Acid-Washed Jeans, a Moussed-Out Mullet, and Eternity Cologne: The Challenges of Growing Up

It was 1987.

I was in eighth grade, and the Spring Fling dance was rocking the South Bonneville Junior High gym like it had never been rocked before.

My main objective up to that point had been to simply look good, and one glance in the mirror confirmed in my oh-so-tainted mind that I had accomplished this (think acid-washed jeans, a moussed-out mullet, and about nine sprays too many of Eternity cologne). But in the back of my mind, I knew that night had the chance to be something special, so as I walked through the green-and-yellow balloon archway leading into the gym, I challenged myself to step up my game and do something I never thought possible: I was going to ask Sarah Hinton to slow dance.

And moments later, when Whitesnake’s “Here I Go Again” erupted from the speakers, I knew it was on.

Challenges.

They’ve always been around, but it seems as if today’s students face more of them than ever before, and unfortunately, they often are much larger in scale than simply deciding who they are going to ask to dance.

The good news is that the literature for today’s adolescents has evolved in a way that tackles these issues head-on. Not only do they expose the challenges of life, they also provide teens with solutions and coping strategies for these inevitable “bumps in the road.”

Three novels that effectively address these tough-to-handle situations are Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and William Golding’s classic *Lord of the Flies*.

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (grades 7+)

In this dystopian novel, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark are selected to participate in the Hunger Games, a televised fight-to-the-death battle between geographical districts. Beyond the gripping storyline and action-filled plot, *The Hunger Games* uses a strong female protagonist to present a wide range of challenges, including physical, emotional, and mental battles.

As an introductory activity, bring in the weekly grocery ads and, in groups, let students decide what they would buy if given $100 right now. Next, have them share their lists and the logic behind each purchase. Then, after explaining the concept of rationing and nutrition (two challenges within the novel), have the students reevaluate and reshare their choices. Ideally (although not always) the list changes from favorites such as candy and soda to essentials such as canned fruit and bottled water. This activity is effective in that it forces students to look at the same issue...
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(spending $100 on groceries) from two different perspectives. The first list they create serves as what they want. The second list reflects what they need. It’s a simple activity, yet the challenge of understanding want versus need is a crucial one, especially with today’s “I need the latest and greatest” teen mentality.

Next, early in the novel, show students a map of the United States that you have divided into 13 “districts,” reflecting the geographical districts from the novel. From here, break the class up into 13 groups, assigning each group to a district. Once divided, have students research both the strengths and weaknesses of their district, including geographic location, population, and available natural resources (to name a few). This could also make a productive link to a geography class, and for those really looking for a challenge, I’m sure there’s a lesson connecting the 13 districts in the novel to the 13 original colonies in the United States.

The Hunger Games also offers a range of informal and formal writing opportunities. Students could write a chapter or letter from the perspective of one of the other minor characters at any point in the novel. This will help students reflect on unspoken challenges that each character confronts. Students could also write about the skills they would bring to the Hunger Games if they were selected. This assignment has the unique feature of allowing students the chance to share a talent with their classmates that they might not otherwise talk about. Regarding more formal writing, a paper analyzing the many similarities between today’s reality television and the Hunger Games (and the consequences of this form of “entertainment”) is ripe for the picking.

Finally, as a closing activity, allow students to have some fun by asking them to serve as director for the film version of the novel. In this role, students must decide what actors will play each of the major characters, which characters will be left out, where the movie will be filmed, and what five key scenes must be included in the film (see fig. 1). This activity can also be adapted to specific television shows where students link traits of the characters in the book to those on their favorite shows. You can’t tell me your students won’t be jumping over each other to explain how Katniss resembles Snooki or how Peeta has the same traits as the Situation (for all you Jersey Shore fans out there—you know who you are!). You will be amazed by how much effort and thought goes into this!

![The Hunger Games Lesson](image)

**FIGURE 1. The Hunger Games Lesson**

**Lights! Camera! Action!**

*The Hunger Games . . . The Movie!*

Tired of the same old directors creating the same old movies? Hollywood is looking for some fresh faces, and they just called you!

**The Assignment**

Your job is to create the lineup for the movie version of *The Hunger Games*. You must also select the five key scenes from the book that you insist be in the film version.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katniss</td>
<td>Actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peeta</td>
<td>Haymitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gale</td>
<td>Prim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President Snow</td>
<td>Effie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinna</td>
<td>Rue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesar Flickerman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five key scenes and brief explanation of why they must be in the movie:

1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  

**The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie (grades 9+)**

Arnold “Junior” Spirit lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation,
and after seeing his mother’s name in one of his school books, he decides to transfer from his reservation school to Reardan High, the all-white school 20 miles away. On arriving and discovering that the only other Native American there is the school mascot, the challenge of keeping his identity begins. This is a funny and emotional novel (including some hilarious drawings), and students will connect with Junior as he battles to remain true to his past while striving to improve his future.

As a starter activity, write the phrase “Little pieces of joy in my life” (Alexi 176) on the board, and underneath it, write down a few things that make you happy—and please include your students on this list! After explaining your examples, have students create a list or, even better, have them come up to the board and write down an item or two that gives them joy. Anything from books to movies to songs to food is fair game, but challenge them to be specific in their selections; don’t write food—write Wendy’s triple cheeseburger! And let them know that repeats are not allowed; there are enough pieces of joy in the world to avoid repetition. You can make a great segue from this activity into a discussion about how even when life beats you up, there are still pieces of hope that often get overlooked (one of the themes in the novel).

Next, show the picture of Junior (page 57) and have the class explain the conflict he is going through based solely on what they see. Following this discussion, have students draw cartoon versions of themselves that illustrate two different sides of their personality or culture. This can include home versus school, sports versus academics, or alone versus with friends (to name a few). After they’ve drawn their pictures, give the students a chance to share and explain their self-portraits. This is an effective activity in that it allows students to understand that everyone has different layers to them. This is also a great chance for you to model that even teachers have lives outside of school. And if you’re looking to add a little music to the unit, play Johnny Cash’s “Ira Hayes” after this activity. It’s a true narrative that perfectly illustrates the two sides of Native American Ira Hayes’s heroic, yet sad, life.

Like The Hunger Games, there are writing activities related to the challenges within the story. The beauty of these questions is that they can be used at any point throughout the novel. And while I know it may go against your teaching instincts, it is OK to assign a paper before finishing the book! Possible writing prompts include the following:

1. How much should a person’s responsibility to family or community overshadow individual goals?
2. How do your race, class, culture, and gender determine the type of person you are or will become?
3. Junior leaves the reservation to get a better education. Discuss a tough decision you made and how it affected you.

Finally, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian would be a perfect link with an American history class where Native American experiences are studied. Topics for discussion might include life on a reservation, reservation health and education statistics, and why reservations were created in the first place. If there are history teachers in your school who are looking to incorporate more literacy into their classes, this would be a great choice. Why should English teachers have all the fun?

Lord of the Flies by William Golding (grades 8+)

After their plane crashes on an island, a group of young boys is forced to work together to survive. But as time passes, the challenge of remaining civilized gives way to the beast that lives inside
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us all, and the struggle for power and survival begins. The book is filled with various conflicts, and today’s teens will connect with the internal battles between right and wrong that Ralph, Jack, Piggy, and the rest of the boys endure.

If your students are like mine, they pretty much think they know everything about everything. Because of this, I like to start my *Lord of the Flies* unit off with an outdoor survival test. There are a lot of these online, some more complex than others, but I like to keep it simple by sticking to some pretty basic questions (see fig. 2). This activity connects with both the setting and the plot of the novel in a much more engaging manner than simply doing a book talk or introduction of the story. Plus, I’m always amazed at how much my students know about this kind of thing.

In addition to the challenges faced within the story, *Lord of the Flies* also is a great tool for helping to solidify students’ understanding of symbolism. Pretty much everything in this novel has a deeper meaning, and to support this, I have students create a symbolism log where they keep track of what the people, objects, or events from the novel represent. To support various learning strategies, students can create visual representations, written explanations, or a combination of both. Another option that stresses the symbolism in the story can be found by going to the *Lord of the Flies* Educational Productions website for the Nobel Prize (http://nobelprize.org/educational/literature/golding/) for an interactive review of the symbols and motifs used throughout the novel. This review can be effectively implemented for both small- and large-group reviews.

Finally, as a closing activity, the conflicts presented in the story, including character-versus-self and character-versus-nature, align perfectly with those presented in Tom Hanks’s *Cast Away*. Specifically, the physical and mental struggles faced in both stories make for an ideal Venn diagram project/discussion. And if showing full-length movies isn’t your thing, there’s always “Das Bus,” *The Simpsons*

### FIGURE 2. Survival Quiz

#### Houston, We Have a Problem

**A Survival Quiz**

1. Your airliner has crashed in the mountains. You’re one of several survivors. You should:
   a. Climb to the top of the nearest mountain and build a signal fire
   b. Make short trips; a road may be nearby
   c. Stay put and wait for rescue

2. It’s cold and you have no fire. To keep warm, you should:
   a. Remain motionless to conserve energy
   b. Exercise vigorously
   c. Cover your head

3. You suspect that searchers may be in the woods looking for you. You should:
   a. Scream several times
   b. Build a fire and make smoke signals
   c. Try to find your way toward the rescue party

4. A search plane flies overhead. To attract a plane’s attention, you should:
   a. Use the mirror in your compact as a signal
   b. Wave your most colorful piece of clothing
   c. Climb to the top of a tree

5. Your airliner has crashed in deep snow and the temperature is below zero. The warmest place you can be is:
   a. In the plane’s broken fuselage
   b. Under the snow
   c. Inside a tent made of seat cushions and parachutes

6. You suspect it may be many days before you’re found. Your greatest concern is:
   a. Lack of food
   b. Lack of water
   c. Lack of shelter

**Answer Key to Survival Quiz:**

1. **C** (It’s big and can be seen from above.)
2. **C** (Most of your body heat is lost through your head.)
3. **A** (It gets the attention of the searchers.)
4. **A** (It will catch the pilot’s eye.)
5. **B** (It’s about 32 degrees, well above the surrounding negative temperature.)
6. **B** (You can only last for five days without water.)
with the inevitable struggles that occur during the teen years, to better understand how to manage these difficulties that life often throws our way.

Oh, and for those of you wondering what happened with Sarah Hinton, my eighth-grade would-be paramour, here’s the short (yet still slightly painful) version.

Alan Spears: that’s what happened.

By the time I had meandered my way across the dance floor to make my move, he had already shuffled Sarah off to the dance floor.

In a perfect world, this would be the part where I told you that even though I was down, I wasn’t out. And then I’d probably tell you that on the very next slow song, I walked right up to her and finally got my dance. But I didn’t.

In fact, I never got that dance—Sarah moved away at the end of that school year (insert sigh here). Besides, I was waiting for that song on that night with that girl—you can’t re-create that kind of thing!

Challenges.

Sometimes you get the best of them, other times they get the best of you. But like Junior says, when the bad times come, you just have to think of “those little pieces of joy” and just keep plowing forward.

Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go put on my acid-washed jeans.

Works Cited

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Standardization, in the Spirit of William Blake

Testmaker, testmaker,
Dost thou know who made thee?
Funny, one of the words on the test
Was widget.
Widget!
Which tells me that thou, testmaker,
Knowest naught of irony
Thou a testmaker and I a widget
We are called by . . . well, money and oneness, I suppose
Or by no name
By which we may reconcile
Testmaker, testmaker,
Who gave thee power and bid thee standard
O’er the future
Gave thee a license
A measure
By which we may reconcile

Gave thee knowledge, which to test
Didst he who made the curriculum make thee?
Or did thou make he,
Who made the comprehensive plan?

School a “vale” I knowest not
A community fraught with equivalence
A process by which I sink, or slake
A society under surveillance

Testmaker, testmaker, dost thou know who made thee?
Testmaker, testmaker, I’ll tell thee . . .
That is, I’d tell thee if I didn’t have to measure
Standard 4.2.36.22.33253, my vocation.

Testmaker, testmaker,
I quit thee,
I quit thee.

—Corey Rose

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