

Name:

Date:

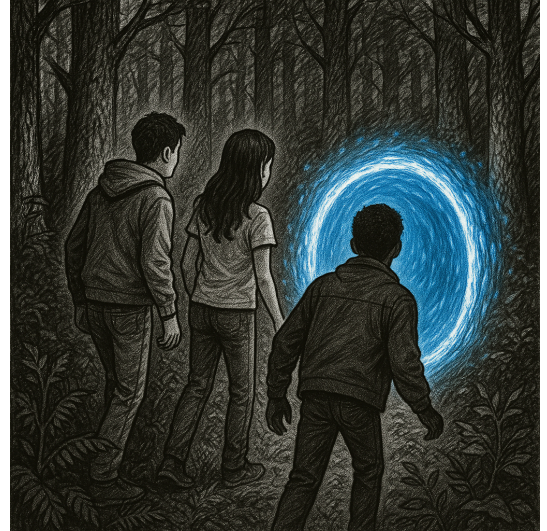
Instructions: Read the passage carefully. Then, answer the questions that follow.

The Portal in the Pines

Jake, Marcus, and Sofia had spent every summer afternoon exploring the dense forest behind Jake's neighborhood. But today felt different. The air was unusually still. The birds were silent. As they trudged deeper into the woods, something caught Jake's eye—a faint glow pulsing behind a cluster of pine trees.

"It's...blue," Marcus whispered, stepping forward.

There, floating just above the mossy ground, was a shimmering portal—rough-edged and shifting like liquid glass. It rippled like water, glowing with a soft electric blue light that seemed to hum in the still air.



"No way this is real," Sofia said, wide-eyed. "Is this...an illusion?"

Jake bent down and threw a stick through. It vanished without a sound.

"Only one way to find out," Jake said with a grin that barely hid his nerves.

After a few dares and double-dares, all three stepped through at the same time.

The sensation was brief—like walking through a waterfall without getting wet. On the other side, everything looked exactly the same. The trees. The sky. The air.

Except the portal behind them was now glowing **red**.

"Okay, weird," Jake muttered. "Let's go tell my dad."

They raced back to the neighborhood, bursting through the treeline onto Jake's street—only to stop dead.

His house was...**off**.

It still stood on the same lot, but the color was wrong. The shutters were missing. And there was a tall metal fence in the front yard where there had never been one before.

"Did your dad remodel?" Sofia asked cautiously.

Name:

Date:

Jake shook his head. “Not... like *this*.”

They walked up the porch steps, exchanging uneasy glances. Jake knocked on the door.

It opened. A man stood there—Jake’s father. Same face, same build. But his hair was shorter. His clothes more formal. His eyes colder.

“Yes?” the man asked, voice flat.

Jake blinked, then let out a shaky laugh. “Dad...? It’s me.”

The man’s expression didn’t change. “Who are you?”

Jake’s smile faded. “Jake. Your son.” He glanced back at Marcus and Sofia as if they could explain it.

The man frowned. “I don’t have a son.”

Jake’s throat tightened. “What—yes you do. I live here. This is my house.”

“I don’t know you,” the man said, sharper now. “You kids need to leave.”

“Dad, wait!” Jake blurted, stepping forward.

But the man was already pulling the door shut.

SLAM!

Stunned, they stood there for a long moment.

Marcus finally broke the silence. “Guys... what if we crossed into a world where everything is almost the same... but not *ours*?”

Sofia swallowed. “So... we’re in the same place, but a different version of it?”

Jake turned to the street, heart pounding. The cars looked different. The neighbors' houses had strange designs. A strange, spiderlike drone hovered overhead, pausing as if it were thinking—then swiveling in their direction.

They weren’t home anymore.



Name:

Date:

Assignment: Through the Portal – A Mystery in the Pines

Based on the story: *The Portal in the Pines*

Characters: Jake, Marcus, and Sofia

PART 1: Comprehension Check

Answer each question using complete sentences.

1. Who are the main characters in the story, and what are they doing in the forest?
2. How do the kids react to the portal, and what does that show about their personalities?
3. What changes after Jake, Marcus, and Sofia go through the portal?
4. Why is Jake shocked when he sees his dad?
5. What clues show that the kids are no longer in the same version of their world?

Name:

Date:

PART 2: What If...? (Critical Thinking)

Answer in 3–4 complete sentences. Be sure to explain your thinking clearly.

1. What do you think happened to the original version of Jake's father in the world they came from?

2. Do you think Jake, Marcus, and Sofia should try to go back through the red portal? Why or why not?

Name:

Date:

PART 3: Write Your Own Portal Story!

*Use your imagination to write a short story in at least **3 paragraphs**.*

Your story must include:

- **Three characters** (you and two friends)
- A strange **portal** discovered in an everyday place (your school, a park, your street, etc.)
- A world that seems the same at first—but something big is different
- How your characters react, what they discover, and what they decide to do next

Tips for Writing:

- Start with an exciting or mysterious beginning
- Show how the characters feel through their words and actions
- Build suspense and surprise in the middle
- End with a twist or a tough decision

Teacher's Guide & Answer Key

For: *Through the Portal – A Mystery in the Pines* - Grades: 5–6

Note: Key vocabulary can be found on pages 9 and 10 as an optional resource for students.

PART 1: Comprehension Check – Answer Key

Encourage complete sentences, but here are concise expected answers:

1. **Who are the main characters in the story, and what are they doing in the forest?**
 - Jake, Marcus, and Sofia are the main characters. They are exploring the forest behind Jake's neighborhood when they find a strange blue portal.
2. **How do the kids react to the portal, and what does that show about their personalities?**
 - Jake is bold and curious—he throws a stick and wants to go in. Marcus is cautious but interested, and Sofia is surprised and unsure. Their reactions show that Jake takes the lead, Marcus thinks carefully, and Sofia is observant but hesitant.
3. **What changes after Jake, Marcus, and Sofia go through the portal?**
 - Everything looks the same at first, but the portal turns red, and later they realize their neighborhood and Jake's house are different.
4. **Why is Jake shocked when he sees his dad?**
 - His dad looks the same, but doesn't recognize him and says he doesn't have a son.
5. **What clues show that the kids are no longer in the same version of their world?**
 - Jake's house looks different, his father doesn't recognize him, the neighbors' homes have changed, and unfamiliar technology (like a strange drone) is in the sky.

PART 2: Critical Thinking – Teacher Notes & Sample Responses

Goal: These questions are open-ended and meant to develop reasoning. Use them for discussion or written assessment.

1. What do you think happened to the original version of Jake's father?

Sample Answer:

Maybe he's still in their real world, and the man they met is from an alternate reality where Jake doesn't exist. It could be that in this world, Jake was never born or moved away.

2. Should the kids go back through the red portal? Why or why not?

Sample Answer:

Yes, because it might be their only way to return home. The red portal might be a clue that the path works both ways. On the other hand, it could be risky—maybe it leads somewhere worse.

Tips for grading: Look for:

- Evidence of reasoning
- Creative but grounded thinking
- Reference to story details or personal application

Name:

Date:

PART 3: Creative Writing – Rubric & Support

Objectives: Narrative development, use of descriptive language, originality, and basic structure.

Criteria	3 – Meets Expectations	2 – Developing	1 – Needs Support
Beginning	Clear and interesting opening	Somewhat clear start	Unclear or missing
Characters & Setting	Described with some detail	Limited description	Very little description
Plot Development	Clear middle and climax	Some plot progression	Confusing or off-track
Ending/Resolution	Thoughtful or surprising ending	Basic or unclear ending	Missing or abrupt ending
Language & Creativity	Strong word choice, original	Some variety	Repetitive or basic
Conventions (grammar/spelling)	Few errors	Several errors	Many distracting errors

Tips for Support:

- Allow peer brainstorming
- Offer portal-themed story starters or visual prompts
- Use a checklist for story parts (beginning, middle, end)

Differentiation Strategies for Teaching “The Portal in the Pines”

Assignment

1. Differentiate by Readiness (Skill Level)

Support for Struggling Readers/Writers:

- Provide a **read-aloud** or **audio version** of the story
- Highlight or pre-teach **key vocabulary** (e.g., portal, version, shimmer, formal, recognize)
- Use **sentence frames** for Part 2 and Part 3 (e.g., “I think the red portal means _____ because...”)
- Offer a **guided group brainstorm** before writing
- Break writing tasks into **step-by-step checkpoints** with examples

Challenge for Advanced Students:

- Ask them to write an **alternate ending** or **prequel**
- Add a twist: What if only **one** character remembered the real world?
- Encourage use of **figurative language, dialogue**, or a subplot
- Extend Part 2 with research: “Are parallel universes possible in science?”

Optional Extension Ideas:

- **Class discussion:** What makes a “home”? How would you prove who you are?
- **STEM tie-in:** Create a fictional explanation for how the portal works.
- **Art project:** Draw two different versions of the same location (before and after the portal).

Name:

Date:

Key Vocabulary from “The Portal in the Pines”

Grade Level: 5th–6th

Tier: A mix of Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary (general academic and story-specific)

Word	Student-Friendly Definition	Example Sentence
dense	Packed closely together; thick and hard to see through	The forest was so dense they could barely walk between the trees.
faint	Very light or weak; barely noticeable	A faint glow was coming from behind the trees.
glow	A soft, steady light	The portal gave off a quiet, blue glow.
pulsing	Moving in and out or getting brighter and dimmer, like a heartbeat	The light was pulsing, like it was alive.
cluster	A group of similar things that are close together	A cluster of pine trees blocked their view.
shimmering	Shining with a soft, wavy light	The shimmering portal looked like rippling water.
portal	A magical or science-fiction doorway that leads to another place or world	They stepped through the glowing portal without knowing where it led.
vanished	Disappeared completely	The stick vanished as soon as it went through the portal.
sensation	A feeling or experience through the senses (touch, sight, etc.)	Walking through the portal gave them a strange sensation.
uneasy	Uncomfortable or worried; not feeling right	They exchanged uneasy glances before knocking on the door.

Name:

Date:

formal	More proper or serious than usual	Jake's dad looked formal, like someone at a business meeting.
snapped	Spoke in a sharp or angry way	"I don't know you," the man snapped.
stunned	Too shocked or surprised to speak or move	The kids stood there, stunned by what just happened.
version	A different form or type of something	Marcus wondered if they were in another version of their world.
illusion	An illusion is something that tricks your brain into seeing, hearing, or believing something that isn't really true	Sofia asked if the portal was an illusion.
drone	A small flying machine that can be controlled remotely	A strange drone flew overhead in the sky.

Name:

Date:

Thank you for downloading!

This resource is **free** for you and supported by optional tips.

If it helped your students (or saved you prep time), you can support Little Fire Learning here:

BuyMeACoffee.com/LittleFireLearning



Questions, ideas, or collaboration requests?

Email anytime: **support@littlefirelearning.com**

What You'll Find at Little Fire Learning

Free, thoughtfully designed resources for upper elementary and middle grades, including:

Reading + Writing • Science • Social Studies • Critical Thinking

Always free. Always classroom-ready.