

Teachers Guide: Feed

Questions to Think About as You Read

What are the science fictional elements of this novel? Why is it categorized as science fiction?

The novel describes a near-future where the majority of people have a television/Internet-like "feed" implanted in their brain. The feed is linked to their neurological system, and allows them to access information of all kinds. It also bombards them with ads, custom-designed for each individual. The story is set at some point in the future; although no exact date is given. While much of the novel focuses on the relationships between a group of teenagers – in particular Titus and his girlfriend, Violet – there are plenty of futuristic inventions that identify this as a work of science fiction.

What exactly is the "feed"? Is there anything similar today? List some of the advantages and disadvantages of the feed.

The actual workings of the feed are not described in detail until more than halfway through the book. It is an implant that is usually installed in infants, as it is more likely to malfunction if installed too late in development. The "feedware" ties into body control, emotions, memory – just about all major functions in the body. It includes linkages to the limbic system, the motor cortex, and hippocampus, and is an integral part of the brain. What it provides is the ability to chat (silently) with others – called "m-chat", as well as access to any information desired. The feed is always on, and changes depending on a person's location. For instance, walking into a store, the feed will present ad banners from that vendor, customized to the individual. Shoppers can have the credits for their purchases deducted automatically via the feed. Students can probably come up with many more examples of how the feed works as described in the book.

There are some similarities between the feed and the incessant corporate sponsorships and advertisements of our world. While these ads aren't (yet) in our heads, as in the novel, advertisers do use cookies and spyware on computers to target ads more directly. Other examples of such profiling include "frequent shopper" programs and the savings cards used by grocery stores.

The story drives home the disadvantages of the feed. Students may think at first that some features of the feed are cool. The ability to chat privately with whomever you want, when you want, may seem appealing, for instance. However, by the time they reach the end of the novel, kids will discover that reliance on such technology renders one shallow, stupid, and without the capability of independent thought.

What technological innovations are present in this story? Make a list as you read of the futuristic technology in this book.

There are multiple examples of futuristic technology throughout the novel. Some examples are cars that fly (upcars), families living in bubbles where they can control their own sun and stars, synthetic breezes and air factories, filet mignon "farms" – complete with steak mazes, holographic teachers, speech tattoos, and whales that are laminated to enable them to live in the toxic seas. In addition, babies are born in "conceptionariums" because radiation has made conventional conception unviable. Students will be able to come up with other examples as well.

Although Feed describes a different world from the one we live in today, there are still many similarities. Make a list of some of the things in the book that seem contemporary.

Teenagers in *Feed*, like teenagers today, are concerned with fashion, being cool, and being accepted by their peers. Clothing and hair styles in *Feed* change often, teens drink, take drugs, and have sex, parents are weird and/or out of touch, soap opera stars have big hair and go on crying jags, schools suffer funding cuts, insurance companies refuse to provide adequate coverage, and the Fox network is still around. An advertising promotion with Coke plays a small role in the story, and Dodge and Nike are mentioned as well.

*The characters use a great deal of slang, obscenities, and made-up words (for example, **unette**) throughout the story. Most of them do not seem to have very advanced vocabularies, and often struggle for words. Why do you think the author chose to use these components for the novel? What purpose do they serve?*

At first it may seem distracting, but the extensive use of slang and crude speech mirrors the actual way teens converse. Testing the boundaries of their world by creating new language to describe what is happening in their lives is found in every generation. In order to really get inside the head of the narrator and his friends, it's important that the reader **think** as these teens do. That includes not only immersion in their language, but also in their obsessions with purchasing, partying, and perpetual fashion changes.

The language in the novel is also meant to demonstrate the relationship between vocabulary and literacy. Violet, who is home schooled, has the most advanced vocabulary of any of the teens, while the others seem to pepper their discussions with "like" and "you know" and "oh" without ever really explaining what they mean. School (which is trademarked in the novel) is mainly geared at teaching people how to use the feed more effectively; there's no need for real learning, as anyone can simply look up what they need to know using the feed. With no learning ensuing, and everything you need supplied via intracranial feed, there is no need to be articulate. Even the parents in the story, with the exception of Violet's father, have very limited speech proficiencies.

Why are there interludes between some chapters of the book that do not involve the main characters? How do they relate to the story?

These interludes provide the reader with a glimpse into what is being delivered through the feed. They also provide some background for world events, as most of the characters, with the exception of Violet, seem completely disinterested in anything beyond their superficial lives.

How does Titus compare to his friends, as far as attitudes, beliefs, intelligence, background, etc.?

Before he meets Violet on the moon, Titus appears to be a fairly normal teenager, and seems just as hedonistic and self-absorbed as all of his friends are. As the story progresses, we learn more about his background. Much like his buddies, Titus lives in a bubble with empty-headed parents who either ignore or indulge him, and who created him to look like an actor they thought would become famous (but didn't). Some of the other teens in the story, particularly the girls Quendy and Calista, appear to be complete slaves to fashion and trends. However, Titus is not quite as vapid as the others; on the moon, he turns down his friends' invitation to go "in mal" (a drug-like trip where the feed is made to deliberately malfunction). Violet admits later that she is attracted to Titus because he is the only one who uses metaphor, and he decides to hang out with her even though his friends don't seem to like her. This indicates

at least some original thinking on his part. Titus even seems willing to go along with Violet's idea of resisting the feed, at least for a time, realizing that there really is something wrong with his world. Eventually, though, he decides that it's just too much effort.

Questions by Section

Part One

What are the "lesions" referred to in the Impact chapter? Is there anything similar today?

The lesions appear to be some kind of skin disorder; while the cause is never really revealed, late in the book the author describes even worse problems, where people have less and less skin, and most lose their hair. From the brief descriptions of world events that we do get in the novel, it is clear that the planet has become quite toxic. Students could compare the lesions to current mysterious diseases such as SARS. It is interesting to note that further on in the story, the lesions become popularized in TV shows and advertisements, thus rendering them a fashion statement of sorts.

The girls have to change their hair in the chapter The Nose Grid because hairstyles had changed. What does this statement tell us about trends in the novel?

Fashion trends come and go quickly in our time; in *Feed*, they change even more quickly, propagated by the feed itself, which can broadcast new styles directly and instantaneously into people's brains. Teenagers, of course, are often the earliest adopters of such fads, and to be cool it's important to conform to the latest style. Characters in the book make fun of others who haven't gotten wind of the fact that styles have changed in the last ten minutes.

On page 25, Titus notes that Quendy is an economy model of Calista. How does this statement reflect Titus' viewpoint? What does this tell us about the relationship between Quendy and Calista?

Of the two girls, Calista appears to be the more popular one. Perhaps she has more money to adopt the latest styles, or perhaps she has a better sense of what's cool than her friend. In any case, Calista sets the trends, and Quendy can only follow, perhaps with inferior clothes or styles. Quendy looks up to Calista and tries to emulate her; there may even be some rivalry between the two as to which one has the better hairstyle, clothes, or whatever. This is often common in peer groups where one teen has elevated status within the group. Titus may or may not be making an accurate observation of the situation; it's possible that he is more enamored of Calista and therefore judges Quendy inferior solely for that reason.

Part Two

In the chapter called Boring why does Titus think the boat picture is boring? Do you think pictures like the ones he describes are boring? Why or why not?

Characters in the story are driven to go, go, go, and there is no real time for relaxation, or even just sitting and thinking. With the feed running in their heads all the time, activity is always part of their lives. The picture of the boat on the lake, which Titus describes as "nothing that was about to happen or had just happened", might inspire reflection and meditation in the present time. Viewers might also use their imagination to envision a possible scenario for the picture. In a world with the feed, no one uses their imagination because the feed provides everything for you. It's also likely that Titus has never been on a

real boat, so he may have no context for anything depicted in the picture. Students might agree or disagree with Titus, depending on their own interests.

At the beginning of the chapter Missing The Feed Titus compares life before the feed to "like if you carried your lungs in a suitcase and opened it to breathe". What does this say about the relationship between the feed and humans in the story? Can you think of something similar in your world?

This is an apt analogy to explain how critical the feed has become for everyday life in this story. Students might feel as dependent on their cell phones or computers, but no modern invention is quite as integrated into human existence as the feed – at least, not yet!

On page 48, the feed is described as knowing what you need before you do – is this really what the feed is doing?

Students might think at first that it's a good idea to have advertisers know everything about you, in order to provide you with the best shopping options. However, further reading should lead them to see that the consumer-driven society of *Feed* is superficial and frivolous. The teens in the book spend a majority of their time listening to ads and buying things pushed on them by their customized feed. Rather than the feed knowing what you need, what it really does is **tell** you what you need, creating the need within you through a constant barrage of sales pitches. As Violet notes, advertisers divide people up into personality types, putting them into categories so they can market to them. The system is like a spiral – items are made more basic so they will appeal to more people; as a result, everyone becomes used to things being simple, so individuals become less and less varied as people. As tastes become less refined, items are made even simpler, and so on. Comparisons can be made between the world of *Feed* and how advertisers market to consumers today.

In the chapter Father, Titus' father uses the word "dude" – a word which is topical slang in our world – and it stands out in the book in comparison to much of the unfamiliar slang used in the novel. Why did the author have his character use this word?

Just as kids' fathers or parents today might use outdated slang (i.e. "groovy"), the same thing is true in the time of the story. Parents may use such terms in an effort to appear cool or in sync with what is happening in teens' worlds, unaware that such attempts make them seem even more out of touch.

What are the "salad days" Violet refers to on page 60?

"Salad days" is a reference to the "green" of youthful inexperience or innocence. Salad days are sometimes considered to be the best times of early life. Unfortunately, Titus doesn't understand this metaphor – it's apparently over his head.

Violet tells Titus on page 63 that he is the only one of his group who uses metaphor. Is this meant to be a complement? Why does Violet choose to point out this particular characteristic?

With the exception of Violet and her father, the characters' grasp of language in *Feed* is pitiful. Violet feels that Titus' usage of metaphor may indicate the possibility that he is more intelligent than the others, and thus more like Violet herself. This is intended as a complement, and articulated as a means to encourage Titus to express himself more coherently.

Why would Violet's father want to study the dead languages?

This is one of his ways of resisting the feed, by trying to hold on to a past era when people actually had to retain knowledge of things. At first, readers might think "dead languages" refers to Latin and similar languages that we refer to as "dead" today, but in *Feed* they are computer languages such as Basic and Fortran.

What is the purpose of mentioning the Captain Top Quark program on page 76? What is a "quark"?

This is just one example of how television has bombarded the lives of the characters in the novel. However, it is interesting to note that the program states that the whole planet is so sad it needs lots of hugs – a reflection of the actual state of the world of *Feed*. A quark is a sub-atomic particle, considered the simplest of all particles. Quarks combine primarily to form protons and neutrons. Perhaps it is meant to indicate that even on the sub-atomic level, the state of the world of *Feed* is very sad indeed.

Part Three

Why are Clouds™ trademarked?

Due to the deteriorating state of the ecosystem in the novel, there are no **real** clouds anymore. The clouds people see are created by a manufacturer who has trademarked the concept. They appear in the artificial sky, and then are sucked back into ducts when no longer needed or wanted. This example also serves to provide further evidence that the people in the novel live in a completely consumer-oriented environment.

On page 80, Violet says that the experience of being hacked has to change them somehow. Why would she say that?

The feed plays such a crucial role in people's lives that being hacked is a major life-changing experience. Repairing the feed is not just a matter of running an anti-virus program on your computer, as we would do. For these people, having their feed hacked is so critical that they are actually "shut down" and taken to the hospital, where they spend several days in recovery. This is akin to a major illness or accident in today's world, and such events often do provoke major change in a person's outlook on life. Violet may also be alluding to the fact that the temporary hack attack and subsequent loss of the feed **should** make Titus and the others realize the damaging power the feed has on their lives. Unfortunately, the other characters only view the interruption as an adventure, and possibly a chance to be rewarded by their parents – for instance, Titus' parents buy him a car.

What is the "ABC Afterschool Special" referred to on page 87?

The ABC Afterschool Specials were a series of one-hour educational programs that aired on the ABC network from 1972 to 1996. They generally aired at a time when kids were home from school for the afternoon, and covered diverse topics ranging from death, sex, drugs, and peer pressure. At the time, many of these shows covered subjects that parents were reluctant to discuss with their kids, but toward the end of the programs' run, kids had become far too sophisticated for the shows, and the broadcasts were ridiculed. In the story, Titus uses this example as a joke to suggest to his friends that the current situation is similar to the plot line of one of these Afterschool Specials.

What are the little Russian dolls referred to on page 91? What do they signify?

This is a reference to the Russian Matryoshka nesting dolls (sometimes called stacking dolls). A tiny doll is enclosed in a larger doll, which is enclosed in a larger doll, and so on. Traditional nesting dolls are handcarved and made of wood. In the story, Violet likens her and Titus' brains to the smallest dolls, rattling around inside the larger dolls that are their heads. The dolls could be viewed as signifying the layers of complexity that make up a human being, with the brain being the most basic level of what makes us who we are – the littlest doll.

What do you think about the description of School™? Is this an ideal school? Why or why not?

In *Feed*, school exists only to provide instructions on how to more effectively use the feed. When everything one needs to know can be looked up on the feed, there's no need for anyone to acquire any actual knowledge. Some students may find this to be a reasonable learning strategy. Certainly some educators have argued that teaching kids to do research using the Internet does not reinforce true learning – it just teaches them how to use the Internet. Teachers can use the depiction of school in the story to emphasize the benefits of actual learning.

What do you think of Violet's father? Does she have good reason to hide him from her friends? Is his plan to save the language a reasonable one?

Violet's father is not like the other parents depicted in the novel, and like many teenagers, she finds it embarrassing to have him meet her friends. From the description provided, he does seem to be exceptionally eccentric (as opposed to just not very cool, like most parents). Violet's father thinks the language is dying and being debased, so he has the odd quirk of speaking in weird words and irony, so that his speech can't be simplified. However, his attempts seem futile, given the overall state of the world in *Feed*. Violet's father could also be considered at least partially to blame for her eventual misfortune. We learn later in the story that he waited too long to have the feed installed in her, increasing the likelihood that there would be problems, and he opted for an inferior brand of feedware. Because he has deliberately chosen an obscure profession that provides a low wage, he is not able to pay for the extensive medical bills that result from her hack attack.

What do you think about Violet's theory of the importance of self-control?

Violet's theory of self-control and delayed gratification is certainly contrary to the world of *Feed*; when you can order anything, at any time, there's no need to exercise self-control. In our time, the prevalence of credit cards has eliminated delayed gratification in much the same way for many individuals. No need to save up for what you want – just charge it! It's not explicitly stated in the book, but part of the pleasure in getting something can be the anticipation of receiving it. Sadly, this sort of pleasure is pretty much eliminated for the characters in the story.

Why does Violet say death is now a blank, when it used to be a hole you fell into and kept falling? Why is it different?

Since the feed is always with a person, providing information and stimulus around the clock, death is a blank because it's the only way to completely end the feed. Before the feed, some may have imagined death as falling into a hole – a journey towards a great unknown. When the feed allows you to know everything, there can't be any true unknowns, so the old notion of death is no longer valid. Students may choose to disagree with Violet's depictions, and can discuss their own opinion of this subject.

When Violet says "it makes good times even better when you know they are going to end" what does she mean? Can you think of examples from your own life? Do you think her analogy of grilled vegetables being better because some of them are partly soot is a good comparison in this case? Why or why not?

This is a thought-provoking statement that students can reflect on, and they may have differing opinions about its validity. Violet's comparison of grilled vegetables seems a bit off, however, and even Titus isn't sure that this is an apt comparison. Students can also discuss whether this is a good illustration of Violet's point, or provide other, more relevant examples.

On page 161, Violet asks the question "If something's an acquired taste...how do you start to acquire it?" What's the answer to this question?

This question can get kids to talk about the process of "acquired taste" and whether it's even advisable. For instance, smoking and drinking are often said to be acquired tastes, and there are good arguments for not indulging in either one.

One of the characters mentions the Watts Riots on page 163. What were these?

The Watts Riots occurred in Los Angeles in 1965. Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, states attempted to circumvent the new law. The resulting racially-fueled uprising turned a routine traffic stop in the Watts neighborhood into a six-day riot, with over 1000 injuries, almost 4000 arrests, and 34 deaths.

*Why do you think Violet acts differently from the other girls in the book? Do you think she **wants** to be different? Why do the other girls make fun of her?*

Violet was brought up differently from the other girls in the book, so she can't help but act differently from them, even though she wants to fit in. The others see that she is not like them, and in typical teenaged fashion, make fun of her as a way of making themselves look superior. While Violet says she wants to be like the rest of the gang, some of her actions indicate that she is secretly proud of being different. For example, her vocabulary is more advanced than the others, and she tries to discuss world news, even though the others are mostly oblivious to what's going on with the planet.

Why does Quendy get the lenticels? Why does Calista say that Quendy is stupid for doing so?

Quendy has always tried to imitate Calista in an attempt to become more popular. By getting the lenticels (cuts all over her body) Quendy thinks she can top Calista's fake lesions, thus elevating herself to the status of most popular. Calista's response is an attempt to be mean to Quendy, as she is worried that Quendy's new look, which some of the guys are admiring, will unseat Calista's popularity, and cause Calista's boyfriend to start going out with Quendy instead. Saying Quendy is stupid is also a way of making herself look better. Secretly, Calista may think Quendy really **is** stupid because she believes the lenticels truly are too extreme. Teens can probably think of examples from their own lives that are similar to the ongoing one-upmanship between Quendy and Calista.

Why does Violet scream at everyone on page 202 that they are being eaten and raised for food? Is this an accurate assessment?

Violet knows her life will be ending. Although she's refrained from sharing her true beliefs about the feed in the past, in order to retain credibility with Titus and his friends, she has finally reached the point where she doesn't care what they think anymore. She thinks

Quendy's lenticels are ridiculous, she doesn't like the party game everyone is playing, she doesn't like how people are making fun of her, and she's just fed up. Her assessment that everyone is being raised for food is actually pretty accurate. By this point in the story, it's clear that everyone who has the feed is groomed by it for continuous consumption; in a sense, food for the feed.

What does Titus mean when he says the party is over at the end of Part Three?

While this is a literal reference to the actual party being over, it is also a reference to the life they have been leading – up to this point in time – being over as well. This is one of Titus' rare metaphoric statements.

Part Four

On page 217, Violet asks "what am I, without the feed?" Are people anything without the feed, in the world of the story?

This statement confirms just how much people depend on the feed for their daily lives. As Violet notes in this passage, all of her ideas about living life to the fullest come from sitcom openers. She is beginning to realize that even she is not completely able to resist the overriding influence of the feed. One of the points the author makes throughout the story is that the feed consumes a person's individuality.

Violet says her mother called the feed "the brain mole". Do you think this is an apt description? Why or why not?

Moles tunnel through the earth in search of food. The feed seems to work in much the same way, searching out those elements of a person's thoughts that will lead to increased consumption of goods and services.

Who are Tutankhamen and Mithridates, mentioned on page 231?

Tutankhamen, AKA King Tut, is probably the most famous Egyptian pharaoh; his tomb was discovered in 1922. He became a ruler at age 9 and died in his late teens. Mithridates was an ancient king of Pontus who also became a ruler as a child. He expanded his empire by defeating the Romans, but was later driven out by Pompey

Why does Violet create a list of wishes? Why does she send the list to Titus?

Violet knows she is going to die, so she wants to experience as much of life as she can before her death. Realistically, Violet is aware that she won't be able to achieve all of her wishes – some of them, in fact, are impossible, such as her desire to be from Fort Wayne. The mere act of creating the list allows Violet to vicariously savor some of her desires, at least in her imagination. Some of her wishes include doing things with a boyfriend, and she sends the list to Titus in the hopes that he will join her, even if only to dream about the possibilities.

Violet's request for assistance repairing her feedware is rejected. Is it her own fault that she can't get help? Does this have implications for things today?

In fact, Violet has, to some degree, brought her troubles upon herself. Because her purchasing habits have not conformed to the kind of consumer portrait that corporations are interested in, none of them consider her a worthwhile investment for repair. If she's not going to buy things, in the culture of *Feed* she is of no use. Students can assess whether corporate

culture is working in similar ways today. For instance, is it fair that athletes who turn down corporate sponsorship "opportunities" rarely become as famous as those who agree to them? What does such a person give up when embarking on such an "opportunity"?

Why does Titus delete all of the memories that Violet has sent him? Why does he later lie to her about it?

Titus is starting to realize he got more than he bargained for when he decided to date Violet. At first, her uniqueness was attractive, but he is finding it difficult to resist the enticement of the feed, and he isn't really adult enough to handle Violet's eventual demise. Violet is sending her memories to Titus in the hopes that he will still be around to play them back to her when she can no longer remember them herself. By deleting them, he is already beginning to disengage himself from her life. He later lies about deleting the memories to further avoid any responsibility towards her. However, he does have some regret about his lies (indicating he still has some feelings for her) when he finds out it makes her believe that her feed malfunction is even worse than it actually is.

Why doesn't Titus want to go with Violet to the mountains?

Titus is starting to feel like being with Violet is a burden and an inconvenience. In a sense, he isn't really mature enough to deal with what she's going through. But then, most people in the story aren't very mature.

Violet admits on page 262 that "they're really close to winning". Whom is she talking about? What does she mean by "winning"?

Despite Violet's attempts to resist the feed, she is finding it increasingly difficult. The "they" referred to is the creators of the feed, and she is admitting that she is beginning to succumb to the feed's influence again. "Winning" implies that Violet will lose some or all of her individuality, as the feed once again subsumes her independence.

Why does Titus respond to Violet's statement in the previous question by telling her to keep "doing"?

Titus is trying to offer encouraging words to Violet, but he doesn't have the precise vocabulary to do so. This does show that Titus is still courageous enough to resist the feed, or at least to support Violet in doing so.

*Why does Violet want to be "normal" like Titus and his friends? What exactly **is** "normal"?*

Students can discuss what it means to be "normal". Is it just a reflection of the culture one lives in, or does normal mean something else? Violet has felt different for much of her life; she was home-schooled and received her feed at a late age, so she is not like many people her own age. Like many teenagers, she is trying to find her identity as she matures, and she believes that becoming more like the people she hears about from the feed and sees around her will make her "normal".

On pages 270-272, why does Titus act the way he does? Why does he break up with Violet?

Titus objects to being used by Violet – he is finally realizing that in some way, she was using him in her quest to live a normal life. Unfortunately, he's not very articulate (no one is, except for Violet and her father, in the story) so he can't really express what he feels to Violet. He breaks up with her because he can't handle her impending death, and he feels their

relationship has turned out to be more than he bargained for. He wasn't interested in a serious relationship, but Violet apparently was. He is also getting tired of Violet's insinuations that he is stupid. Even though Titus isn't very intelligent, he is smart enough to know when he's been called dumb!

At the end of the chapter Summertime, Titus says he felt like he has been running toward cool for a long time. What is meant by this statement?

Titus tries to be as cool as his friends are, but for some reason he isn't quite there. For instance, he rarely gets in mal, although his buddies do. This might be why Violet was attracted to him, because he was a little different. She noted that he was the only one who used metaphor, and he does agree to go along with her plan to resist the feed, at least for a little while.

Who are the eloi, and why does Violet's father mention them?

The eloi were one of the people visited by the time traveler in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. The eloi were descended from the leisure classes, and became weak and childlike creatures, unable to defend themselves against an opposing race, the Morlocks. Violet's father is comparing Titus and his friends to the eloi, and it is intended to be an insult. Although Titus does detect a "snotty" tone in Violet's father's voice, he doesn't really understand the magnitude of the offense, since he doesn't know what the eloi are.

Why does Titus order all of those pants in the second-to-last chapter?

Titus has been resisting the feed, at Violet's urging. By buying so many pairs of pants that he exhausts his credit, he is giving in – surrendering to the feed. This is similar to the way a person on a weight-loss plan might binge on candy when they decide to break their diet; they overcompensate for all the time they were depriving themselves.

What does the feed interlude at the end of the book mean?

The "Final Sales Event" where "everything must go" can be read as the ultimate deterioration of the planet. In the last chapters, we learn that strange events are happening all over the earth; everyone is losing hair and skin, and yet people still keep buying. The final event will be the last big sale before there's no one left on Earth to do any buying. As a cautionary tale, the world of *Feed* can only come to a very bad end.