

Grade 6: Unit 5

Heart of a Samurai: Introduction

Purpose: Why This Unit?

Heart of a Samurai by Margi Preus is a powerful novel that tells the coming-of-age story of Manjiro, a young Japanese fisherman who was the first Japanese person to set foot in America. During the next few weeks, you will help your scholars love and deeply understand this historical fiction novel.

Your job, though, is first and foremost that of a reading teacher. You must ensure that your scholars enlist the basic tools of great readers — envisioning, reading with fluency, engaging in word attack, and, of course, using plot, setting, and character development — to understand the book’s provocative ideas. You must know your scholars’ Fountas & Pinnell levels and ensure that they are swiftly growing as readers. You must ensure that your scholars are reading and writing at home and that your scholars’ parents are invested in their learning.

You are also a teacher of writing. You must ensure that your scholars are deeply invested in improving their writing and that they give you their best work. Always set sky-high expectations and settle only for scholars’ best effort. It is your responsibility to dramatically improve your scholars’ writing capacities. You will need to study the Top 5 Writing Tactics and ensure that scholars know how to be critics of their own writing.

In particular, you are responsible for the following outcomes:

- First and foremost, you must get 100% of your scholars independently reading at least four books per month.

- You are responsible for 100% of your scholars completing nightly literacy homework that will develop them as readers and writers.
- You are responsible for getting minimally 90% of your scholars on or above grade level in reading, as measured by the Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessment.

You will not achieve 100% without setting clear expectations for your scholars AND their parents, and driving relentlessly toward these goals. If you hold scholars and parents accountable and are an absolute stickler at the beginning, you will make it easier for yourself and frankly for your scholars and their parents. The worst thing you can do as a teacher is let scholars slide and then get tough. You will breed resentment and distrust, whereas clear expectations and utter consistency breed trust and respect.

Themes in *Heart of a Samurai*

In order to successfully teach this unit, you must be intellectually prepared at the highest level. This means reading and studying the entire book before launching the unit, and understanding the major themes that Margi Preus communicates through the book. By the time your scholars finish reading *Heart of a Samurai*, they should be able to articulate and explain these themes.

The table below outlines the major topics and themes highlighted in *Heart of a Samurai*. Note that you should NOT review these with scholars before they begin reading the book. Rather, scholars will uncover themes organically through their reading. As a teacher of reading, your job is to facilitate rich conversations about the meaning of each chapter. You will do this by posing the discussion questions provided in each seminar. As scholars read the text, you will press them to analyze how the author uses events in the book to communicate the major themes.

Although there is not one correct thematic statement for each major topic discussed in the book, there are accurate (evidence-based) and inaccurate (non-evidence-based) interpretations of what the author is arguing. Therefore, we have provided exemplar thematic statements in the table below.

Topic	Theme
Coming of Age	Coming of age is a process that involves acquiring newfound bravery and wisdom.
Experience Shapes Perspective	People’s biases and outlooks on life are shaped by their prior experiences, or lack thereof. When individuals cross boundaries, their perspectives widen.
The Meaning of Home	Home is where you feel a sense of belonging and love; it is not necessarily the place where you were born.
Security versus Freedom	In order to achieve full security, one must give up freedom, experience, and the potential for true advancement.

The Value of Education	A good education can put one on the path to more favorable life outcomes.
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