

Grade 8: Unit 2

To Kill a Mockingbird: Introduction

Purpose: Why This Unit?

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee is a remarkable coming-of-age novel set in a sleepy Southern town during the Great Depression. During the next few weeks, you will help your scholars fall in love with this book as they navigate the characters' loss of childhood innocence.

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 any of your scholars who are still reading below grade level, as measured by the Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessment, to a Level Z.

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 *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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 Harper Lee communicates through the novel. By the time your scholars finish reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they should be able to articulate and explain these themes.

The table below outlines the major topics and themes highlighted in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Note that you should NOT review these with scholars before they begin reading the novel. 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 novel to communicate the major themes.

While there is not one correct thematic statement for each major topic discussed in the novel, 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
Prejudice and Discrimination	People who hold prejudices against others often act in discriminatory ways, and in effect, deprive others of equal rights and dignity.
Coming of Age/Loss of Innocence	Children tend to approach the world with innocence, assuming the best in others. As they grow up and are exposed to injustice, children lose this innocence and become more jaded.

The Importance of Empathy	Conflict can only truly be resolved when all parties seek to understand each other's perspectives. Only when "climbing into another's skin" (page 39) can a person truly empathize.
Justice	Although elusive, justice is worth pursuing, even in the face of personal sacrifice.
Good vs. Evil	People are not merely good or evil; good and evil qualities can, and often do, coexist within people.