Great Books Roundtable™

Sample Lesson Plans

Complete readings and lesson plans for:
- “Rattlesnakes” by John Muir
- “The Hand” by Mary Ruefle
The Great Books Roundtable program focuses on outstanding literature and the Shared Inquiry™ method of interpretive reading and discussion. The Shared Inquiry approach to learning helps students work together to read closely and interpret a complex text, guided by the curiosity and open-ended questioning of a leader.

Roundtable provides the superb framework and support teachers need for developing the reading comprehension, critical thinking, vocabulary, and writing skills of students with diverse abilities, needs, and learning styles.

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About Shared Inquiry

In Shared Inquiry, students—guided by their teacher—explore fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by discussing open-ended questions and sharing responses and insights. In schools that use Great Books classroom materials and our inquiry-based method of teaching and learning, students consider important ideas, discover how these ideas have shaped events of the past, and learn the critical-thinking skills that will prepare them for the future.

Great Books Roundtable includes outstanding texts and thought-provoking interpretive activities—from prereading to postdiscussion writing and extension activities—that incorporate the Shared Inquiry approach throughout the reading process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-quality fiction, nonfiction, and poetry</td>
<td>Support close reading and extended textual inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing questions activities</td>
<td>Stimulate curiosity while building metacognitive and collaborative skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note-taking suggestions for second reading</td>
<td>Support reader response and analysis of literary elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Inquiry discussion</td>
<td>Builds students’ abilities to develop ideas, use textual evidence, and listen and respond to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual vocabulary activities</td>
<td>Use proven methods to build academically useful vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written response activities</td>
<td>Enable students to build on ideas developed in discussion; provide an authentic context for writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Connections</td>
<td>Deepen understanding by extending thinking about textual concepts to other subject areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative response activities</td>
<td>Allow students to respond imaginatively to texts using visual art, drama, music, and other forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated instruction through the Road Map</td>
<td>Support and challenge options fit the learning needs of all students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and reflection</td>
<td>Formative and summative options build a complete picture of students’ progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher resources and annotated units</td>
<td>Simplify finding and using appropriate techniques; enrich use of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and implementation recommendations</td>
<td>Make getting started with the program and customizing its use easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Courses, on-site consultation, virtual coaching, and webinars provide ongoing support and skill development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Great Books Roundtable Program Preview

Student Anthology

The student anthology includes:
- Twelve works of fiction, two works of nonfiction, and six poems that support interpretive reading and discussion
- Information about the Shared Inquiry approach to reading, questioning, and discussion

Leader’s Materials

The Leader’s Edition includes:
- An overview of program materials and features
- Tips for Shared Inquiry discussion, targeting frequently asked questions
- An overview page for each selection, including read-aloud time, setting, genre, and an author biography
- A Unit Guide for each reading selection, outlining the activity sequence and providing the selection-specific information needed to complete each unit
- Reading selections and information about Shared Inquiry as they appear in the student anthology, annotated with instructional support

Activity instruction cards with:
- Step-by-step instructions for conducting Great Books Roundtable reading and discussion activities
- An Orientation Unit and two stages of scaffolded learning
- Guides to working with nonfiction and poetry
Activity Summary
Students write an essay supporting their interpretation of...

EXPOSITORY WRITING: INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

Activity Instructions (2–3 class periods plus homework)

Part 1: Organizing and Outlining

1. What is your interpretation of the evidence available? How does this interpretation lead to your thesis statement?
2. main points differ from one another:
3. Good explanation of how evidence supports the thesis:
4. Enough evidence to support the thesis:
5. Thesis answers the essay question:

Supporting Evidence

Supporting Evidence

Thesis Statement

Main points differ from one another:

Good explanation of how evidence supports
the thesis:

Enough evidence to support the thesis:

Thesis answers the essay question:

Activity Instructions

Part 2: Drafting

1. Ask students to draft their essays for homework or during other class time, using the Sample Evidence Organizer and modeling steps 2–4 with the class.
2. Have them number the organizer boxes in the order in which they want evidence to support the thesis.
3. Beginning with the evidence in their Inquiry Logs, have students record explanations of how the evidence supports the thesis.
4. Where appropriate, use the Essay section of the Curriculum Downloads.

Curriculum downloads

- Expository writing activities
- Creative response activities
- Poetic response activities
- Curriculum Connections
- Assessment materials
- Student and leader reflection forms

The Road Map provides:

- Guidance in choosing how to best implement the Great Books Roundtable program in your classroom
- Support in differentiating Great Books Roundtable activities to meet the needs of a variety of learners

Audio (MP3s)

Professionally recorded audio versions of each selection provide another outlet for students to listen to the texts read aloud fluently.
Roundtable Unit Activities

Core activities (★) in a Great Books Roundtable unit include reading and rereading the selection, sharing questions, making notes, and participating in a Shared Inquiry™ discussion. Other activities, such as vocabulary work and postdiscussion writing, are optional. Assessment and reflection can be done on a regular basis. Each unit guide in the Leader's Edition follows the sequence of activities outlined below.

Session 1
★ Prereading (5–10 minutes)
★ First Reading (30–45 minutes)

Session 2
★ Sharing Questions (30–40 minutes)
◆ Vocabulary (10–20 minutes)

Session 3
★ Second Reading (40–50 minutes)

Session 4
★ Shared Inquiry Discussion (40–50 minutes)

Session 5
◆ Postdiscussion Activity Options
  ◆ Expository Writing
  ◆ Creative Response
  ◆ Poetic Response
  ◆ Related Cross-curricular Projects
  ◆ Related Readings
  ◆ Assessment and Reflection

Research shows that when schools use Great Books programs consistently, including all sessions and activities, student attendance improves and test scores rise.

About the Great Books Foundation

Founded in 1947, the Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization that creates reading and discussion programs for students and adults with the conviction that literacy and critical thinking help form reflective and well-informed citizens. For more about us, visit greatbooks.org.
Rattlesnakes

John Muir

John Muir shares some of his encounters with rattlesnakes in Yosemite National Park and describes how his attitude toward them changed.

**Genre:** Essay  
**Length:** 5 pages  
**Read-Aloud Time:** About 8 minutes

**About the Author**

John Muir, one of the first environmental activists in the United States, was born in Dunbar, Scotland, in 1838. He traveled extensively through the United States, as well as in other countries—often on foot—documenting his observations and opinions about wildlife conservation in numerous articles and books, such as *The Mountains of California* (1894) and *Our National Parks* (1901), in which this selection appears. His writing greatly influenced public and governmental perspectives on forest preservation in the United States, leading to the establishment of Sequoia and Yosemite national parks. Muir also cofounded the Sierra Club in 1892, serving as president until his death in 1914.
Rattlesnakes
John Muir

The following guide will aid your unit planning for “Rattlesnakes.” Accompanying materials can be found online. Circled numbers correspond to numbers on the activity instruction cards.

**SESSION 1** (35–55 minutes)

**Prereading** (5–10 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students briefly discuss a concept relevant to the text they will be reading.

**Materials:**
- Prereading card 4
- Inquiry Log card (student handout) 18

**Option 1**

**Prereading Question**
Ask students one or both of the following:
- Why might a human find a wild animal threatening?
- Why might a wild animal find a human threatening?

**Option 2**

**Background Knowledge**
Have students write down and share what they already know about rattlesnakes.

Suggested follow-up question:
- Given what you know, how would you react if you encountered a rattlesnake in the wild?

**First Reading** (30–45 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students listen as the text is read aloud, marking places where they have questions and other reactions.

**Materials:**
- Inquiry Log card (student handout) 18
- Prereading and First Reading card (student handout, side 4) 20

**SESSION 2** (40–60 minutes)

**Sharing Questions** (30–40 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students share different types of questions about the text.

**Materials:**
- Discussion Planner card 17
- Inquiry Log card (student handout) 18
- Sharing Questions card (student handout, side 4) 20

**Vocabulary** (10–20 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students determine word meaning using context and outside sources.

**Materials:**
- Vocabulary card (student handout, side 2) 21

**Details:**
Suggested vocabulary words: venomous, persecuted, degraded, intentionally, provocation, righteous indignation
**Session 3** (40–50 minutes)

**Second Reading** (40–50 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students reread the selection and mark passages, using one of three note prompts.

**Materials:**
- Discussion Planner card 17
- Inquiry Log card (student handout) 18
- Second Reading cards 22 23 24

**Details:** Choose one of the following options:

**Option 1** **Contrasting Notes** card 22

C = You are convinced by what the author says.
U = You are unconvinced by what the author says.

Suggested follow-up questions:
- See Stage 2 Second Reading: Contrasting Notes card 22

**Option 2** **Recurring Concept Note** card 23

F = A character (narrator or snake) does something “fair and charitable.”

Suggested follow-up question:
- Why does the character’s action seem fair and charitable?

**Option 3** **Literary Element Note** card 24

T = You get a strong sense of the author’s tone.

**Tone:** the attitude a writer has toward his or her subject; tone is created by many elements, including word choice, style, imagery, sound, and rhythm

Suggested follow-up questions:
- What is the tone here, and how do you know (word choice, imagery, etc.)? What does the tone reveal about the author?

**Session 4** (40–50 minutes)

**Shared Inquiry Discussion** (40–50 minutes)

**Activity Summary:** Students explore the text’s meaning by discussing an interpretive question.

**Materials:**
- Discussion Planner card 17
- Inquiry Log card (student handout) 18
- Shared Inquiry Discussion card 25

**Details:** Suggested interpretive questions for discussion:

**Option 1** **Why does Muir learn to respect rattlesnakes after he kills two?**
- Why does Muir say that at one time he “imagined that rattlesnakes should be killed wherever found”? (p. 175)
- Why, after killing the first snake, does Muir say he feels “degraded by the killing business”? (p. 176)
- Why does Muir feel “sore and guilty” about killing the snake he finds in his cabin? (p. 176)
- Why does Muir explain his decision to encamp on a boulder rather than on the patch of flood-sand where he finds two snakes?
Option 2  Why does Muir use human characteristics and feelings to describe snakes?

- Why does Muir describe snakes as “fair and charitable”? (p. 176)
- Why does Muir see the second rattlesnake as “desperately embarrassed”? (p. 176)
- Why does Muir say, “I have looked into the eyes of so many wild animals that I feel sure I did not mistake the feelings of this unfortunate snake”? (p. 177)
- Why does Muir describe the snake he accidentally threw his bundle of bread on as having a “come-in-if-you-dare expression”? (p. 178)

Activities in the Curriculum Downloads (instructions and approximate times provided with the activities)

Session 5

- Expository Writing: Students deepen their understanding of the selection through the writing process.
  
  **Interpretive Essay** Students write an essay supporting their interpretation of the selection.
  
  **Evaluative Essay** Students write an essay based on an evaluative question. Have students choose one of their own or one of the following:
  
  - Is John Muir right to think of rattlesnakes as having human characteristics and feelings?
  - Is killing a wild animal ever acceptable?

- Creative Response: Students deepen their understanding of the selection with a creative response activity. Suggested for this unit: Comic Strip.

Curriculum Connections

- Related Projects: Connect “Rattlesnakes” to other subject areas.
  
  - **Social Studies: A Visit to Yosemite** Students learn about Yosemite National Park and plan an imaginary visit.
  
  - **Science: All Sorts of Snakes** Students choose a specific type of snake to research and present their findings to the class.

- Related Readings: Learn which well-known titles share themes, settings, or other important features with the selection.

- Cross-Text Activities: Compare and contrast any combination of prose selections.

Wrapping Up the Unit

- Assessment: Track students’ learning by using a variety of assessment tools, including multiple choice tests, portfolio assessments, and rubrics.

- Reflection: Track your work as a leader and help students assess their progress and set goals.
RATTLESNAKES

John Muir

There are many snakes in the canyons and lower forests, but they are mostly handsome and harmless. Of all the tourists and travelers who have visited Yosemite and the adjacent mountains, not one has been bitten by a snake of any sort, while thousands have been charmed by them. Some of them vie with the lizards in beauty of color and dress patterns. Only the rattlesnake is venomous, and he carefully keeps his venom to himself as far as man is concerned, unless his life is threatened.

Before I learned to respect rattlesnakes I killed two, the first on the San Joaquin plain. He was coiled comfortably around a tuft of bunch grass, and I discovered him when he was between my feet as I was stepping over him. He held his head down and did not attempt to strike, although in danger of being trampled. At that time, thirty years ago, I imagined that rattlesnakes should be killed wherever found. I had no weapon of any sort, and on the smooth plain there was not a stick or a stone within miles, so I crushed him by jumping on him, as the deer are said to do. Looking me in the face he saw

Yosemite: a national park located in the Sierra Nevada mountain range (eastern California); established in 1890 due to John Muir’s conservation efforts

San Joaquin: a river that runs from the Sierra Nevada through the southern Central Valley, forming a delta with the Sacramento River
I meant mischief and quickly cast himself into a coil, ready to strike in defense. I knew he could not strike when traveling, therefore I threw handfuls of dirt and grass sods at him to tease him out of coil. He held his ground a few minutes, threatening and striking, and then started off to get rid of me. I ran forward and jumped on him, but he drew back his head so quickly my heel missed, and he also missed his stroke at me. Persecuted, tormented, again and again he tried to get away, bravely striking out to protect himself, but at last my heel came squarely down, sorely wounding him, and a few more brutal stampings crushed him. I felt degraded by the killing business, farther from heaven, and I made up my mind to try to be at least as fair and charitable as the snakes themselves and to kill no more save in self-defense.

The second killing might also, I think, have been avoided, and I have always felt somewhat sore and guilty about it. I had built a little cabin in Yosemite and for convenience in getting water, and for the sake of music and society, I led a small stream from Yosemite Creek into it. Running along the side of the wall it was not in the way, and it had just fall enough to ripple and sing in low, sweet tones, making delightful company, especially at night when I was lying awake. Then a few frogs came in and made merry with the stream—and one snake, I suppose to catch the frogs.

Returning from my long walks, I usually brought home a large handful of plants, partly for study, partly for ornament, and set them in a corner of the cabin, with their stems in the stream to keep them fresh. One day, when I picked up a handful that had begun to fade, I uncovered a large coiled rattler that had been hiding behind the flowers. Thus suddenly brought to light face-to-face with the rightful owner of the place, the poor reptile was desperately embarrassed, evidently
Tuolumne Canyon: the large canyon cut by the Tuolumne River, in what is now Yosemite National Park
his head below the level of them, ready to shoot up like a jack-in-the-box for frogs or birds. My foot spanned the space above within an inch or two of his head, but he only held it lower. In making my way through a particularly tedious tangle of buckthorn, I parted the branches on the side of an open spot and threw my bundle of bread into it, and when with my arms free I was pushing through after it, I saw a small rattlesnake dragging his tail from beneath my bundle. When he caught sight of me he eyed me angrily, and with an air of righteous indignation seemed to be asking why I had thrown that stuff on him. He was so small that I was inclined to slight him, but he struck out so angrily that I drew back and approached the opening from the other side. But he had been listening, and when I looked through the brush I found him confronting me, still with a come-in-if-you-dare expression. In vain I tried to explain that I only wanted my bread; he stoutly held the ground in front of it, so I went back a dozen rods and kept still for half an hour, and when I returned he had gone.

One evening, near sundown, in a very rough, boulder-choked portion of the canyon, I searched long for a level spot for a bed and at last was glad to find a patch of flood-sand on the riverbank and a lot of driftwood close by for a campfire. But when I threw down my bundle, I found two snakes in possession of the ground. I might have passed the night even in this snake den without danger, for I never knew a single instance of their coming into camp in the night, but fearing that in so small a space some latecomers not aware of my presence might get stepped on when I was replenishing the fire, to avoid possible crowding I encamped on one of the earthquake boulders.

There are two species of *Crotalus* in the park, and when I was exploring the basin of Yosemite Creek I thought I had

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**rod:** a measurement of distance equal to 16.5 feet; a dozen *rods* equals 198 feet

*Crotalus:* in science, the genus name for rattlesnake
discovered a new one. I saw a snake with curious divided appendages on its head. Going nearer, I found that the strange headgear was only the feet of a frog. Cutting a switch, I struck the snake lightly until he disgorged the poor frog, or rather allowed it to back out. On its return to the light from one of the very darkest of death valleys, it blinked a moment with a sort of dazed look, then plunged into a stream, apparently happy and well.
About the Author

Mary Ruefle

Mary Ruefle was born outside of Pittsburgh in 1952 and, as a member of a military family, spent her childhood moving throughout the United States and Europe. Her poems, filled with robust imagery, have earned her a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Foundation Writer’s Award, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Her books of poetry include *The Adamant* (1989); *Cold Pluto* (1996), in which “The Hand” appears; *Post Meridian* (1999); *Among the Musk Ox People* (2002); and *Tristimania* (2003). Ruefle has taught at Bennington College, Colby College, the University of Michigan, and Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Shared Inquiry and Poetry

Poetry, which naturally encourages multiple readings and investigation of layers of meaning, is ideally suited to Shared Inquiry. The Shared Inquiry method enables students to experience a poem from multiple angles and consider its meaning in depth.

The Shared Inquiry process for poetry differs from the process for prose units. The chart below highlights ways in which specific Shared Inquiry activities differ for poetry selections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Activities in Prose Units</th>
<th>Activities in Poetry Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Prereading</td>
<td>Prereading (optional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Reading</td>
<td>First Set of Readings with Sharing Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sharing Questions</td>
<td>Second Set of Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Shared Inquiry Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Second Reading</td>
<td>Postdiscussion Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Shared Inquiry Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Postdiscussion Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Hand

Mary Ruefle

The teacher asks a question.
You know the answer, you suspect you are the only one in the classroom who knows the answer, because the person in question is yourself, and on that you are the greatest living authority, but you don’t raise your hand.
You raise the top of your desk and take out an apple.
You look out the window.
You don’t raise your hand and there is some essential beauty in your fingers, which aren’t even drumming, but lie flat and peaceful.
The teacher repeats the question.
Outside the window, on an overhanging branch, a robin is ruffling its feathers and spring is in the air.

Notation Key

The icon indicates an example of a leader modeling confusion or curiosity during the first reading.

The icon indicates sample student responses to a second-reading note; the corresponding part of the poem is [bracketed].

Modeling Curiosity

“I wonder who the speaker might be talking to. I’m going to put a question mark here.”

Contrasting Notes

Student responses might include:

U = The speaker understands that the person she is talking to knows the answer.

D = The speaker does not understand what the answer is because only the person in the poem knows it.

Literary Element Note

R = The poet repeats “you” and “your.”

Student responses might include:

• The poet is showing how not answering the question gives the person a sense of self.
• The poet is showing how each moment after the teacher’s question changes the student.
• The poet is giving a sense of urgency and excitement—maybe the excitement of realizing something.
The Hand
Mary Ruefle

The following guide will aid your unit planning for “The Hand.” Accompanying materials can be found online. Circled numbers correspond to numbers on the activity instruction cards.

**Session 1** (25–35 minutes)

**Prereading (Optional)** (5–10 minutes)

*Activity Summary:* Students share their ideas and expectations about poetry.

*Materials:* Inquiry Log card (student handout) 27
Prereading card 28

**First Set of Readings with Sharing Questions** (20–25 minutes)

*Activity Summary:* Students listen to the poem read aloud multiple times, marking places where they have questions.

*Materials:* Discussion Planner card 26
Inquiry Log card (student handout) 27
First Set of Readings with Sharing Questions card 29

**Session 2** (40–50 minutes)

**Second Set of Readings** (20–25 minutes)

*Activity Summary:* Students reread the poem and mark contrasting ideas, recurring themes, or literary elements.

*Materials:* Discussion Planner card 26
Inquiry Log card (student handout) 27
Second Set of Readings card 30

*Details:* Choose one of the following:

**Option 1** Contrasting Notes

- **U** = The speaker describes something she understands.
- **D** = The speaker describes something she does not understand.

Suggested follow-up questions:

- For what reason did you mark this line that way? You marked the same place as Jen did, but did you mark it for a different reason?

**Option 2** Literary Element Note

- **R** = The poet repeats a word or idea in the poem.

Suggested follow-up questions:

- Why do you think the author uses repetition here? What effect does it have on the tone of the poem?
Shared Inquiry Discussion  (20–25 minutes)

Activity Summary: Students explore the poem’s meaning by discussing an interpretive question.

Materials: Discussion Planner card 26
Inquiry Log card (student handout) 27
Shared Inquiry Discussion card 31

Details: Suggested interpretive questions for discussion:

Why doesn’t the person in this poem raise his or her hand?
♦ Why are we told “the person / in question is yourself”?
♦ Why does the person raise the desktop “and take out an apple,” rather than raise his or her hand?
♦ Why is there “some essential beauty” in the person’s fingers?
♦ Why aren’t the person’s fingers “even drumming”?
♦ Why do the last three lines of the poem describe what is outside the window?

Activities in the Curriculum Downloads (instructions and approximate times provided with the activities)

Session 3

Expository Writing: Students deepen their understanding of the poem through the writing process.

Interpretive Essay Students write an essay supporting their interpretation of the poem.

Evaluative Essay Students write an essay based on an evaluative question. Have students choose one of their own or one of the following:
♦ Do you agree with the speaker that “you are the greatest living authority” when it comes to yourself?
♦ When, if ever, is not answering a question better than answering it?


Cross-Text Activity: Students create new poems using lines from poems they have read.

Wrapping Up the Unit

Assessment: Track students’ learning by using a variety of assessment tools, including short answer tests, portfolio assessments, and rubrics.

Reflection: Track your work as a leader and help students assess their progress and set goals.
### Level 1

**Orientation Unit**
- Gaston
  - William Saroyan

**Stage 1 Units (Fiction)**
- The Old Man of the Sea
  - Maeeve Brennan
- Through the Tunnel
  - Doris Lessing
- Raymond’s Run
  - Toni Cade Bambara
- The Witch Who Came for the Weekend
  - (from *Juliet’s Story*)
  - William Trevor
- As the Night the Day
  - Abioseh Nicol

**Stage 2 Units (Fiction)**
- The Parsley Garden
  - William Saroyan
- The Veldt
  - Ray Bradbury
- A Likely Place
  - Paula Fox
- The Mountain
  - Charles Mungoshi
- Afternoon in Linen
  - Shirley Jackson
- The Mysteries of the Cabala
  - Isaac Bashevis Singer

**Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)**
- Rattlesnakes (from *Our National Parks*)
  - John Muir
- Throwing Snowballs
  - (from *An American Childhood*)
  - Annie Dillard

**Poetry Units**
- Introduction to Poetry
  - Billy Collins
- [I’m Nobody! Who are you?] (from *My Life, and Love of the Beast*)
  - Emily Dickinson
- This Is Just to Say
  - William Carlos Williams
- Mushrooms
  - Sylvia Plath
- Table
  - Edip Cansever
- The Road Not Taken
  - Robert Frost

### Level 2

**Orientation Unit**
- The White Umbrella
  - Gish Jen

**Stage 1 Units (Fiction)**
- Harrison Bergeron
  - Kurt Vonnegut Jr.
- The First Day
  - Edward P. Jones
- Props for Faith
  - (from *Floating in My Mother’s Palm*)
  - Ursula Hegi
- El Diablo de La Cienega
  - Geoffrey Becker
- The Cat and the Coffee Drinkers
  - Max Steele

**Stage 2 Units (Fiction)**
- The Box House and the Snow
  - Cristina Henríquez
- I Just Kept On Smiling
  - Simon Burt
- Mercedes Kane
  - Elizabeth McCracken
- Sandra Street
  - Michael Anthony
- Day of the Butterfly
  - Alice Munro
- The White Circle
  - John Bell Clayton

**Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)**
- Wolf (from *The Unexpected Universe*)
  - Loren Eiseley
- Colter’s Way
  - Sebastian Junger

**Poetry Units**
- Harlem [2]
  - Langston Hughes
- An Irish Airman Foresees His Death
  - William Butler Yeats
- [n]
  - E. E. Cummings
- The Fort
  - Marie Howe
- Bicycles
  - Andrei Voznesensky
- Snake
  - D. H. Lawrence

### Level 3

**Orientation Unit**
- The Summer of the Beautiful
  - White Horse
  - William Saroyan

**Stage 1 Units (Fiction)**
- Sucker
  - Carson McCullers
- The Possibility of Evil
  - Shirley Jackson
- Superstitions
  - Mary La Chapelle
- Gryphon
  - Charles Baxter
- Fellowship
  - Franz Kafka

**Stage 2 Units (Fiction)**
- Approximations
  - Mona Simpson
- The Bet
  - Anton Chekhov
- The Secret Lion
  - Alberto Álvaro Ríos
- Star Food
  - Ethan Canin
- A Visit of Charity
  - Eudora Welty
- The Destructor
  - Graham Greene

**Stage 2 Units (Nonfiction)**
- How It Feels to Be Colored Me
  - Zora Neale Hurston
- I Have a Dream
  - Martin Luther King Jr.

**Poetry Units**
- The Hand
  - Mary Ruefle
- The Song of Wandering Aengus
  - William Butler Yeats
- Child on Top of a Greenhouse
  - Theodore Roethke
- The Parakeets
  - Alberto Blanco
- Mending Wall
  - Robert Frost
- The Fish
  - Elizabeth Bishop