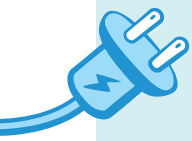


# The Brave Little Toaster

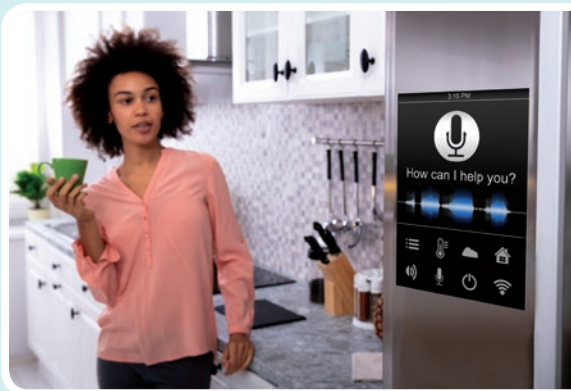
Science Fiction by Cory Doctorow

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION:**  
*Does technology improve or control our lives?*



## Engage Your Brain

**Choose** one or more of these activities to start connecting with the story you're about to read.



### “Smart” or Not?

The Internet of Things (IoT) is a network of devices including “smart” appliances that are connected to the Internet. In recent years, a lot of “smart” technology has hit the market—think of “smart” phones and “smart” boards used in the classroom. What are the benefits of these connected devices? Discuss your answers with the class.

### Put Your Inventor’s Hat On

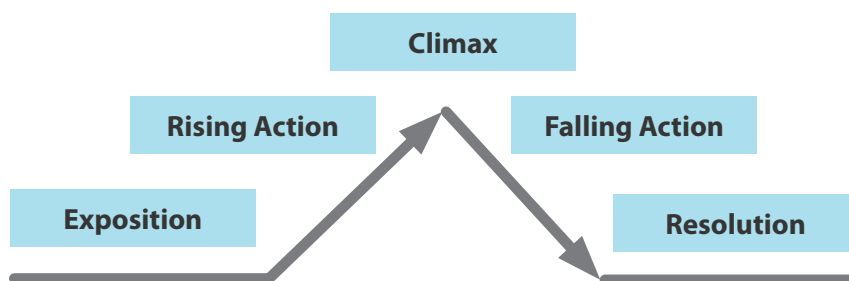
If you could invent a new device that would help people in their kitchens or around their homes, what would it be? Use the space below to describe and/or illustrate your invention. Make sure to include details that will help explain the usefulness of the invention.

## Analyze Plot

A story's **plot** is a series of events that occur in stages of development. Most plots focus on a **conflict**, or a problem faced by the main character. Most stories have five stages of plot development:

- An **exposition** that introduces the characters, setting, and conflict
- **Rising action**, in which the main character or characters try to solve the problem even while complications may be introduced
- A **climax**, or point of greatest tension, when the conflict eases
- **Falling action**, in which the effects of the climax become clear
- A **resolution**, or final outcome

To analyze a plot, examine the way events at each stage propel the story toward its climax and finally to the resolution of the conflict.



## Analyze Science Fiction

In **science fiction**, writers combine scientific facts with their own ideas to create a believable **setting**—the time and place of the story's action. Science fiction writers set their stories in the future or in an alternative reality to explore the possible effects of science and technology. As characters move through the plot, several **themes**, or messages about life or human nature, are developed. Often, readers must use clues in the story to draw conclusions about a story's themes. As you read "The Brave Little Toaster," ask yourself these questions:

- What is the main conflict in the story?
- What effect does the setting have on the characters?
- What messages or lessons does the story convey about technology?

### Focus on Genre

#### ↳ Science Fiction

- includes the basic elements of fiction—setting, characters, plot, conflict, and theme
- combines real scientific facts and theories with imaginative elements
- may comment on the present world by imagining a possible future
- may convey a message about the effects or consequences of technology

## Annotation in Action

Here is an example of notes a student made about this paragraph from “The Brave Little Toaster.” As you read, mark words that show elements of science fiction and make note of details that help you draw a conclusion about where and when the story takes place.

“Why did you throw away all my food?” he demanded.  
 The refrigerator hummed smugly at him.  
 “It was spoiled,” it said.

why is the refrigerator acting smug? And why is it talking?

## Expand Your Vocabulary

Put a check mark next to the vocabulary words that you feel comfortable using when speaking or writing.

- |             |                          |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| chafe       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| retract     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ample       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| reintegrate | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Turn to a partner and talk about the words you already know. Then, use as many words as you can in a paragraph about a home full of networked devices in the future. As you read “The Brave Little Toaster,” use the definitions in the side column to learn the vocabulary words you don’t already know.

## Background



**Cory Doctorow** (b. 1971) is a journalist, a blogger, and the author of many works of science fiction. His young adult novels include *Homeland*, *Pirate Cinema*, and the award-winning *Little Brother*, which was also adapted for the stage. His other works include graphic novels, essays, and short stories. Doctorow was born in Toronto, Canada, and lives in Los Angeles. In addition to his other pursuits, he works for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which aims to protect freedom in technology law and policies.



# The Brave Little Toaster

Science Fiction by Cory Doctorow

## A mysterious energy drink interferes in Mister Toussaint's networked home.

- 1 **O**ne day, Mister Toussaint came home to find an extra 300 euros' worth<sup>1</sup> of groceries on his doorstep. So he called up Miz Rousseau, the grocer, and said, "Why have you sent me all this food? My fridge is already full of delicious things. I don't need this stuff and besides, I can't pay for it."
- 2 But Miz Rousseau told him that he had ordered the food. His refrigerator had sent in the list, and she had the signed order to prove it.
- 3 Furious, Mister Toussaint confronted his refrigerator. It was mysteriously empty, even though it had been full that morning. Or rather, it was *almost* empty: there was a single pouch of energy drink sitting on a shelf in the back. He'd gotten it from an enthusiastically smiling young woman on

<sup>1</sup> **euros'** (yŏŏr'ōz) **worth:** valued in euros, the currency of the European Union. 300 euros is about the same as \$350 in American currency.

### NOTICE & NOTE

As you read, use the side margins to make notes about the text.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### ANALYZE PLOT

**Annotate:** Notice what Mister Toussaint does with LOONY GOONY in paragraph 9. Mark details in paragraphs 6–8 that explain why he does this.

**Infer:** What conflict is Mister Toussaint facing in this story?

---

---

---

### NOTICE & NOTE AGAIN AND AGAIN

When you notice certain events, images, or words being repeated in a story, you've found an **Again and Again** signpost.

**Notice & Note:** What pattern do you notice in Mister Toussaint's actions? Mark words that show the pattern.

**Analyze:** Why might the author repeat this pattern of events again and again?

---

---

---

---

the metro<sup>2</sup> platform the day before. She'd been giving them to everyone.

4 "Why did you throw away all my food?" he demanded. The refrigerator hummed smugly at him.

5 "It was spoiled," it said.

6 But the food hadn't been spoiled. Mister Toussaint pored over his refrigerator's diagnostics<sup>3</sup> and logfiles, and soon enough, he had the answer. It was the energy beverage, of course.

7 "Row, row, row your boat," it sang. "Gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, I'm offgassing ethylene."<sup>4</sup> Mister Toussaint sniffed the pouch suspiciously.

8 "No you're not," he said. The label said that the drink was called LOONY GOONY and it promised ONE TRILLION TIMES MORE POWERFUL THAN ESPRESSO!!!!ONE11! Mister Toussaint began to suspect that the pouch was some kind of stupid Internet of Things<sup>5</sup> prank. He hated those.

9 He chucked the pouch in the rubbish can and put his new groceries away.

10 The next day, Mister Toussaint came home and discovered that the overflowing rubbish was still sitting in its little bag under the sink. The can had not cycled it through the trapdoor to the chute that ran to the big collection-point at ground level, 104 storeys below.

11 "Why haven't you emptied yourself?" he demanded. The trashcan told him that toxic substances had to be manually sorted. "What toxic substances?"

12 So he took out everything in the bin, one piece at a time. You've probably guessed what the trouble was.

13 "Excuse me if I'm chattery, I do not mean to nattery, but I'm a mercury battery!" LOONY GOONY's singing voice really got on Mister Toussaint's nerves.

14 "No you're not," Mister Toussaint said.

15 Mister Toussaint tried the microwave. Even the cleverest squeezezy-pouch couldn't survive a good nuking. But the microwave wouldn't switch on. "I'm no drink and I'm no meal," LOONY GOONY sang. "I'm a ferrous<sup>6</sup> lump of steel!"

<sup>2</sup> **metro:** subway.

<sup>3</sup> **diagnostics** (dī'əg-nōs'tīks): tools a computer uses to identify problems.

<sup>4</sup> **offgassing ethylene** (əth'ə-lēn'): releasing a flammable gas, C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>.

<sup>5</sup> **Internet of Things:** the network of devices, including "smart" appliances, that are connected to the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> **ferrous** (fēr'əs): containing iron.



Don't forget to **Notice & Note** as you read the text.




---



---



---



---

16 The dishwasher wouldn't wash it ("I don't mean to annoy or **chafe**, but I'm simply not dishwasher safe!"). The toilet wouldn't flush it ("I don't belong in the bog, because down there I'm sure to clog!"). The windows wouldn't **retract** their safety screen to let it drop, but that wasn't much of a surprise.

17 "I hate you," Mister Toussaint said to LOONY GOONY, and he stuck it in his coat pocket. He'd throw it out in a trash-can on the way to work.

18 They arrested Mister Toussaint at the 678th Street station. They were waiting for him on the platform, and they cuffed him just as soon as he stepped off the train. The entire station had been evacuated and the police wore full biohazard containment gear. They'd even shrinkwrapped their machine-guns.

19 "You'd better wear a breather and you'd better wear a hat, I'm a vial of terrible deadly hazmat," LOONY GOONY sang.

20 When they released Mister Toussaint the next day, they made him take LOONY GOONY home with him. There were lots more people with LOONY GOONYS to process.

21 Mister Toussaint paid the rush-rush fee that the storage depot charged to send over his container. They forklifted it out of the giant warehouse under the desert and zipped it straight to the cargo-bay in Mister Toussaint's building. He put on old, stupid clothes and clipped some lights to his glasses and started sorting.

22 Most of the things in the container were stupid. He'd been throwing away stupid stuff all his life, because the smart stuff was just so much easier. But then his grandpa had died and they'd cleaned out his little room at the pensioner's ward<sup>7</sup> and

**chafe**

(chāf) v. To *chafe* is to annoy or bother someone.

**retract**

(rĭ-trăkt') v. To *retract* is to pull in.

**ANALYZE SCIENCE FICTION**

**Annotate:** Mark details in paragraphs 18–20 that show what happens when Mister Toussaint tries to dispose of LOONY GOONY on the way to work.

**Analyze:** Why are the police waiting for him at the train station? What theme or themes about technology might these events suggest?

---



---



---



---



---



---

© Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company • Image Credits: ©adpePhoto/Shutterstock

<sup>7</sup> **pensioner's ward:** part of a hospital that provides care for people receiving pensions, or government support for older persons.

---

---

### ample

(ăm'pəl) *adj.* To be *ample* is to be plentiful or enough.

### reintegrate

(rē-în'tī-grāt') *v.* To *reintegrate* is to come together, as when similar materials are collected for recycling.

## NOTICE & NOTE AHA MOMENT

When you notice a sudden realization that shifts a character's actions or understandings, you've found an **Aha Moment** signpost.

**Notice & Note:** What words and phrases in paragraph 29 suggest that Mister Toussaint is having an Aha Moment? Mark these words and phrases.

**Cause/Effect:** What does Mister Toussaint suddenly realize, and how does this change things?

---

---

---

## VOCABULARY

**Context Clues:** If you are unfamiliar with the word *vindictive* in paragraph 31, you can use surrounding words or other context to infer that it means "intended to hurt or take revenge on someone."

**Analyze:** What does the author's use of this word suggest about the firefighters?

---

---

---

he'd just shoved it all in the container and sent it out to the desert.

23 From time to time, he'd thought of the eight cubic meters of stupidity he'd inherited and sighed a put-upon sigh. He'd loved Grandpa, but he wished the old man had used some of the **ample** spare time from the tail end of his life to replace his junk with stuff that could more gracefully **reintegrate** with the materials stream.

24 How inconsiderate!

25 The house chattered enthusiastically at the toaster when he plugged it in, but the toaster said nothing back. It couldn't. It was stupid. Its bread-slots were crusted over with carbon residue and it dribbled crumbs from the ill-fitting tray beneath it. It had been designed and built by cavemen who hadn't ever considered the advantages of networked environments.

26 It was stupid, but it was brave. It would do anything Mister Toussaint asked it to do.

27 "It's getting hot and sticky and I'm not playing any games, you'd better get me out before I burst into flames!" LOONY GOONY sang loudly, but the toaster ignored it.

28 "I don't mean to endanger your abode, but if you don't let me out, I'm going to explode!" The smart appliances chattered nervously at one another, but the brave little toaster said nothing as Mister Toussaint depressed its lever again.

29 Just as he did, he thought to check in with the flat's diagnostics. Just in time, too! Its quorum-sensors<sup>8</sup> were redlining<sup>9</sup> as it listened in on the appliances' consternation.<sup>10</sup> Mister Toussaint unplugged the fridge and the microwave and the dishwasher.

30 The cooker and trash-can were hard-wired, but they didn't represent a quorum.

31 The fire department took away the melted toaster and used their axes to knock huge, vindictive holes in Mister Toussaint's walls. "Just looking for embers," they claimed. But he knew that they were upset because there was simply no good excuse for sticking a pouch of independently powered computation and sensors and transmitters into an antique toaster and pushing down the lever until oily, toxic smoke filled the whole 104th floor.

<sup>8</sup> **quorum-sensors:** devices that receive input from Mister Toussaint's smart appliances; when a certain number (a quorum) of the appliances signal distress, emergency action is taken.

<sup>9</sup> **redlining:** reaching a limit or maximum; here, approaching the point at which the apartment would take action to stop the toaster.

<sup>10</sup> **consternation:** a feeling of alarm or fear.

- 32 Mister Toussaint's neighbors weren't happy about it either.
- 33 But Mister Toussaint didn't mind. It had all been worth it, just to hear LOONY GOONY beg and weep for its life as its edges curled up and blackened.
- 34 He argued mightily, but the firefighters refused to let him keep the toaster.

### TURN AND TALK

Turn to a partner and discuss the ending of "The Brave Little Toaster." What do you think the author's opinion of technology is?



**ESSENTIAL QUESTION:**  
**Does technology improve or control our lives?**

Review your notes and add your thoughts to your Response Log.

## Assessment Practice

Answer these questions before moving on to the **Analyze the Text** section on the following page.

1. This question has two parts. First answer **Part A**, then **Part B**.

### Part A

Why does Mister Toussaint's refrigerator order more groceries?

- A The refrigerator takes stock and identifies missing items.
- B Miz Rousseau receives a grocery list from the refrigerator.
- C LOONY GOONY tells the refrigerator that the food is spoiled.
- D The appliances reach a quorum about placing an order.

### Part B

Which detail best supports the correct answer?

- A Miz Rousseau has a signed order for the groceries.
- B Mister Toussaint identifies LOONY GOONY after analyzing data.
- C The refrigerator tells Mister Toussaint that the food was spoiled.
- D Mister Toussaint throws out the pouch of LOONY GOONY.

2. Why is the toaster able to destroy LOONY GOONY?

- A The toaster is braver than the other kitchen appliances.
- B The other appliances are not aware of the toaster.
- C The apartment's quorum-sensors approve the toaster's actions.
- D The toaster does not receive messages from other devices.



Test-Taking Strategies



## Analyze the Text

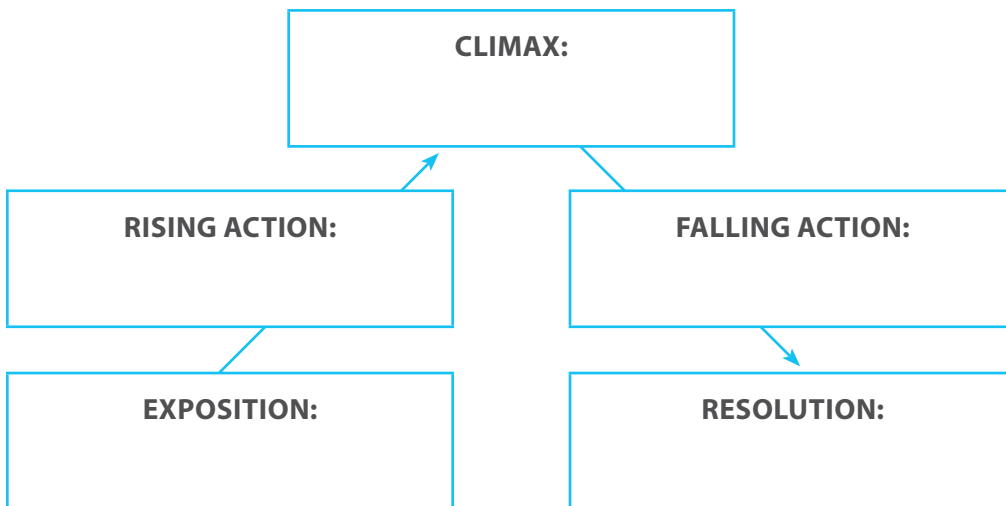
Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- 1 **DRAW CONCLUSIONS** Is the story set in the past, the present, or the future? What details in the text help you draw this conclusion?
- 2 **ANALYZE** In paragraph 6, Mister Toussaint has an **Aha Moment** when he confirms that the energy drink caused his fridge to throw out his food. How does this realization affect the plot of the story?
- 3 **INTERPRET** Is LOONY GOONY an “Internet of Things prank,” as Mister Toussaint suspects? Explain why.
- 4 **ANALYZE** Find the statement that Mister Toussaint says **Again and Again** in paragraphs 8 and 14. What is he responding to each time? How does this repetition relate to the story’s main conflict?
- 5 **SUMMARIZE** Complete a plot diagram for “The Brave Little Toaster” by briefly summarizing the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution of the story’s plot.



**NOTICE & NOTE**

Review what you **noticed and noted** as you read the text. Your annotations can help you answer these questions.



- 6 **SYNTHESIZE** Think about the story overall. Then, write a sentence that states its theme—its message about life or human nature.

## Choices

Here are some other ways to demonstrate your understanding of the ideas in this lesson.

### Writing

#### ↳ Summarize a Story

Write a summary of “The Brave Little Toaster.” Your summary should briefly retell the most important events of the story in your own words.

- Begin by describing the story’s setting and introducing the main character, Mister Toussaint.
- Next, describe the conflict Mister Toussaint faces and how he responds to it. Tell the main events of the story in the order in which they happened.
- Explain how the conflict is resolved at the end of the story.

As you write and discuss, be sure to use the **Academic Vocabulary** words.

commentary

network

occupation

option

speculate

### Media

#### ↳ Create a Comic

With a partner or a small group, create a sequel to “The Brave Little Toaster” in the form of a comic or graphic novel. Use a combination of images and text to show what happens to Mister Toussaint after the events described in Doctorow’s story.

- Decide what Mister Toussaint’s conflict will be in your sequel. Does he try to find another “stupid” toaster to replace the one that melted? Does he become the victim of another prank?
- Organize the events into a plot structure that unfolds naturally. Review the plot diagram at the beginning of the lesson.
- Work together to draw the images for your comic or find images online. Use digital tools to construct your comic and to give it a polished look.

### Social & Emotional Learning

#### ↳ Discuss with a Small Group

What could Mister Toussaint teach his neighbors about dealing with a prank like LOONY GOONY? Work with a group to create a set of helpful tips.

- As a group, review the story and note Mister Toussaint’s actions in response to LOONY GOONY. Discuss which actions were effective and which were ineffective or destructive, and why.
- Brainstorm a list of tips or guidelines that would help someone overcome a similar “Internet of Things prank.”
- Together, organize everyone’s ideas into a set of step-by-step instructions for what a person should do if faced with something like LOONY GOONY.

## Expand Your Vocabulary

### PRACTICE AND APPLY

Words with similar meanings are called **synonyms**. **Antonyms** are words with opposite meanings. Identify each word pair below as being either synonyms or antonyms.

chafe

retract

ample

reintegrate

1. **chafe** / soothe
2. **retract** / extend
3. **ample** / plenty
4. **reintegrate** / explode

### Vocabulary Strategy

#### ↳ Context Clues

**Context clues** are words, phrases, and ideas in the surrounding text that can provide hints to help you figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Find the word *ferrous* in this paragraph:

Mister Toussaint tried the microwave. Even the cleverest squeezy-pouch couldn't survive a good nuking. But the microwave wouldn't switch on. "I'm no drink and I'm no meal," LOONY GOONY sang. "I'm a ferrous lump of steel!"

*Ferrous* appears right before *lump*, which is a noun. This helps you determine that the word *ferrous* describes *lump*. You also know from previous paragraphs that LOONY GOONY pretends to be made of dangerous materials. Microwaving metal is dangerous, and steel contains iron; these are clues to the word's meaning, "made of iron."



Interactive Vocabulary  
Lesson: Using Context  
Clues

### PRACTICE AND APPLY

Find the words *container* and *stupid* in paragraph 21. Complete the chart for both words.

WORD	POSSIBLE MEANINGS	CONTEXT CLUES	MEANING IN PARAGRAPH 21
container			
stupid			

## Watch Your Language!

### Participles

A **participle** is a verb form that is used as an adjective, which modifies a noun. Writers often use participles to help create vivid descriptions.

- A present participle ends in *-ing*. A past participle can have different endings, such as *-d*, *-ed*, or *-en*.



Interactive Grammar  
Lesson: Participles and  
Participial Phrases

Present participle: **Mister Toussaint had a surprising delivery.**

*(The participle surprising modifies the noun delivery.)*

Past participle: **He called Miz Rousseau about the mistaken order of unwanted groceries.**

*(The participle mistaken modifies the noun order. The participle unwanted modifies the noun groceries.)*

### PRACTICE AND APPLY

Read these sentences from “The Brave Little Toaster.” Identify each participle and the noun that it modifies.

1. His refrigerator had sent in the list, and she had the signed order to prove it.
2. Or rather, it was *almost* empty: there was a single pouch of energy drink sitting on a shelf in the back.
3. LOONY GOONY’s singing voice really got on Mister Toussaint’s nerves.
4. It had been designed and built by cavemen who hadn’t ever considered the advantages of networked environments.
5. The fire department took away the melted toaster and used their axes to knock huge, vindictive holes in Mister Toussaint’s walls.