About the Story

Levels
Lexile Range: 600L-700L
Guided Reading Level: S
DRA Level: 40

Learning Objectives
Students will examine how an author creates relatable characters. They will apply their learning to their own craft of writing.

Content-Area Connections
Social-emotional learning: empathy, perspective-taking

Key Skills
Author’s craft, figurative language, interpreting text, plot, character, problem and solution, inference, cause and effect, conclusion, narrative writing

Standards Correlations
This article and lesson support the following Common Core anchor standards: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, W.3, SL.1, L.4, L.5
Check our website for more standards information.

Your Teaching Support Package
Here’s your full suite of materials, all of which you’ll find at storyworks.scholastic.com:

Audio: Our audio version of this story provides support for struggling readers or works as a read-aloud for your whole class.

Activities to print or project:
• Vocabulary
• Critical-Thinking Question
• Core Skills Workout: Author’s Craft, Character, Plot
• Comprehension Quiz*

*Available on two levels
1. Preparing to Read
Set a Purpose for Reading (5 minutes)
- Call on a volunteer to read aloud the Up Close box on page 11. Ask: Have you read any books by Jack Gantos? How would you describe them? (Possible responses: funny, fast-paced, real, touching)
- Show students the character near the top of page 11. New to Storyworks, the Idiomizer helps kids learn idioms. In this story, they’ll find Money doesn’t grow on trees (p. 11); steal the . . . show (p. 12); Put your money where your mouth is (p. 12); The heat was on (p. 12); burst his bubble (p. 13); went downhill fast (p. 14); Don’t count your chickens before they hatch (p. 15); and others.
- Preview the questions in the margins. Point out the blank “Write your own question” bubble on page 14.

Vocabulary (10 minutes, activity sheet online)
- Distribute our vocabulary activity to preview five words. Students will also be able to add other unfamiliar words from the story.
- Vocabulary words include sneering, regulation, smarmy, fertile, and demise.

2. Close Reading
First Read: Get to Know the Text (20 minutes)
- Read the story aloud as a class, or play our audio version as students follow along in their magazines.

Second Read: Unpack the Text (30 minutes)
- Have small groups read the story again, pausing to discuss the close-reading questions in the margins. Answers follow.
- Discuss the critical-thinking question.

Answers to Close-Reading Questions
- Interpreting Text (p. 11) Jack means that if you think creatively, you can come up with a gift that doesn’t cost much money. Although generous often means “giving,” Jack uses the word to mean “plentiful or broad.”
- Plot (p. 12) Jack must live up to what he said and come up with a fabulous present for Pete that costs only one cent.
- Author’s Craft (p. 12) This line helps you picture how strongly Pete blew out the candles. The author describes the candles as if they were people stunned by a strong wind. (You might explain that this is personification.)
- Character (p. 12) Jack likely feels pressured by his bet with Betsy, a bit guilty for spending all his money on baseball cards, yet still confident in himself.
- Problem and Solution (p. 13) Jack has solved the problem of coming up with a good one-cent gift, and he has won his bet with Betsy. But Pete now expects that his penny tree will actually grow, which becomes a new problem.
- Plot (p. 13) Jack thinks his plan is perfect because he is sure that Pete won’t be able to keep up the watering schedule. Jack will then have an excuse for why the tree won’t grow, and he will have gotten away with spending his money on himself.
- Inference (p. 13) Jack’s mom wants to remind him that Pete is still very young. He trusts his family members and believes what they tell him. She doesn’t want Jack to take advantage of this trust.
- Cause and Effect (p. 14) The story makes Jack realize how important the penny tree is to Pete. Jack starts to feel guilty, and perhaps a little selfish, for trying to fool his brother. As a result, he figures out how to make a penny tree appear for his brother.
- Inference (p. 14) Saying that the pennies will
Differentiate and Customize

For Struggling Readers

To help students keep track of the story’s events, put them in pairs and give each pair three blank strips of paper. Ask them to choose three important events and write one on each strip. Collect and project them, grouping duplicates together. As a class, arrange the strips in the order in which the events happened.

For ELL Students

This story is rife with idioms, which might make it challenging for ELL students. But it also presents a great opportunity to learn these phrases! Refer to the idioms listed in the "Preparing to Read" section. With students, find each idiom in the story and discuss its meaning.

For Advanced Readers

Refer students to Writing Radar, in which Jack Gantos shares with young readers his inspiration and provides guidance for crafting their own stories. Offer extra credit for students who write a story using this guide.

For Independent Readers

Like many of Gantos’s stories, “The Penny Tree” is based on a real-life experience. Invite students to read further and explore Gantos’s Jack Henry series, which is loosely autobiographical.

Critical-Thinking Question

- The author uses the phrase “generous imagination” several times in the story. Who has a “generous imagination” at first? Later? What does this change show? (author’s craft) At first, Jack has a “generous imagination” for coming up with a plan for a cheap but good present. Later, Pete’s imagination becomes even more “generous,” meaning he has unwavering belief in the tree. The change shows how Pete’s faith in his big brother’s gift became stronger than Jack’s desire to trick him—and in the end, Jack gave in and let Pete’s imagination win.

3. Skill Building

Featured Skill: Author’s Craft

- In groups, have students go back to the Up Close box and discuss the words, actions, and thoughts that helped them imagine the characters. Then distribute our author’s craft activity for groups to complete.

turn into nickels was a mistake because Jack will then have to fulfill Pete’s expectation for nickels. Jack might have said this because he enjoyed seeing how excited his brother was. Without thinking, Jack then said something to make Pete even happier.

- Character (p. 15) Jack’s placement of more and more money on the penny tree tells you that, despite his efforts to keep his money for himself, he actually cares deeply about his little brother and doesn’t want to hurt his feelings.

- Conclusion (p. 15) Jack’s plan backfired because his aim was to spend no money on a present, but he ended up spending a lot to fill the penny tree with dollars. Answers will vary, but students might say he learned that being selfish doesn’t pay, trying to trick someone could end up hurting them, or that it’s wrong to take advantage of a younger person’s trust.