

Web Unit Plan

Title: Signs of the Times

Description: High school students study how literature is affected by the times in which it was created and the impact that fiction can have on society. They choose a novel that highlights a social or political issue from the past (such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Animal Farm*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Oliver Twist*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Jungle*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Jane Eyre*) and examine primary sources from the time in which it was written. They analyze the data to produce two digital products: a commentary written by a contemporary of the author and a modern discussion of the novel that takes into account its historical context.

At a Glance

Grade Level: 10-12

Subject sort (for Web site index): Language Arts

Subject(s): English, History

Topics: Literature

Higher-Order Thinking Skills: Analysis, Synthesis, Creativity

Key Learnings: Historical analysis, research, primary sources

Time Needed: 2 weeks, 45–50 minutes per class period

Background:

Unit Summary

Curriculum Framing Questions

Essential Question

- What does the past tell us?

Unit Questions

- How does fiction reflect its times?
- What can we learn about the past from fiction?
- How can we draw conclusions from primary sources?

Content Questions

- What were some political and social movements when historical novels were written?
- How can we use a spreadsheet to organize information?

Assessment Processes

View how a variety of student-centered [assessments](#) are used in the Signs of the Times Unit Plan. These assessments help students and teachers set goals; monitor student progress; provide feedback; assess thinking, processes, performances, and products; and reflect on learning throughout the learning cycle.

Instructional Procedures

Unit Preparation

Before beginning this project, students need to have read most of a novel written in the past that addresses a social, political, or cultural issue. Read some suggested titles in [Signs of the Times Suggested Novels](#). Although the entire class may read the same book, this activity works well when students choose a novel to read. Choosing their own books from a list of preapproved novels gives students more control of their own learning experience and enables differentiation. Students may read the novel individually, with a partner, or with a small group. Some possible groupings could be:

- The entire class reads the same book, but groups of students each target a different issue addressed in the book.
- Working with a history class, groups choose different novels written during a specific time period or in a specific country.
- A group of students chooses a novel and an issue, and each group member takes on a different perspective of the issue.

In place of the usual activities, such as quizzes and vocabulary exercises, when an entire class reads the same book, a variety of activities support students in one classroom reading different books, including:

- Journals
- Small group discussions on books with similar features, such as setting, author, or writing style
- Graphic organizers focused on elements of fiction, such as characterization and plot
- Analytic writing
- Creative responses

Unit Introduction

Bring a collection of old yearbooks to class or ask students to bring their parents' or grandparents' yearbooks. Place students in small groups and ask them to browse through the books and make notes about things that they find strange, funny, or unusual, such as clothing, hairstyles, clubs, and comments. After 10 to 15 minutes, conduct a discussion about the Essential Question, *What does the past tell us?* Use the following suggested prompts to probe students to deeper thinking:

- What is strange about the world you see in the yearbook?
- What is similar to your school life today?
- What do you think of the fashions and hairstyles?
- Do you think everything in the yearbook was stylish at the time?
- How could you tell if something in the yearbook was in style or out of style at the time?

Point out that in order to understand something from the past, whether it is a style of clothing or a political point of view, it helps to try and see it as the people of that era saw it. Explain that they are going to do some research to learn about what the world was like during the time in which their novels were written and to think about what readers at that time might have thought about the ideas in the book.

Emphasize that the books may have been very controversial when they were published, so different people will have had different opinions about the book. They will take on a persona that lived when the book was published and use primary and secondary sources to create that person's opinion of the book. Share the student sample Web site, *Orwell and Me* [[link to https://sites.google.com/site/orwellandme/](https://sites.google.com/site/orwellandme/)]. Discuss the [Signs of the Times Project Rubric](#) and invite student suggestions for modification. Encourage students to refer to the project rubric as they work to ensure they produce high-quality work.

Conducting Research

Introduce the research process that students will use to create two digital products demonstrating their learning. If students are working in groups, their products may be collected into one overall project, but each student must still create both products identifiable as theirs. Ask students to create their own checklist to monitor their progress through the project. Provide hard copies of the [Signs of the Times Research Project Plan](#) or the [online version](#) to students who need it, but encourage them to adapt the checklist to meet their needs.

Identify a Question

Based on their analysis of the political, social, or cultural point of view of their novel, students develop a question to guide their research. Some sample research questions are:

- What were people’s opinions about race in the time in which *Huckleberry Finn* was written?
- What was the political environment during the writing of *1984*?
- What roles did women play in the time of *Pride and Prejudice*?

Collect Data or Evidence

Explain that students will collect evidence that will help them understand the environment in which people originally read their novels. Review the definitions of primary and secondary sources, and ask students to find secondary sources with background information related to the topic of their questions. Then ask them to locate relevant primary sources. See the Resources section for links to sites with useful information.

As necessary, offer mini-lessons in information literacy skills that help students collect and organize their data, such as:

- Conducting effective Internet searches
- Keeping records
- Using spreadsheets to organize data

Analyze Data

Provide instruction through mini-lessons in analyzing data from primary sources. The ARC Guide for Educators and Students (www.archives.gov/research/arc/education) offers a variety of worksheets to help students analyze primary sources.

To support students while they analyze their data, provide additional instruction in relevant critical thinking skills, such as:

- Using spreadsheet tools to think about data in useful ways
- Synthesizing information from different sources
- Creating categories for classifying data
- Identifying patterns in data

Making Meaning

The most important part of research is making meaning of it all. Students collect and

analyze data in order to draw conclusions and share their ideas with others. Schedule time for students to discuss their conclusions and get feedback from a small group.

Draw Conclusions

Students draw from what they have discovered to take on the persona of a person living in the time in which the book was written and published. For example, a student might create the persona of a teen-ager living in the American South during the late 1860s or a doctor living in Britain during World War II. Emphasize that the book was probably met with a wide range of opinions and their job is to explore what one of those opinions might have been. Students use the results of their data analysis to hypothesize the person's views of the ideas in their book to create their products.

Mini-lessons on relevant critical thinking skills can help students with the drawing conclusions phase of the project, such as:

- Using primary source data to make predictions of how people might have felt about a novel
- Determining causal connections between political, social, and cultural events and people, places, and events in the novel

Creating a Product or Presentation

In the final stage of the research process, students share their findings with others. Creating products or presentations that will be viewed and responded to by peers, family, and even the community, encourages students to produce high-quality work. When students have completed a draft of their products or presentations, ask them to use the [Signs of the Times Project Peer Assessment](#) form to get constructive feedback.

Share Findings

From the point of view of their hypothetical persona, students create a product, such as a blog or multimedia presentation, that summarizes the plot and theme of the novel and discusses the hypothetical person's opinion about the theme of the book.

As students work on their products or presentations, provide instruction, as needed, in necessary skills, such as:

- Choosing the right technology for the task
- Using features of different technologies creatively

- Writing to engage readers

Project Showcase

Setting up a time for students to explore and respond to each other's projects gives students a sense of completion and pride in their work. If possible, post links to students' work on school or class Web sites.

Project Conclusion

Conclude the project with a discussion of the Essential Question, *What can the past tell us?* Prompt students to deeper discussion as necessary with questions such as:

- How did the views of issues in your book compare or contrast with other views at the time it was written?
- How did the views of issues in your book compare or contrast with today's views?
- Did your opinion of the book's theme change when you learned more about the time in which it was written? How? Why?

Ask students to reflect on their learning about the role of society in the creation of literature and their experience analyzing and drawing conclusions about primary sources.

Prerequisite Skills

- Internet research
- Literary analysis

Differentiated Instruction

Resource Student

- Prepare a list of approved novels that includes books at different reading levels.
- Identify appropriate primary sources ahead of time for students to use.
- Prepare templates and checklists to help students accomplish tasks and build self-direction skills.
- Provide large-group and small-group instruction in necessary skills.
- Create heterogeneous groups in which students can discuss their work and give each other feedback.

Gifted Student

- Encourage students to explore unfamiliar technologies for completing the project.
- Suggest that students read more challenging books, such as a book written in the past about a previous era, such as *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Crucible*, and discuss how the time in which the book was written influenced the view of the past.
- Suggest that students read two or more books from the same time period that address a common issue.

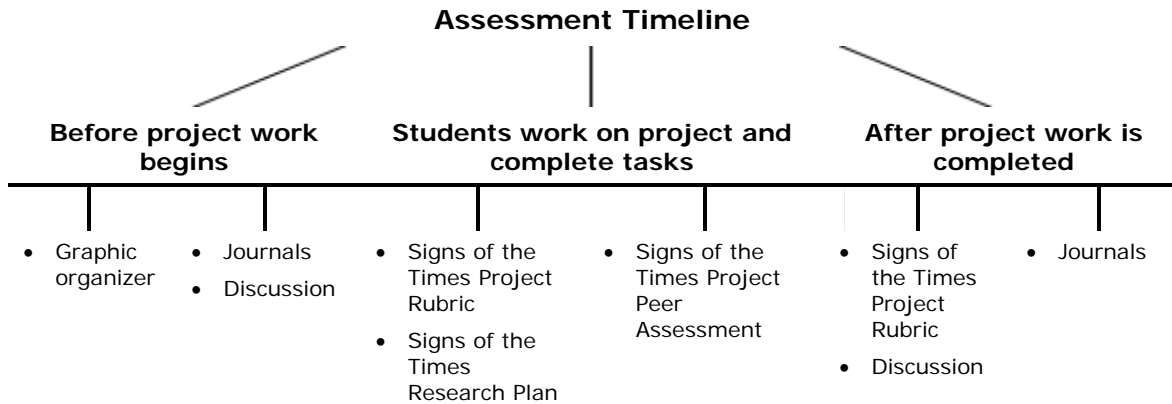
English Language Learner

- Allow students to read a book in their native language.
- Identify possible sources of primary sources in the native language.
- Create heterogeneous groups in which students can discuss their work and give each other feedback.

Credits

Things You Need

Assessment Plan



Before beginning the Signs of the Times project, students complete graphic organizers describing the elements of the novels they have read and write in their journals about their interpretations of the novels. After the project introduction, students discuss the Essential Question *What does the past tell us?* to explain their understanding of the complexity of perspectives on past issues. The [Signs of the Times Research Plan](#) helps students self-assess their research for the project, and they use the [project rubric](#) and the [Signs of the Times Project Peer Assessment](#) to help them create a quality project. At the conclusion of the unit, a discussion and journal prompts guide students to reflect on their learning from the project, and the teacher uses the [project rubric](#) to assign grades to students' projects.

Content Standards and Objectives

Targeted Content Standards and Benchmarks

Wisconsin English Language Arts Standards

- Explain the structure of selected classical and contemporary works of literature, in whole and in part, from various cultures and historical periods, and illustrate ways in which authors use syntax, imagery, figures of speech, allusions, symbols, irony, and other devices in the context of history, culture, and style
- Investigate and report on ways in which a writer has influenced or been influenced by historical, social, and cultural issues or events
- Develop, explain, and defend interpretations of complex literary works

- Examine, explain, and evaluate, orally and in writing, various perspectives concerning individual, community, national, and world issues reflected in literary and nonliterary texts
- Analyze and synthesize the concepts and details encountered in informational texts such as reports, technical manuals, historical papers, and government documents
- Draw on and integrate information from multiple sources when acquiring knowledge and developing a position on a topic of interest
- Evaluate the reliability and authenticity of information conveyed in a text, using criteria based on knowledge of the author, topic, and context and analysis of logic, evidence, propaganda, and language

Student Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Determine the point of view of the author of an historical literary work.
- Use effective Internet search strategies to identify primary sources related to an historical novel's time period and theme.
- Collect and organize data about the historical context of a novel from primary and secondary sources.
- Analyze and synthesize data from a variety of primary and secondary sources to describe the social, political, and cultural environment in which a novel was written.
- Use references to the text and to primary and secondary sources to describe the theme of a novel in terms of its historical context.
- Use appropriate strategies to produce original, unusual, and high-quality products with technology.

Technology and Resources

Internet Resources

ARC Guide for Educators and Students

www.archives.gov/research/arc/education

Tips and tools for using the National Archives to find primary sources

A Chronology of U. S. Historical Documents

www.law.ou.edu/hist

Site with regularly updated documents from the 1215 Magna Carta to Barak Obama's State of the Union speech in 2011

Civil Rights Special Collection

www.teachersdomain.org/special/civil

Audio and video resources, as well as documents about the civil rights movement

Digital Library of India

www.dli.ernet.in

A searchable collection of primary documents, such as newspapers and books

EuroDocs: Online Sources for European History

http://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main_Page

Selected transcriptions, facsimiles, and translations of documents arranged by European country

Eyes on the Prize

www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/sources

A small collection of documents from 1955 to 1983 related to civil rights in the United States

Hanover Historical Texts Project

<http://history.hanover.edu/project.html>

A collection of scanned documents dating from the 11th to the 20th century

Internet History Sourcebooks Project

www.fordham.edu/halsall

An advertising-free collection of public domain historical documents

The Library of Congress: American Memory

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/amhome.html>

Searchable and browsable resource of documents, photos, audio and video files, maps, and sheet music related to American history

Librivox

www.librivox.org

Amateur recordings of literary works in the public domain

Mayflower History

www.mayflowerhistory.com/Library/library.php

A library of documents related to early American history

New York Public Library Digital Gallery

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital>

A comprehensive collection of images sorted into hundreds of subjects

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection

www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_americas.html

A collection of historical maps of North, Central, and South America

Project Gutenberg

www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page

Online source for literature in the public domain

Technology—Hardware

Other Resources