

Comprehension

Genre

A **Play** is a story that is intended to be performed and has features such as a prologue, stage directions, scene descriptions, and dialogue.



Monitor Comprehension

Draw Conclusions

As you read, use your Conclusions Chart.

Text Clues	Conclusion

Read to Find Out

Who is the Phantom Poet?





The Case of the
Phantom
Poet

Time: The present

Setting: A small suburban town in the U.S.A.

Prologue: A local newspaper, *The Town Caller*, is **sponsoring** a writing competition for sixth grade students. From a wide **array** of entries, a team of judges at the paper has narrowed the competition to two students: Delia Marcus and Latisha Walker. To decide the winning student, Mr. Tolliver, the school principal, has requested that both girls write a human interest story, featuring someone of special **significance** to the school. The race is on! It's Thursday and the deadline to submit the articles is Tuesday afternoon.

a play
by Karen English

illustrated by
Nicole Tadgell

Characters (in order of appearance):

Latisha Walker	A bright but shy young writer
Michael Johnson	Latisha's friend and star basketball player
Rhonda Watts	Latisha's friend since kindergarten
Carlos Hernandez	Michael's friend
Delia Marcus	Popular, overly confident winner of several writing competitions
Ms. Singh	School librarian
Miss Mackey	Woman who works in the cafeteria
Mr. Tolliver	School principal

SCENE 1

The school library; Latisha, Michael, Rhonda, and Carlos are huddled at a table, discussing the writing competition.

Michael: *(slowly, as if thinking aloud)* Someone of special significance to the school . . . someone dynamic, appealing, **charismatic**—*(pause)* Hey, why don't you just write about me!
(Everyone laughs, including Michael.)

Latisha: Let's get serious. I'm facing major competition here. Delia Marcus wins just about every writing contest around.

Rhonda: There was the Robert Frost Poetry Contest last year and the haiku competition at the recreation center.

Carlos: And the short story competition that WBAE sponsored last month.



Draw Conclusions

Why is everyone concerned about competing against Delia?





Michael: (*shaking his head*) Hey, remember me? (*with pride*)
Michael Johnson, Most Valuable Player at the school regionals this
year! Slam dunk!

(*Everyone mimics cheering and applauding.*)

Latisha: (*holding a phony microphone up*) Michael, tell us how you
got your start.

Michael: (*humble*) Well, I owe it all to Coach Greer. He's a great
guy and a great role model. (*Everyone looks at one another, then,
in unison . . .*)

All: Coach Greer!

Latisha: (*slowly*) Someone of significance to the school! (*puts arm
around Michael's shoulder*) Michael, old friend, do you think you
can get me an interview with Coach Greer?

(*Enter Delia Marcus.*)

Delia: (*smug*) Too late, Latisha. I just arranged an interview with
him for tomorrow morning. Coach Julius Greer, college all-star
and pride of our town, as my mom always says. She went to school
with him! (*turns to leave*) Good try, Latisha, but life is like sports,
you've got to be quick on your feet. (*walks away, leaving the other
kids dumbfounded*)

Fade out.



SCENE 2

The next day, back in the library; Latisha, Carlos, Rhonda, and Michael sit morosely, with their chins in their palms.

Latisha: Oh, well, back to square one.

(Carlos drums the table with a folded piece of paper.)

Rhonda: Stop that. I can't think.

(Carlos absentmindedly gives the table another tap and then opens the paper and reads to himself but audibly.)

Carlos: *(recites)* Do not despair of desserts not won; Soon you will find your place in the sun. *(sighs)* Courtesy, the Phantom Poet.

Latisha: *(absently)* What's that one about?

Carlos: This one? I didn't place in the last track meet and I was feeling kind of bad.

Michael: Are you going to turn it in to Ms. Singh? She's been collecting those couplets.

(All turn to look at the librarian writing at her desk. A large glass jar filled with folded paper sits on the desk.)



Rhonda: *(pause, as if thinking)* That's it! That's the subject of your human interest story—the Phantom Poet!

Latisha: Nobody knows who the Phantom Poet is.

Michael: We'll just have to find out. How long has this Phantom Poet been dropping those couplets all over the place? A year? A zillion of us have gotten them. Always when something disappointing has happened or when we need a boost.

Rhonda: Remember when the Student Council overlooked Mr. Sauer, the custodian, on Recognition Day? The whole Student Council got one. What'd it say?

Latisha: Um . . . *(recites)* Forgetting to include Mr. Sauer; Is like baking a cake without flour.

Carlos: I've got an idea. *(leaves the table, huddles with Ms. Singh, then returns with the jar)* Let's get to work! Latisha, you're going to write about the Phantom Poet.

(Light fades, then comes up on group sitting at the same table, this time covered with small squares of paper. Latisha and Michael are frowning at notes in their hands.)

Michael: I'm stumped. What do we have so far?

Carlos: The poet's got to be an adult. Check the style—no one our age writes this way.

Latisha: I think Carlos is right. They're too literary for a kid.

Michael: Mmm . . . literary . . . *(studies Ms. Singh, others follow his gaze)*



Draw Conclusions

Who does Michael think is the Phantom Poet?



Rhonda: You think Ms. Singh might be the Phantom Poet?

Latisha: There's only one way to find out. *(leaves the table to confer with Ms. Singh)*

Ms. Singh: How can I help you, Latisha?

Latisha: Um . . . Can I get a list of contemporary women journalists? I'm interested in reading about them.

Ms. Singh: No problem. *(consults her computer, writes something on a piece of paper, and hands it to Latisha)*

Latisha: *(returning to the table, waving paper)* I've got a writing sample. Now we can compare Ms. Singh's handwriting with the writing on the couplets.

(Heads bend over the writing sample.)

Michael: ***(despondently)*** It's not her. The poet's e's have this little flourish. Not one of these e's has that.

Latisha: *(disappointed)* Let's call it a day. Think about any adult who fits the profile of the poet. Tomorrow's Saturday. We can all meet at my house at 10:00 A.M. We've got to find the Phantom Poet!
Fade out.



SCENE 3

The next morning, Latisha's living room; Michael tosses a basketball. Kids are seated on the floor.

Michael: I hope you know I'm going to be late for basketball practice. Let's get started.

Carlos: (*clears throat*) You're going to thank me for this. I must admit my **sleuthing** has been pretty brilliant.

Michael: Speed it up, please.

Carlos: The poet's Mr. Tolliver.

All: Mr. Tolliver!

Carlos: Think about it. He's always giving us pep talks and little lessons at every opportunity.

Rhonda: But poems? How are we going to find out for sure? Latisha's deadline is Tuesday morning.

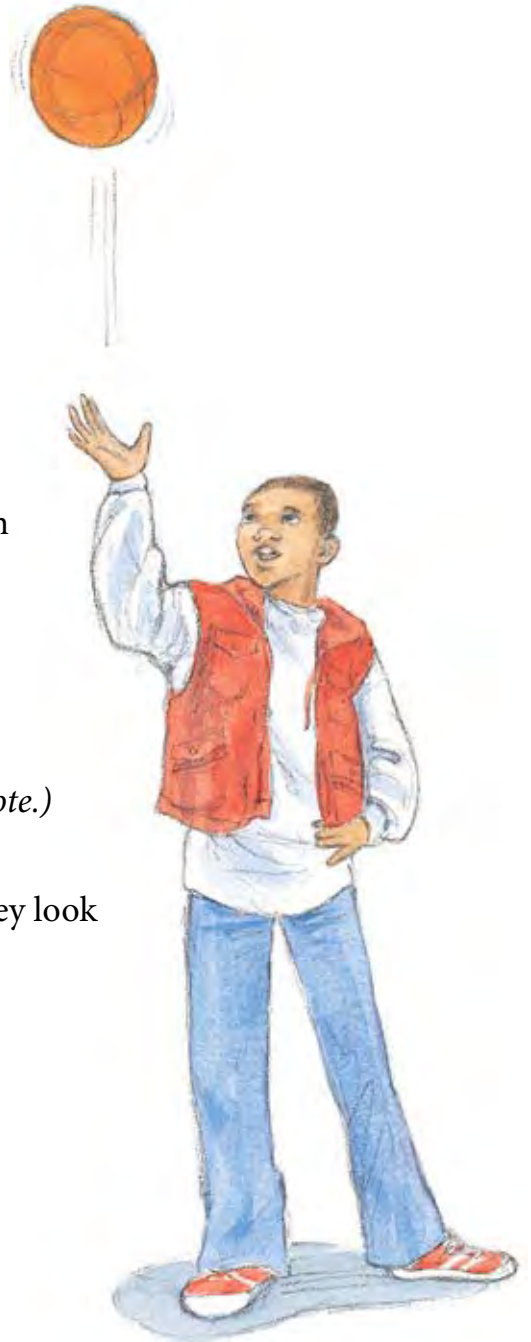
Carlos: Didn't I say I was brilliant? (*pulls paper from his pocket*) I suspected Mr. Tolliver on my way home, so I stopped by his office and asked him if he could write me an excuse for first period when I have to help put away sports equipment. Note the word *equipment*. Note it has two *e*'s.

Michael: Let's have it.

Carlos: Did I hear, "Thank you"?

Michael: (*snatching the note*) Thank you! (*He studies the note.*) Did you look at this, Einstein? The *e*'s are different.

Carlos: All right, they're different but check out the *a*'s. They look pretty similar.





(Latisha also studies the note.)

Latisha: No way, Carlos! Not at all!

Rhonda: *(continues studying the notes while the others argue)* Hold the phone! Check this out. Every single couplet has something to do with food or flowers. *(recites)* A time sweet as mangoes will resume; Take heart, a new day will chase your gloom. *(pause)* That was mine last winter—stuffed in my locker when my parents temporarily separated and I was all depressed.

Latisha: Who'd you confide in?

Rhonda: Only Miss Mackey in the caf . . . e . . . te . . . ri . . . a.

Carlos: Yeah, she's really great. And she always smells like . . .
(pause, as the kids look at one another)

All: . . . flowers!

Latisha: *(thoughtfully)* Miss Mackey . . . Miss Mackey . . . Food, flowers . . . Looks like I have to go see Miss Mackey first thing Monday morning.

Fade out.

SCENE 4

Monday morning, the school cafeteria; Miss Mackey, in a hairnet and apron, with a pen and clipboard, is doing inventory. Latisha stands for a moment looking at her. She notes Miss Mackey's sweater with a flower in the lapel.

Latisha: It's you, isn't it?

Miss Mackey: Pardon me?

Latisha: You're the Phantom Poet. It all fits. *(points at the flower, waves her hand over the room)* Flowers . . . food . . . it's you.

Miss Mackey: *(sitting down, heavily)* Smart girl. Yes, it's me. I'm the poet. In fact, I've had a few of my poems published in *The Town Caller*.

Latisha: But without your name.

Miss Mackey: I never wanted a fuss. My reward comes from all of you. Giving you the right words when you need it.

Latisha: *(softly)* Miss Mackey, I want to write about you. I know it's for a selfish reason. Delia Marcus and I are finalists for the newspaper competition. We've got to write competing human interest stories to decide the winner. I want to be the winner, Miss Mackey, and your story will give me a good shot.

Miss Mackey: I can tell you my story, Latisha, but you can't give away my identity.

Latisha: I won't reveal your name.

Miss Mackey: Let's just say someone helped me with the right words when I needed it. I'm simply passing along the favor my way.

Latisha: Tell me more, Miss Mackey.

Both sit down to talk, quietly. Fade out.

SCENE 5

Mr. Tolliver's office; he's sitting behind his desk while Delia and Latisha stand holding their stories.

Mr. Tolliver: I look forward to your stories. And I'm curious about whom you chose to write about.

Delia: *(stepping forward, confidently)* I did my piece on Coach Greer, three time Most Valuable Player on his college basketball team, and the driving force behind our championship for the last two years.

Latisha: I chose the Phantom Poet.

Delia: *(shocked)* What?

Latisha: I found out who the poet is and interviewed *(pause)* the poet. The poet chooses to remain **anonymous** for personal reasons but I still got a great story. My article is about the rewards of writing words of inspiration to kids who need it.

Delia: How do we know you're not just making it up?

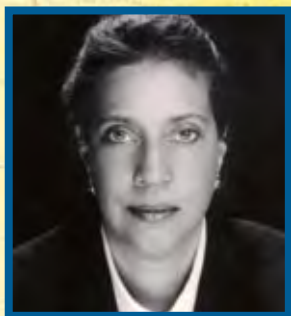
Mr. Tolliver: I'll know—since I, too, know the identity of the Phantom Poet. *(smiles at Latisha)* You'll have my decision by Friday. Good luck, girls.

Latisha: *(extending a hand to Delia; Delia takes it)* May the better story win.

Fade out.



Starring Karen and Nicole



Karen English has four children and has taught school for many years. She knows the joys and the problems of growing up. She used this reservoir of memory, and perhaps the psychology she studied in college, to write this play. It was clever the way she didn't quite tell us the ending. She knew it was a better story letting the reader guess who might win—Delia or Latisha. Whom do you want to win?

Nicole Tadgell was born in Highland Park, Michigan, and now makes her home in Spencer, Massachusetts, with her husband, Mark, and two border terriers. She has illustrated numerous books and is the winner of the Children's Africana Book Award for illustrating *Fatuma's New Cloth*.



Find out more about Karen English and Nicole Tadgell at www.macmillanmh.com

Author's Purpose

A play is meant to be performed as entertainment. What text features tell you that this piece is a play and may be performed?



Comprehension Check



Summarize

Use your Conclusions Chart to help you summarize *The Case of the Phantom Poet*. What is the most important information in each scene?

Text Clues	Conclusion

Think and Compare



1. In what way was Miss Mackey someone who was “of special significance to the school”? Use information from the text to support your answer. **Monitor Comprehension: Draw Conclusions**
2. Miss Mackey mentions that someone once helped her with the right words. If that person were another character in the play, who do you think that person might be? **Evaluate**
3. The Phantom Poet chooses to remain **anonymous**. If you were the Phantom Poet, why would you choose to keep your identity a secret? **Synthesize**
4. Do you think small acts of kindness can make a difference in people’s lives? Why or why not? **Evaluate**
5. Read “The Unusual Robot” on pages 338-339. How do the students in this story accomplish their goal? How are their methods similar to those of Latisha and her friends? **Reading/ Writing Across Texts**

