

# WRITING LESSON

# DIGITAL EMPATHY



The YES! online article **How the Real Teens Behind ‘The Fault in Our Stars’ Are Bringing Empathy to the Internet** by **Christopher Zumski Finke** is a story about the now-millions strong Nerdfighter movement and its dedication to “increase awesome and decrease world suck.” Finke shares how the first-ever, safe, inclusive Internet community mobilizes acts of kindness and empathy toward others.

Students will use Christopher Zumski Finke’s article to write about where they find inspiration for making this world a better (less suckier) place.

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# How the Real Teens Behind “The Fault in Our Stars” Are Bringing Empathy to the Internet

They call themselves “nerdfighters”—and they’re unlike any movement you’ve seen before.



An image from *The Fault in Our Stars*. Photo courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox.

**By Christopher Zumski Finke**

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“I’M PROUD TO BE A NERDFIGHTER IN PART BECAUSE I WISH SO MUCH I COULD HAVE BEEN ONE IN SEVENTH GRADE.”

Those are the words of John Green, author of the number-one New York Times bestselling novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, source of the film out this weekend. John is one of the founders of the millions-strong online movement called Nerdfighters, and the author’s success (he once held four spots on the NY Times best seller list at the same

time) and anticipation for the film belie not just Green’s popularity among teens, but also the desire for an earnest, emotionally gratifying Internet experience of the kind offered by the Nerdfighters.

So, what’s a “Nerdfighter” and why does Green wish he could have been one? Nerdfighters are a group of mostly teenagers who spend a lot of time on the Internet, especially Youtube, making videos and participating in their brand of social change, which includes everything from

spreading anti-bullying messages to raising money for charities. They inhabit a digital neighborhood they refer to as “Nerdfighteria,” and communicate in a language that may leave the uninitiated scratching their heads.

According to the Nerdfighters, there exists a certain amount of “world suck” that can be combated with “awesome.” To this

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end, Nerdfighters created the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, which every year holds The Project 4 Awesome, a fundraising competition to raise money for organizations decreasing suck around the world.

This is the language of the Nerdfighters, and it is used wholly without irony. Nerdfighters are “made of awesome” and work together to “fight against world suck.” The motto is DFTBA: Don’t Forget To Be Awesome. Part of being in Nerdfighteria means understanding the language, the hand-signals, and the countless inside-references.

What does all this—suck and awesome and DFTBA—mean? Nerdfighters rarely spell things out with much clarity; “We just want to make cool stuff with people we like,” John once said of the Nerdfighters. But one can get a sense of the community by looking at their work. Last year’s Project 4 Awesome, a Youtube-based fundraiser held in December, raised more than \$850,000 in two days for Doctors Without Borders, Books for Africa, Water.org, Women for Women International, and many others organizations.

But the Nerdfighters are doing more than fundraising, sharing Youtube videos, and passing along in-jokes. They are bringing kindness and empathy to the native environment of its teenage members—the Internet—a place that too often lacks both.

The Internet can be a rough place for anyone. But for kids who’ve lived their entire lives in the years since the invention of the Internet, whose identities are intertwined with their online life—author Devorah Heitner calls them “digital natives”—the potential dangers of the Internet are compounded. It’s easy to get lost there, where “30 kids can be one kid and no one knows it,” says Heitner. Stories of Internet bullying and harassment and isolation are common, and so too are the terrible consequences that result, including acting out in violence and suicide.

According to a PEW Study, 90 percent of teens have observed, and ignored, cruel behavior online. The cruelty is increased for users with a female-sounding name, who are 25 times more likely to receive malicious messages after putting content online.

These kinds of online behaviors have left a lot of kids searching for compassion and understanding, looking for friends who will accept them and tell them they are loved. But the Internet is not only a source of discrimination, bullying, and anonymous harassment. It also the place where a teenage girl with cancer can live her last months sharing Youtube videos with thousands of interested and responsive viewers; who could inspire a novelist and leave a legacy of support for the families of children with terminal cancer.

This is what it means to be made of awesome in Nerdfighteria. To be a part of something that gives to others, while providing that sense of intimacy and inclusion that comes with creating and sharing a language and cultural identity with other people.

### **A brief history of Nerdfighteria**

Nerdfighteria is the creation of John Green and his brother, the environmental blogger and musician Hank Green. In 2007, the Greens dubbed themselves “the Vlogbrothers” and started a Youtube video blogging channel called Brotherhood 2.0. The original Brother 2.0 videos are short—four minutes or less—and consist of one brother looking into the camera speaking directly to the other. Hank, a fast-talking, hand-waving science guy, made a strong contrast to



John's quieter, more pensive presence.

The brothers cover all kinds of subjects, with an emphasis on the personal and the geeky. John would discuss the progress of his latest novel just as often as he would go on a rant about the economic waste involved in keeping the penny in circulation. Hank wrote songs about Harry Potter and discussed the nutritional



information of Peeps candy.

What made the Vlogbrothers special was not the subject matter, but the commitment Hank and John gave to the project, and, by extension, to each other. Hank and John laid their relationship bare for all viewers who wanted to observe, and it wasn't hard, right from the start, to see that this was something special.

The show quickly attracted a group of devoted online fans, who aided the creation of Vlogbrothers videos by participating in book clubs and challenges the Greens offered. Some even became "secret siblings," by creating their own videos. After John found an arcade game he mistakenly believed to be called Nerdfighters (it was called Aero Fighters), the name was adopted. Brotherhood 2.0 had found its rallying cry.

Today the Vlogbrothers Youtube channel has more than 2 million followers, and the educational channel the brothers started, Crash Course, has another 2 million. On Twitter, the Greens together have almost 3 million followers.

It's not an overstatement to say the Greens are the leaders of a global online movement of millions of teenagers dedicated to the noble goal of "decreasing world suck." And given John Green's popularity and the Vlogbrothers' success building a devoted online following, it's little surprise to see such high levels of

anticipation (the film sold more advanced tickets than any drama in the history of the ticket-selling service Fandango) accompanying the release of *The Fault in Our Stars*.

### **Esther Earl and The Fault in our Stars**

*The Fault in our Stars* is the story of a teenage girl named Hazel Grace Lancaster, her relationship with a boy named Augustus Waters, and her life with thyroid cancer. The book was also, at least in part, inspired by John Green's mostly online friendship with a girl named Esther Earl.

Esther was a teenager and video blogger. In 2010, when she was 16, she died of thyroid cancer. She was an early member of the Nerdfighters, and her presence is still felt strongly across the Internet. Watching her videos, one quickly gets a sense of Esther's personality. She made silly videos where she listed the objects in her bedroom, or celebrated Archie Comics, or explained her time-traveling experiences as the smoke-monster from the television show *Lost*. She was a goofy and warm and vibrant teenager, fluent in the language of the Internet.

(Esther's videos are available on the Youtube Channel HELLO THERE, where she posted videos under the name Cookie4Monster4).

Esther's videos detailed her experience with thyroid cancer, but it's clear her cancer did not define her. She talked about her family often and with reverence. After her diagnosis they moved back to the U.S. from France because she could receive better treatment here. She detailed life with an oxygen tube running into her nostrils, "which are in your nose;" she named her oxygen machine "Denmark,"



and explained how her pain medication was delivered via “PICC line” (a tube running directly to her heart through a vein in her arm), which “makes it feel like I can breathe. Which is a really good feeling.”

Esther made videos through the last month of her life; she blogged with grace and humor and remarkable wit.

John Green has contact with millions of teenagers, but he developed an especially close friendship with Esther, whom he met in 2008 at a Harry Potter Conference. Though John and Esther made only a handful of videos in which they spoke directly to one another, the effect they had upon each other is clear.

With the release of *The Fault in our Stars*, John has spoken in more detail about their relationship.

**Esther made videos through the last month of her life; she blogged with grace and humor and remarkable wit.**

We stayed in touch after the [Harry Potter] conference, but I never really understood how sick she was. But we were talking one day when she was in the ICU, and it slowly came out. After that we were much closer because I was much more conscious of how little time I might have with her. She was just a great friend. You know that creator-fan relationship that often emerges? It wasn't like that. It was just a friendship.

Before she died, John asked Esther what she wanted the Nerdfighters to do to remember her on her birthday, August 3—now a Nerdfighter holiday called “Esther Day.” She said she wanted her day to be about “family and love,” and telling loved ones you love them.

In a video he made shortly after her death, John remembered Esther as an inspiration and a friend:

She wasn't an angel, or a model of perfection or anything. She was a person.

She was a teenager ... And though Esther has died we will continue to do projects with her, because it will be when we work to decrease world suck and when we share our love with



others that Esther will be with us most.

I highlight the story of Esther Earl and her relationship with John Green because it captures beautifully the unblinking idealism and empathy of the Nerdfighters. It's easy for a digital foreigner like me—I, like the Greens, grew up before the age of the Internet—to mistake this sincerity for something else, something trite, shallow, or insincere. But such concerns fade once you realize how deeply committed the Nerdfighters are to being compassionate and earnest and empathetic.

If empathy is the capacity to understand and share the feelings and emotions of someone else, a relationship like that of John Green and Esther Earl demonstrates its digital form. As Heitner puts it, digital empathy is expressed toward the people one encounters online.

Digital empathy includes “empathy for the person you're writing about,” Heitner said, “for the person that reads your post, for the person who sees the picture, for the person featured in the picture you're sharing.” It means extending one's empathy not only to the individual you're interacting with, but for everyone else who might be affected by the life you put online.

Digital empathy can look like two brothers, who, by speaking to one another on Youtube, create a community capable of raising \$850,000 dollars for charity in two days. It's a teenage girl, who in the weeks before her death, made a video thanking a world-famous novelist for a short but powerful friendship and telling him: “Saying you love someone is a good thing. And

I love you, John.”

The Fault in our Stars, John Green’s novel inspired by and dedicated to Esther Earl, is a memento of the digital empathy embodied in Nerdfighteria. This weekend, millions of teenagers and other people will see it, and it almost doesn’t matter if it is good or bad; it is clearly made of awesome.

Nerdfighters create safe spaces online

Stories like Earl’s attract teens deeply because they’re about creating, by choice, online spaces, like the customized Nerdfighters social network, where people who are bullied or otherwise in need of support can safely express their emotions and take care of each other.

**It’s truly rare and radical, especially as teenagers’ identities become more intertwined with the Internet: an empathetic, meaningful online community.**

It’s not a perfect environment, and not all Nerdfighters are committed to the anti-bullying cause. But in its origins the Nerdfighter community was a place for outcasts and awkward kids; those who are most likely to be bullied physically and online. Both John and Hank have made videos about their own experiences being bullied in their youth, and offering support for others in similar situations.

In one video, Hank describes the kind of advice kids often hear from adults. “There was lots of shouts of ‘It gets better,’ and ‘Stay strong’ and ‘We love you,’” Hank says. “But when I put myself back in time to when I was being bullied, none of those things would have helped me.

Here’s how I dealt with bullying. I cried. I hated myself. I hated my life. I didn’t deal with it. I survived it. But I never dealt with it.”

John tells his own story of “Middle School Misery,” of his school days as not merely a nerd, “but a stupid nerd, the worst kind of combo,” and how scared and powerless he felt, and how he fantasized about revenge.

These words are reminiscent of things that Heitner says happen too often online, where the cruelty that exists in real life may be extended, documented, and shared. Kids feel powerless and scared and are looking for someone to share with, someone who understands what they’re experiencing. Someone to empathize.

It’s truly rare and radical, especially as teenagers’ identities become more intertwined with the Internet: an empathetic, meaningful online community.

Which is why John Green wishes he could have been a Nerdfighter in his youth. “I’ve found that sometimes, often even, kids are capable of tremendous kindness and generosity,” John Green says. “In fact that’s been the hallmark of the Nerdfighter Community for over seven years now. There are always Nerdfighters who will listen to you if you will listen back. And that is truly awesome.”

More than the fundraising campaigns and the secret language and fawning teenage fans, this is what Nerdfighters bring to the world. It’s something truly rare and radical, especially as teenagers’ identities become more intertwined with the Internet: an empathetic, meaningful online community. Nerdfighteria isn’t perfect and it certainly is not for everyone, but it gives teenagers the chance to find other teenagers and to build something special.

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Christopher Zumski Finke wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas and practical actions. Christopher blogs about pop culture and is editor of The Stake. Follow him on Twitter at @christopherzf.

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## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Parents often label the Internet as a hotbed for cruelty and bullying. Nerdfighters prove the Internet can be used for good, that it can be a place to create community that combats negativity—or “world suck”—with “awesome.” What are some ways—digital or otherwise—that you get strength and support to fight world suck with awesome?

## Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

### **How did this lesson work for you and your students?**

Share your feedback with us and other teachers  
by leaving a comment on our website:

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writing-lessons/digital-empathy](http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/digital-empathy)



## Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Focus on topic</b>	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
<b>Organization</b>	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Originality and strength of ideas</b>	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
<b>Evidence and/or reasoning</b>	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
<b>Command of grammar and conventions</b>	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
<b>Voice</b>	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

\* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.



# Combating the “World Suck” of Baseball Tryouts with “Awesome”

By Bowie Shreiber, Grade 7

Last year, I tried out for my middle school’s baseball team. I am very passionate about baseball. I always try my best, want to be the best on the team, and I’m always excited for a game or practice. However, this was not the case with the middle school team. As tryouts were creeping closer, I was a nervous wreck. Lucky for me, we had an unimaginable winter with tons of snow. After the snow melted, the fields were soaked. I was relieved when tryouts were postponed a week. Throughout that week, I wished they were canceled.

I was so stressed when Monday came. I was supposed to stay after school for tryouts. What if I’m not as good as everyone else? What if I’m so bad everyone makes fun of me? What if my friends make it and I don’t? These were the questions I pondered as I stood in the hallway, waiting to enter the gym. The first day we didn’t do much. The field was still too wet. The coach, Mr. Gardner, had us warm up, throw to each other, and run laps. Most people were joking, laughing, and talking with each other. However, I was not one of them. I was too busy concentrating on having perfect form, even while running and warming up.

I think Mr. Gardner, who was also my gym teacher, might have noticed my edginess. On Tuesday, after gym, he held me after class to talk. I knew he liked me, but I was afraid I was in trouble or that I did something wrong. Instead of chastising me, he started talking to me about baseball. “You’re a great young player with lots of talent,” he said to me. “But you need to have more fun. It’s just baseball. So what if you don’t make the team? There’s always next year. You just need to have fun, and I guarantee tryouts will be easier.”

Mr. Gardner’s words really inspired me. From then on, I tried to relax and enjoy the tryouts. I still attempted to do my best, but didn’t make being perfect as big of a deal as I did before. I had a great time and made it more about playing baseball with my friends rather than trying to ensure myself a spot on the team. I ended up making the team, and even though we weren’t very good, it was a great experience.

Mr. Gardner unintentionally acted like one of the Nerdfighters in Christopher Zumski Finke’s YES! Magazine article, “How the Real Teens Behind ‘The Fault in Our Stars’ Are Bringing Empathy to the Internet.” Nerdfighters try to combat “world suck” with “awesome” by being kind and having empathy for others. There is nothing good about middle school baseball tryouts. They’re nerve wracking, stressful, and everyone is worried about making the team. Mr. Gardner recognized my nervousness, and the world suck of baseball tryouts, and fought it with awesome. He reminded me that playing baseball is supposed to be fun and encouraged me not to worry so much about the outcome. Even now, when I play baseball, I think of Mr. Gardner and focus more on having a good time with my friends because I know these times will not last forever. I still try to be my best, but worry less about being the best, and that feels awesome.

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# The Literal Heart Sustains an Ailing Body

By Ally S., Grade 11

I have been a nerd since I was very young. At the library, you'd find me mesmerized in the Greek mythology section. I sat on the floor in front of the shelf and went through each book, savoring each picture and memorizing each story. Athena and Odysseus quickly became my favorites, so the librarian, Ms. Rojas, always notified me whenever a new version of *The Odyssey* came. As I grew up, I was fascinated by esoteric topics, like Ancient Greek religion and art, linguistics, and analysis of the Harry Potter series. I didn't know people who were interested in those things at my school, but Nerdfighteria was a safe space where I could share those kinds of interests with others. John and Hank Green's videos discussed topics I cared about, from history and science to pop culture and lame puns. My main goal in life was—and is—to become as informed about the world and other people as possible, which the Vlogbrothers made almost stupidly easy. A wealth of information was in a convenient playlist of exciting new videos, each under four minutes long. I couldn't ask for more.

Of course, many things in my life have changed in the three years since I discovered the Vlogbrothers' channel. I started high school, began to take on the responsibilities of young adulthood, and developed depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

I go to an extremely rigorous school, and it is one of the most consistent pressures in my life. My school system offers services to help students with mental illness, but I can't expect the same support from teachers and friends without telling them about my personal struggles. My depression and anxiety drag me down by playing on my fears and worries. By definition, anxiety is my brain going into panic

mode over commonplace things. Depression feels like a weight, a burden that will never stop dragging me down. I don't want to tell anyone about how tired and scared I am, afraid that they will dislike me as much as I dislike myself.

The Internet, on the other hand, is a place where expectations don't overwhelm me. When I go online, I know that I can find others who will support me, without judgment. The Internet is not at my school, telling my teacher that I couldn't get through all of my work, or at my house, telling my mother that I went another week without even making an effort to clean my room. The Internet, specifically Nerdfighteria, is a place where I can be myself. In Christopher Zumski Finke's *YES! Magazine* article, "How the Real Teens Behind 'The Fault in Our Stars' Are Bringing Empathy to the Internet," he described "the unblinking idealism and empathy of the Nerdfighters."

For most of us, the empathy Finke speaks of comes from personal experience with world suck, in big or small ways. The Nerdfighter community is extremely supportive of mental illness, especially because so many video bloggers struggle with the same issues. John Green has depression and anxiety and touches on those subjects in his books, especially *The Fault in Our Stars*. In fact, there is a Nerdfighter group on Facebook, called the Literal Heart, for Nerdfighters with chronic illnesses. It is named after the support group in *The Fault in Our Stars* and is meant to serve a similar role.

Many adults think online communities are arenas for cruelty and bullying, but the Literal Heart has welcomed me in a way I don't feel elsewhere. Nerdfighters with both physical and mental illnesses vent about the bad times and celebrate the good. Since it is expressly for

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Ally S. essay continued)*

those with chronic diseases, there is no stigma against having a bad day or bad month. It's as easy as searching the group on Facebook and requesting to join, no questions asked. I have had weeks where I'm not sure how I'll make it through, but posting in the Literal Heart group and receiving comments where people voice their belief in me helps. Knowing that there is someone who believes in me comforts me so much. Even though no one can actually give me a hug through our computers, their comments feel like the real thing. Little words, like telling me they're proud that I went to the psychiatrist or that they're sorry that I was feeling bad, help me to know that I'm not alone, that I have

support, and that things will get better.

I believe that Internet friendships are just as valuable as face-to-face friendships because I know that, without the support of my friends in the Literal Heart, I might have stayed undiagnosed—living with the brutal fatigue of mental illness. People whom I've never seen in person have supported me through extreme emotional difficulty, never taking advantage of me or expecting anything in return. The impersonality of the Internet can be a breeding ground for hate and terrible unkindness, but there's another side— a better side. I know that out there, there are Nerdfighters battling world suck. And those people inspire and support me while I fight my own personal demons.

# The Internet: A Beautiful Place to Be a Harbinger of Awesome

By Shannon Hickey, Birmingham-Southern College

A little over one year ago, I made the journey from Hueytown to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to exercise one of my constitutional rights: the right to protest. In response to the recent tornadoes that had claimed several lives, the Westboro Baptist Church decided to picket the university, claiming that the sins of the gays and the Jews were what led to the disaster. I found a link to a counter-protest on Twitter, clicked on it, and was taken to an event page on Facebook. Would this event have happened without the help of social media? Almost definitely. Protests were staged for centuries without the Internet. Would it have reached such a broad audience? Almost definitely not. I would not have even known about the event had I not followed a member of the Alabama social justice community on Twitter. Is the Internet the perfect tool for budding Bolsheviks planning to overthrow the bourgeoisie? Of course not. But it is a perfect tool for fostering environments of awesome, providing a place for collaboration, and spreading information when the media fails.

In his article “How the Real Teens Behind ‘The Fault in Our Stars’ Are Bringing Empathy to the Internet,” Christopher Zumski Finke names several ways that people receive support online that they don’t receive from their physical communities. Growing up as a queer trans Catholic kid in the (Protestant) Bible Belt led to me being silenced during my childhood. My sexuality and my gender had to be concealed from my family and my church, as did my religious beliefs in spaces for queer and trans individuals that were not often welcoming to people of faith. My life changed when I found a safe space online, where I didn’t need to

apologize for being the way I was.

The Internet allows the marginalized a place to speak up. It allows women to deconstruct patriarchal influences, the queer community to counter the “no homo” jokes with “no hetero,” and the trans community to support homeless transgender kids. It is a place where “white middle-class straight cisgender male” is not the default and where he is not given preferential treatment for once. The social justice community on Tumblr, a blogging website, showed me how to stop thinking of myself as broken, and Twitter gave me a place to vent about my frustrations with the straight people at my high school. One such example: “someone whom i will not name just messaged me on facebook saying queer was a bad word and i shouldn’t use it straight people are amazing,” which derived from a day when a straight “ally” took offense to my everyday speech.

For many people, the Internet is a place to express their identity on their own terms, to combat world suck with their own inner awesome, and to spread that awesome with others. Facebook groups like Queer Housing allow queer homeless kids to figure out ways to alleviate their situations. Facebook also recently allowed non-binary gender options (e.g., genderfluid, bigender, androgyne) for people who don’t fully identify as either male or female, as well as preferred pronouns (e.g., the singular “they”). Check out #GayRights on Twitter and come across tweets from human rights organizations mixed in with pictures of beautiful weddings. Tumblr is perhaps the best example; it is commonplace to see threads of messages about topics like marriage equality, the cons of capitalism, and intersectional



## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Shannon Hickey essay continued)*

feminism. Being queer or trans is so normal on Tumblr because so many outcasts find refuge there. The pressure is off, and, while not everyone is the picture of welcoming grace, many people are truly supportive.

It is easy to see a lot of the suck in the world as “my world suck,” but spend time online and you’ll see that “my world” is

someone else’s world as well. I am not the only queer trans Catholic kid who found solace and awesome on the Internet, and it’s my job to use what has been given to me to spread awesome even further. As I get older, I become a caregiver and harbinger of awesome to those younger than me who still drown in the suckiness of the world, and the Internet is a beautiful place to do that.

# Anita and Tavi's New Curriculum

By Tori Gardner, Grade 10

At a young age, I was taught that women should cover up our bodies. I was taught that when women are catcalled while out on an early morning jog, we should say “thank you” because we are lucky to have any male notice us at all. This was taught and enforced when I was still in grade school. When I was in fifth grade and a classmate of mine told me to show him my breasts, I yelled at him. I was then promptly sent in the hall for being a distraction. When my teacher came to talk to me afterwards, I told her what he said, and she replied with the horribly over-used excuse for sexism, “boys will be boys.”

Sexism is not just something women have to deal with when we walk down the streets. The Internet is another popular place to harass females. When we make statuses saying that we're out somewhere, people may feel the need to comment and tell us to “get back in the kitchen.” If we post pictures with a small amount of cleavage showing, we might be called a slut, or have men tell us that we should sleep with them because that is all we are good for. Women are degraded constantly online for having an opinion on any social or political issue.

Anita Sarkeesian's story is important when discussing feminism in the virtual world. Anita Sarkeesian is a Canadian-American feminist, blogger, and video game critic. She's the author of the blog “Feminist Frequency” and the video series Tropes vs. Women. As a successful woman, Sarkeesian has made enemies. In May 2012, Sarkeesian started a Kickstarter campaign to raise money for a series of videos to examine the tropes of women in video games and other forms of media, such as the “Ms. Male Character” trope who is only a feminized version of a popular male character. (A prime example

of this is Ms. Pac Man whose only difference from the original Pac Man was a bow, heels, and makeup.) Sarkeesian's videos triggered tidal waves of rude and sexist comments, and Sarkeesian even received violent intimidations. After receiving a particularly scary bomb threat, Sarkeesian was forced to flee her home and stay with a friend. She later told everyone that she was safe and despite the hateful comments she was getting, she would not back down from her cause.

Despite her issues with the Internet and its misogynistic population, Anita Sarkeesian remains as outspoken and influential as ever. At the XOXO Festival in Portland, Oregon, Sarkeesian spoke about the most basic way to support women online. “One of the most radical things you can do is to actually believe women when they talk about their experiences...” Sarkeesian walked off stage to a standing ovation.

Tavi Gevinson is another great woman who made her own path through the forest of online sexism. At only eleven years old, Gevinson started “Style Rookie,” a fashion blog, and a couple years later, she started blogging about feminism. Gevinson was only 15 years old when she started standing up for herself and her gender. Her sister says she was lucky, simply because she “got into feminism and Riot Grrrl (a popular punk feminist movement from the 1990's) before she got into that girl self-esteem phase...” when girl's self-esteem plummets.

Gevinson has made many speeches on feminism and how it has affected the world. In her 2012 TED Talk, Gevinson talks about how pop culture makes female characters very 2-D—compliant, easy to get along with, well mannered, and boring—how people expect

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Tori Gardner essay continued)*

women to conform to this unrealistic mold. Women then tend to punish themselves because they don't fit the form of these flat characters. A character that defies this depressing standard is young Arya Stark from HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Arya's strong will and utter disregard of gendered stereotypes are only some of the reasons that she is an awesome role model for younger girls. Instead of taking up the so-called "women's duties," Arya takes to sword fighting and archery at a young age. She prefers wooden swords to dolls and would gladly head into battle. When this young warrior was told that she wasn't being "ladylike," she replied, "Good!"

Gevinson also interviewed Miley Cyrus for *ELLE* magazine in late April 2014. When Miley said that she was a feminist and wanted everyone to be equal, Gevinson agreed, saying

"Right! And that's what feminism is!"

Following the examples of Anita Sarkeesian, Tavi Gevinson, and other women like them, I encourage anyone and everyone on the Internet to stand up against the ignorance and misogyny that riddles the cracks of almost every website. When a rape joke is made, don't laugh. Instead, say "That's not funny," even if it's just to yourself. The first step to stopping sexism is changing your own attitude. Stand up to the sexualized comments, rude banter, and women-in-the-kitchen jokes.

Teaching every generation from here on out that everyone is equal no matter their gender, race, sexual orientation, political party or age is something that is just as important as the core education they receive in the classroom. Misogyny should be banished from what we teach our younger and future generations and replaced with acceptance and love.