

## Using Steinbeck as a model for social commentary.

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In this lesson, designed for a 10<sup>th</sup> grade American Literature Honors class, students will use selected essays from Steinbeck's *America and Americans* and chapters of *Grapes of Wrath* (as well as essays from other authors) as models for writing a social commentary (see assignment sheet below).

**Student learning objective/target: At the end of this unit, students will be able to draft, compose, and revise a social commentary essay about a topic of their choosing. Students will understand the importance of narrative, specificity, concrete examples, and voice to establish tone and to connect with an audience.**

At this time in the course, students will have discussed the relevance of the American Dream today, discussed oppression of minority groups, and connected literature to modern day issues (e.g., rape culture, black lives matter, minimum wage). Thus, by this time in the course, students should understand how reading American literature allows us to gain empathy and can provide context for the nation's climate at any point in history.

- 1) I will introduce the context of a commentary with visual argument. Students and I will discuss images from Banksy: <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/banksy%E2%80%99s-10-most-powerful-works-social-commentary> and from artist Steve Cutts: <http://www.boredpanda.com/modern-world-caricature-illustrations-steve-cutts/>  
Students will annotate these images (with the goal of helping us to understand form, audience, purpose, and tone) in small groups and then present to the class, which will start discussion.
- 2) Students will read essays from John Steinbeck's *America and Americans* ("Paradox and Dream" and "The Pursuit of Happiness"); essay chapters from *Grapes of Wrath* (chapters 7, 14, 15); essays such as "The Woman's Movement" by Joan Didion, "The Sanctuary of School" by Lynda Barry, "On Compassion" by Barbara Lazear Ascher, and "Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin. Students will also read "Honey Boo Boo Could Be My Neighbor" by Jared Yates Sexton and contemporary commentaries of their choosing from *Huffington Post's* social commentary section (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/social-commentary/>).

Students and I will go through close-reading strategies (especially looking at form, audience, and purpose, and tone of the prose) just as we did through the images. The SOAPSTONE strategy (<http://teacherweb.com/LA/MandevilleHighSchool/Hooker/soapstone-reading-strategy.pdf>) will guide us through these discussions; in addition, we will note:

- the effectiveness of first-person;
  - why/how narrative can be mixed with commentary to achieve voice and ethos;
  - showing rather than telling and narrowing of details and how this establishes tone of an essay;
  - lyricism of prose and its impact;
  - elements of persuasion and opinion without preaching/soapbox rants.
- 3) I will assign the commentary essay (see assignment sheet). Students will brainstorm topics alone, and then as a class.

Students will have one day to gather research in the computer lab.

- 4) Students will practice writing with voice with a given topic. For example, I will start class with a journal prompt such as “pretend companies were allowed to put large advertisements in our hallway, such as a giant Cheetos ad on the door of the gym in order to raise money for sports—what would be your reaction to this?” Students will write for ten minutes and we will share, discussing their strategy for writing the paragraph, their thoughts on the subject, and their personal “voice,” tone and lyricism in their paragraph. We will also discuss, if this were their real topic, how they would plan the rest of the essay and then how they might revise that first paragraph to make it stronger. Students will peer edit each others’ paragraphs and they will edit their own paragraphs as homework.
- 5) Students will continue through the writing process (thesis statement approval, outlining, revising, editing, and workshop) until completion. Emphasis in revision will come with clarity of voice and specificity in writing, as well as MLA format, transitions, etc. As students revise their papers, they will approach their relevance (why does your voice matter?) as we had done with the formal essays from earlier.
- 6) To differentiate, students could modify their commentary into an op-ed and submit it to the local newspaper, students could use literary journalism and primary sources throughout the essay, students could create a visual commentary alongside their essay, such as for a cover page. Possible E.F. Ricketts/science connection so to circle back to Steinbeck: require students to write their commentary about an environmental issue, possibly to engage in observations of the environment around them and then write the commentary.



## ***WRITING A SOCIAL COMMENTARY***

The purpose of commentary is not simply to report things but to give readers a way to make sense of them. A commentary will help you write critically about a topic and will help you analyze this topic within a larger societal context.<sup>1</sup>

Following the models of well-known American authors John Steinbeck, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, and the other authors we've discussed, you are going to write a commentary essay—an essay wherein you explain, comment on, and analyze a socially relevant topic of your choosing.

You should do some general research before you begin this essay. Look at news articles and editorials similar to your topic—gain ethos by having background knowledge.

### ***REQUIREMENTS***

- Your topic must relate to the American experience in some way. You're helping your reader understand how to interpret some sort of state of affairs in our nation.
- You must show evidence of research; you must cite at least two sources, and in MLA format.
- **You must be specific. Narrow your topic as much as possible. Get off the soapbox, stay on point.**
- You must follow the examples of the authors we have read—use them as mentors as you write your own essay.
- You must be an engaging writer—commentaries are not just about the information but also about having a connection with the author, finding an acquaintance in the author. For this reason, first person is best for this essay.
- Your essay should be lyrical and concrete. (See above.)
- Your essay should be as long as it needs to be, but let's say no more than three pages to avoid preaching.
- If you'd like another layer (which I highly recommend!), you may approach this essay as a literary journalist—interview, observe, etc., and work that into your writing; you may also create a visual argument of your commentary.

### ***OTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER***

- Give readers something to react to, think about, or use to make sense of topic.
- You will not use an objective tone or take a neutral stance; you have a perspective.
- You are attempting to analyze and explain what is going on around you.
- You are asking your readers to consider one possible way of making sense of what has happened in the past and what is going on in the present.
- Your readers want a satisfying account of our shared experience and to find patterns of meaning that can make the world make more sense.
- Approach your readers as co-thinkers: you are asking them to look at the world from your perspective (whether they ultimately agree with you or not). Even through your perspective, you must negotiate differences fairly.\*

<sup>1</sup> Source: Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne

\*ibid

## ***BRAINSTORMING***

On your own, list everything you think about in your free time, spend time doing, wish you could spend time doing; everything you discuss with others because it interests you, everything that irritates you and that you wish you could fix.

With a partner, list the topics the authors discussed, and then make a master list of your own ideas (take what you've written above and consider how it could become an essay). Write as many as you can. Like, it's a contest who gets the most possible topics.

