



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Literary Doorways Through Time

BY KOBI NELSON

Overview

Through this lesson, students will compare reading to traveling. The goal is for students to better understand how different authors in different eras wrote about and responded to their societies. Using visual literacy activities, students will explore the skills readers need to develop to understand a work of literature from an author's point of view. These activities will counteract the tendency to look at literature only from a contemporary point of view. With the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors in their minds, students will read and write about 2 essays written during 2 different time periods. They will have the opportunity to synthesize their thinking with a writing prompt that asks them to clearly articulate their viewpoint, guided by a well-developed thesis.



Essential Questions

- How can approaching literature like traveling help us understand how people in different historical periods interpreted, responded, and wrote about their societies?
- What skills do readers need to develop to travel to an author's world and understand the author's point of view rather than judge the author's work by contemporary standards?
- What does it mean to read with historical empathy while maintaining analytical rigor?

Learning Objectives

- Understand that a narrator's or speaker's perspective is shaped by historical context.
- Distinguish between an author's viewpoint and contemporary viewpoints.
- Explain how word choice, connotations, and historical/cultural references carry different meanings across time periods.
- Create commentary and argumentation that acknowledges historical context and uses evidence to support nuanced interpretations.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **NAR-4.B:** Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.
- **NAR-4.C:** Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speakers' perspective.
- **FIG-5A:** Distinguish between the literal and the figurative meanings of words and phrases.
- **FIG-5B:** Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- **LAN-7.C:** Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- **LAN-7.D:** Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Materials

- Sphere Education Initiatives: Core Principles of the Declaration of Independence
- Copies of the Declaration of Independence
- "Conclusion" from *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain
- "Why We Travel" by Pico Iyer
- US government's [travel advisory site](#)

Warm-Up

WRITE AND RESPOND

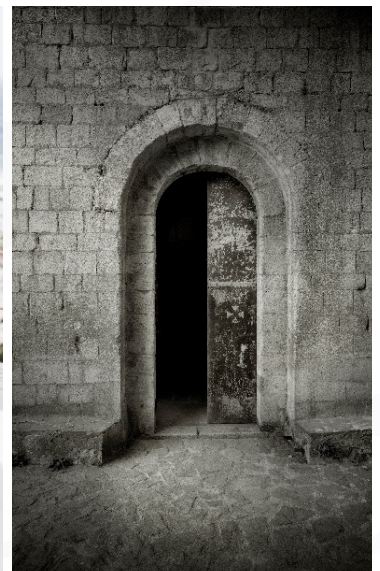
Post the following pictures along with the following writing prompt:

Prompt:

Write your thoughts in response to the pictures displayed and be ready to share your thoughts with the class.

Read these questions to students as they look at the pictures.

- What connections can you make between these pictures? How are they alike and different?
- Each picture takes a particular perspective. Where is the camera positioned in relation to the subject? What does that camera angle reveal or emphasize?
- What tone or emotion does each picture evoke? What details (lighting, colors, shadows, space) create this sense?



DEBRIEF

After all students have had a chance to write down their thoughts, have them share with a partner or in a small group. Then ask a few students to share their thoughts with the whole group.

Some of the ideas that students might share about perspective include the following:

- A close-up on a door handle versus a wide shot of where a doorway stands in relation to the building(s)
- Part of a door being shown versus an entire door
- Doors showing a blurred image inside versus showing a clear image
- Doors leading inside versus leading outside
- Clear and crisp versus blurry and unknown

Some of the tones/emotions that students might share include the following:

- Familiar and homey versus foreign and exotic
- Warm and inviting versus cold and foreboding (or neutral feeling)
- Light and bright versus dark and shadowy

TRANSITION

To transition to the next activity, students will need to understand that the common element in all these photos is an open door. Once that has been established, ask students why you might have asked them to write about open doors in the Warm-Up. What might an open door symbolize?

Some ideas that might be shared:

- Opportunity
- Curiosity
- New places
- Openness

Take a few responses before turning to the lesson's activities.

Lesson Activities

OPEN/PREPARE

Say

We began today looking at photos of doorways from varying angles and perspectives. Depending on the angle of the camera, we were able to see more or less of the door itself, which was likely the photographer's purpose. What do you think would be different if you actually traveled to a place to see one of these doorways? What do you imagine would be

different? If you were to step through one of these doorways, what might you experience that the camera might not be able to capture?

READ

Ask students to read (or ensure that students have read for homework) the essay "[Why We Travel](#)" by Pico Iyer and the "[Conclusion](#)" from *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain. Note for students that Iyer wrote his essay in 2000 and Twain wrote his book in 1869. More than 100 years stand between the publication of these 2 pieces.

IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE

STEP 1

After students have finished reading, divide them into small groups. Explain that the similarities between these texts are like mirrors and the differences between them are like windows. (For a more in-depth introduction to this metaphor, see Sphere Education Initiative's "[Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors](#)" lesson.)

Note: If students are having difficulty understanding the metaphor, you can give them the following prompt:

Prompt:

Imagine that Pico Iyer and Mark Twain were in the same room. Each author was reading his writing to the other. In what parts of each text would Iyer and Twain say, "Hey, that's something we have in common"? Those are the ways their texts serve as mirrors. And, in what part of each text would Iyer and Twain say, "That's a different experience from mine"? Those are the ways the texts can serve as windows (into another person's world, so to speak).

STEP 2

Have students make a table as shown here and write examples from their reading.

Texts as Mirrors	Texts as Windows

STEP 3

Once students have completed their tables, ask them to discuss the following questions in their small groups:

- Look at your “Texts as Windows” column. Choose 3–5 instances where the texts served as windows into “another world.” How did you know that these were windows? What is it about the word choice, connotations, historical context, or cultural setting that stood out to you?
- Look at both columns. Think about the voice of each author. How did each author’s voice provide clues to his perspective or the historical context in which he lived?
- Look back at both texts. These were written before you were born and carry some different viewpoints and assumptions from those you may be familiar with. What are the differences in viewpoints and assumptions that you noticed? How are these different from your own viewpoint?

SYNTHESIZE

STEP 1

Ask students to take out a piece of paper or a journal, or open a document. Give them the following prompt and allow them to write their responses individually for 10–15 minutes.

Prompt:

Think about the essays from Iyer and Twain and answer the following question. “How can approaching literature like the act of traveling help us understand how people in different historical periods interpreted, responded, and wrote about their societies?” Write a well-developed paragraph that begins with a clear thesis statement and uses at least 1 piece of supporting evidence from each essay.

If students need scaffolding, pull out a couple of quotations from the texts that align with each other and ask students to develop a thesis that begins, “Reading literature is like traveling because. . . .” Here are 2 key quotations you might offer students:

- “Yet for me the first great joy of traveling is simply the luxury of leaving all my beliefs and certainties at home, and seeing everything I thought I knew in a different light, and from a crooked angle.”
—Pico Iyer
- “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrowmindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”
—Mark Twain

STEP 2

After students have been given time to write independently, allow them time to talk about their responses with a peer, in a small group, or with the whole class. During the conversation, students should discuss the following questions:

- What are the benefits and challenges you might encounter by thinking of reading as an opportunity to travel to a new place or time?
- What characteristics does a person need to travel “responsibly” when reading? How can a person maintain curiosity and openness while thinking critically?

EVALUATE

Divide students into small groups of 3–4. Have them brainstorm the characteristics a person needs to read with both empathy and analytical rigor. Then ask students to create a travel advisory for reading American literature from the 19th and 20th centuries. You can give them this [travel advisory site](#) from the US government for ideas of what a travel advisory looks like.

Note: This assignment serves 2 purposes: (1) to get students to think about the characteristics they will need to read literature from authors who lived in a different era, and (2) to give you, the teacher, insight into any assumptions students may be making about these eras in American history.

Closing

Have students share some of the ideas they wrote about in their travel advisories. Record these ideas on the board, a piece of butcher paper, or a shared class document that you can revisit. Ask students to read the [Declaration of Independence](#) and [Sphere's Core Principles of the Declaration: We Hold These Truths](#) before the next class.