

## Literature e-Circles Unit Plan

**Title:** Digging Deep with Literature e-Circles

**Description:** Using the popular young adult novel *Holes*, middle school students explore relevant topics, such as relationships to authority, friendship, and morality. Students also learn valuable strategies for making literature personally meaningful.

### At a Glance

**Grade Level:** 6-8 Arts

**Subject(s):** Language Arts

**Subject Sort (for Web site index):** Language

**Topics:** Literature, Writing, Technology

**Higher-Order Thinking Skills:** Inferring, Analyzing, Synthesizing

**Key Learnings:** Analyzing Narrative, Appreciating Reader Interpretations

**Time Needed:** 2 weeks, 90 minutes daily

**Background:** [Odyssey Story](#) from North Carolina, United States

### Unit Summary

Students in different middle schools read the novel *Holes*, by Louis Sachar, and meet in virtual literature circles (or *e-circles*) to discuss their interpretations of the novel. Comprehension questions and a modified Socratic discussion method promote deep thinking about characterization, plot, style, author intent, and personal interpretation. Students meet face-to-face to create technology-supported projects that demonstrate their understanding and appreciation of the text. An online survey marks changes in attitudes about reading and the ethical questions the novel presents.

### Curriculum-Framing Questions

#### Essential Question

Why should words be chosen carefully, and why do people tell you to be careful what you say?

#### Unit Questions

Why do people interpret books differently?

How did the book impact you or change your outlook on life?

How are the events and characters in the book similar to events and characters you have known or experienced?

#### Content Questions

How did the author use dialogue to depict the characters?

How did the author play around with time to tell his story?

What techniques did the author use to develop the characters, setting, and plot?

### Assessment Processes

View how a variety of student-centered [assessments](#) are used in the Literature e-Circles Unit Plan. These assessments help students and teachers set goals; monitor student progress; provide feedback; assess thinking, processes, performances, and products; and reflect on learning throughout the learning cycle.

### Instructional Procedures

Prior to instruction, collaborate with local teachers. Arrange to read the book together, and plan your literature e-circle themes. Set up online virtual literature circles for cross-school discussions using a free bulletin board, such as [Boards2Go](#)\* or [Quicktopics](#)\*.

Prepare bookmarks with a reading schedule on one side and reader response strategies on the other (as described in Phase I). Plan a time in which classes from the different schools can meet for group presentations and a reading celebration.

#### Phase I: Getting Ready to Read, 1 or 2 periods

Phase I includes introducing the topic and text, assessing initial thinking, introducing online discussion, and preparing to read.

Conduct a Think-Pair-Share activity. Ask students to do a quickwrite on one of the following topics, and then share what they have written with a partner:

- When have you learned something important from a story?
- Why do people read stories?
- How is reading a story different from reading other kinds of writing?

Follow up with a whole-class discussion. Take anecdotal notes regarding individual student discussion points and use to differentiate instruction if necessary.

Ask students if they have ever been blamed for something they did not do. Conduct a discussion about how they had responded to the accusation and what they now think of their response.

Distribute copies of Louis Sachar's *Holes*. Have the class look at the cover, and ask students to discuss what the cover art evokes in the reader and why the publisher may have chosen that imagery. Read the text on the back of the book, the note about the author, and the list of other books by Louis Sachar. Many students will remember reading the *Wayside School* series of books and will enjoy comparing the style and themes of *Holes* to the author's earlier books. Ask students if they ever use any of these strategies before starting a book and discuss why the strategies are useful actions to take.

Have students complete a [Survey](#)\* to assess their attitudes about reading. After students complete the survey, discuss class (but not individual) results. Ask, How do we think alike? How are we different? How can we account for our similarities and differences? Build a climate of trust and acceptance for the varying points of view and interpretations of the book that will arise as students read *Holes*.

Teach students to respond actively to the text by recording their thoughts on sticky notes as they read. Print the following list of response strategies on bookmarks:

- Personal Connections to the Text
- Reactions, Opinions, Feelings
- Questions, Inferences, Predictions

- Vivid Imagery
- Wonder Words (memorable language or moving passages)
- Evaluation (the way the book is written—what works? what does not work?)

Introduce students to the online message board you have set up, and explain processes for online discussion. Student discussions should focus on answering the following questions:

- *Why should words be chosen carefully, and why do people tell you to be careful what you say?*
- *Why do people interpret books differently?*
- *How did the book impact you or change your outlook on life?*
- *How are the events and characters in the book similar to events and characters you have known or experienced?*
- *How did the author use dialogue to depict the characters?*
- *How did the author play around with time to tell his story?*
- *What techniques did the author of Holes use to develop the characters, setting, and plot?*
- What can I do to get the most out of this book?
- What can I learn about myself and others from reading this book?

As the unit progresses, small groups create projects related to the book. Assign students to small groups of 3 to 5 members. Try to make groups diverse so students share a variety of opinions and reading experiences. Assign roles to individuals so everyone in the group contributes. Roles might include team recorder, materials manager, art director, and technology expert. Distribute the [collaboration rubric](#) and review with students before they start working in their small groups.

Pass out response strategy/schedule bookmarks and help students record the number of pages they should read each night. (If students read during class and at home, most can finish the book in one week.)

## **Phase II: Reading and Reflection, 5 or 6 periods**

During Phase II, students engage in the following actions every day:

- Read the book
- Keep a reading response journal
- Meet in online discussion groups
- Participate in literature lessons or Socratic seminars

### **First Half of Each Period**

Students engage in independent reading, response journal writing, and e-circle discussions. During independent reading, students write responses to the text on sticky notes. After reading a scheduled number of pages, they record and expand their notes in their journal and write a response to the prompt for that day's e-circle. This entry serves as the "ticket" into the ongoing e-circle discussion. Use the independent reading-responding time to meet with individuals or small groups who need extra support. To encourage steady reading effort, record the number of pages the class has read at the end of each period. Seeing the number of pages grow on a "Class Reading Progress" chart can be motivating.

Every three days, ask students to select their three best notes, write a reflection about the strategies they used, and turn the notes and reflection in for assessment.

Have students complete their daily reading response before engaging in the e-circle. As students join an e-circle discussion, they either respond to teacher prompts or, depending on their maturity, carry on a student-driven discussion. You may want to print and post samples of online dialogue to remind students of the discussion parameters.

### Second Half of Each Period

Focus on direct instruction on a literary theme, reading strategy, or technology tool that you need to teach or is dedicated to a Socratic seminar. Teach students about [Socratic Seminars Methods](#)\* and provide them with the [seminar rubric](#). Walk through a sample Socratic seminar question process, explaining important points. If this is a new activity, you might want to introduce the activity and conduct a mock seminar before you focus on discussing the text. Post prompts online in the e-circle space in advance, so students can begin thinking about the upcoming discussion.

Focus the discussion on the following core questions in order to promote the transfer of thinking skills and reading strategies to other literature:

- *Why should words be chosen carefully, and why do people tell you to be careful what you say?*
- *Why do people interpret books differently?*
- *How did the book impact you or change your outlook on life?*
- *How are the events and characters in the book similar to events and characters you have known or experienced?*
- *How did the author use dialogue to depict the characters?*
- *How did the author play around with time to tell his story?*
- *What techniques did the author of Holes use to develop the characters, setting, and plot?*
- *What can I do to get the most out of this book?*
- *What can I learn about myself and others from reading this book?*

### Phase III: Creating a Project, 3 or 4 periods

In Phase III, introduce the project by showing the [sample presentation](#) and sharing the [project rubric](#). Ask for input and make revisions as necessary. Guide students through a project-planning process, such as the following:

1. Select a theme from the book that is especially meaningful to you, one that you can connect to your life or the lives of your classmates.
2. Think about what you want to tell others about the theme in life and in the book.
3. Brainstorm ideas for the project. Try to think of as many ideas as you can that are unusual and meaningful.
4. Choose a format for your project (such as a multimedia presentation, dramatization, video, Web site, mock trial, newsletter, or brochure).
5. Make a plan for completing the project with deadlines and responsibilities.
6. Help each other stay focused and do high-quality work.
7. Answer one or more of the following questions and support your answer with evidence from the book, survey results, and quotes and responses from others in your e-circle:
  - *Why should words be chosen carefully, and why do people tell you to be careful what you say?*
  - *Why do people interpret books differently?*
  - *How did the book impact you or change your outlook on life?*
  - *How are the events and characters in the book similar to events and characters you have known or experienced?*

Ask students to complete the [checklist](#) as they work to help keep them on track.

As students work on projects, conduct whole-class or small-group instruction on the following skills as appropriate:

- Brainstorming
- Distinguishing good ideas from bad ideas
- Developing a project plan
- Addressing interpersonal group problems (such as encouraging workers who are not doing their share, managing bossy group members, drawing out shy students, and so forth)
- Assessing their own work
- Solving problems (such as working with technology, locating resources, and getting good help and advice)

Ask students to self-assess their group work using the [collaboration rubric](#).

Plan a celebration for sharing the projects with the online groups.

#### **Phase IV: Conclusion and Reflection**

In Phase IV, place students in new small groups to reflect on the unit. Ask them to discuss the following questions:

- *What did I learn from the people in my e-circle?*
- *What strategies did I use to help me apply this book to my life?*
- *Is Holes a good book? Is it a great book?*

#### **Prerequisite Skills**

Student should have familiarity with:

- Digital and video cameras
- Multimedia presentations
- Web page authoring

#### **Differentiated Instruction**

##### **Resource Student**

- Supply visual guides
- Break activities into manageable sections, and record tasks on a calendar
- Provide extra time to complete assignments
- Supply a copy of the book on tape or CD
- Group the student with more capable learners
- Encourage cooperation by explaining to the class that *collaboration* means working together to meet goals

##### **Gifted Student**

- Encourage the student to create supplemental assignments or extensions
- Provide technologies that offer advanced features

##### **English Language Learner (ELL)**

- Provide copies of the text in the student's first language

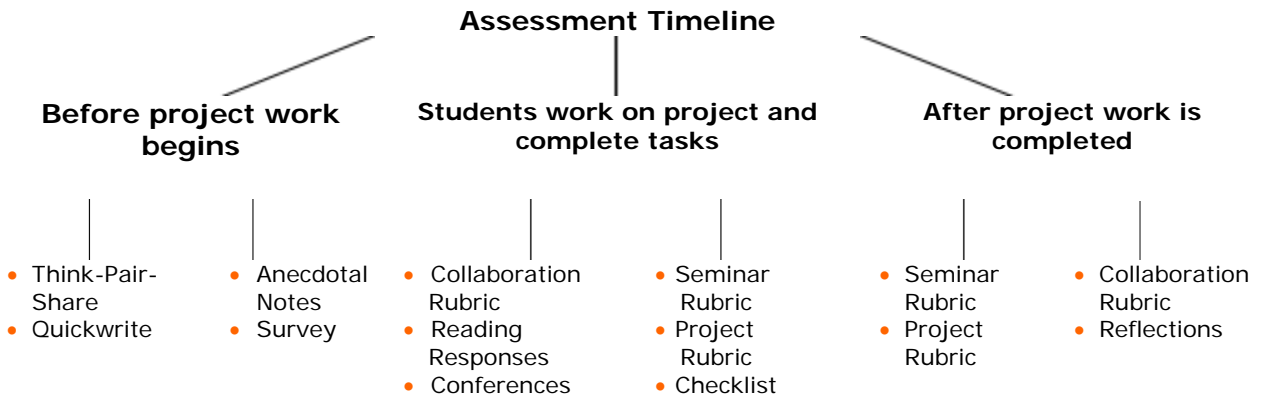
- Show the student how to use a computer microphone to record the student reading aloud
- Provide a glossary

## Credits

Johnny Walters participated in the Intel® Teach Program, which resulted in this idea for a classroom project. A team of teachers expanded the plan into the example you see here.

## THINGS YOU NEED (highlight box)

### Assessment Plan



Give students daily class work and homework grades for maintaining their reading status. Each day, check with students to see how many pages they have read. Ask comprehension questions to gauge general understanding and adjust instruction as necessary.

Grade e-circle participation. Give points for showing the following:

- Effective interaction about the book
- Elements of good reader-response
- Acceptable spelling, usage, and grammar

Ask students to self-assess their use of reading strategies periodically throughout the reading of the book. Review these reflections to assess progress and understanding.

Assess Socratic seminar participation using this [seminar rubric](#). Provide students with a checklist to help them track their own progress on the project. Ask students to assess their group work using the collaboration rubric. Assess student projects and presentations using the [project rubric](#).

## Content Standards and Objectives

### Targeted Content Standards and Benchmarks

### North Carolina Language Arts Standards

- Uses language to express individual perspectives in response to personal, social, cultural, and historical issues
- Synthesizes and uses information from a variety of sources
- Refines the understanding and use of argument
- Refines critical thinking skills and creates criteria to evaluate text and multimedia
- Responds to various literary genres using interpretive and evaluative processes
- Applies conventions of grammar and language usage

### **National Education Technology Standards (NETS)**

Grades 6-8 Performance Indicators:

- Apply productivity/multimedia tools and peripherals to support personal productivity, group collaboration, and learning
- Collaborate with peers, experts, and others using telecommunications and collaborative tools
- Select and use appropriate tools and technology resources to accomplish a variety of tasks and solve problems

### **Student Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- Analyze a literary character
- Identify and describe the narrative elements of a book
- Reflect on moral issues raised in a book
- Read critically using a variety of reader-response techniques
- Identify a theme supported with specific references to a book
- Break down complex tasks into manageable pieces
- Reflect metacognitively on the use of reading strategies

<b>Resources:</b>
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### **Materials and Resources**

#### **Printed Materials**

Sachar, L. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Sachar, L., Yelnats, S., & Newman, J. (2003). *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake*. New York: Random House Children's Books.

#### **Supplies**

- Shovel
- Other story-related props
- Poster board
- Markers
- Paint
- Rolls of paper

#### **Internet Resources**

- Desert USA  
[www.desertusa.com](http://www.desertusa.com)\*  
A virtual field trip to an American desert
- *Holes* ThinkQuest  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/J0113061>\*  
A unit study based on *Holes*

- Louis Sachar  
[www.louissachar.com](http://www.louissachar.com)\*  
Story synopsis and interview with the author about *Holes*
- Quicktopics  
[www.quicktopics.com](http://www.quicktopics.com)\*  
A free message board for e-circles
- Boards2go  
[www.boards2go.com](http://www.boards2go.com)\*  
Another free message board for e-circles
- Zoomerang  
[www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com)\*  
A free online survey tool
- Atomic Learning  
[www.atomiclearning.com](http://www.atomiclearning.com)\*  
Online tutorials for many software programs

### **Other Resources**

#### **DVD**

Davis, A. (Director). (2003). *Holes*. [DVD]. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video.

#### **Technology—Hardware**

- Internet access to participate in the online discussions
- Computers, digital cameras, video cameras, or presentation equipment might be required to complete some projects

#### **Technology—Software**

- Online discussions for e-circles
- Internet browsers for students to participate in online discussions
- Presentation software for students who want to create multimedia presentations