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## **Ideas for Using Informational Text to Teach Literature: A Model Based on To Kill a Mockingbird**

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# Ideas for Using Informational Text to Teach Literature: A Model Based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Not long ago Peter Sagal was joking on National Public Radio's *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* about *To Kill a Mockingbird* being replaced in schools across the country by instructional manuals like *Recommended Levels of Insulation* and *The Invasive Plant Inventory*. English teachers everywhere were probably pretty excited that the debates about informational text and the Common Core State Standards had made their way onto NPR. But while we know that *Huck Finn* is not going to be replaced by "Executive Order 13423: Strengthening Federal, Energy, and Transportation Management," we are all grappling with how to integrate informational text into our classrooms without losing the literature we love.

One approach, offered by Sara Mosle in *The New York Times*, and taken up by supervisors and curriculum designers in many districts, has been to embrace stand-alone informational text units. Mosle suggests that teachers address the informational text standard with anthologies such as *30 for Under 20: Great Nonfiction Narratives*. The danger with this approach, however, is two-fold. First, it threatens to compartmentalize our curriculum: literature on one side of the room, non-fiction on the other. Second, it would require the elimination of something, likely fiction, poetry, or even writing. After all, one can't include a new informational text unit without taking something out.

Our approach<sup>2</sup> is to include informational text in a way that enhances rather than takes away from the teaching of literature. As we'll discuss below, informational text can provide engaging, exciting opportunities to get students deeper into the literary text.

Such an approach, however, poses two specific challenges. First, how do we find engaging

and interesting informational texts that connect in meaningful ways with the literary works our students are reading? Second, how do we integrate these informational texts into our teaching of literature while also making these different and sometimes challenging readings accessible to our students?

## **Finding engaging, interesting informational texts to access background knowledge**

Consider those moments in your class when you wish your students knew more about something. You are teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jem and Scout have come upon the confrontation between Atticus and the lynch mob outside the Maycomb jail. But your students don't know anything about lynching, so they have no way to access the charged context for this scene. Here is a moment where you can pull in an informational text to provide that piece of background knowledge or historical context. We suggest two highly accessible excerpts from autobiographies by two of the Scottsboro boys: Haywood Patterson and Clarence Norris both describe being set upon by lynch mobs and thinking they were about to be lynched. In the context of these pieces, students can analyze more carefully the mob scene in *Mockingbird*: what is Scout not seeing in that moment; what are the political implications of Harper Lee's narrative perspective?

Worthwhile informational texts don't have to be fancy, complex, or controversial. For *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we knew we needed something to fill in students' background knowledge about rabies. With the help of Laura Kortz, a supportive, resourceful librarian at New Jersey City University, we found a short excerpt from a 1915 farm manual that clearly communicates the seriousness of the situation that the residents of Maycomb face in chapter 10. Pair that with a humorously dated but still informative 1982 educational video by the American Veterinary Medical Association and students will

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<sup>1</sup> See Audrey Fisch and Susan Chenelle, *Using Informational Text to Teach To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014 [forthcoming].

be fully prepared to think about the significance of rabies in *Mockingbird*.

Similarly, we knew we wanted students to have a way of making sense of the gender issues in *Mockingbird*. Why is there so much attention to what Scout wears and how she interacts with the ladies in the novel? We searched for an informational text that would help students put the issues about gender roles into historical context. Through a Google Books search, we found an excerpt from a 1921 etiquette book that articulates wonderfully the gender-based expectations Scout has to deal with. Pair this with some Emily Post Productions on YouTube, and Scout's navigation of the tea service at Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle will come into focus in a whole new way for students.

Once you begin thinking along the lines of using informational text to fill in gaps, the opportunities to work with "seminal U.S. texts" (ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.8) and "foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance" (ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.9) will appear everywhere. In *Mockingbird*, for example, the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision is critical to supporting students' understanding of the Dolphus Raymond chapters. If Scout must reframe her perception of Raymond as the town drunk, so too do our students. Together with excerpts from the HBO film *The Loving Story*, *Loving v. Virginia* allows students to understand the social and legal risks someone like Raymond faced not so very long ago in the United States.

Every literary text you teach will have a wealth of these teachable moments: instead of giving a mini-lecture on that unrecognizable allusion or unfamiliar political reference, use a piece of informational text to allow your students to uncover the idea on their own.

### **Using contemporary informational texts to allow students to connect with the text**

Let's face it. Many of the texts we love and teach are old. Students struggle to find the relevance of these texts to their lives. Sometimes we struggle to help them see connections. Informational text can be key here.

Reframe those moments where your students insist that the literary text under consideration is outdated and irrelevant to their lives. Danielle Clarke recently posted in the NCTE Connected Community a teaching idea pairing

*Lord of the Flies* with newspaper articles related to the Chilean miners who were trapped for 70 days in 2010. Perhaps it's unlikely that a group of boys is going to be stranded on a desert island to fend for themselves, but people still find themselves in extraordinary circumstances, isolated from resources and society. How do they react? Do William Golding's ideas ring true today? How and why was the plight of the miners so different from that of Piggy and his peers?

With *Mockingbird*, we suggest thinking about Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson in the context of the defense of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh or the detainees at Guantanamo Bay. What it means to defend a politically unpopular client is still a timely topic. And setting up this comparison can allow students to think carefully about Atticus's role in the defense. It's worth noting, for example, that Atticus is not self-appointed here: he does not volunteer to defend Tom Robinson.

Topical connections, like Clarke's brilliant idea or the connection between Atticus and the Guantanamo lawyers, are tough. After all, the wonderful contemporary linkage between a current event and a literary text has a short shelf life. So teachers need to constantly come up with new connections, which can be tough to pull off regularly over the course of a busy school year.

*The New York Times Learning Network*, however, makes some of this work easy by assembling links from its vast and varied archives related to commonly taught literary texts and making them available for free to teachers, outside the NYT paywall, along with suggested discussion questions and instructional activities. Newsela is a free service launched in 2013 that offers current news articles from their partner news outlets, like the *Bergen Record* and the *Associated Press*, in versions aimed at different Lexile levels. Other publications like *Psychology Today*, *Science Daily*, and *Wonderopolis* are also reliable sources for high-quality informational texts.

Want to stay timely and show your students news articles that are two or three weeks old rather than two or three years old? Set a Google alert for a topic, keyword, author, or title. Then, the most up-to-date informational text possibilities can be delivered to your inbox daily.

And don't forget your school or local librarian. These people can be tremendous resources if we utilize them well. Ask for help and

ideas and you'll be surprised by what they drop into your lap. Finally, talk to your content-area colleagues. Don't overlook possible informational text connections that your students might already be encountering in their other classes.

### Preparing the informational text for your students

As important and revealing as *Loving v. Virginia* is, however, it isn't an easy text to teach. It certainly meets the CCSS and offers students access to some fundamental context to *Mockingbird*, but it is also quite challenging in terms of vocabulary and readability. Supreme Court decisions are fundamentally not easy reading! So what do we do when we find a great informational text that offers a lot but seems too challenging for our students?

Indeed, finding a promising informational/literary text pairing is a gratifying first step, but it is just the beginning of our work. We can't simply throw an historical document, a news clipping, or an interview at our students and expect them to read through the text without any struggle and to make the connections we are hoping for.

We think there are two key steps to preparing the informational text for your students.

First, use excerpts. Think about what exactly you want your students to get out of the informational text. Is there more to the reading than you need? Excerpt and edit ruthlessly. Even a single paragraph can sometimes fulfill your purposes. The goal is not to overload our students with even more reading. Set up your students for success by giving them choice morsels and leaving out the irrelevant and the unrelated. For example, we wanted students to be able to see the connection between Franklin Delano Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address and Scout's allusion to a time of "vague optimism" in *Maycomb*. But Roosevelt has a long diatribe about the banking system in his address that is far more interesting to economists than teenagers, so we cut all that out. Less can be more.

Second, think about what in the informational text might prove challenging to your students. Does the text feature a great deal of difficult domain-specific vocabulary? Are there concepts and ideas, like the idea of an appellant in *Loving v. Virginia*, that may prove unfamiliar and intimidating? Are the students familiar with the

format of the text (a judicial decision reads very differently than a short story, for example)? Are there issues of style, audience, purpose, voice, or format that need to be unpacked in order for your students to access the text?

Create pre-reading activities that front-load both vocabulary and key concepts for your students. We love vocabulary activities<sup>3</sup> that allow students to be creative and have fun while focusing on high level and authentic interaction with the words and ideas. Among other vocabulary activities, we ask students to create and perform vocabulary skits to highlight key words. Central to FDR's Inaugural Address is his insistence on optimism, so before reading FDR's address, we offer the guidelines for a skit to be written and performed (without too much time or effort) in class:

optimist – somebody positive and hopeful about the future

- My sister is always an optimist; if she gets a bad grade in school, she always holds out hope that the teacher miscalculated the grade and that she might have earned a better mark.
- I sometimes find it difficult to be optimistic about our troubled, dangerous, beleaguered world.
- Do you always see the cup as half full? Then you are an optimist.

**Scenario:** Create a skit in which a small group is shipwrecked on a desert island. There is no food, no water, no supplies, and no hope. One in the group, however, remains optimistic to the dismay and disbelief of his/her companions.

By preparing and performing this skit, the students are interacting with the word repeatedly, owning the word, and working with the concept of optimism in difficult times. When they

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<sup>2</sup> Vocabulary is inherently difficult. Students need "massive practice" (Moffett) to make new words their own, but that practice doesn't need to be tedious. The CCSS emphasize awareness of words forms as well as dictionary skills, which means students need different kinds of vocabulary practice. Sample exercises can be found at [www.usinginformationaltext.com](http://www.usinginformationaltext.com).

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encounter FDR's optimism, they will be prepared for both the word and the idea.

FDR also emphasizes his candor; he suggests that he will speak plainly with the American people about the troubles facing the nation. We ask students to think about candor in their own lives:

Do you expect candor from your friends? Why or why not?

This kind of question requires the students to negotiate not just the meaning of candor but the concept of candor as well, so that Roosevelt's rhetoric is more accessible and meaningful.

Working to prepare a workable-sized excerpt and activities to help your students tackle the key ideas and vocabulary in that excerpt doesn't have to take up a lot of time, and doing so will mean that your students' encounter with the informational text will be that much more successful.

### What to do as you read the informational text with your students

Even if you've prepared your students well for the informational text, you still can't throw these texts at your students and expect

instant success. Just as we would with a poem or a challenging piece of literature, reading these texts requires guidance. Offer your students reading-comprehension questions that challenge them to read slowly, critically, and carefully. These texts are the perfect moment to practice all those good reading-comprehension strategies with your students. Have them read and think about the title and any heading or additional information. Have them examine any important textual features. What kind of text are they reading? Who is the writer? What is the publication venue? Who is the intended audience? Chunk the reading with questions that ask students to think about substance and meaning (what is the point of this paragraph, what point is the author trying to make) as well as style and rhetoric (what is the tone of this paragraph, what rhetorical strategies do you notice at work). As you practice these reading strategies with your students, they may be able to begin to take on some of this work themselves. Soon, you'll be able to ask students to produce these sorts of sidebar questions on their own (or in groups) and then come back together to formulate answers to the different questions.

**Reflect on the title:** "At the Bar: To Attack a Lawyer in 'To Kill a Mockingbird': An Iconoclast Takes Aim At a Hero." Why does the writer construct the title in this way? What does the title tell us about the legal scholar who is criticizing Atticus?

**Notice** how Margolick begins his article. Why does he make reference to Jeanne Dixon? What point is he trying to make? What does it mean to be the "canniest clairvoyant"?

**Notice** how the second paragraph continues with several rhetorical questions about Atticus? What is the purpose of these questions? What impact do they have on the reader?

### At the Bar; To Attack A Lawyer In 'To Kill a Mockingbird': An Iconoclast Takes Aim At A Hero

By David Margolick

In her prognostications for 1992, the psychic Jeanne Dixon predicted that "anti-lawyer riots will shake the profession." But could even the canniest clairvoyant have foreseen an attack on Atticus Finch?

Atticus Finch, the sagacious and avuncular lawyer-hero of Harper Lee's 1960 novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," who earned the scorn of his segregated Southern town by defending a black man wrongly accused of rape? Atticus Finch, who stood down a lynch mob that had come to collect his client one night at the Maycomb jail? Atticus Finch, who taught a community and his two young children about justice, decency and tolerance, and who drove a generation of real-life Jems and Scouts to become lawyers themselves?

### Using the informational text to connect back with the literature

Finally, cash in on all your hard work. You've found an engaging informational text. You've worked hard to make it accessible to your students, and you've read it carefully with them in class. Now is the time to ask your students to put the informational text into a meaningful conversation with the literary text. Create discussion and writing activities that ask for this kind of high-level synthesis work from your students. Show them what it means to put two texts into conversation with one another.

- As the residents of Maycomb County confront the "dark realities" that Roosevelt describes in his Inaugural Address, do they seem optimistic or fearful?
- Based on the events in chapter 10 [the rabid dog episode], what can you predict about the health of the community of Maycomb and about what Atticus's role will be in acting to safeguard the community?
- Given that Atticus defends a client he thinks is innocent, while Jones defended a client [Timothy McVeigh]

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he believed to be guilty, whom do you find more ethical, Atticus or Jones?

### Conclusion

We are by no means arguing that you should find and make full use of an informational text in connection with every issue that a novel raises. But the payoff for making this effort for even just one topic in the course of your novel study can be tremendous. First, your students will have strengthened their critical thinking, vocabulary, and close reading skills in authentic ways that will serve them well as they encounter complex texts in the future. Second, the connections that your students forge between the literary and informational texts will enhance their understanding of the literary text and its relevance to their own lives. Third, by opening up a literary work and examining how it intersects with the real world, you can help your students develop a real appreciation for the wondrous things great works of literature do in drawing from, illuminating, and influencing the historic, everyday and timeless aspects of the human experience. And Common Core or no, isn't that what we hope to do in our classes?

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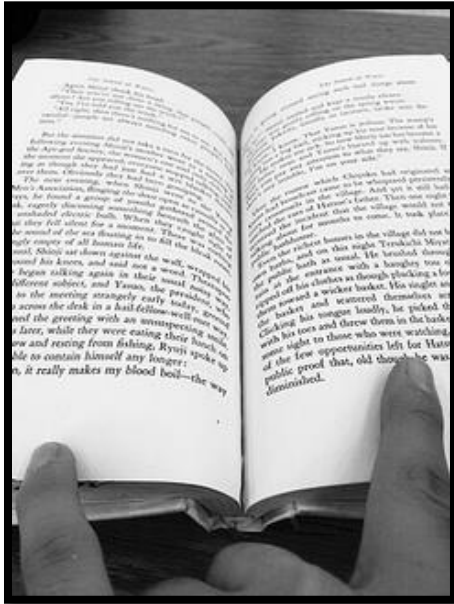
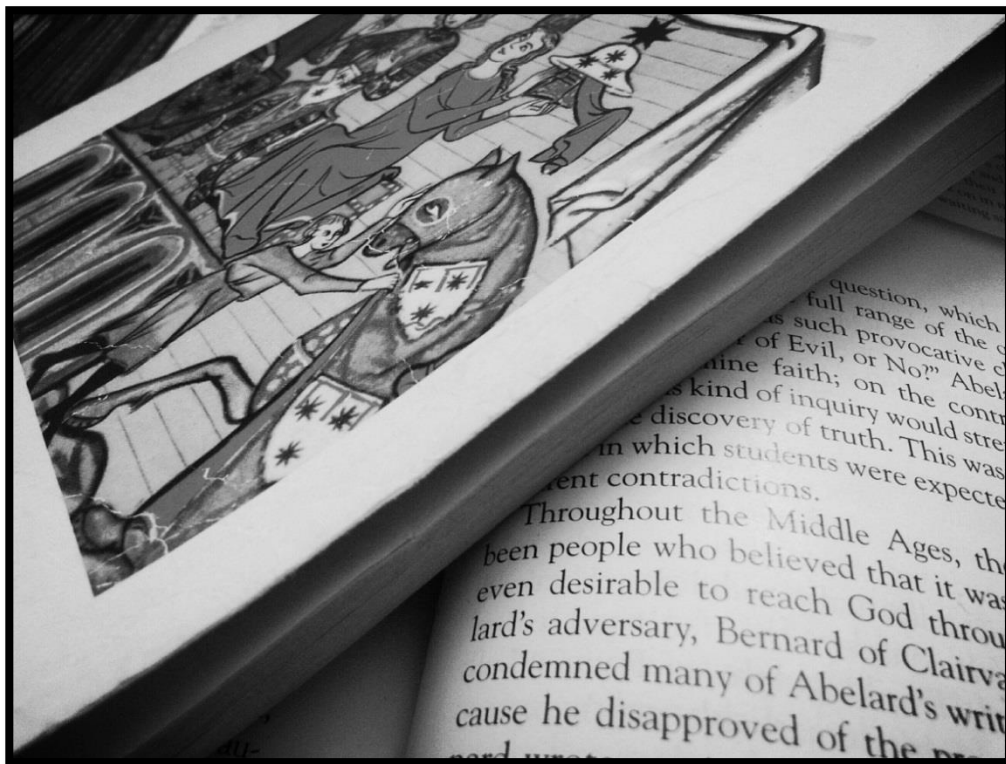


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Sir Gawain, by Sue Lee