



THE HUNGER GAMES: AN INDICTMENT OF REALITY TELEVISION



AN ELA PERFORMANCE TASK

***The Hunger Games* and Reality Television**

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 drawing comparisons between *The Hunger Games* and shows currently on Reality TV:
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdmOwt77D2g>)
- After watching the video clip, ask each group recorder to create two columns on a piece of paper. In one column, the group will list recent or current reality television shows that have similarities to the way reality television is portrayed in *The Hunger Games*. In the second column, list or explain some of those similarities.
- To clarify this assignment, ask the following two questions:
 1. What are the rules that have been set up for *The Hunger Games*, particularly those that are intended to appeal to the television audience?
 2. Are there any shows currently or recently on television that use similar rules or elements to draw a larger audience?
- 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. The narrator in the video clip suggests that entertainments like *The Hunger Games* “desensitize us” to violence. How true do you think this is?
 2. What current shows are particularly guilty of this? What, if anything, should be done about them?

Student Directions: Part 1

THE HUNGER GAMES: *An Indictment of Reality Television*

Task:

Suzanne Collins, author of the trilogy *The Hunger Games*, is said to have initially gotten her idea for the book series while watching television, switching channels between a news station and reality shows. It becomes clear from very early on in the book that through the plot device of having the entire country of Panem watch the games on television, as well as the presence of surveillance cameras located throughout the Districts, Collins has a point to make about reality television and its pervasiveness in modern life.

In order to explore the topic of reality television, you will read four articles that present a variety of perspectives. You may take notes in the margin as you read these 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 explanatory 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 explanatory 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: *THE HUNGER GAMES* and Reality Television

The following article is from a website designed for teachers to post ideas for lesson plans that they suggest would be interesting to students. This particular article looks at THE HUNGER GAMES as a potential resource where students could make some connections to modern-day reality shows.

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

SUZANNE COLLINS SAYS SHE GOT THE IDEA for *The Hunger Games* while watching television. She was switching back and forth between news about the war in Iraq, and reality shows. One moment she would see images of explosions, gun fire, and carnage, and the next moment she would see people competing to remain in a fraternity-like house with their every movement documented by cameras. This juxtaposition triggered the idea that blossomed into *The Hunger Games*, a story about a 16-year-old girl forced to fight to the death against other teens in a vast outdoor arena, while the rest of the country watches on television. Collins' novel poignantly comments on our current fascination with so-called “reality,” and our enduring fascination with violence.

The first major reality-television show, and perhaps the one most related to *The Hunger Games*, is called *Survivor*. It is a show featuring a



crew of “real people,” cast away in a remote location, where they must survive and compete with each other. The survivors face many physical challenges—lack of food, grueling competitions for creature comforts, etc.—but the most competitive aspect

of the game is its elimination process. Every week, the survivors gather together and vote one member out of camp. The last person left is the winning survivor and receives \$1,000,000. The parallels to *The Hunger Games* are several and obvious. In *The Hunger Games*, Tributes must also survive in a harsh environment and are forced to compete against each other much like the people on *Survivor*, but instead of eliminating competition by voting them out of camp, the Tributes must fight to the death until only one remains. The winner gets a house, a monthly stipend, and is essentially set for life.

The Hunger Games also shares some similarities with other reality television shows, but the most compelling similarity, and perhaps the one Suzanne Collins most wants to draw attention to, is the way in which the audience watches and experiences the shows. In *The Hunger Games*, the

audience consists of people from the Capitol, for whom the Games are prime-time must-see TV, and the rest of Panem, who are forced to watch the brutal games. The Capitolers are at best blissfully ignorant, and at worst callously uncaring, about the plight of the Tributes, who are teenagers reaped from impoverished Districts, forced to participate in blood sport for the entertainment of their wealthy oppressors. The Capitol audience shows the same detached, voyeuristic qualities seen in people who delight in the cruel pitfalls of our society's reality television. Real-life audiences root for and against all kinds of people on television—people with eating disorders, people battling obesity, addiction, and mental health disorders. We watch these people as though they aren't real, as though their suffering doesn't matter.



This detached voyeuristic viewing is what allows the Capitolers to revel in the real-life suffering of the Tributes in *The Hunger Games*. Because they do not truly recognize the participants as real people, the audience is able to experience *The Hunger Games* as pure entertainment. The same is largely true for today's reality-television audience. It is easy to forget that the people we see on TV are just as fragile, as insecure, as real as the rest of us. While reading Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, students should compare the games and its context in Panem to our own reality television. The similarities might surprise them.

Article 2: Why America Loves Reality TV

This next article, by Steven Reiss and James Wiltz, was first published in PSYCHOLOGY TODAY in September of 2001, when reality television was first becoming popular. In it, the authors attempt to analyze about what makes Reality TV so attractive to its many viewers.

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

EVEN IF YOU DON'T WATCH reality television, it's becoming increasingly hard to avoid. The salacious *Temptation Island* was featured on the cover of *People* magazine. *Big Brother* aired five days a week and could be viewed on the Web 24 hours a day. And the *Survivor* finale dominated the front page of the *New York Post* after gaining ratings that rivaled those of the Super Bowl.

Is the popularity of shows such as *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island* a sign that the country has degenerated into a nation of voyeurs? Americans seem hooked on so-called reality television—



programs in which ordinary people compete in weeks-long contests while being filmed 24 hours a day. Some commentators contend the shows peddle blatant voyeurism, with shameless exhibitionists as contestants. Others believe that the show's secret to ratings success may be as simple and harmless as the desire to seem part of the in crowd.

Rather than just debate the point, we wanted to get some answers. So we conducted a detailed survey of 239 people, asking them about not only their television viewing habits but also their values and desires through the Reiss Profile, a standardized test of 16 basic desires and values. We found that the self-appointed experts were often wrong about why people watch reality TV.

Two of the most commonly repeated "truths" about reality TV viewers are that they watch in order to talk with friends and coworkers about the show, and that they are not as smart as other viewers. But our survey results show that both of these ideas are incorrect. Although some people may watch because it helps them participate in the next day's office chat, fans and nonfans score almost equally when tested on their sociability. And people who say they enjoy intellectual activities are no less likely to watch reality TV than are those who say they dislike intellectual activities...

One aspect that all of the reality TV shows had in common was their competitive nature: contestants were vying with one another for a cash prize and were engaged in building alliances and betraying allies. The first *Survivor* series climaxed with one contestant, Susan Hawk, launching into a vengeful tirade against a one-time friend and ally before casting the vote that deprived her of the million-dollar prize. It makes sense, then, that fans of *Survivor* tend to be competitive--and that they are more likely to place a very high value on revenge than are other people. The *Survivor* formula of challenges and voting would seem to embody both of these desired qualities: the spirit of competition paired with the opportunity for payback.

But the attitude that best separated the regular viewers of reality television from everyone else is the desire for status. Fans of the shows are much more likely to agree with statements such as, "Prestige is

important to me" and "I am impressed with designer clothes" than are other people. We have studied similar phenomena before and found that the desire for status is just a means to get attention. And more attention increases one's sense of importance: We think we are important if others pay attention to us and unimportant if ignored.

Reality TV allows Americans to fantasize about gaining status through automatic fame. Ordinary people can watch the shows, see people like themselves and imagine that they too could become celebrities by being on television. It does not matter as much that the contestants often are shown in an unfavorable light; the fact that millions of Americans are paying attention means that the contestants are important.

And, in fact, some of the contestants have capitalized on their short-term celebrity: Colleen Haskell, from the first *Survivor* series, has a major role in the movie *The Animal*, and Richard Hatch, the scheming contestant who won the game, has been hired to host his own game show. If these former nobodies can become stars, then who couldn't?

The message of reality television is that ordinary people can become so important that millions will watch them. And the secret thrill of many of those viewers is the thought that perhaps next time, the new celebrities might be them.



Article 3: TV Contestants: Tired, Tipsy and Pushed to the Brink

This NEW YORK TIMES article by Edward Wyatt and published in 2009 exposes some of the tactics used by reality television shows as they prep their contestants for participation. Do you see any parallels to the treatment of the tributes in THE HUNGER GAMES?

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

LOS ANGELES — In the first episode of this season's *Hell's Kitchen*, the 16 aspiring chefs clamber out of a bus and canter into the kitchen of Gordon Ramsay's reality show restaurant like convicts on a jailbreak. If the current season is like earlier ones, that is not so far from the truth.

“They locked me in a hotel room for three or four days” before production started, said Jen Yemola, a Pennsylvania pastry chef who was on the 2007 season of *Hell’s Kitchen*, a cooking competition. “They took all my books, my CDs, my phone, any newspapers. I was allowed to leave the room only with an escort. It was like I was in prison.”

Long workdays and communication blackouts are largely the rule for contestants on reality shows, a highly lucrative genre that has evolved arguably into Hollywood’s sweatshop. Unscripted series now account for more than one-quarter of all primetime broadcast programming — and essentially the entire day on cable channels like Discovery, Bravo and A&E. The most popular reality series, *American Idol*, has commanded advertising rates as high as \$1 million for a 30-second spot.

But with most contestants receiving no union representation, participants on reality series are not covered by Hollywood workplace rules governing meal breaks, minimum time off between shoots or even minimum wages. Most of them, in fact, receive little to no pay for their work.

It can make for a miserable experience but compelling entertainment, creating a sort of televised psychological experiment that keeps contestants off-balance and vulnerable.



Most reality series have contestants sign nondisclosure agreements that include million-dollar penalties if they reveal what happened on set. But interviews with two dozen former contestants — most of whose agreements expired after three years — from half a dozen reality series suggest that the programs routinely use isolation, sleeplessness and alcohol to

encourage wild behavior.

During the 2006 season of the popular ABC dating show *The Bachelor*, the contestants waited in vans for several hours while the crew set up for a 12-hour “arrival” party where, two contestants said, there was little food but bottomless glasses of wine. When producers judged the proceedings too boring, they sent out a production assistant with a tray of shots.

“If you combine no sleep with alcohol and no food, emotions are going to run high and people are going to be acting crazy,” said Erica Rose, a contestant that year.

Things were not very different on *Project Runway*, a fashion-design competition shown first on Bravo and now on Lifetime Television. Diana Eng says she was so tired after multiple 18-hour days of shooting the program's 2005-6 season that she was sometimes awoken by the camera crew standing over her.

"One morning they scared me so bad I jumped and screamed," she said. "They said that wasn't good, so I had to pretend to wake up again."

Producers of reality shows say that participants know what they are getting into when they sign up for a show. Even if contestants have not watched previous seasons — and most have — detailed contracts specify that anything they do or say is fair game for broadcast.

Mike Fleiss, the creator of *The Bachelor*, and Arthur Smith, an executive producer of *Hell's Kitchen*, declined to be interviewed for this article. Executives of ABC and Fox, which broadcast those series, also would not be interviewed.

Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz, the principals of the company Magical Elves, which produced the first five seasons of *Project Runway*, said in a written statement that the show kept contestants isolated "to ensure fairness and prevent cheating," as well as to prevent results from leaking.

"We always give contestants the best conditions we can," the executives said. "Our budgets are less than half what a similar network show would have, and that means very long days for cast and crew, but our contestants are fed at least every six hours, and there are always snacks and water available."

Others who have studied the genre, however, say that reality competitions often make participants emotionally and physically dependent on the producers.

"The bread and butter of reality television is to get people into a state where they are tired, stressed and emotionally vulnerable," said Mark Andrejevic, an associate professor of communications studies at the University of Iowa and the author of *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*.

"That helps make them more amenable to the goals of the producers and more easily manipulated."



Article 4: Why Reality TV is the New Family TV

James Poniewozik is the television critic for TIME magazine. In his preface to this article published in 2013, he asserts, “The genre that was supposed to be the death of civilized society has become—at least some of it—the best primetime programming for parents to watch with kids.”

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

THIRTEEN SUMMERS AGO, when a pair of shows called *Survivor* and *Big Brother* debuted on CBS, there were uneasy cries that reality TV was coarsening our civilization. Contestants were encouraged to lie and backstab one another! People were eating actual rats! What was going to be next: snuff films?

Thirteen years later, you can debate how well reality TV, overall, has fulfilled its promise as a hell-bound handbasket. But I do know this: when the regular TV season ended last week and the summer premiere season started, it was an exciting time at home, because it meant *Masterchef* was coming back, and we could watch it together with the Tuned In Jrs.

Reality TV is a big, diverse medium, of course: some of it is raunchy, some of it ugly, some obnoxious (like tonight’s despicable let’s-fire-someone-fest *Does Someone Have to Go?* on Fox), and some of it very, very good. In other words, it’s not unlike scripted TV.

But another funny thing has happened over the past generation:

reality TV has also become the new version, and maybe the last bastion, of primetime family viewing. It’s not just *Masterchef*. Nearly every TV series my wife and I watch with the Tuned In Jrs. is a reality show.

We handicap *The Voice* contestants’ odds every week. *The Amazing Race* has given us a whole new perspective on airport travel. *Shark*

Tank captivates the kids, and has shown me—one of the least entrepreneurial people I know—what a fascinating process valuing a business is. *Top Chef*, *Chopped*, *Market Warriors*—if it involves cooking or selling something, we’ll watch it. Other families I know, anecdotally, are into *Storage Wars* or *Duck Dynasty* (the latter, I guess, much like families in the ’60s were into *The Beverly Hillbillies*).

Most of these are competition reality shows, which is no accident: like sports, reality shows like these are a genre of TV that can appeal to kids’ and adult interests without denying either one. Most of these series are made for adults, often without any particular goal of being all-ages entertainment.



But on their own terms, they reflect things kids—at least, the Tuned In Jrs.—are interested in: competition, creation, scorekeeping. They make performance more exciting, or they game-ify aspects of adult life, like cooking or traveling or making money. And though “appropriate” is a relative term, they tend to do it in relatively clean terms.

When people complain that there are fewer good TV shows for families to watch together, it’s often assumed that means that TV has become more vulgar or adult. Which of course is true in some ways, but really the overall trend is simply that, as TV has become more various and fragmented, it’s become more *specific*. Everyone has their own demo-targeted TV now, children and parents alike. We actually live in a pretty great era for kids’ TV, and I’ve written endlessly here about great shows that could only exist in a time of many cable outlets and greater creative license. But most adults have limited tolerance for shows written for kids, and it will be years before I show the Jrs. more than the opening titles for *Game of Thrones*. (Which they love.)



And by the way, that’s fine. Like any parent now, I find navigating media with my kids to be a challenge sometimes. (Enough with the gross subway ads, please.) But I don’t expect, or want, media to cater to my particular concerns as a parent.

People sometimes assume that, because I’m a TV critic, I’m permissive about what my kids watch. Just the opposite—there are many things I watched as a kid that I would not let my own kids near. Yesterday, when news broke that Steve Forrest, star of the ’70s drama *SWAT*, had died, I was overcome with nostalgia, for a show that was pretty much a constant barrage of heavy-weapons fire (with a great theme song). What the hell was I doing watching this when I was seven years old?

I remember enough to know that the good old days were not always as kid-sanitized as we may want to think. (We recently re-watched the original *Bad News Bears*, a fantastic movie about kids—which also happens to include underage drinking and a zillion racial and homophobic slurs.) And while I may miss *The Cosby Show*—we’ve been marathoning reruns from the DVR—plenty of the “family” sitcoms from my childhood, however warmly I may remember them, do not exactly hold up well. I’m glad instead that my kids are growing up in a time that has created primetime series like *Lost*—which they can watch, later, when they’re older.

In the meantime, I’m grateful for reality TV. If it’s sending society to hell, at least the kids and I can go there together.

1. Authors frequently craft their word choices to produce a strong response in readers. Choose one sentence from each of the four articles where you felt this is true and analyze the intended effect on the reader.

	Effective wording:	Intended effect
Article 1: <i>The Hunger Games and Reality Television</i>		
Article 2: <i>Why America Loves Reality TV</i>		
Article 3: <i>TV Contestants: Tired, Tipsy and Pushed to the Brink</i>		
Article 4: <i>Why Reality TV is the New Family TV</i>		

2. Of the four articles, some more strongly take a position on whether reality television is a good or a bad phenomenon. Complete the chart below, filling in the boxes to reflect the authors' stance on reality TV and at least one sentence or phrase from the text that emphasizes this stance.

Article Title	Your ranking on a scale of 0-10 (Circle a number) : 0 = Strongly opposed to Reality TV; 5 = Neither for nor against; 10 = Enthusiastically supportive of Reality TV
Article 1: <i>The Hunger Games and Reality Television</i>	<div> <div>0</div><div>1</div><div>2</div><div>3</div><div>4</div><div>5</div><div>6</div><div>7</div><div>8</div><div>9</div><div>10</div> </div> <div>Evidence from the text:</div>
Article 2: <i>Why America Loves Reality TV</i>	<div> <div>0</div><div>1</div><div>2</div><div>3</div><div>4</div><div>5</div><div>6</div><div>7</div><div>8</div><div>9</div><div>10</div> </div> <div>Evidence from the text:</div>
Article 3: <i>TV Contestants: Tired, Tipsy and Pushed to the Brink</i>	<div> <div>0</div><div>1</div><div>2</div><div>3</div><div>4</div><div>5</div><div>6</div><div>7</div><div>8</div><div>9</div><div>10</div> </div> <div>Evidence from the text:</div>
Article 4: <i>Why Reality TV is the New Family TV</i>	<div> <div>0</div><div>1</div><div>2</div><div>3</div><div>4</div><div>5</div><div>6</div><div>7</div><div>8</div><div>9</div><div>10</div> </div> <div>Evidence from the text:</div>

3. The authors of the four articles you have read vary quite a bit in terms of how much they rely on facts and sources as opposed to expressing their own opinions when discussing views on reality television. Rank the four articles in the order you think they belong, from the one using the most support and evidence down to the one that most heavily relies on personal opinion. Reveal and explain your ranking in the graphic below, making sure to use specific examples from the text.

Article	Ranking (1-4)	Explanation for ranking
Article 1: <i>The Hunger Games and Reality Television</i>		
Article 2: <i>Why America Loves Reality TV</i>		
Article 3: <i>TV Contestants: Tired, Topsy and Pushed to the Brink</i>		
Article 4: <i>Why Reality TV is the New Family TV</i>		

Part 2:

As revealed in these four articles, there are a variety of reasons people choose to watch reality television. In an explanatory essay, discuss some of these reasons and how they may be similar to or different from the motivations of the audience watching the Capitol's broadcasts of *The Hunger Games* in the novel. Be sure to include specific references to the articles you have read for Part 1 of this task as well as to the book itself.