

To Kill a Mockingbird

A Study Guide



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Introductory Materials — *Why teach To Kill a Mockingbird?*

“Why teach To Kill a Mockingbird?” might be the wrong question – this is one of the most widely taught books around. A better question is: why you should teach To Kill a Mockingbird using this guide?

This novel is a canonical story about discrimination and segregation in the Jim Crow American South – but that is an American story. Failure to learn about Canada’s history in this time leaves students ill-equipped to have discussions about our history on our own terms, learn the lessons distinct to our history, and to take pride in those who fought for equal rights in Canada.

This guide pairs the relatively straightforward story of To Kill a Mockingbird with suggestions for Socratic discussion and collaborative learning to deal with significant, ambiguous, or challenging passages, short answer exercise sheets, and in-class discussion about the text. But it takes these resources and pairs them with resources detailing Canada’s history of segregation and civil rights movement, information about significant African-Canadians, and challenges to social change. Students are encouraged to draw parallels and find differences between the American story – which they’re likely to know better – and our Canadian past.

Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

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Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through **discussion based inquiry**. A few guidelines:

- Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.
- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.

Chapters 1 – 6

Discussion questions:

- What kind of town do you think Maycomb is? What would it be like to live there?
- Why do you think Miss Caroline is so unprepared for the children in her class?
- Why do you think people in Maycomb are so poor?
- Do you think Miss Caroline has a different idea of the potential to change among the students than they have about themselves?
- Why do you think Jem and Dill want Boo Radley to come out so badly?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 2: “It certainly was. Before the first morning was over, Miss Caroline Fisher... I contented myself with asking Jem if he’d lost his mind.”

Chapter 2: “My special knowledge of the Cunningham tribe... ‘Walter hasn’t got a quarter at home to bring you, and you can’t use any stovewood.’”

Chapter 3: “After supper, Atticus sat down with the paper and called, ‘Scout, ready to read?’... ‘I don’t know any landowner around here who begrudges those children any game their father can hit.’”

Chapter 4: “The remainder of my schooldays were no more auspicious than the first... yet I did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for me.”

Chapter 5: “Miss Maudie hated her house: time spent indoors was time wasted. She was a widow, a chameleon lady... ‘Wouldn’t you stay in the house if you didn’t want to come out?’”

Chapter 5: “Jem held out a filthy piece of paper. Atticus took it and tried to read it... ‘I thought I wanted to be a lawyer but I ain’t so sure now!’”

Exercises

The history of prejudice and racism:

Share with your students the overview of history and prejudice in Canada and the history of Jim Crow laws in the United States, both on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca.

- What aspects of Canada's history do you think mirror the experience that Alabama would have had in the 1920s?
- What are some differences between what you know about the American South in the 1920s and Canada in the 1920s?
- Why do you think there were differences in Canada and the United States?
- Do you think the differences have helped or hurt Canada over time?
- What strengths do you think Canada has when it comes to fighting prejudice?

Chapters 7 – 11

Discussion questions:

- What do you think the old fashioned house at Finch's Landing tells us about the family?
- What do you think Finch's Landing represents to different members of the family?
- Why do you think that even the family is upset with Atticus' decision to defend a black man?
- Why do you think it's so important to Atticus that his children be able to hear insults and let them go?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 7: "Jem stayed moody and silent for a week... From then on, we considered everything we found in the knot-hole our property."

Chapter 7: "He did a fair job, only one spring and two tiny pieces left over, but the watch would not run... but I thought it odd that I had not heard him."

Chapter 8: "Miss Maudie's sunhat was suspended in a thin layer of ice, like a fly in amber... among other things, the recipe called for a cup of sugar."

Chapter 9: "You can just take that back, boy!'... 'It's different this time,' he said, 'This time we aren't fighting the Yankees, we're fighting our friends. But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they're still our friends and this is still our home.'"

Chapter 9: "There went with the house the usual legend about the Yankees: one Finch female, recently engaged... Aunt Alexandra didn't understand girls much, she'd never had one."

Chapter 9: "When I surveyed the damage there were only seven or eight red marks, and I was reflecting upon relativity... I guess he was trying to answer my question, but he made no sense whatsoever."

Chapter 9: "I waited, on tenterhoods, for Uncle Jack to tell Atticus my side of it... it was not until many years later that I realized he wanted me to hear every word he said."

Chapter 11: "Jem was scarlet. I pulled at his sleeve, and we were followed up the sidewalk by a philippic... 'The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.'"

Chapter 11: “The next afternoon at Mrs. Dubose’s was the same as the first, and so was the next... if one day it did not ring, what would we do?”

Chapter 11: “He answered it, then went to the hat rack in the hall. ‘I’m going down to Mrs. Dubose’s for a while,’ he said... she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew.”

Exercises

Segregation in Canada:

Choose resources on racial segregation in Canada from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca to share with your students, and share again the history of Jim Crow in the United States.

- Do you think there were major differences in segregation in Canada and the U.S. because the U.S. made Jim Crow laws, while Canada’s segregation was mostly “policy, but not law”?
- Do you think any of these differences help or hurt Canada or the U.S.?
- Do you think that any of the differences in segregation would have changed the story in *To Kill a Mockingbird* if it had been set in Canada? If so, why? If not, why not?

Chapters 12 – 16

Discussion questions:

- What do you think explains the different reactions of congregants at First Purchase to the children's attendance?
- What does Scout mean when she says there's a "caste" system in Maycomb?
- Why do you think the trial is such a big deal that people are coming from out of town to see it?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 12: "First Purchase African M.E. Church was in the Quarters outside the southern town limits... 'Will the music superintendent lead us in the first hymn,' he said."

Chapter 12: "That Calpurnia led a modest double life never dawned on me... Aunt Alexandra was sitting in a rocking chair exactly as if she had sat there every day of her life."

Chapter 13: "When Aunt Alexandra settled in with us and life resumed its daily pace... had thrived on county welfare money for three generations."

Chapter 15: "In Maycomb, grown me stood outside in the front yard for only two reasons: death and politics... all he would say to my questions was go on and leave him alone."

Chapter 15: "As we walked up the sidewalk, we saw a solitary light burning in the distance... Doors slammed, engines coughed, and they were gone."

Chapter 16: "She waited until Calpurnia was in the kitchen, then she said, 'Don't talk like that in front of them.'... 'you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough.'"

Exercises

Black towns and neighbourhoods in the U.S. and Canada:

Share resources from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on:

- Eatonville, South Florida
 - The Elgin Settlement in Buxton, Ontario
 - Black Bottom in Detroit, Michigan
 - Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia
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- What parallels do you see between Eatonville and the Elgin Settlement?
 - What benefits do you think living in all-black towns had for their residents?
 - Do you think there were any limitations to living in all-black towns? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - What parallels do you see between the story of Black Bottom in Detroit and Africville in Halifax?
 - Why do you think Africville did not have running water or working sewers? Who do you think was responsible for providing those things?
 - Do you think it made sense for the town to use the lack of services as a reason to bulldoze the neighbourhood, rather than to provide services? Why or why not?
 - Do you think there was any chance that the community of Africville could have been maintained after the city moved them?
 - Do you think the residents of Africville were better off owning their homes, or renting newer living spaces from the city?
 - If Halifax was right that the residents were better off, why do you think it didn't simply give the residents a choice? Or, if you think the town was wrong, why do you think they used this reason?
 - Do you think that the government in Halifax will be seen by former residents of Africville as representing them? What about the province of Nova Scotia, or the Country of Canada?
 - Why do you think no level of government stepped in to stop the expropriation and demolition of Africville?

Chapters 17 – 21

Discussion questions:

- Do you think the “caste” system that Scout mentioned has anything to do with how the trial went?
- What do you think the two most important moments of the trial were?
- What do you think the jury should have thought the two most important moments of the trial were?
- What do you think Tom Robinson’s real crime was, in the eyes of the jury?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 20: “Dill sucked on the straws, smiled, and pulled at length... ‘and thanks for the drink, it was mighty settlin’.”

Exercises

The Civil Rights movement in Canada:

Choose resources on important figures from Canada's Civil Rights movement, available from LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, to share with your students. Included is a link to watch a 47 minute film from the National Film Board on the five figures listed.

Divide the class into five groups, and either assign or have each group choose a figure from Canada's civil rights movement. Have each group prepare a short presentation for the class on their figure.

Have each student in the class write a short paper on their favourite figure, along with why they thought they were important.

What might each figure have contributed to Maycomb in the story told in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and why? If you think they could not have contributed, explain why.

Chapters 22 – 31 and Conclusion

Discussion questions:

- Did you think, when you first read it, that Atticus should be worried about Mr. Ewell's threat? Why?
- Do you think it would be better if juries asked questions?
- What do you think is going on in the missionary circle?
- Why do you think Mrs. Merryweather can be simultaneously so concerned about the spiritual well-being of disadvantaged people, but so intolerant of the black residents of Maycomb when they react to the trial?

Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 22: “It was Jem’s turn to cry... ‘tell them they must never do it again. Times are too hard...’”

Chapter 22: “There was a big cake and two little ones on Miss Maudie’s kitchen table... ‘That’s something you’ll have to take up with your father,’ Miss Maudie said.”

Chapter 24: “‘Sin and squalor – what was that, Gertrude?’ Mrs. Merryweather turned on her chimes... on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water.”

Chapter 26: “So many things had happened to us, Boo Radley was the least of our fears... I withdrew from them, and never thought about them until I was forced to.”

Chapter 26: “Cecil Jacobs knew what one was though. When his turn came, he went to the front of the room and began... It’s one of the most terrible stories in history. Time for arithmetic, children.”

Chapter 30: “‘Mr. Finch,’ Mr. Tate said stolidly, ‘Bob Ewell fell on his knife. He killed himself.’... ‘It’s a sin and I’m not about to have it on my head. If it was any other man it’d be different. But not this man, Mr. Finch.’”

Exercises

Final assignment/essay questions:

- What do you think really happened to Bob Ewell? Why? What would different answers mean to what's to come in Maycomb?
- What are some differences between the world Harper Lee wrote about and Canada during segregation? How would *To Kill a Mockingbird* be different if it had happened in Canada?
- What do you think would have happened if Viola Desmond had tried to sit in the “whites-only” section of a theatre in Maycomb during the time of *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

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Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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