

The Report

BY LUNCHTIME the next day, Nick had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Seventh period was coming. He was going to have to stand up in front of Mrs. Granger's class. The eyes of everyone in the class would be glued to his face. And Mrs. Granger's eyes would be cranked up to maximum punch power.

He looked over his notes again and again—the first English dictionary, the growth of the English language, William Shakespeare, words from French and German, new words, old words, new inventions, Anglo-Saxon words, Latin and Greek roots, American English—it all became a big jumble in his mind. And his grand plan from the night before? In the harsh fluorescent light of the school day, it seemed impossible.

What is it with the clocks in school? When you're planning to go to the carnival after school, the clocks in every class practically run backward, and the school day lasts for about three weeks. But if you have to go to the barber or go shopping for clothes after school, *zzzzip*—the whole day is over before you can blink. And today? After lunch, periods five and six went by in two ticks.

As the seventh-period bell rang, Mrs. Granger walked into the classroom, took four steps to her desk at the side of the room, flipped open her attendance book, glanced out at the class, and made two little check marks. Then looking up at Nick, she said, "I think we have a little report to begin our class today. Nicholas?"

Fifteen seconds into seventh period, and Nick was onstage. *This lady plays for keeps*, thought Nick. He gulped, grabbed his crumpled note cards and his book bag, and walked to the front of the room. He stood next to the giant dictionary on its little table, and Mrs. Granger walked to the back of the classroom and sat primly on a tall stool next to the bookcases. She was wearing her blue uniform.

Taking a deep breath, Nick began. "Well, the

first thing I learned is that the first English dictionary—”

Mrs. Granger interrupted. “Excuse me, Nicholas, but does your report have a title?”

Nick looked blankly at her. “A title? N-no, I didn’t make a title.”

“Class, please remember to include a title whenever you prepare an oral or written report. Now, please go on, Nicholas,” and she smiled and nodded at him.

Nick began again. Looking right at Mrs. Granger he said, “The Dictionary.” A couple of kids thought that was funny, but Nick played it straight, and just kept talking. “A lot of people think that the first English dictionary was put together in the 1700s by a man named Samuel Johnson. He lived in London, England. He was real smart, and he wrote a lot of books, and he wanted all the other smart people to have a good dictionary to use, so he made one. But there were other dictionaries before his. The thing that was different about Johnson’s dictionary was its size, first of all. He had over forty-three thousand words in it.”

The class made a bunch of noise at this big number—“Ooh,” and “Wow!” and stuff like

that—and Nick lost his concentration. He glanced up at Mrs. Granger, expecting to see those eyes drilling a hole in him. But they weren't. They were almost friendly, in a teacher-y kind of way. She shushed the class and said, "Go on, Nicholas. That's a fine beginning."

Nick almost smiled, but he saw all the kids staring at him, so he gripped his note cards even tighter, and jumped back in.

"The other thing that Samuel Johnson did that was special was to choose the words he thought were most important, and then give lots of examples showing how the words got used by people. For example, he showed how the word *take* could be used in one hundred thirteen different ways. . . ."

Nick's report went on smoothly for twelve minutes. Nick was surprised at how easy it was to stand there and talk about this stuff. At the end of the first five minutes Mrs. Granger had had to stop Nick again to say, "Class, it is not good manners to yawn out loud or to put your heads down on your desks when someone is giving an oral report." No one in the class cared one little bit about the report. Except Mrs. Granger.

Every time Nick glanced up, she was smiling.

And her eyes were not the least bit icy or sharp. She was eating this stuff up, listening, and nodding, and every once in a while she would say, "Very good point" or "Yes, that's exactly right."

But the next time Nick looked up, he saw Mrs. Granger sneaking a look at her watch. Eighteen minutes gone. Maybe his idea was going to work after all. Time for phase two.

Reaching into his book bag, Nick pulled out the red dictionary he had brought from home, the one most of the kids had—the one Mrs. Granger said they should use. Nick said, "This is the dictionary that I use at home for my vocabulary work, and . . . and I opened it up last night to the very front, and right there I found out a lot about how the dictionary was made . . . right in this book. So I thought some of the ideas would be good as part of my report. It says here . . ."

"Nicholas?" Nick looked up. Mrs. Granger got off her tall stool, and its wooden legs made a screech on the linoleum. Heads snapped to attention, and the class was alert again. Mrs. Granger smiled, raised her eyebrows and pointed at her watch. "Nicholas, I think the class should read that at home themselves. Now . . ."

John's hand was up in the air, and at Mrs. Granger's nod he said, "But I don't have that dictionary at home, Mrs. Granger. I have the blue one." And several other kids immediately said, "Me, too."

Mrs. Granger tried not to show that she was annoyed. "Very well, Nick, but it shouldn't take too long. We have other things to do today."

Nick kept his eyes open wide and nodded, adjusted his glasses on his nose, and began to read.

Without question this modern American dictionary is one of the most surprisingly complex and profound documents ever to be created, for it embodies unparalleled etymological detail, reflecting not only superb lexicographic scholarship, but also the dreams and speech and imaginative talents of millions of people over thousands of years—for every person who has ever spoken or written in English has had a hand in its making. . . .

It was a long article, and the kids were bored to death. But no one looked bored at all. Every kid

in the room knew now that the period was more than half over, and that Nick's report wasn't just a report. It was one of the greatest time-wasters he had ever invented.

Mrs. Granger knew it, too. She had edged around from the back of the room to the side near the windows. Nick glanced up at her now and then as he read, and each time, Mrs. Granger's eyes clicked up to a new power level. After eight minutes of Nick's best nonstop reading, her eyes were practically burning holes in the chalkboard behind him. There were only ten minutes left in seventh period.

When he took a breath to start a new paragraph, Mrs. Granger cut him off. "That's a fine place to stop, Nicholas. Class, let's all give him a round of applause for his report." The applause didn't last long.

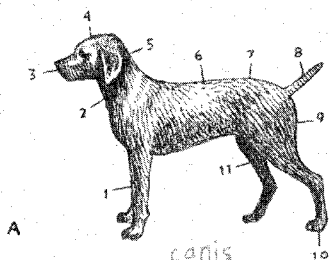
As Nick took his book bag and notes and sat down, Mrs. Granger's eyes went back to almost normal, and she actually smiled at him. "Although your report was a little long—" she paused to let that sink in—"it was quite a good one. And isn't it fascinating that English has more different words than any other language used anywhere in the world?" She pointed at

her large dictionary. "That one book contains the definitions of more than four-hundred fifty thousand words. Now, wasn't I right, Nicholas? All this will mean so much more since you learned about it on your own."

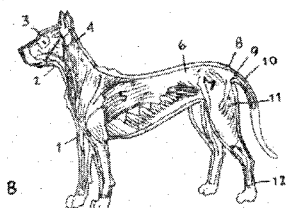
Mrs. Granger was beaming at him. Nick sank lower in his chair. This was worse than writing the report, worse than standing up to give it. He was being treated like—like the teacher's pet. And he had the feeling she was doing it on purpose. His reputation was in great danger. So he launched another question.

He raised his hand, and he didn't even wait for Mrs. Granger to call on him. "Yeah, but, you know, I still don't really get the idea of why words all mean different things. Like, who says that d-o-g means the thing that goes 'woof' and wags its tail? Who says so?"

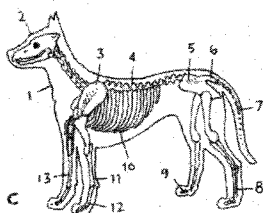
And Mrs. Granger took the bait. "Who says *dog* means dog? You do, Nicholas. You and me and everyone in this class and this school and this town and this state and this country. We all agree. If we lived in France, we would all agree that the right word for that hairy four-legged creature was a different word—*chien*—it sounds like 'shee-en,' but it means what d-o-g means to



canis



chien



hund



狗



canis



собака



копек



犬



犬



perro



σκυλος



dog



كلب

Who says dog means dog?

you and me. And in Germany they say *hund*, and so on, all around the globe. But if all of us in this room decided to call that creature something else, and if everyone else did, too, then that's what it would be called, and one day it would be written in the dictionary that way. *We* decide what goes in that book." And she pointed at the giant dictionary. And she looked right at Nick. And she smiled again.

Then Mrs. Granger went on, "But of course, that dictionary was worked on by hundreds of very smart people for many years, so as far as we are concerned, that dictionary is the law. Laws can change, of course, but only if they need to. There may be new words that need to be made, but the ones in that book have been put there for good reasons."

Mrs. Granger took a look at the clock, eight minutes left. "Now then, for today you were to have done the exercises beginning on page twelve in your *Words Alive* book. Please get out your papers. Sarah, will you read the first sentence, identify the mistake, and then tell us how you corrected it?"

Mrs. Granger jammed the whole day's work into the last eight minutes, a blur of

verbs and nouns and prepositions, and yes, there was another homework assignment.

And Nick didn't try to sidetrack Mrs. G. again. He had slowed her down a little, but had he stopped her? No way.

She was unstoppable . . . at least for today.

The Big Idea

THREE THINGS HAPPENED later that same afternoon.

Nick and Janet Fisk had missed the bus because of a school newspaper meeting, so they walked home together. They were seeing who could walk along the curb without falling. It took a lot of concentration, and when Janet stepped off into the street, Nick said, "That's three points for me."

But Janet said, "I didn't fall. I saw something. . . . Look." She bent down and picked up a gold ballpoint pen, the fancy kind.

That was the first thing—Janet finding the pen.

They got back on the curb, and Nick followed Janet, putting one foot carefully in front of the other on the narrow concrete curb.

And while he stepped along, he thought back over the school day, especially about his report. And what Mrs. Granger had said about words at the end of the period finally sank in.

That was the second thing—understanding what Mrs. Granger had said.

She had said, “Who says *dog* means dog? You do, Nicholas.”

“You do, Nicholas,” he repeated to himself.

I do? Nick thought, still putting one foot in front of the other, following Janet. *What does that mean?* And then Nick remembered something.

When he was about two years old, his mom had bought him one of those unbreakable cassette players and a bunch of sing-along tapes. He had loved them, and he played them over and over and over and over. He would carry the tape and the player to his mother or his big brother or his father and bang them together and say, “Gwagala, gwagala, gwagala,” until someone put the cassette in the machine and turned it on.

And for three years, whenever he said “gwagala,” his family knew that he wanted to hear those pretty sounds made with voices and instruments. Then when Nick went to preschool, he

learned that if he wanted his teacher and the other kids to understand him, he had to use the word *music*. But *gwagala* meant that nice sound to Nick, because Nick said so. Who says *gwagala* means music? "You do, Nicholas."

"No fair!" yelled Janet. They were at the corner of their own street, and Nick had bumped into her, completely absorbed in his thoughts. Janet stumbled off the curb, and the gold pen in her hand clattered onto the street.

"Sorry . . . I didn't mean to, honest," said Nick. "I just wasn't watching. . . . Here . . ." Nick stooped over and picked up the pen and held it out to her. "Here's your . . ."

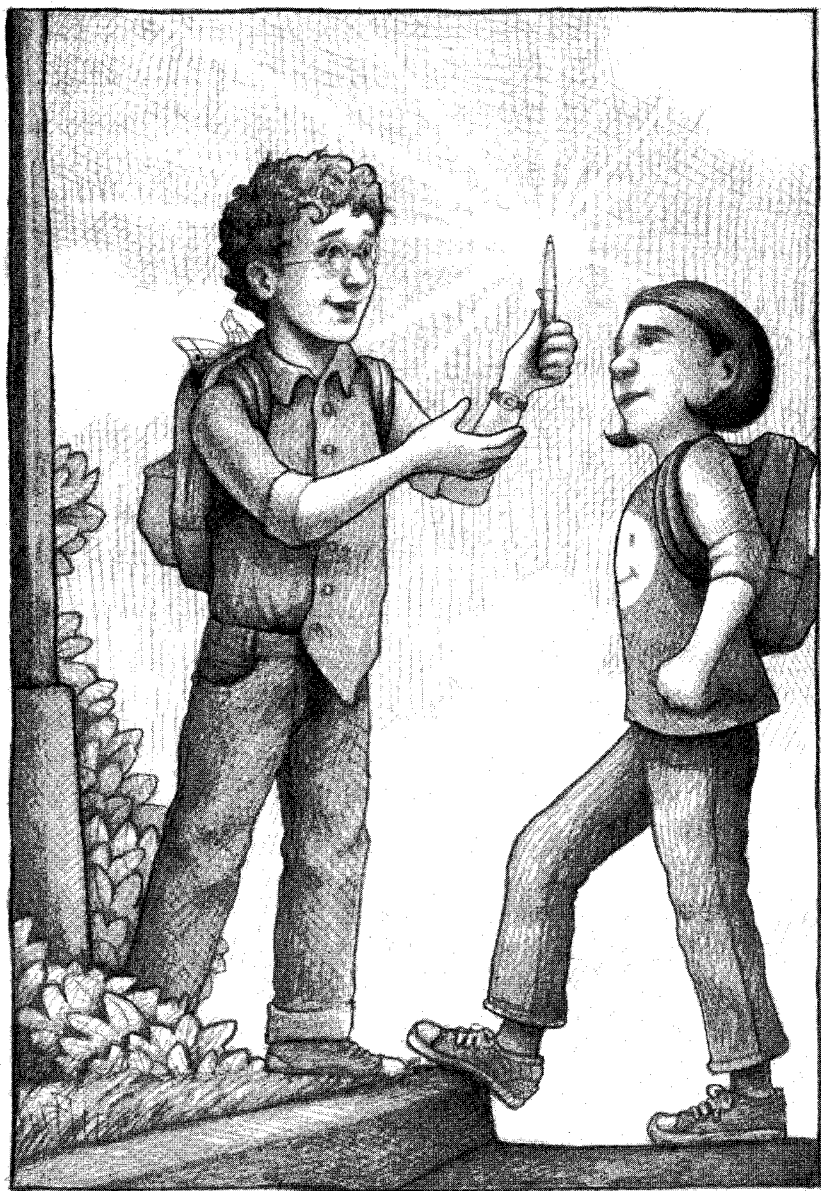
And that's when the third thing happened.

Nick didn't say "pen." Instead, he said, "Here's your . . . frindle."

"Frindle?" Janet took her pen and looked at him like he was nuts. She wrinkled her nose and said, "What's a *frindle*?"

Nick grinned and said, "You'll find out. See ya later."

It was there at the corner of Spring Street and South Grand Avenue, one block from home on a September afternoon. That's when Nick got the big idea.



The big idea

And by the time he had run down the street and up the steps and through the door and upstairs to his room, it wasn't just a big idea. It was a plan, a whole plan, just begging for Nick to put it into action. And "action" was Nick's middle name.

The next day after school the plan began. Nick walked into the Penny Pantry store and asked the lady behind the counter for a frindle.

She squinted at him. "A what?"

"A frindle, please. A black one," and Nick smiled at her.

She leaned over closer and aimed one ear at him. "You want *what*?"

"A frindle," and this time Nick pointed at the ballpoint pens behind her on the shelf. "A black one, please."

The lady handed Nick the pen. He handed her the 49¢, said "thank you," and left the store.

Six days later Janet stood at the counter of the Penny Pantry. Same store, same lady. John had come in the day before, and Pete the day before that, and Chris the day before that, and Dave the day before that. Janet was the fifth kid that Nick had sent there to ask that woman for a frindle.

And when she asked, the lady reached right for the pens and said, "Blue or black?"

Nick was standing one aisle away at the candy racks, and he was grinning.

Frindle was a real word. It meant *pen*. Who says frindle means pen? "You do, Nicholas."

Half an hour later, a group of serious fifth graders had a meeting in Nick's play room. It was John, Pete, Dave, Chris, and Janet. Add Nick, and that's six kids—six secret agents.

They held up their right hands and read the oath Nick had written out:

From this day on and forever, I will never use the word PEN again. Instead, I will use the word FRINDLE, and I will do everything possible so others will, too.

And all six of them signed the oath—with Nick's frindle.

The plan would work.

Thanks, Mrs. Granger.