



Upper School Summer Reading 2022 Guidelines and Guiding Questions

Every time we glance at our phones, we hold in our hands something containing more stories than could ever be explored in a lifetime.

- Christopher Mims, *Arriving Today*

Once again, all Upper School students will be reading the same selection for summer reading. This year's text is a recently published exploration of the billion-fold practice of shipping products, some as mundane as the USB charger you use for your phone, around the globe by *Wall Street Journal* technology reporter Christopher Mims. For most of us, the ease with which we can click a couple of buttons on our phone and have a product delivered to our doorstep the next day takes for granted the thousands of miles traveled, the hundreds of humans in myriad jobs employed, the dozens of automated machines programmed, and the several different modes of transportation used in getting that item into our hands. Mims' book offers a detailed and in-depth chronicle of each step of the shipping process, raising a veil on just how complex—and at times dangerous—the work of moving products all over the world has become.

This year the summer reading collaboration is between the English and Math Departments. The primary theme upon which discussion and assessment for this year's text will be focused is "connectivity." In addition to Mims' focus on how all of the various human stakeholders involved in shipping a product from, say, Vietnam to Omaha are connected in countless undetectable ways, *Arriving Today* also gives considerable attention to the ever-expanding use of automation, Artificial Intelligence, and algorithms at each stage of the shipping process, thus highlighting the growing interconnectivity between humans and machines—increasingly autonomous robots in particular. Given Brownell Talbot's thriving Robotics program, Mims' book should be of particular interest to those students interested in learning more about practical applications of the mathematics involved in designing, maintaining, and utilizing this technology.

In addition to reading the book, *The Wall Street Journal* and Mims have collaborated on a documentary that visualizes much of what is discussed in *Arriving Today*, and students are encouraged to view that documentary as well. The film should be viewable without a subscription to *The Wall Street Journal*, but we'll make separate arrangements if that reality changes in the next couple of months:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-sanctions-on-russia-war-in-ukraine-and-covid-in-china-are-transforming-global-supply-chains-11648267248>

Guiding Questions*

1. Christopher Mims started writing this book before the coronavirus pandemic changed nearly every facet of daily life, including the shipping industry. What are some of the most notable ways that transporting products around the world has altered in the past two-and-a-half years?
2. Why do you think Mims uses a USB charger as the product that he follows throughout the book? Is this a product that you use in your own life? Do you think differently about charging your phone or tablet based on your reading of *Arriving Today*?
3. What stands out most to you about Mims' descriptions of life on a container ship as it sails across the Pacific Ocean, from Vietnam to California? If you've ever spent any time on a boat (especially a long voyage, such as a cruise), what is similar and different about the experiences described in this section of *Arriving Today*?
4. Have you or your family experienced any delays in the arrival of products based on the bottlenecks still being experienced at our nation's largest ports? How does Mims' descriptions of those ports shed light on just how easy it is for this portion of the shipping process in particular to jam up?
5. Are you surprised to read about how sophisticated and automated semi trucks have become? What aspects of the trucking industry—perhaps the most familiar and visible aspect of the shipping process for those of us living in the Midwest along a major interstate—do you believe have been most affected by the growth of automation, AI, and algorithms?
6. Why do you think Mims chooses to spend so much time inside of the distribution facilities, warehouses, and sorting centers used by companies like Amazon? These chapters include some of the most interconnectedness between humans and machines, but what changes are taking place that might soon end those types of interactions?
7. Much of this book also concentrates on the mundane realities of the human workers in those warehouses and distribution facilities—do you feel like Mims provides an accurate portrayal of both the benefits and the risks associated with this type of labor?
8. In the penultimate chapter, "The Future of Delivery," Mims spends time with smaller robots used to deliver individual items (such as a Starbucks coffee) across a college campus. Can you envision a reality in which you have a similar

experience—i.e. you order a burger or pair of shoes or new earbuds and they are brought to your house by a robot or drone?

9. Despite the seeming mundanity of its subject matter, *Arriving Today* is constructed as a narrative that tells the story of an item's "journey" from a faraway place to an American's door step. Does this story have a protagonist, or even a hero? Does it have a villain? If one of the goals of narrative is to create empathy in its audience, to whom do you feel most closely connected in the story that unfolds across the book's 288 pages?

10. Of all the attention that Mims gives to various applications of math—algorithms, statistics, measurement, graphing, robotics, logistics, and many more—which do you feel is the most immediately relevant to your own life? Has this book shed light on a field of mathematics that you had previously considered?

*responses to these questions will be collected and graded by your English teacher at the start of the school year.