



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Unpacking Language and Meaning in *Huckleberry Finn*

BY KOBI NELSON

Lesson Overview

This opening mini-lesson will ask students to engage with Mark Twain's language in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through reflective journaling. After exploring the meaning of the word "ruminate," students will be introduced to the idea of challenging language and given guidelines to complete their Read and Ruminare Journal entries. Students will be expected to write 7–10 journal entries for each set of chapters of assigned reading so they can cognitively empathize and critically analyze the language used. At the end of this mini-lesson's learning activities, students will work together in small groups to complete their 1st journal entries. They will write about Twain's "Explanatory," which precedes the 1st chapter of the novel. Then students will reflect on the ways they want to engage with language in the text of *Huckleberry Finn*.



Essential Questions

- How does Mark Twain's language affect the meaning of the story of *Huckleberry Finn* and, as readers in the 21st century, how do we approach the language he used in the 19th century?
- How do the stories of Jim and Huck grapple with the Founding principles put forth in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal"?
- How do Huck's internal conflicts reveal the tension between individual moral insight and societal definitions of right and wrong?
- How does Huck and Jim's journey illuminate the unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

Learning Objectives

- Engage in reflective journaling to explore your responses to language in the text of *Huckleberry Finn*.
- Analyze how Twain's use of language reflects the societal attitudes of 1840s America.
- Evaluate the literary purpose of Twain's language choices and consider the effectiveness of those choices for his audience.
- Reflect on your own beliefs and values in relation to the language used in the novel in order to foster cognitive empathy and critical analysis.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **FIG 5.B.** Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- **CHA 1.D.** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **CHA 1.E.** Explain how a character's own choices, actions, and speech reveal complexities in that character, and explain the function of those complexities.
- **NAR 4.C.** Identify and describe details, diction, or syntax in a text that reveal a narrator's or speaker's perspective.
- **LAN 7.B.** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and establishes a line of reasoning.
- **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

- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Photos of animals that are ruminants
- Read and Ruminant Journal Entries Student Worksheet (1 per student).
- Read and Ruminant Journals – Students can use notebook paper or a digital format.

A Note on This Lesson

Teachers: To honor the intent and authenticity of the primary source material, we will use the original-language version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Before working through this lesson, we encourage you to discuss with students that this text reflects the period in which it was authored and may be jarring for some. The text presents the unique challenge of using certain thorny words that may lead to further difficult conversations. We advise you to preview this important information about the text and prepare discussion norms to navigate this challenging primary source material. Although the lesson calls for a group reading and reflection activity, it may be advisable to consider replacing certain words or skipping over them.

Warm-Up

Show students all 4 of these pictures together. Ask them to discuss with a partner what these photos all have in common.

After giving students a few minutes to talk, ask a few students to share their thoughts with the whole class.





DISCUSS

Have students share a few ideas, and then tell them that all the animals pictured are called “ruminants.” If students haven’t heard the term “ruminant” before, share [this definition from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary](#): “an animal that chews the cud, specifically an herbivorous, even-toed, hoofed mammal (suborder Ruminantia and Tylopoda) that has a complex 3- or 4-chambered stomach.”

Ask

Why are these animals called ruminants?

Take a few suggestions from students and explain that the word “ruminant” has to do with the way these animals eat and digest food. They literally ruminate their food by chewing it over and over again (which is sometimes called “chewing the cud”).

DEBRIEF

Ask students if they have heard the word “ruminate” used in another way; for example, “I will ruminate over the topic of an upcoming essay.” Then facilitate a discussion about how we, as humans, don’t literally ruminate, but we do figuratively ruminate—particularly over words, thoughts, and ideas.

Give students the opportunity to share any instances in which they have ruminated over a word, a thought, or an idea. Try to get them to explain whether it was interesting, challenging, surprising, or thought-provoking. .

Lesson Activities

Tell students that rumination is an important part of reading for meaning. A way we can ruminate is to write reflectively as we read interesting, challenging, or thought-provoking works. Explain that many readers have found *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be interesting and challenging—specifically because the language that Mark Twain uses to

narrate the story and convey complex ideas contains words and perspectives that reflect the social inequalities and prejudices of 1840s America. As we read, we'll work together to understand why Twain made these language choices while we acknowledge the real effects of such language on individuals and communities.

INTRODUCE REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

To be able to productively ruminate on challenging passages, students will keep a reflective journal, called a "Read and Ruminare Journal," where they will paraphrase or summarize the context in which specific words, phrases, or sentences are used. Then they will focus on the meaning behind the language used and reflect on its usage. Introduce students to the following assignment:

READ AND RUMINATE JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

Instructions: For each set of chapters you read, you will be expected to keep a journal in which you ruminate on interesting, challenging, or thought-provoking language from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For each set of chapters, you will write 7–10 entries. Each of these entries will include the following:

- Your selected question (the questions are listed under these instructions)
- A paraphrase or summary of the language used (including chapter or page numbers) and the context in which this language was used
- Your thoughts, feelings, and responses to the language used
- Why you think the language was used

Tell students you will hand out a Student Worksheet to help them make notes as they do their reading and journaling. Tell them they can set up their journal like the table in the Student Worksheet, or they can write out each entry, but they need to include the 4 categories you've told them about. The categories are the column headings of the Student Worksheet.

Selected question	Language used and context	My thoughts or feelings about the language	Reasons I think this language was used

Read and Ruminare Journal Questions

1. What sentences or paragraphs stood out to you as interesting or challenging?
2. What specific sentences or paragraphs are used to describe the characters in *Huckleberry Finn*?
3. Are there any sentences or paragraphs that included language that was confusing?
4. What sentences or paragraphs specifically serve a literary purpose?
5. What sentences or paragraphs challenge your own beliefs or values?
6. What conversations between characters are illuminating for you?
7. How might readers from different backgrounds or communities respond differently to this passage?
8. What does this passage teach us about the importance of treating all people with dignity and respect?

PRACTICE

Tell students that they will complete a practice Read and Ruminare Journal entry together as a class so they can get the feel of it before they try it on their own.

STEP 1

Ask students to read Twain's "Explanatory," a short paragraph right before the 1st chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*, as follows:

EXPLANATORY

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.

THE AUTHOR.

STEP 2

Work with the whole class to complete the journal entry process on the board. Create or project a table with 4 columns, such as the table provided in the assignment instructions.

Then complete the table with student suggestions for each column. The following is a completed sample table:

Selected question	Language used and context	My thoughts or feelings about the language	Reasons I think this language was used
Question 2	At the end of the "Explanatory," Twain says that he included the explanation so that readers wouldn't think all the characters were trying to speak like each other without being successful. Because this sentence was used at the end of the "Explanatory," I think Twain wanted to leave the reader with this thought.	At first, the sentence is confusing because it seems obvious that Twain wouldn't make each character speak the same way.	The obvious nature of this sentence and its placement at the end of the "Explanatory" indicates its purpose is to be like the punch line of a joke. I think Twain meant this to be humorous.

STEP 3

Have students work together in small groups to complete 3 more entries about the "Explanatory."

Closing

Discuss students' thoughts based on their work in small groups on the "Explanatory" language. As time allows: Let several students share their group's journal entries with the whole class.

Then ask students the following questions as an exit ticket:

- Why is it important to ruminate on interesting, challenging, and thought-provoking language?
- Why do you think Mark Twain included a number of different dialects in his writing, including some words that we might now see as offensive?
- How do you want to respond to words, phrases, and sentences that are challenging or offensive as we read *Huckleberry Finn*?
- What responsibilities do we have as readers when we encounter texts that contain language that some might find offensive?

Read and Ruminare Journal Entries

Student Worksheet

For each set of chapters you read, you will be expected to keep a Read and Ruminare Journal in which you ruminare on interesting, challenging, or thought-provoking language from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For each set of chapters, you will write 7–10 entries. Each of these entries will include the following:

- Your selected question (see the list of questions)
- A paraphrase or a summary of the language used (including chapter or page numbers) and the context in which this language was used
- Your thoughts, feelings, and responses to the language used
- Why you think the language was used

Selected question	Language used and context	My thoughts or feelings about the language	Reasons I think this language was used