



Preface to Lessons on Huckleberry Finn

BY KOBI NELSON

It can be daunting to think about teaching a text like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because of the language used by author Mark Twain. The following suggestions will help you feel more confident about teaching this text. The main ideas are to establish classroom norms, communicate transparently with parents and administrators, and present novels as windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors.

Set Classroom Norms and Practice Self-Assessment

Be intentional about setting **healthy discussion norms** with your students around what respectful language looks and sounds like in your classroom. Draft an **editable norms contract** that you can revisit and revise with students as necessary.

Periodically, ask students to complete a self-assessment about their civil discourse. This **editable self-assessment**, although designed for middle school, can be scaffolded up to meet your students' needs. Furthermore, you could begin this unit by teaching Sphere Education Initiative's lesson on "**Fair-Minded Critical Thinking and Listening**." Then ask students to regularly self-assess how well they have engaged in listening and reading practices in a fair-minded way.

Be Transparent

WITH PARENTS

Before the unit begins, be transparent with parents about your reasons for teaching *Huckleberry Finn*. Send home an **email or letter** that clearly shares your thoughts about the novel, the language used, and why you believe it's important for students to read the original language. For instance, you might point out that a key skill for AP Literature students includes being able to understand how the diction and syntax of the narrator (and other characters) illuminate their point of view. Twain's "**Explanatory**" note at the beginning of the novel makes this point particularly relevant to teaching this novel to students.

WITH ADMINISTRATORS

Let your administrators and school leaders know you'll be teaching a unit on *Huckleberry Finn* and explain how this unit will help your students gain a deeper understanding of civil discourse and meet their academic needs. If administrators have questions about the language used in the text, you might state the same reasoning you gave to students' parents—citing students' need to be able to analyze the diction, syntax, and point of view of characters. As with parents, be open to feedback and brainstorming ideas with school leaders to allow this unit to be a meaningful learning opportunity for all students.

Discuss the Idea of Language as a Mirror, a Window, and a Sliding Glass Door

If students become too distracted by the language in *Huckleberry Finn*, take time to revisit the idea that texts can be mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors for us as readers. Discuss the fact that the language used in the novel is both a window into the terrible inequities of the past and a mirror for us to better understand why we don't use certain words in the present.

You can also discuss the ways in which the language in *Huckleberry Finn* is a sliding glass door through which we are able to fully immerse ourselves in the world of America in the mid-19th century. John McWhorter notes in [this TED Talk](#) that a beneficial reason to learn new languages is “because they are tickets to being able to participate in the culture of the people who speak them, just by virtue of the fact that it is their code.” Even though your students are not technically learning a new language, it might be helpful to remind them that reading and deciphering dialects from more than 150 years ago is a way for them to immerse themselves in a novel's setting and experience the text more fully.