Octavio Diaz was lost. It had happened so fast. He had been with his sister Maria and brother Oscar in the corn maze. The three Diaz siblings were puzzled about how to get out of the maze, but they were not afraid. There was still some time before sunset. The children had been meandering down one path after another. As they kept selecting paths that led to nowhere, they laughed and laughed.
When Octavio knelt down to tie his shoe, Maria and Oscar did not stop walking. They turned a corner. When his shoe was tied, Octavio stood up and turned the corner. As he did, he entered a small, circular opening. Maria and Oscar were nowhere in sight. There were three different paths that led from the opening. Maria and Oscar had selected one of the paths, but which one?
At first Octavio heard Maria and Oscar calling him, so he followed the path that seemed to go toward their voices. But the farther Octavio walked, the softer the sound of the voices became. Octavio went back to the opening. Now he could not hear them at all. He shouted their names, but there was no answer.

As he studied the paths, Octavio realized that he did not recall which one he had taken. There was no doubt about it. He was lost! Octavio panicked a bit. Then he thought about his situation and relaxed. He was lost in a corn maze, not a jungle, after all.
Octavio reached into his pocket for the map of the maze that each of the children had been given. The maze was designed to look like a drawing of a large tractor parked near a barn. That is what the map resembled. Each line in the drawing represented a path.

The challenge was that the drawing had numerous lines to illustrate the details of the tractor and barn. That meant that there were many paths in the maze. Some were connected, but some were dead ends. The connected paths eventually led out of the maze.
There were many ways to go, many dead ends, and no guarantee that Octavio could discover the correct paths before sundown. Plus Octavio did not know his current position on the map.

Across the top of the map were the words “The History of Corn.” When Octavio was with Maria and Oscar, he had noticed signs about corn. But he did not pay them any attention. Now Octavio had a suspicion that they might disclose the secret of the maze.
Octavio walked down one of the paths searching for a sign. That path was a dead end, but he returned to the opening and took a new path. Octavio walked several yards and spotted a sign that said, “Columbus brings corn seed to Europe, 1492.”

Octavio continued down that path until it split into more paths. By one a sign announced, “Squanto shows Pilgrims how to grow corn, 1621.” Octavio selected that path. Soon he discovered sign after sign that told the history and science of corn.
Each sign had a year that came closer to modern times. Finally he saw a sign that said, “First modern corn mazes created, 1990s.” On the other side of the sign was the exit!

As Octavio exited, he saw his mother waiting patiently. But Maria and Oscar were not there. They were still making their way through the maze!

Maria and Oscar emerged from the maze at dusk. But it was from the entrance, not the exit. They had been guided out by one of the maze workers.
On the way home the children joked about being lost. As they did, Octavio realized he had learned some things. First he now knew a lot about corn. Second he now knew he could remain calm in a frightening situation. Octavio smiled. It had been a valuable experience.
Many people do not think of fields of corn when they visit their local market. However, they should. Most groceries carry more than one thousand products made with corn. It is difficult to find an aisle that does not have some items with corn as an ingredient. What types of foods contain corn? Examples include salad dressings, cooking oils, breakfast cereals, syrups, breads, margarines, and much more.
Today corn and corn products feed the world. This is not a new trend. Corn has been vital for centuries. Corn is so common that we may take it for granted. Scientists do not because corn fascinates them.

Scientists are always looking for ways to improve corn. They work hard to protect it from harmful agents. They try to guarantee the quality of the corn crop. They know how crucial this plant is. If corn could not be grown, large parts of the world would go hungry.
Some scientists study how corn affects the human body. All corn products contain carbohydrates. These are beneficial sources of energy. However, some forms of these compounds can be harmful. Scientists are working to find out how to process corn to get the best use of its energy.

Other scientists are learning how corn might lessen medical concerns. They have discovered that the hull of a corn kernel can be used to make a vegetable oil. This oil will be used in many foods. It may lower the risk of heart ailments in many people. It might help prevent many serious health issues.
Corn is more than just food for humans. It also feeds livestock all around the world. Scientists learn how corn can be improved to make healthier cattle, pigs, poultry, and sheep.

And corn appears in more than the products found at the market. Parts of the plant are used in building materials, artists’ paints, paper goods, and even clothing.
Even with all the ways it is used in daily life, scientists still search for more knowledge about corn. They continue their research because corn is unique compared to other natural resources that might be used in similar ways. Why does this plant stand out? It stands out because it is renewable. This means that corn can be grown every year. Many other resources are nonrenewable.
An example of a nonrenewable resource is petroleum. Petroleum is used to make gasoline, heating oil, plastics, and many other products. It is even used in beauty aids. But there is a problem. There is only so much petroleum in the world. Sooner or later it will disappear.

Scientists are always looking for alternatives to petroleum, and corn is an excellent option. For example, fuel can be made from corn. This fuel is mixed with gasoline. It can be used in car and truck engines.
Corn is also used to make plastics. Currently corn-based plastics are not quite as sturdy as the petroleum-based plastics. But corn-based plastics are found in packaging and many other items for which plastic is needed.

Scientists prefer these corn-based plastics because they will break down in landfills. This makes them more environmentally friendly than petroleum-based plastics. Those sit in landfills unchanged for years.
In fact the plastic bag you throw away today will still be in a landfill when your grandchildren are alive! On the other hand, corn-based plastics will become part of the earth again.

What new products will be made from corn? How will corn change medicine and energy? Scientists are busy at work on those questions. And they are sure to find some answers that help us all.
These questions can help you think about the story and the article you just read. After you write your responses, discuss them with a small group.

**What if?**
How would the story be different if Octavio had not had a map in his pocket?

**What would you do?**
Imagine that you are lost in a maze of corn and you do not have a map. How would you try to find your way out of the maze?

**What did you discover?**
How can a cornfield be good for the environment? What is the difference between a corn-based plastic and a petroleum-based plastic?