Brief:** The secret messages that we will be sending and receiving are called Mission Briefs. They are descriptions that tell Secret Agents where to go and what to do.
  - You may want to re-read the example from the beginning of class about the zoo to point out descriptions of the “where” and the “what” before explaining further.
- **Writing a Mission Brief:** A Mission Brief is a description of a place, but since it is a spy Mission Brief we need to describe the place without just saying outright where it is so our reader will have to put together the clues to guess.
  1. **Pick a Public Place:** The first step to coming up with a Mission Brief is to pick a public place to describe. It should be a location that most people would be able to go and would be able to recognize from a description. Here are a few ideas if you want to assign or suggest them to students:
    - Beach, movie theater, bowling alley, sports stadium, park, restaurant, gym, bookstore, library, pet store, museum, toy store, video game store, pool, bank, airport, amusement park, salon/barbershop, bakery, carwash, dance studio, fire station, plant nursery, post office, theater, aquarium
  2. **Address the reader directly:** You are giving instructions to a Secret Agent, so you can talk to them directly in your description. Use the word “You” to tell them where they will go, and what they will see/hear/etc.
  3. **Use sensory details:** Describe the public place using sensory details. Tell the Secret Agent what they will see, hear, smell, touch, or taste at the place.
  4. **Stay Secretive!** As you describe the place, be sure to not say the name of the place. Use the sensory details as clues to your reader instead.

#### 5. Group Practice: “We Do”: Making a class example Mission Brief

As a class, use the steps outlined above to create a group example Mission Brief.

1. **Pick a Public Place:** Ask students to give a suggestion of a public place. You can use the list above for ideas
  - Ask students to brainstorm some common features of that place: *Who spends time there? What kinds of things would you see or hear there?*
  - You can write these ideas down for reference later.
2. **Address the reader directly:** Begin your Mission Brief by addressing the reader directly.
  - For example: *“Hello Secret Agent! Today’s mission is to go to a specific place...”*
3. **Use sensory details as clues:** Describe the “what” and the “where”
  - You can reference the list of ideas from earlier and ask students to describe those things using their 5 senses.
  - For example: *“The first thing you will hear is the sound of children splashing in the water, followed by a loud*

*tweet of a whistle, and the lifeguard yelling, ‘No Running! You will smell sunscreen and feel the sticky residue of popsicle drips on the asphalt. Look near the towel stand, and you will see me wearing a polka-dotted bathing suit and dark sunglasses.’”*

- 4. Stay Secretive!** As you describe the location, be sure to not say the name of the place. Use the sensory details as clues to your reader to help them find where their mission is.

## 6. Independent Practice: “You Do”

Have students follow steps 1-4 above to create a Mission Brief.

## 7. Sharing: Deliver your Mission Brief!

- **Partner or Group Share:** Have students share their Mission Briefs to partners or in groups. Students can take turns playing the two main roles of the Secret Agent and the Mission Commander. If you’d like, you can even create a fun costume element by having the Mission Commander wear sunglasses when delivering the Mission Brief!
  - *Mission Commander:* The Mission Commander will read the Mission Brief they wrote to the Agents. Mission Commanders are responsible for giving clues through their Mission Briefs, and reading slowly and clearly.
  - *Secret Agents:* The Secret Agents will listen to the Mission Brief the Mission Commander wrote and guess what place the Mission Commander is describing. Agents are responsible for collecting clues from the Mission Briefs and explaining how they inferred what place was being described.
- **Whole Class Share:** You can also have students share their Mission Briefs to the whole class, and have the whole class guess all together.

## STEM integration: Secret Codes and Secret Message Songs

- If students want more spy-centric lessons, they can watch the archived Story Pirates University Livestream classes below:
  - [Creative Writing: Secret Codes](#)
  - [Music Monday: Secret Message Songs](#)