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# Introduction

This guide is divided into eight units of study, and includes the following components:

## Pre-reading Discussion

This is a detailed section on the key elements that readers will encounter in the reading assignment. The Pre-reading Discussion centers on the literary elements of *Death Be Not Proud* and gives suggestions for provoking interest in the chapters ahead. The section ends with ideas for initiating class discussions about the important concepts in the book.

## Study Guide and Vocabulary List

Each unit contains a study guide and vocabulary list, along with a corresponding reading assignment. Study guide pages are designed to be duplicated and distributed when the reading assignment is given. Students should answer the questions and study the vocabulary words. Each study guide contains a “Writing Forum” section, in which students are asked to write a brief explication of some textual element. You may want to choose one or all of the questions listed; students may keep the Writing Forum questions in a continuing notebook. The following day’s class session could begin with a review of the written work before proceeding to a discussion of the chapters.

## Discussion Concepts

This section details the important concepts that students have encountered in their reading of *Death Be Not Proud* and may be used to initiate class discussions. Discussions should involve events in the story and their relevance to the characters, important themes, and comparing and contrasting actions and statements. Students should be able to find quotes to support their opinions when necessary. Teachers may want to ask students to practice note-taking periodically during this discussion.

## Tests

Tests of comprehension and vocabulary are included in the *Death Be Not Proud* guide. Varied formats challenge students to think intently and creatively about the material.

## Writing Projects

The writing projects at the end of the guide may be used as students progress through *Death Be Not Proud*, or after the class has finished Unit 8.

# Background

## Type of Literature

*Death Be Not Proud* is a memoir, or biography, of a young man's struggle against a brain tumor. Despite its somber subject matter, the book conveys a joyous message about hope and the tenacity of life.

## Setting and Atmosphere

The setting of the story, or the time and place in which the events of the story occur, is New York City, the suburbs of Connecticut, and Deerfield, Massachusetts during the 1940s. The era in which this book was written plays an important role in the events of the story, since, at that time, medical technology for the treatment of brain tumors was in its infancy.

The atmosphere of *Death Be Not Proud* is, in one sense, very serious; but the joy with which Johnny lives his life infuses the text with hope.

## Character Development

The characters in *Death Be Not Proud* are developed through their words, actions, and feelings. The central character in *Death Be Not Proud* is seventeen-year-old Johnny Gunther. The story details Johnny's struggle against the brain tumor that killed him.

Johnny's character is revealed in the book by stories his father tells about him. Jokes, anecdotes, schoolwork, letters, and entries from Johnny's diary add to the richness of John Gunther's memories of his son.

The author of *Death Be Not Proud* plays a large part in the book, both in his role as the dying boy's father and as narrator and analyst of the events leading up to Johnny's death. Frances, Johnny's mother, functioned as Johnny's comforter and confidant on the issue of death. Because Johnny shared the last months of his life so closely with his parents, and because he showed different sides of himself to each parent, the views of both parents are included to help the reader see Johnny as clearly as possible.

## Plot

The plot consists of the series of events that introduce, develop, and resolve the major conflict in the story. Conflict exists in every narrative, and may appear in various forms. Conflict may exist between one person and another, between one person and a group, or between one person and nature or the environment. Several major conflicts may exist within one story; these are subplots. Conflicts are resolved, though not necessarily happily, by the end of the text.

The plot of *Death Be Not Proud* centers on Johnny's illness and the events leading up to his death. On the surface, the major conflict in the book is between Johnny and the tumor, but there is also an underlying conflict between Johnny and time. Johnny struggles to fill his remaining time with life experiences, and with, as he says in his "Unbeliever's Prayer," activities that "fight the good fight."

Another conflict in *Death Be Not Proud* lies in the medical profession itself. There were many conflicting views at this time on how to treat brain tumors. Doctors and scientists fought Johnny's tumor as well as they could, but medical knowledge was not advanced enough in the 1940s for Johnny to have been saved.

## **Point of View**

*Death Be Not Proud* is told from the first person point of view. John Gunther tells the story of his son's struggle from the position of a bereaved father.

## **Theme**

The theme of a book may be either directly stated or implicit. In disseminating a text, the theme, or central concept of the story, becomes recognizable as a universally known idea.

*Death Be Not Proud* concerns itself with many important issues, including the quality of life, fear, acceptance, death, love, and courage. John Gunther's testament to his son's valiant struggle against a brain tumor paints a picture of a boy who takes an unusual amount of joy in living. Though Johnny lived only seventeen years, his life was extremely full. He enjoyed learning and was interested in many things besides schoolwork. His great courage in continuing to pursue his interests despite the toll the tumor took on his mind and body reveals his ability to accept the fact that death is part of life.