



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

In Cold Blood

Truman Capote



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

In Cold Blood

Truman Capote

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analyzing, inference, research,
opinions, prediction

Comprehension

Plot development,
compare/contrast, cause/effect

Literary Elements

Symbolism, imagery, metaphors,
static/dynamic characters,
conflict, irony, foreshadowing

Vocabulary

Definitions, application,
synonyms/antonyms

Writing

Essays, poetry, news story, letter
to the editor, synopsis

Listening/Speaking

Presentation, discussion, news
report, book review, art analysis

Across the Curriculum

Literature—book review, author
interview, New Journalism,
François Villon; Social Studies—
current events, religion, jury
selection, capital punishment,
subliminal messages, interview
techniques; Art—cover art,
photography, painting, collage,
symbols

Genre: nonfiction, true crime

Setting: Holcomb, Garden City, and Kansas City, Kansas; Las Vegas, Nevada; various locations in Mexico and the Western United States

Point of View: third-person omniscient

Themes: fear, trust, suspicion, regret, good versus evil, loss of innocence, class structure, distortion of self-image, effects of a troubled childhood, destruction of the family unit

Conflict: person vs. society, person vs. self, person vs. person

Style: investigative true account documenting a multiple murder and the subsequent trial; one of the first examples of “New Journalism”

Tone: solemn, factual, intimate

Date of First Publication: 1965

Summary

Herbert Clutter and his family are prosperous, though humble, members of the Holcomb, Kansas community. One night in November 1959, four members of the Clutter family are bound and murdered in their home by Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. While the actual murders are not described until later in the book, Capote thoroughly examines the lives of the Clutters and the convicted murderers prior to that fateful night. Capote explores the murder investigation, the community’s response, and the murderers’ flight across the country and into Mexico. Smith and Hickock’s relationship begins to deteriorate, and they return to the United States to commit more crimes. Meanwhile, they attempt to avoid the police and forget about the Clutter murders. Smith and Hickock are eventually caught when they return to Las Vegas and are recognized by the authorities. Through the duration of the book, Capote details Smith and Hickock’s childhoods, their reasons for killing the Clutter family, and their time on Death Row. Capote also relates the solemn yet hopeful lives of those in the Holcomb community as they attempt to return to normal following the capture and execution of Smith and Hickock.

About the Author

Truman Capote (1924–1984), born Truman Streckfus Persons, was an American author best known for his early short stories and essays, many of which were published in the most respected literary magazines of the time, such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *The New Yorker*. His success led to a career as a novelist, and his novella *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* inspired fellow author Norman Mailer to call Capote “the most perfect writer of my generation.” The novella was the basis for the 1961 film of the same name, starring Audrey Hepburn. After becoming fascinated with a news brief in *The New York Times* that relayed the initial story of the Clutter murders in Kansas, Capote set out for Holcomb with his friend Harper Lee (who would later write the literary classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*). The two interviewed many of those involved with the case (some numerous times) during the search for the killers and the subsequent trial. Capote is also notorious for developing a close relationship with Perry Smith and Dick Hickock prior to their executions—these relationships are what helped Capote provide such a detailed description of the killers’ lives before and after the murder. *In Cold Blood* became a wildly popular literary

10. **Prediction:** Will Dick's refusal to wear stockings backfire? Why or why not?

Supplementary Activities

1. Complete the Characterization chart on page 29 of this guide.
2. Truman Capote foreshadows the Clutters' fate in a few ways, offering statements by friends or observations about the Clutters' traits that hint at the tragedy to come. Find at least two of these veiled references, and explain in a paragraph for each how these facts help build suspense.

Pages 38–74

Capote continues to explore the personal traits and histories of the Clutter family members, focusing on Kenyon Clutter and his relationships with the other members of his family. Capote recounts how an insurance agent stopped by the farm to discuss life insurance with Herb Clutter, and Bobby Rupp describes the last evening he spent with Nancy and the rest of the Clutter family. Capote also delves into Perry's criminal background and his interactions with Willie-Jay, a chaplain's clerk who is sympathetic and friendly to Perry. Willie-Jay offers some psychological insight into Perry's qualities. As Dick and Perry drove closer and closer to their destination, they discussed the plan and contended with their anxiety. The two approached the dark house shortly after Nancy went to bed. Capote then jumps ahead to the next morning, explaining how friends of the family, concerned that the Clutters were not ready for church, went to the farm and discovered the murders. The news quickly spread through the town, and rumors began to circulate about the killers and their whereabouts. Meanwhile, Dick and Perry had already returned home and promptly fallen asleep.

Vocabulary

temperament
credulous
ruminations
intervene
repertoire
agoraphobic
anecdote
encumbered
languid
pacified
unassuming
varmints

Discussion Questions

1. Whom did Mr. Clutter meet with the day before he died, and why was this meeting both tragic and ironic? (*Herb met with Bob Johnson, an insurance agent from Garden City, to discuss life insurance. After much discussion and debate, Mr. Clutter agreed to purchase a sizeable life insurance policy. Sadly, this meeting occurred just hours before Mr. Clutter and three members of his family were murdered. The meeting was ironic because Mr. Johnson and Mr. Clutter both agreed that Herb was in great health and had a long life ahead of him.*)
2. Who is Willie-Jay? Explain his relationship with Perry. (*Willie-Jay is a chaplain's clerk at Kansas State Penitentiary who befriended Perry and tried to guide him toward a relationship with God. Willie-Jay believed Perry was "a poet, something rare and savable" [p. 42]. He believed Perry's only flaw was that he exhibited "explosive emotional reaction out of all proportion to the occasion" [p. 43], meaning that Perry has rage issues and must get them under control. Perry appreciated Willie-Jay's encouragement and feels the man is his "real and only friend" [p. 42]. Perry believes that Willie-Jay is the only person to have "ever recognized [his] worth" [p. 45], and he wishes to see Willie-Jay again.*)

9. How did Sheriff Robinson, Larry Hendricks, and Clarence Ewalt find Herb Clutter, and what haunts Hendricks the most about this? *(They found Herb Clutter in the furnace room in the basement. His ankles were tied, but his hands were not, as if he had managed to pull his hands free from the restraints. His mouth was taped, and he had been shot. However, unlike any other member of the family, Mr. Clutter's throat had been cut. Beneath him lay a large cardboard box upon which was half a bloody footprint. The image that most haunts Hendricks is the piece of cord tied to the steampipe above Herb. This led him to wonder if Herb had been tortured, a thought that disturbed him greatly.)*
10. What did Perry do immediately after the murders? What did Dick do, and why did his father find this strange? What do these actions reveal about Dick and Perry? *(Perry fell asleep in a hotel room after taking off his boots and leaving them to soak in a washbasin. Dick returned home, ate dinner with his family, and fell asleep watching television. His family was "not conscious of anything uncommon in his manner" [p. 73] until the Hickock men went into the living room to watch a televised basketball game and Dick fell asleep shortly after it began. Dick's father stated that "he never thought he'd live to see the day when Dick would rather sleep than watch basketball" [pp. 73–74]. Answers will vary, but most students will note how the two men's seemingly calm, normal activities reveal their lack of thought and regret for their crime. That they can simply fall asleep after having brutally murdered four people is evidence of their cruel natures [and possibly, their abnormal mental states].)*

Supplementary Activities

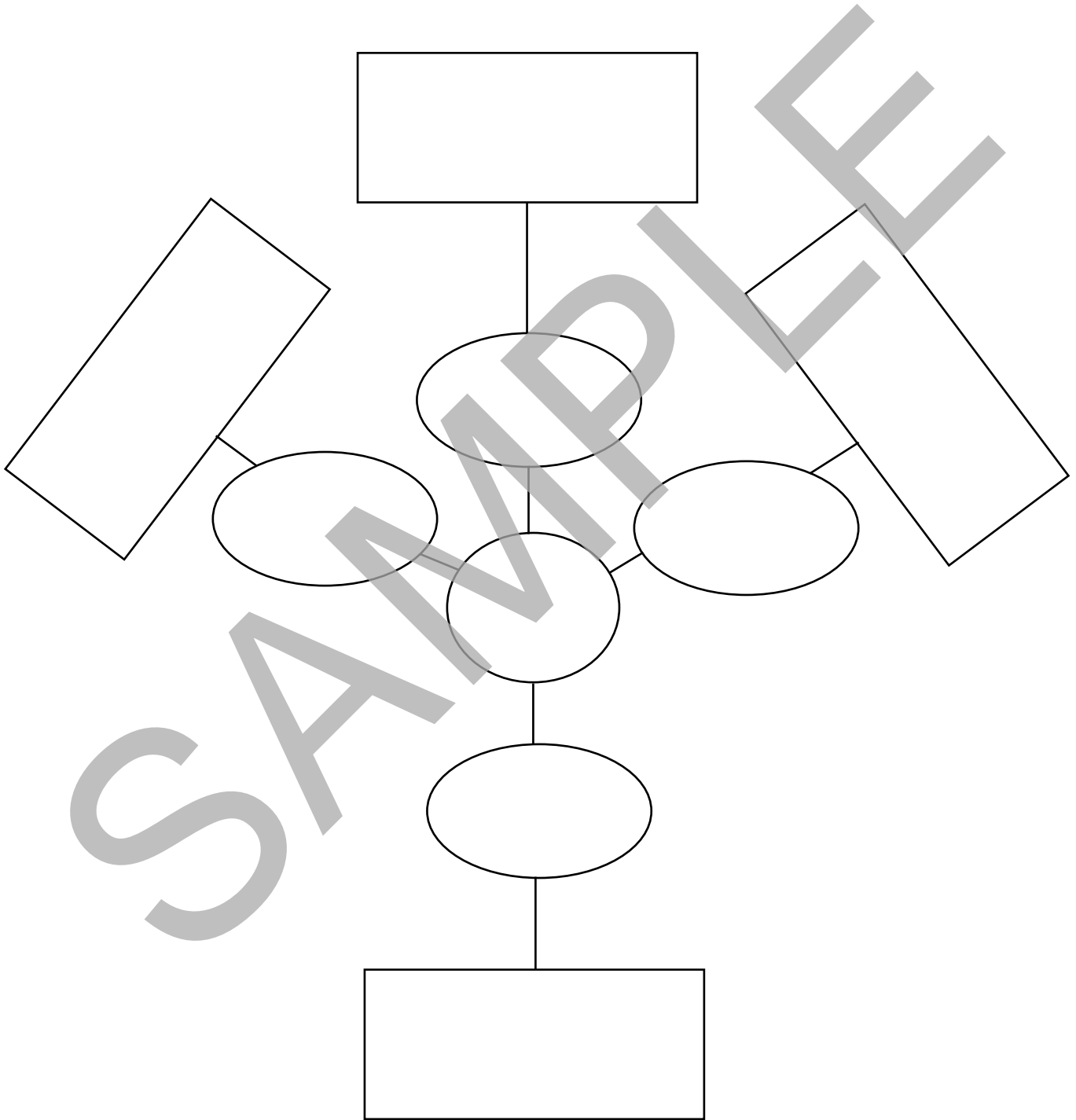
1. Complete a Word Map (see page 30 of this guide) for at least six vocabulary words from this section.
2. Create a collage or other artistic interpretation of Dick and Perry at the gas station, their last stop before the murders. Use symbols and images to depict how each feels about their plan, about themselves, and about each other.

Part II: Persons Unknown Pages 75–117

Capote details how the community of Holcomb went about burying the Clutter family and cleaning their home. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) assigned the case to Alvin Adams Dewey of Garden City, Kansas. A total of 18 men were eventually assigned to the case full time, and Dewey's personal team—including Agents Nye, Church, and Duntz—played key roles in tracking down Dick and Perry, a difficult task considering the utter lack of evidence. They scoured the frightened community for any clues and chased down numerous rumors and wild theories concerning the Clutters' possible enemies. Meanwhile, Perry became obsessed with following the case in the newspapers, terrified that the police would find them. Dick was unconcerned and didn't wish to discuss the case. Dick and Perry decided to secure money to leave town by writing bad checks for cash and merchandise that they sold or stockpiled to sell later. They stole a large amount of money and soon left for Mexico, but their troubles followed them. Perry continued to harp on the murders, and the two men grew weary and suspicious of each other.

Characterization

Directions: Place one of the following character's names in the center circle: Herb Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Dick Hickock, Perry Smith. Brainstorm four of this character's most prominent qualities, and place them in the ovals surrounding the center circle. In the rectangles, list details from the story that demonstrate each quality.



Word Map

Synonyms

Antonyms

WORD

Definition in your own words

Used in a sentence
