

## Grade 8: Unit 7

# Freakonomics: Introduction

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### Purpose: Why This Unit?

*Freakonomics* by Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner is a groundbreaking nonfiction book that uses economics to investigate the freakish riddles of everyday life. During the next few weeks, you will help your scholars analyze and appreciate this powerful nonfiction text.

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 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 efforts. 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 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.

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## Themes in *Freakonomics*

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 Levitt and Dubner communicate through the book. By the time your scholars finish reading *Freakonomics*, they should be able to articulate and explain these themes.

The table below outlines the major topics and themes highlighted in *Freakonomics*. Note that you should not review these with scholars before they begin reading the book. Rather, scholars will uncover the themes organically through their reading. As a teacher of reading, you need 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 authors use events in the book to communicate the major themes.

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

| <b>Topic</b>                         | <b>Theme</b>   |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Incentives</b>                    | Human behavior can be understood by analyzing the incentives that drive people to do — or not do — certain actions.                            |
| <b>Experts</b>                       | Motivated by fear and conventional wisdom, people often mistakenly trust “experts,” those with perceived special access to information.        |
| <b>The Real Influence of Parents</b> | The influence that parents have on their children’s future prospects is most directly tied to who parents are, not to what they do as parents. |
| <b>Crime</b>                         | Crime can be considered a natural human behavior greatly influenced by a person’s environment.   |