

LESSON 2

HOW TO TALK ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL

"No one remembered? Not even your dad?"

"Nope, not even *my* dad," I said, as I unwrapped my cafeteria burrito. I poked around in it with my finger. "What the hell is this, anyway?"

"Ew, don't touch it, just eat it," said Janet.

"Seriously, is this even legal?" I asked, as I hung what I assumed was a bean at her face.

She giggled and picked the mystery food piece out of her hair before tossing it back at me. "Hey, you be nice to that burrito. You know, there are starving children in Africa who would kill for a prime Westerborg High burrito like the one you have there."

"Then they're welcome to it." She giggled again and closed up her calculus textbook. Janet was taking AP Calc, AP Bio, and fifth-year Spanish, and could usually be found studying over lunch. She was also the editor-in-chief of the newspaper and captain of the girls' field hockey team, and had never worn braces in her life. She was, in my father's words, "a good influence." Lucky for her I never held that against her. I decided to forego the rest of the burrito and balled up the wrapper.

"You wouldn't be thinking of leaving that on the table now, would you, lee?" That oily, irritating voice could only mean one thing.

"Not a chance, Mr. Limbergh. I was just making my way over to the trash can."

A small, rodent-like face popped out from behind our principal's considerable stomach. "None of your lip, lee!" it screeched.

"Sure thing, Mr. Quimby, sir."

The vice-principal narrowed his beady little eyes at me, and both he and Mr. Limbergh kept their eyes firmly locked on me as I slowly walked to the row of garbage cans.

Limbergh and Quimby don't like me, and that's an understatement. They like to think they run this school like their own private military compound, and they hate-hate-people who talk back. Last year they'd caved to parent pressure to ban *Catcher in the Rye* from the English curriculum, and I raised a stink about it in an editorial for the *Tatler*. I mean, I find Holden Caulfield as annoying as the next guy, but that doesn't mean the book should be *banned*. Man, I can't *wait* to leave all this high school crap behind, I thought as I walked back to the picnic table. I don't hate the *idea* of school. Just the reality of high school.

Limbergh and Quimby gave a nod to Janet—honestly, I think she's the only reason they haven't managed to suspend me yet—and went to go rout out the potheads smoking in the girls' room.

"Well, that was exciting." She finished off her pudding cup and threw it in her lunch bag. "Hey, I know what we could do for your birthday."

"What? Something glamorous, I hope."

"Sure. There's a pep rally tonight."

"Ew!" I screeched. "Not a chance in hell."

"Come *on*, Alex. If we get to June and you've never gone to a pep rally, I don't think they can give you your diploma."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. But only because *Buffy* is a rerun."

"Great. I'll pick you up at six."

Fantastic. Best birthday ever.

WORDS ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL

High school fashion is really **capricious**: one week it's all wallet chains, dog collars, and low riders, and then the next it's Gap khakis and polo shirts.

capricious (*adj*): tending to make sudden, unpredictable changes

The popular crowd has an amazing power to **assimilate** other people: If you start hanging out with them, pretty soon you're dressing, walking, and talking like them.

assimilate (*v*): to integrate into a group so that differences are erased

My journalistic right to free speech was really **constrained** by the principal, who didn't think my editorial was appropriate for a school paper.

constrain (*v*): to limit or restrict something

RELATED WORDS

A close synonym is **circumscribe** (*v*): to limit the power of something or somebody. In math terms, to *circumscribe* a geometric shape means drawing another shape around it so they touch at every corner—think of a circle ("circum-") being drawn (or "scribed") around a square.

In your senior year, English, math, and a foreign language are **compulsory** subjects.

compulsory (*adj*): required by law or authority

State law **compels** me to stay in high school till I turn eighteen, and there's no way I can **coerce** my father into letting me homeschool myself.

compel (*v*): to make something happen by force

coerce (*v*): to force someone to do something (usually implies persuasion)

Most students at my high school only do a **cursory** job on their homework; they don't bother really learning anything.

cursory (*adj*): done quickly or superficially

I'm so bored by the **quotidian** nature of high school! Why does nothing exciting ever happen?

quotidian (*adj*): ordinary, everyday

Someday, I will look back on high school and think fondly of these **halcyon** days. Unfortunately, that day is not today.

halcyon (*adj*): peaceful, free from disturbance

High school girls can be really disingenuous: They'll fawn over you to your face, and then, as soon as your back is turned, they'll dis you.

disingenuous (*adj*): giving a false impression of sincerity

WORDS ABOUT JANET

Janet is completely **indefatigable**; she's president of four clubs, captain of the field hockey team, and manages to pull straight A's-and she never takes naps!

indefatigable (*adj*): never showing signs of tiredness

My father admires Janet's **intrepid** struggle to get into the best college she can.

intrepid (*adj*): brave; persistent in the pursuit of something

Teachers love Janet's **assiduousness** when it comes to her homework.

assiduousness (*n*): care, effort

I've never seen Janet get in trouble for anything- she's completely **irreproachable**.

irreproachable (*adj*): unable to be criticized

Janet is really **judicious** with her compliments, so you know you can always take what she says at face value.

judicious (*adj*): showing wisdom and good sense, especially in the sense of avoiding unnecessary trouble or waste

Here are some synonyms for **judicious**:

sagacious (*adj*): very knowledgeable and intelligent, showing good judgment

astute (*adj*): shrewd, discerning

discriminating (*adj*): able to judge very subtle differences

Janet is positively **munificent** with her time, energy, and support.

munificent (*adj*): very generous

Janet's **magnanimity** knows no bounds: She devotes a lot of her spare time to **altruistic** causes like volunteering and tutoring.

magnanimity (*n*): generosity

altruistic (*adj*): showing concern for others

Janet will someday grow up to be a great president or a major business **magnate**.

magnate (*n*): somebody with a lot of wealth and power

Most teachers hold Janet up as a **paragon** of excellence in the classroom.

paragon (*n*): somebody or something who is the best example of something

Some kids at school like to imply that Janet is an **opportunist**- they just can't understand that she does all this stuff because she genuinely cares, not because she's trying to get something out of it.

opportunist (*n*): somebody who takes advantage of something- particularly someone who does so in a dishonest or unethical way

WORDS ABOUT THE ADMINISTRATORS

Mr. Quimby is such a **martinet**, I bet he'd make a great drill sergeant.

martinet (*n*): someone who imposes strict discipline on others

RELATED WORDS

Sometimes Mr. Quimby goes on these **despotic** rampages and does random things like canceling off-campus lunch privileges for no reason.

despotic (*adj*): behaving like a tyrant

Mr. Limbergh is so **pedantic**; he gets really irritated if the morning announcements start at 8:07 instead of 8:05.

pedantic (*adj*): too concerned with the correct rules and details

Mr. Quimby is so **irascible** around teenagers; it makes me wonder why he got into education in the first place.

irascible (*adj*): easily moved to anger

Mr. Quimby likes to use **insipid** sayings, such as "The early bird gets the worm." But really, who wants a worm in the first place?

insipid (*adj*): dull, unoriginal

Sometimes I think Mr. Limbergh's only job on campus is to **mollify** Mr. Quimby when he gets all ticked off.

mollify (*v*): to soothe

Mr. Limbergh speaks in this really annoying, **querulous** voice that only a Chihuahua could love.

querulous (*adj*): whiny or complaining

Mr. Quimby likes to **relegate** less savory duties- like bathroom patrol- to Mr. Limbergh.

relegate (*v*): to pass responsibility for something onto someone else

Mr. Limbergh is such a **sycophant** - think Burns and Mr. Smithers from *The Simpsons* and you'll get a pretty good picture.

sycophant (*n*): someone who sickeningly flatters a superior

Mr. Limbergh is so **compliant** to everything Mr. Quimby says. I wish he'd have an original opinion, just once!

compliant (*adj*): easily agreeing or conforming

A synonym for **compliant** is **tractable** (*adj*): very easy to control.

Mr. Quimby is really **supercilious** around the students-but I think it probably comes from the fear of being exposed as a huge moron.

supercilious (*adj*): contemptuous and arrogant

Mr. Limbergh would like to see himself as a cool, **stolid** guy, but he gets so flustered at the tiniest problems.

stolid (*adj*): solemn, emotionless

If it hadn't been for Janet coming in at exactly the right time, Mr. Quimby would have never granted me any **clemency**.

clemency (*n*): an act of mercy or leniency

Eventually I was **exonerated** of my supposed infraction, but not until Janet could **corroborate** my story that I had, in fact, passed the editorial by our faculty advisor. Honestly- this administration treats a little freethinking as if it were an act of supreme **heresy**!

exonerate (*v*): to officially declare someone not guilty

infraction (*n*): an instance of breaking the law

corroborate (*v*): to back up someone's story, to show that something is true

heresy (*n*): an opinion that contradicts established theory (originally used in a religious sense to mean an act or statement that went against the established religious beliefs)

Mr. Quimby is such a **misanthrope**, it's no wonder he's still single.

misanthrope (*n*): someone who hates people

Mr. Quimby likes to clear his throat before he launches into his **bombastic**, moralizing speeches.

bombastic (*adj*): long-winded and pretentious, with the intent of impressing people

Mr. Quimby once issued an **injunction** that all students had to start addressing him as Your Grand Excellence.

injunction (*n*): a command from someone in a position of authority

Mr. Limbergh **patronizes** us like we're a bunch of eight-year-olds.

patronize (*v*): to talk down to someone

Our administration is so **parochial**. It couldn't care less what is happening in the Middle East, as long as the campus is clean and we send a bunch of kids *off* to the Ivy League again.

parochial (*adj*): concerned only with local issues, without regard to the wider world

I probably shouldn't be so **contemptuous** of our administrators- it's not their fault they're morons.

contemptuous (*adj*): feeling or expressing a strong dislike or disrespect

Quimby hates nothing in the world as much as he hates **insolent** students.

insolent (*adj*): showing a lack of respect