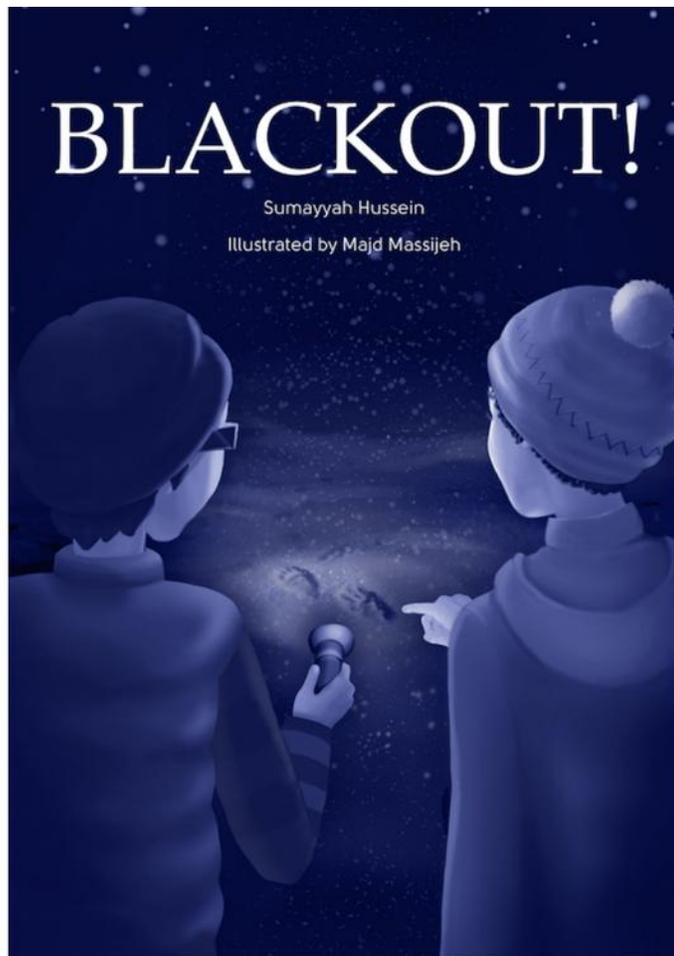


Teaching Resource for *Blackout!* Activities & Comprehension Questions



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Table of Contents

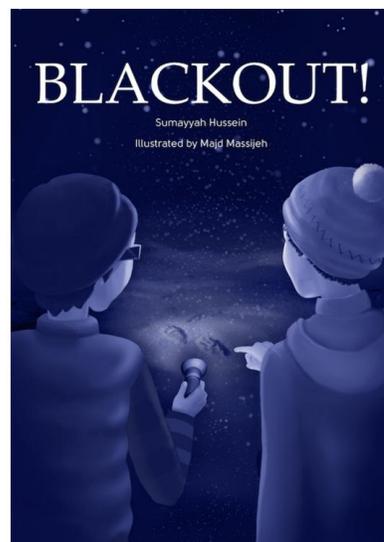
Information about the Book	1
Activities	2
Comprehension Questions	6
Answer Key.....	16

Information about the Book

Description:

Yusuf's cousin Ahmed is a Syrian refugee. After the death of Ahmed's father, Yusuf's parents work hard to bring Ahmed and his mom to Canada. When the paperwork finally goes through and they're on their way to Toronto, Yusuf is excited! He spends hours making sure everything is perfect for Ahmed's arrival and plans to teach him all about life in Canada. But when an ice storm hits during Ahmed's first night and cuts off power for three whole days, Yusuf realizes that he's the one with so much to learn.

Blackout! is an engaging chapter book that allows children to explore some of the lived experiences of refugees. The story fosters a sense of gratitude for everyday blessings that are often taken for granted, and promotes helping people experiencing difficult situations.



All profits from the book will be going to the Syrian Canadian Foundation's mental health and wellness initiative for Syrian newcomers.

Ages 8+ (recommended for students in grades 3 to 8). 70 pages. 5×7" paperback.



About the author:

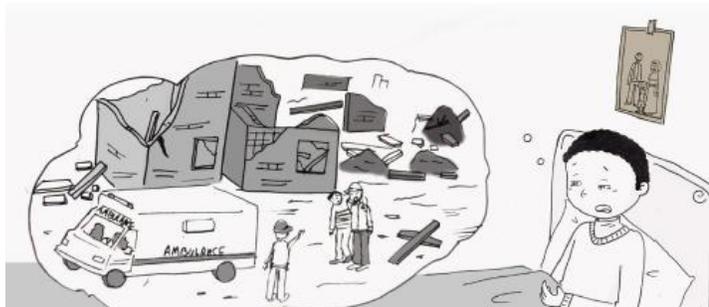
Sumayyah Hussein is a Toronto-born writer, teacher, and mother of two girls. She is also the author of *One Hundred Ice Creams* (Ruqaya's Bookshelf, 2016) and *Littering Stinks!* (Compass Books, 2017).

To watch an interview with the author about *Blackout!*, visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nQWICp6OOY&t=340s>



About the illustrator:

Majd Massijeh is a Syrian artist, designer, and animator. During the illustration and design of *Blackout!*, she lived in Syria under circumstances similar to those described in the story.



Activities

Below are suggested activities to use while studying *Blackout!* with your students. Depending on what you find most suitable for your students, choose some or do them all!

Before Reading

Discussion:

Start a class discussion about human beings' basic needs and rights. Then, compare and contrast your students' answers to the reality being lived by many refugees in the world whose basic needs are not being met. Ask students what they know about refugees. Can students name places in the world where many refugees come from? Discuss why there may be many refugees from certain countries.

(Note: Page 70 of *Blackout!* provides a definition and some statistics about refugees.)

Research:

To build some background knowledge in students before reading the story, ask students to do some online research. You may ask students to find the answers to specific questions like:

- ◆ What are the biggest cities in Syria?
- ◆ What is the weather like in Syria? What are Syrian winters like?
- ◆ What are the most famous foods in Syria?
- ◆ What are the most famous places to visit in Syria?
- ◆ When did the conflict in Syria begin?
- ◆ How many refugees are there in the world today?
- ◆ What is a refugee camp, and what does it look like?
- ◆ How many Syrian refugees are there around the world?
- ◆ How many Syrian refugees are there in Canada?

Then ask students to present their findings to the class. (Note: Providing a map of Syria could provide much-needed context and hone students' map-reading skills.)

During Reading

Read-Aloud:

Reading the book aloud in parts (for example, one chapter per day) will provide both the opportunity to model good reading and the opportunity to discuss students' questions and reflections throughout the story.

Comprehension Questions:

Depending on the needs of your students, you may use the chapter-by-chapter comprehension questions included in this resource as in-class work or homework, as individual work or group work, and as assignments to be completed after independent reading or after the class read-aloud and discussion.

Journal Writing:

Ask students to write a few sentences in their journals after reading each chapter. Possible prompts:

- My favourite part of the chapter was...
- This chapter made me wonder about...
- One thing I learned from this chapter is...

After Reading

Letter-writing:

Ask students to write from the point of view of one of the characters. Some examples:

- ◆ After the power returns, Yusuf writes a letter to his best friend Salman. He wants to tell him about all that's happened in the past three days!

(If students need further prompting, remind them of the important events that took place: his cousin's arrival, the blackout, his bad mood, helping Mr. Caldwell, and the idea that he and Ahmed thought of together.)

- ◆ Ahmed often writes letters to his father in his journal. He knows he can't send them to him, but he likes writing down his feelings and imagining that his father will read them. Ahmed wants to write about what it has been like to move to Canada.

(If students need further prompting, provide these questions: Does Ahmed like living with Yusuf? How did he feel about the blackout? How did he feel about helping Mr. Caldwell? How did he feel about the idea he and Yusuf had?)

- ◆ Mr. Caldwell writes to an old friend of his. He tells him about how he ended up in the hospital and about the neighbours who saved his life!
- ◆ Yusuf's father writes a letter to another sister of his who lives in Egypt. He tells her how he feels to have their sister Amal living with him, about the growing friendship between Yusuf and Ahmed, and about the adventures the whole family had during the blackout.

Themed Activities:

Gratitude, helpfulness, and being a good neighbour are key themes in *Blackout!* Transform these themes into fun activities!

- ◆ **Gratitude Tree Display:** Make a “gratitude tree” with your students. Prepare leaf shapes and ask each student to write one thing he or she is grateful for. Then attach these leaves to a cut-out of a tree trunk with branches to make a beautiful display.

- ◆ **Gratitude Journal:** For a one-week period, ask students to write about one thing they are grateful for each day. Ask them to, in a few sentences, reflect on why that thing is important to them. (Every entry should be about a different thing they are grateful for.) At the end of the week, have students share what they wrote about in small groups and then with the whole class. (Note: This activity can be used as part of the preparation for the gratitude tree display.)

- ◆ **Helping Tree Display:** Similar to the idea of the gratitude tree, you can also make a “helping tree” with your students. Prepare leaf shapes and ask each student to write about one way to be helpful to others. Then attach these leaves to a cut-out of a tree trunk with branches to make a beautiful display. (Can also be done as “Helping Stars” with cut-outs of star shapes on a dark, night-sky background.)

- ◆ **Good Neighbours:** Invite the neighbouring class for hot chocolate or cookies! Just as Yusuf and Ahmed did in the story, students can create beautiful invitations for the event, plan out the seating arrangements, make decorations, and decide who will bring what. A fun (and delicious) way to encourage sharing and being a good neighbour!

Visual story summary:

As part of the comprehension questions in this resource, students are asked to draw a picture of the most important image from each chapter. Ask students to re-draw (and colour) these pictures on a Bristol board, and write a sentence explaining each picture. Each student will have thus made a visual summary of the book. Students can then be paired up with classmates or younger students to share their story summary. This is a great opportunity for students to practice their storytelling skills, mentor younger children, and help foster the love of reading in younger students.

Cross-Curricular Connections:

Due to the nature of the story in *Blackout!* – which relates to refugees fleeing regions of conflict – there is an opportunity to integrate the curricula of language arts and social studies. For example, students can practice their map-reading skills by studying a map of Syria.

Chapter 1: Welcome

1. Name one thing you figured out about Yusuf's personality from the first chapter. Explain your answer.

2. Yusuf meets two neighbours outside his house. When they ask how he's doing, what does he say?

3. What does the weather report on the radio forecast?

4. What happened to Ahmed's father?

5. How has Yusuf's family been preparing for Ahmed's arrival? Mention two things.

6. Why is Yusuf suddenly nervous about meeting Ahmed?

7. Yusuf notices that his aunt looks much older than his father, even though she is younger. What could the reason for this be?

8. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 2: A New Home

1. What does Ahmed say that surprises Yusuf?

2. Why is Yusuf convinced that Ahmed can read his mind?

3. What does Ahmed have in his bag? Name the four items.

4. Why has Ahmed kept a pair of shorts that are too small for him?

5. Why doesn't Ahmed use some hot water to wash his hands for lunch?

6. What does Yusuf think about as he helps his mother set the table for lunch?

7. What activities do the cousins do together on the first day? Name three.

8. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 3: Lights Out!

1. What wakes Yusuf in the middle of the night?

2. What dream has Ahmed been having lately?

3. What calms Ahmed so he can go back to sleep?

4. What happens in Yusuf's dream?

5. What wakes Yusuf the second time?

6. Why does the bedside alarm clock go dark?

7. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 4: Ice Storm

1. Why does Yusuf put on so many layers?

2. Why does Yusuf have a peanut butter and jam sandwich for breakfast?

3. What caused the power outage?

4. What four pieces of advice does Yusuf hear on the radio?

5. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 5: Lost at Sea

1. The boys spent all their daylight hours outside. Name three activities they did.

2. How does Yusuf's mood change when the sun sets?

3. What three things did Aunt Amal used to do to get through winter nights without electricity?

4. What way of thinking does Aunt Amal say has helped her?

5. What is it that makes the cold room feel warm?

6. Why does Yusuf grit his teeth as he washes up for prayer?

7. Why does the family decide to sleep in the living room?

8. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 6: Unwelcome Adventure

1. How would you describe Yusuf's mood on the second day of the power outage?

2. Why do Yusuf's parents decide to put the bags of frozen meat in the backyard?

3. Why does Yusuf say he wants his life to go back to normal?

4. Why does Ahmed say he wishes his life could go back to normal too?

5. What did Ahmed's father tell him that helped him see things differently?

6. How did Ahmed and his mother help the old lady at the refugee camp?

7. What is on Yusuf's mind at the end of the chapter?

8. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 7: Mr. Caldwell

1. Why does Yusuf think it's strange when he feels a wave of warm air as he steps into Mr. Caldwell's house?

2. Where is the warmth coming from?

3. Why does Yusuf decide that the situation is an emergency?

4. How did Yusuf's father react when he found out about the dangerous situation? What two important things did he do?

5. Based on Mr. Caldwell's symptoms, what are three signs a person might be suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning?

6. How does Yusuf feel at the end of the chapter? How is it different from how he felt in the previous chapter?

7. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 8: Night Visitor

1. Who is the night visitor?

2. What happened to the bags of meat in the cooler?

3. What does Dad decide to do as a result?

4. What is Yusuf learning from washing up with cold water?

5. What advice does the imam in the mosque give?

6. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 9: The Idea

1. What is the idea that Yusuf and Ahmed have come up with?

2. What task is Yusuf in charge of, and how does Ahmed help him?

3. After the barbecue is over, Dad says, “Well, we don’t have any meat left, but we’ve gained something a lot more valuable.” What did they gain?

4. According to Aunt Amal, what good deed did the boys do?

5. What good news does Dad share with the family in the evening? Why is Dad so happy?

6. At the end of the chapter, “Yusuf knew he had learned something valuable that day.” What do you think he has learned?

7. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Chapter 10: Gratitude

1. How does Yusuf feel when he discovers that the power has been restored?

2. Why does Yusuf remember the look on Ahmed's face when he first came to his house and looked up at the lights?

3. Why does Yusuf start to say, "Can't complain," but then stop himself?

4. Draw a picture showing what you think is the most important part of the chapter.



Answer Key

Chapter 1

1. Possible responses: I know Yusuf likes things to be perfect because he checks the room over and over before leaving for the airport. I know Yusuf is responsible and helpful because he cleared the snow off the driveway without being told.
2. When Mr. Caldwell and Mrs. Meriwether ask how Yusuf is doing, he says, “Can’t complain.”
3. The weather report forecasts freezing rain.
4. Ahmed’s father drowned during the last part of their trip. Ahmed’s family had been searching for a safe place to live after their house was destroyed in Syria.
5. Possible responses: Dad fixed up Yusuf’s old room for his sister, Aunt Amal. He renovated the basement so it could be the boys’ room. Mom returned to work to help with the costs. They bought furniture, clothes, and toys. Dad sold their small car and bought a van.
6. He’s worried that Ahmed won’t remember him, or that they won’t get along like they used to.
7. Yusuf’s aunt probably looks older because she has experienced a lot of difficult things, like the destruction of their house and the death of her husband.

Chapter 2

1. Ahmed asks if the electricity ever goes out.
2. Ahmed seems to know that Yusuf wants to see what’s in his bag.
3. A family portrait, a few items of clothing, a thin blanket, and a pair of shorts.
4. Ahmed kept the shorts to remind him of the day he built the sand city with Yusuf, or to remind him of Yusuf.
5. Ahmed is used to only having cold water, so it didn’t occur to him to check for hot water.
6. Yusuf thinks about how he has electricity and water all the time, and only notices them when they’re gone.
7. Possible responses: Yusuf and Ahmed build a Lego tower, read *National Geographic* magazines, discuss the places that Ahmed has travelled to, and pray together at the mosque.

Chapter 3

1. Yusuf wakes up from the sound of Ahmed crying because he had a bad dream.
2. He dreams that his house falls down on him while he’s sleeping and he can’t breathe.
3. Ahmed goes back to sleep after Yusuf calms him by telling him he is safe now.
4. Yusuf dreams that he goes to buy bread from a bakery in Homs, Syria, and just as he approaches the door, he hears an explosion.
5. This time Yusuf wakes up from the sound of thunder.
6. The power went out.

Chapter 4

1. The house is very cold because the power is out and the heater is not working.
2. Yusuf has a peanut butter and jam sandwich because the stove doesn't work when the electricity is out.
3. The ice storm caused electrical wires to be covered with ice. When the wires snapped, that caused the power to go out.
4. The radio host says to unplug appliances, to leave faucets on slightly, not to use kerosene heaters indoors, and to check on neighbours.

Chapter 5

1. Possible responses: They admired everything that was encased in ice. They made tracks in the snow. They made a snowman. They threw snowballs.
2. He is very frustrated because there's nothing to do indoors without power.
3. She says they would huddle together to keep warm, sleep early, and tell stories.
4. She says thinking of what she has instead of what's missing has helped her.
5. Ahmed and his mother have been talking about Ahmed's father and the happy memories they shared. Their laughter makes the cold room feel warm.
6. The water is so cold it feels like it's seeping into his bones.
7. They decide to sleep in the same room to stay warmer. Also, the living room gets a lot of sunlight during the day, and has doors that can be closed to trap the heat inside.

Chapter 6

1. He's feeling sad, irritated, frustrated, and angry.
2. The freezer is not working, and they don't want the meat to spoil. Also, it's colder outside.
3. Yusuf is tired of sitting around feeling cold and miserable instead of doing all the fun things he had planned to do with Ahmed.
4. The war in Syria changed everything. Instead of worrying only about his grades and improving his soccer skills, Ahmed started worrying about the safety of his family and whether they would have enough food.
5. He told Ahmed that God would only hold him responsible for the things he could control.
6. They helped the old lady in the refugee camp by visiting her and listening to her stories.
7. Yusuf is thinking about the old man who lives all alone next door.

Chapter 7

1. The wave of warm air is strange because the electric heater wouldn't work during a power outage.
2. The warmth is coming from a kerosene heater.
3. Using kerosene heaters indoors can cause carbon monoxide poisoning.
4. He dialled 911 and he took Mr. Caldwell out into the fresh air.
5. Dizziness, shortness of breath, and nausea.
6. Yusuf feels fulfilled because he helped someone in need. This is very different from the previous chapter when he felt angry and frustrated.

Chapter 8

1. Two raccoons!
2. The raccoons opened the cooler and took one bag and ran away.
3. As a result, Dad decides to bring the cooler inside.
4. He is learning how to wash up as quickly as possible, and using as little water as possible.
5. He advises everyone to look out for each other and think of ways to do something positive.

Chapter 9

1. Their idea is to cook all the meat on the gas-powered grill and have a barbecue for their neighbours.
2. Yusuf is in charge of writing the invitations, and Ahmed helps him by drawing pictures inside the cards.
3. Possible responses: They got to know their neighbours. They did something good for their neighbours.
4. Bringing happiness to people when they need it.
5. Five other families followed their example and also had neighbourhood barbecues. Dad is very happy about this because Yusuf and Ahmed's good deed will be multiplied.
6. Possible responses: It's important to break out of feeling miserable and think about others. There's always something positive to do and something to be grateful for.

Chapter 10

1. He feels very happy and grateful.
2. Yusuf realizes that Ahmed was right to be amazed, and that electricity is one of many blessings he has taken for granted.
3. He feels very grateful, and he wants his responses to show his gratitude. ("Can't complain" is not a very grateful thing to say.)