

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Freedom Writers Diary

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The Freedom Writers Diary

Notes on Teaching *The Freedom Writers Diary*

The Freedom Writers Diary is the story of high school students that “the system” typically tolerates without hope that they will excel or even become helpful, productive citizens. When matched with a fiercely determined teacher, they find hope and resources within themselves—but only by meeting one daunting obstacle after another. The students and teacher, in interspersed diary entries, reflect on their frustrations and fears, their sense of alienation from mainstream society, and their simmering hostility at conditions that limit and threaten them. By the end, however, they begin to reflect on their accomplishments and hopes.

The book contains strong language, racial epithets, scenes of gun violence, gang fights, physical and emotional abuse, abortion, and some explicit drug use. These elements are a reflection of the reality in which the students live; they are not sensationalized or exploited.

All quotations are from the Broadway books edition of *The Freedom Writers Diary*, an imprint of Random House, Inc., copyright 1999.

The Freedom Writers Diary

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the motifs of alienation and the drive to belong, using examples from the book.
2. discuss what makes a good teacher and how school systems can foster or inhibit excellence in teaching.
3. discuss the dangers faced on a daily basis by the students of Wilson High School and how different students react initially to those dangers.
4. gain an understanding of the racial tensions existing in America today and develop comments on overcoming those tensions.
5. give examples of how books the students read contribute to their realization that they could change their own lives.
6. discuss the role of anonymity in this book, including whether using numbered entries instead of student names makes the experiences seem more universal or takes away from the forward momentum that tracing a given student's history might have offered.
7. discuss why the Freedom Writers feel such kinship with victims of the Holocaust.
8. take a position on gun violence and form arguments into a cohesive essay on what America's policy should be on guns.
9. discuss the double standard on behavior by males and females as cited in this book, and evaluate ways the double standard is perpetuated.
10. evaluate Ms. Gruwell as a teacher, citing both positive and negative points.
11. discuss death as it impinges on the lives of students at Wilson High School.
12. cite and discuss the qualities that allow these students to defy the expectations that they would fail.
13. identify people from outside the classroom that have a profound effect on the success of the Freedom Writers, and cite the nature of their importance to the students.
14. discuss the use of brand names in the book, whether it is appropriate, and why certain brands are cited.
15. evaluate *The Freedom Writers Diary* as an example of journalism.
16. Decide on and discuss an overall theme for the book.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Cite the heroes of the Freedom Writers and explain why the students respect them so much.
2. Discuss why California students in the 1990s relate so strongly to the Holocaust.
3. Discuss the role of sororities and gangs in the social fabric of Wilson High School, including whether the administration is handling them wisely or whether new policies should be put in place and what those policies might be.
4. Explain why the Freedom Writers consider Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic to be heroes.
5. Cite at least one humorous entry and then discuss why this book does not include many instances of humor.
6. Discuss the process the Freedom Writers go through to prepare their entries for publication, and cite instances of errors that remain in the text.
7. Discuss the use of drugs by teenagers and by adults in this book, and comment on the different ways in which drug use affects the students.
8. Discuss the ramifications of the “Toast for Change” and why having a real toast instead of a classroom discussion makes this more significant for the students.
9. Explain the kinds of “culture shock” the students encounter on their trips to hotels, movies, and other cities. How are they prepared for such new environments? What do they encounter that surprises them?
10. Choose one of the outsiders listed below and discuss why this person affects the students, what they admire about the person, and what they learn from him or her.
 - John Tu
 - Zlata Filipovic
 - Mies Giep
 - Gerda Seifer
11. In the movies and on television, use of a brand in the film, not as part of a commercial, is called product placement. Discuss the use of product placement (such as Marriott Hotels and GUESS? jeans) in the book, why the brands are included, and whether you think this adds to or detracts from the story.

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Foreword

By Zlata Filipovic

Vocabulary

encapsulated – contained or limited
tenacity – persistence

1. Who is Zlata Filipovic and what is her relationship with the Freedom Writers?

2. What parallels does Zlata cite between herself and the Freedom Writers?

3. What other diarists does Zlata cite as inspirations?

4. What does Zlata say her diary allowed her to do?

12. Why does one student characterize John Tu as a prince?

13. Another student stopped skipping school; why?

Diary 34

17. Why would a narrative thread on student alcoholism be included, given the fact that no conclusion is reached in the piece?

Diary 35

18. What are the underlying motifs in this entry about shoplifting?

Diaries 36 – 40

19. Why do some of the students writing these entries think they will not be interested in the diaries of Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic, and what do they come to realize when they read about these two protagonists?
