



The Death Penalty: *Just Mercy*

MULTI-DAY LESSON

BY KELLY YOUNG-RAYMORE

GRADE LEVEL: 11TH-12TH GRADES

Objectives

- Engage in critical thinking and discussion about the criminal justice system, capital punishment, and social justice issues
- Analyze and evaluate the pros and cons of the death penalty
- Articulate their own opinions on the topic, supported by evidence
- Engage in respectful and informed discussions about controversial issues



Vocabulary

- Eighth Amendment
- Exonerate
- Capital punishment

Materials

- Projector or TV screen
- DVD or streaming access to the movie *Just Mercy* (supplemental options available in Appendix)
- Whiteboard or chart paper
- Markers
- Handouts with discussion questions (optional)

Prework (about 10 minutes)

Optional: Have students complete the lesson Rule of Law and the Death Penalty. In this lesson, students will explore their existing knowledge on the Eighth Amendment and learn how the United States compares on a global scale of capital punishment.

The day before, have students fill out a Know, Want to Know, and Learned (KWL) chart regarding the death penalty and have them focus on the “know” and “want to know” sections. Examples students might share are the Eighth Amendment or recent court cases they have heard about.

K (Know)	W (Want to know)	L (Learned)

Warm-Up Activity (about 10 minutes)

Step 1: Write the following quote by Martin Luther King Jr. on the board: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Step 2: Ask students to reflect on the quote and write a short paragraph discussing what they think it means.

Step 3: After a few minutes, ask a few students to share their thoughts with the class.

Lesson Activities

DAY 1

ACTIVITY 1: READING ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION (30 MINUTES)

Step 1: Organize students into groups of five. Pass out printed copies or have them pull up digital versions of “[The Ultimate Punishment: A Defense](#)” and “[Why the Death Penalty Should Be Abolished](#).”

Step 2: Have each student take a section and summarize it for the group. Each student will read two sections.

Step 3: Facilitate a brief discussion of both articles. Ask students the following questions to drive discussion: What perspective does each article convey about the death penalty? What evidence do they use to support their argument? Did either perspective surprise you? What new information did you learn?

Step 4: From here, have students fill more of their KWL charts.

Optional Break: You can pause here and have a conversation previewing what students should expect to experience when watching *Just Mercy*. Find out where to watch the movie and prepare before watching the movie at [Common Sense Media](#). Or, you can start the film and then skip to parts of step three to debrief with your students. When they have finished watching the movie, revisit all of step three. For other recommendations on films that are free or may have ratings that your school prefers, please see the list in the appendix.

DAY 1 AND 2

ACTIVITY 2: JUST MERCY

Step 1: Show one section of the movie *Just Mercy* to the class.

Step 2: Encourage students to take notes during the movie, paying attention to key themes, character development, and important scenes.

Step 3: After the movie, facilitate a class discussion to explore the following topics (note that if you choose a different movie option, please skip the last question and adjust the other questions as necessary):

- The impact of racial bias in the criminal justice system
- The power dynamics between lawyers, judges, and defendants
- The importance of empathy and compassion in seeking justice
- The role of activism and advocacy in addressing systemic issues
- The emotional and psychological toll of wrongful convictions and death row
- The significance of Bryan Stevenson's work and the Equal Justice Initiative

DAY 3

ACTIVITY 3

Select a person from the [National Registry of Exonerations](#) and prepare a short presentation on their case. Students may use Google Slides, PowerPoint, Storyboard, or Prezi.

Exit Ticket

- Distribute index cards to each student.
- Ask students to write down one question they still have about the movie or the issues it raises.
- Collect the index cards as students leave the classroom.

Extension Activities

Activity 1: Extended Reading

Encourage students to read *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row* by Anthony Ray Hinton.

Activity 2: Encourage students to watch the TED film [Bryan Stevenson: We Need to Talk about an Injustice](#).

Activity 3: Organize an in-class debate for and against the death penalty, having students use the evidence they have gathered from the lesson.

Activity 4: Read [The Financial Implications of the Death Penalty](#) and design an infographic outlining the reasons to support or abolish the death penalty.

Common Core Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text explicitly says, as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2:** Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, group, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Appendix

“One for Ten”: series of shorter clips that align with the thematic questions

“The Penalty of Death”: individuals explore the debate on capital punishment aligning with the key thematic questions of this lesson

“Searching for Justice”: a short, 5.5-minute clip about a death row prisoner sparking debate on the legality of the death penalty

Just Mercy author interview: interview with Bryan Stevenson that contextualizes the movie *Just Mercy*; may be used in conjunction or instead of watching whole film