



THE HUNGER GAMES: REQUIRED READING?



AN ELA PERFORMANCE TASK

The Hunger Games: Required Reading?

Introductory Classroom Activity (30 minutes)

- Have students sit in small groups of about 4-5 people. Each group should have someone to record their discussion and someone who will report out orally for the group.
- Present on a projector the video clip of the movie trailer for the film *The Hunger Games* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMGRhAEn6K0>).
- After watching the trailer once, ask each group recorder to create two columns on a piece of paper. In one column, the group will list “Plot and character elements emphasized” in the trailer; in the other column, the group will be asked to list “Plot and character elements that are ambiguous or left out of the trailer.”
- To clarify this assignment, ask the following two questions:
 1. What elements of the plot and details about characters are made clear in the trailer?
 2. What elements of the plot/details about characters are left ambiguous or ignored by the trailer?
- Have the students watch the trailer one more time keeping these questions in mind.
- Allow about 5 to 10 minutes for students to work in their small groups to complete their lists.
- Have students report out on their group work, starting with question #1. Repeat the report out process with question #2.
- Discuss as a large group the following questions:
 1. What reasons might the movie producers have for omitting or avoiding certain plot aspects or showing certain scenes?
 2. Are there aspects of the book (and the movie) that the producers likely would want to downplay or avoid showing in order to reach a larger audience?

Student Directions: Part 1

The Hunger Games: Required Reading?

Task:

The trilogy of novels *The Hunger Games* (which also serves as the title of the first of the three installments in the series) quickly established themselves as “must-reads” soon after the first novel was published in 2008. Because of its adolescent heroine, as well as having an accessible style and an engaging plotline, perhaps the book’s most enthusiastic audience has been teens in middle school and high school. In many ways, it may seem like an ideal choice for teachers looking to find classroom materials that would engage even the most reluctant readers.

However, detractors of Suzanne Collins’ book question the appropriateness of some of the themes and events in the novels, particularly the ethical dilemma faced by Katniss, the protagonist of the series, who struggles with the prospect of killing or being killed.

Is this sort of subject matter appropriate for required classroom reading?

In order to provide some perspective on this topic, you will read four articles that deal with some of the ethical issues addressed in the books (as well as the movies based on the books). You may take notes in the margin as you find information in the sources to capture your thoughts, reactions, and questions as you read. After reading these articles, you will answer a couple of brief questions that relate to them. In Part 2, you will write an argumentative essay on a topic related to the sources.

Directions for Beginning:

You will now examine several sources. You can re-examine the sources as often as you like.

Initial Questions:

After examining the research articles, use the rest of the time in Part 1 to answer the three questions about them. Your answers to these questions will be part of your score for the reading portion of this assessment. Also, your answers will help you think about the information you have read and viewed, which should help you write your argumentative essay. Both your margin notes and your answers to the questions, along with a copy of *The Hunger Games*, will be available to you as you work on your essay.

Article 1: *Hunger Games: Ethics 101*

This first article by Benjamin O’Loughlin is from a Catholic website called FORMATION TOOLBOX, which offers short articles describing “simple tools” to help readers think and grow.

Notes on my thoughts,
reactions and questions as I
read.

The Hunger Games is a serious movie that raises serious questions. A PG-13 rating for teenagers battling to the death onscreen? That type of butchery catapulted to almost universal obligatory reading for 6th grade and up?

The debates will go on. However, the most interesting questions are the ones *The Hunger Games* themselves ask.

The whole trilogy revolves around a series of moral dilemmas that in the end boil down to the two essentials of morality: what we do, and why we do it.

What makes Katniss such an endearing hero is the fact that she is no hero—just a decent person trying to fight her way through the maze of evil that suddenly crisscrosses her life.

As the stakes rise, Suzanne Collins places Katniss in one dilemma after another. Self-defense? Mercy killing? Lying? Bloody revolution? Vengeance? Katniss doesn’t always know what to do. She’s not always sure if she acted for the right reason. Or what the right reason is, for that matter.

Katniss doesn’t even always make the right choice. She knows that, and agonizes over the past. Why did I kill? Why did I lie? Was it the right thing to do?

The worst thing about *The Hunger Games* is that they don’t give any answers. Just as in real life, gut-wrenching dilemmas pile up, one after the other, without waiting for the protagonists to catch up.

Nonetheless, that brutal frankness is what makes the books and the movie so powerful. They don’t shy away from the fact that our world—just like Panem—constantly forces us to choose between good and evil. They don’t ignore the consequences of either. They don’t try to smooth things over.

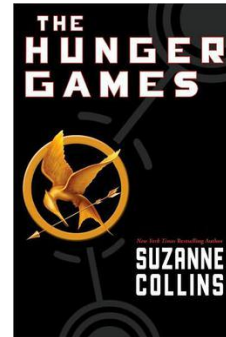
The Hunger Games are a reminder that all of us eventually have to measure our conscience against very tough decisions. And that we had better be ready for them.

Article 2: *Ethical Dilemma for the Reader/Viewer of THE HUNGER GAMES*

This next article was posted on a website called HubPages, which describes itself as “an open community of passionate people” where users can engage in sharing words and pictures, asking questions, and finding answers.

Notes on my thoughts, reactions and questions as I read.

BY NOW YOU HAVE MOST CERTAINLY heard of *The Hunger Games*. It is the youth-targeted novel by Suzanne Collins, and recent blockbuster film, that has swept both the list of bestsellers and the box office. It tells the story of Katniss Everdeen and her journey from a poorer district of a futuristic society to being the champion, well co-champion, of the yearly event called "The Hunger Games." In said event, twenty-four children have been mostly randomly chosen, with a few various exceptions of volunteers, to enter into the televised event where they are then supposed to brutally murder each other for the world's entertainment.



Ethical Problem in the Book/Film



An obvious ethical problem from the plot has arrived, and is echoed multiple times throughout both the book and film. That problem being, of course, how much more sick form of entertainment can there be than gleefully watching children murder each other? Many of the

characters are disgusted by it, and rightly so. A whole nation that watches *The Hunger Games* as its highest form of entertainment is obviously unethical, and Collins addresses this in her books. However, there is not simply an ethical problem within the story. Reading and/or viewing such a book/movie raises a serious question of ethics for the reader/viewer.

Ethical Dilemma for the Reader/Viewer

The ethical problem with this book and/or film is not so much what it contains as elements of the story, but how it is presented and taken in by the reader and/or viewer. Most everyone is appalled at the concept of *The Hunger Games*, yet we gleefully sit there and watch the film seeking to be as entertained as the thought-to-be citizens of Suzanne Collins' fictional world. Possibly even worse, the actual Hunger Games portion of the book was enjoyed by thousands (maybe even millions) of teenage children and young adults. As I watched the film it got to a point where I realized that we, the supposedly passive viewers, really may not be any better than the bloodthirsty fictional viewers within the story. We are being entertained in one of the most brutal ways imaginable.



I admit this may certainly be a philosophical question Collins intended to raise within the reader and/or viewer of her story, but I highly doubt most people thought of it this way, and most likely went on enjoying nastier parts of *The Hunger Games* as much as they probably should not. What does this reflect about human nature, or at least consumer society? This is book/film about the brutal murder of twenty-two minors presented as entertainment not only within the book, but to the audience the book is marketed to as well. So I simply ask, is it unethical to even read/view *The Hunger Games*, or just in a way that takes entertainment from its not-so-pleasant factors, or is the story fine as it is in whatever way taken in?

P.S. If you think that no one within the younger age demographic, or just people in general, would enjoy the more unpleasant features of the book/film, how do you explain horror movies (though I definitely do admit that *The Hunger Games* is many times better than any horror film)?

Article 3: *WWKD: The Moral and Ethical Issues of THE HUNGER GAMES*

Author Shoshana Kessock (who describes herself as a “comics fan, photographer, game developer and all around geek”) posted this article on *Tor.com*, a blog site dedicated to examining and discussing works of science fiction and fantasy.

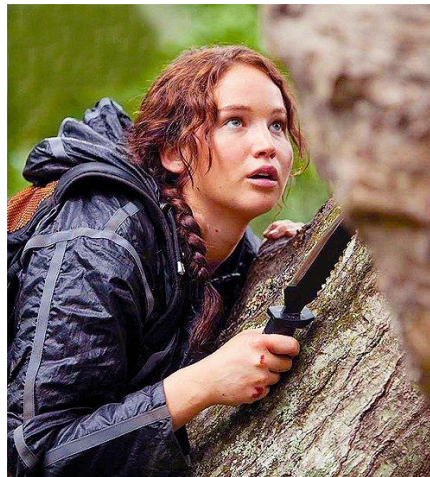


IT'S NO SECRET that *The Hunger Games* throws around some very serious moral and ethical questions. In a book originally marketed as young adult fiction, it presents questions of government control, deceit, violence and child killing for the reading audience to consider. Yet as people of all ages have embraced the story of

Katniss and the society of Panem, conversations are being had all over about the moral implications of activities of our favorite Girl on Fire and her co-characters. Having read the story, fans are getting together to ask the tough questions, such as: if you were put in the same position as Katniss, what would you do?

...The major ethical question of *The Hunger Games* series comes down to the Games themselves. Our heroine Katniss is forced to consider the fact that she will have to kill her fellow Tributes before a television audience to return to her family alive. The question of when killing is justified has plagued society forever, and Katniss is presented with killing children to ensure her own survival. Now, while the argument can be made that the other Tributes are out to kill Katniss and therefore her actions are justified as self-defense, Katniss (and the reading audience) is also aware that these kids are nearly all being forced into the games as well. The only Tributes who are seemingly without excuse for their actions are those who volunteer for the glory of winning the games, such as the Tributes from District One. Katniss chooses, early on, to step into the games to defend her sister and therefore takes on this moral dilemma for the best reasons. Yet the question still stands: is Katniss justified in her actions? Is murder for self-defense against the other Tributes justified?

Notes on my thoughts, reactions and questions as I read.



For the most part, Katniss takes a very pragmatic approach to her situation. She knows she must survive to return to her sister, whom she loves and protects. She is unwilling to lay down her own life because she has things worth living for. Yet during the games, her plan to be ruthless to survive is tested by her sympathy for those trapped within the games as well. She often does not engage directly in combat but waits to defend her own life when attacked instead of being the aggressor.

Peeta presents another interesting moral dilemma for Katniss. When he presents a “fake” story of a burgeoning love for



Katniss for the viewing audience to obsess over, Katniss is forced to lie about feelings she does not yet have for Peeta, all to win the support of the viewers. While in the grand scheme of things, a moral dilemma about lying seems trivial in the face of all the questions

about murder, the book goes out of its way to deal with Katniss’s discomfort with lying. Author Suzanne Collins in fact spends a lot of time presenting Katniss as a practical but honest person who prefers to be herself rather than presenting a front of manipulation. The fact that throughout the series Katniss is forced to compromise her honesty to manipulate people for survival’s sake seems often more of a problem than the questions about murder and violence.

But let’s get back to that murder and violence, especially in the face of Peeta. While Katniss becomes a reluctant fighter rather than a ruthless killer, the fact remains that only one Tribute may survive the Games. The main question that keeps us guessing throughout the very first book is whether Katniss will be able to sacrifice Peeta so she might survive. As the two grow closer, the moral dilemma changes. It becomes whether or not Katniss will be forced to sacrifice herself to let Peeta live or whether she must kill one person she cares for to go back to her sister, whom she also loves. The dilemma is then whether or not self-sacrifice is something to be lauded or whether or not survival and self-protection has its own merits. Is it better to give up one’s own life for their fellow Tribute, or is it more important to defend yourself? Anyone who has

read the series knows how it goes — Katniss and Peeta stand up to the government and defiantly refuse to die. Yet the question raised in the book rings so true that conversations abound all over by fans: what would you do, given the same situation? Is survival more important than the crime of murder?

To say that there are right and wrong answers would be problematic, since these are questions philosophers, law-makers and just people have been fighting with for the longest time. Yet Collins presents the audience with these major issues to consider in Katniss and provides great counterpoints in the supporting cast. Where Katniss struggles with the question of survival versus murder, she is opposed by Career Tributes

whose entire purpose in life has been to train for the Games and the violence they'll do in the arena. She's also offered a glimpse into the future by Haymitch, her mentor, who has been where she is and has suffered the psychological scars of surviving his own violent Games.



Haymitch is a dark mirror to Katniss and as the events of the series progress, Katniss's trauma at the events she has survived come to closely mirror Haymitch's own. Author Collins makes sure that the reading audience understands that both characters have been horribly psychologically scarred by the events they have been forced to endure. There is no celebration of violence in these books — murder and violence are not glorified, even when used in the later books as forces of revolution. Instead, they are deeply scarring tools that sometimes prove necessary but leave deep impressions upon the characters that never entirely heal.

These aren't the only two moral questions in the books. We could talk all day about the ethical problems of the reality TV parallels in *Hunger Games* and the question of being entertained by other's suffering. But the questions raised by *The Hunger Games* about justifiable murder and violence packs a wallop into a young adult novel that is powerful and thought-provoking. And since the books have become so popular, it's giving a forum for discussions about ethical decisions that people, especially young people, might not have a forum to talk about otherwise.

So next time you and your friends are sitting around, talking about Team Peeta or Team Gale, or which is your favorite Tribute,

maybe consider taking the conversation into the ethical realm. Ask yourself, WWKD — What Would Katniss Do? And more importantly, do you agree with her actions? Would you do the same?

Article 4: “THE HUNGER GAMES”: A Glimpse of the Future?

This final selection is excerpted from a longer article that appeared on a website called THE VIGILANT CITIZEN, a site that claims to examine how the media uses various strategies to manipulate the masses.

Appealing to the Basest Instincts

The games are broadcast to the nation in the form of a reality-show, complete with TV hosts who analyze the action, interview the tributes and judge their performance. The tributes are so indoctrinated in this



culture that they readily accept the rules of the game and in turn are fully willing to start killing to win the Games. The masses also actively participate in the event, cheering for

their district’s representatives, even though the entire event celebrates the sacrifice of their own. This reflects a sad but true fact concerning mass media: Any kind of message can reach people if it manages to capture their attention...The sheer violence of the event grabs the attention of the masses, who forget that the Games serve as a reminder of the people’s servitude to its elite. This concept is already well-known and fully exploited in today’s mass media, as elite-sponsored messages are constantly sold to consumers as being “entertainment.” *The Hunger Games* therefore aptly portray the role of media in the manipulation of public opinion. Will the movie help young people realize this fact?

At one point in *The Hunger Games*, the death of a little girl shocked the people to a point that it brought a brief moment of lucidity and solidarity as the kill highlighted the atrocity of the Games. The live broadcasting of the death led to a violent uprising in her district as the locals realized that they were willing participants in something terrible. The uprising was quickly quelled, however, by the ever-present police force of the state. Furthermore, in order to prevent further social trouble, the producers of the show introduced a new element to the show: Love between Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, the girl and the boy from District 12. By introducing love into the show, the producers managed to quell the masses and brought them back to

their usual state of silent stupor. This part of the movie reflects how mass media is used by the powers that be today. The worldwide reach of *The Hunger Games* series itself proves that stories that cleverly feature the ingredients of sex and violence are bound to get people hooked. And, even though *The Hunger Games* seems to be denouncing the perversity of violence in mass media, it sure brings more of it into movie theatres.

Desensitizing to a New Type of Violence

While there is no shortage of violence in Hollywood, *The Hunger Games* movie crosses a boundary that is rarely seen in movies:

Violence by minors and towards minors.

In this PG-13 movie we see kids aged between 12 and 18 violently stabbing, slashing, strangling, shooting and breaking the necks of other children – scenes that are seldom seen in



Hollywood movies. While it is surely a way for the movie to grab the attention of the movie's target audience (which happens to be teenagers aged 12 to 18) *The Hunger Games* brings to the forefront a new form of violence that was previously deemed too disturbing to portray in movies.

In Conclusion

The Hunger Games is set in world that is exactly what is described to be the New World Order: A rich and powerful elite, an exploited and dumbed-down mass of people, the dissolving of democracies into a police state entities, high-tech surveillance, mass media used for propaganda and a whole lot of blood rituals. There is indeed nothing optimistic in the dystopian future described in *The Hunger Games*. Even human dignity is revoked as the masses are forced to watch their own children killing each other's as if they were caged animals. That being said, there is little to no difference between movie goers who watch the movie *The Hunger Games* and the masses in the movie that witness the cruelty of the Games. Both are willing participants in an event that portrays the sacrifice of their own under the amused eye of the elite. Furthermore, one can argue that the movie accomplishes the same functions as the Games in the movie: Distracting the masses with blood and sex while reminding it of the elite's power.

1. As noted in these four articles, *The Hunger Games* introduces a variety of moral and ethical issues. In the boxes below, list at least three major moral/ethical issues examined in the book and movie and which article(s) included a discussion of them. Include up to five if you can think of others.

| Moral/Ethical Issue | Discussed in which article(s)? |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. | |
| 2. | |
| 3. | |
| 4. | |
| 5. | |

2. As described in the four short introductions, each of these articles was taken from websites that are designed to appeal to a very specific audience. Choose **one** of the articles and analyze how the author's purpose is reflected in the article's tone and content. Be sure to include specific quotations from the text.

3. None of the four articles actually directly states a position on whether this book (or the movie based on it) would be appropriate for use in a classroom. Complete the chart below to reflect the stance you think each of the authors would take if asked if this book should be taught in a regular classroom. Cite specific wording from each article that supports your conclusion.

| Article | Should it be taught? (Yes/No) | Specific wording from the text that supports your conclusion: |
|------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Article #1 | | |
| Article #2 | | |
| Article #3 | | |
| Article #4 | | |

Part 2:

You will now have the opportunity to review your notes and sources, plan, draft, and revise your essay. You may use your notes and refer to the sources. You may also refer to the answers you wrote to the questions in Part 1. Now read your assignment and begin your work.

Your Assignment

Your English department staff is considering using *The Hunger Games* as one of the required books for a literature class. Students have been asked to write an argumentative essay either supporting its use or arguing against it. Write your own argumentative essay that takes a clear position, using material from the articles you have read, as well as the text of *The Hunger Games* itself, as support. Be sure that your recommendation acknowledges both sides of the issue so that people know that you have considered this recommendation carefully. You do not need to use all the sources, only the ones that most effectively and credibly support your position and your consideration of the opposing view.