

March 15, 2012, 3:29 pm

The Odds Ever in Your Favor: Ideas and Resources for Teaching ‘The Hunger Games’

By [KATHERINE SCHULTEN](#) and [LILY ALTAVENA](#)

Updated | April 4, 2012

If you're like [many of the students who post on The Learning Network](#), you won't have to consult the [Movies section](#) to answer the question, “When will the first film in the ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy come out?” (March 23. But you already knew that, right?)

These dystopian young-adult novels, which have [“pretty much owned”](#) The Times’s children’s series bestseller list for a year and a half, have, like the “Harry Potter” and “Twilight” series before them, enthralled fans of all ages and backgrounds.

Many educators see them as a way to both excite avid readers and hook reluctant ones, and have [devised imaginative ways to teach with them already](#).

Below, our own Times-inspired ideas, some of which were contributed by “Hunger Games” enthusiast and Learning Network college intern Lily Altavena, who also scoured the Web for wonderful fan-created art and writing and other resources that might inspire.

Are your students obsessed? How do you teach these novels? Tell us below.

Who is Katniss?

She has been called [“the most important female character in recent pop culture history.”](#) but who is Katniss? Why is she so fascinating — to people of all ages and both genders? (According to [this teacher](#), her male students argued for days over who had the best chance of getting a date with her.) What qualities allow her to prevail in such a brutal world, yet remain sympathetic to readers?

Fans hotly debated the casting of Jennifer Lawrence. How do you feel?

[In this article](#) she describes why she took the part:

“I thought, ‘If this is going to be the thing I’m most known for, I want it to be something I’m proud of.’ If someone comes up to me and says, ‘Are you Katniss?’ I’m O.K. with that. Because I love this character and this book so much.”

She also worried about what might otherwise happen to Katniss. “I was hoping and praying that if I didn’t play the part, they wouldn’t make her into a bad-ass girl who can kill anyone,” she said. “Because I think it’s a much sadder story. Katniss doesn’t have any time to think. She feels like she can die at any second. She’s vulnerable, and she doesn’t want to have to kill, but she’s also a hero.”

Do you think Ms. Lawrence got Katniss right?

(For more on Katniss, read [“A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia.”](#))

From Hester to Hermione: Best Female Characters

In 2010, Katie Roiphe wrote a [review of “Mockingjay”](#) that described Katniss as “a great character without being exactly likable”:

Katniss is bossy, moody, bratty, demanding, prickly. She treats the world with an explosive aggression that is a little out of the ordinary, to say the least. . . In short, she belongs to a recent tribe of popular heroines: the small, difficult teenage girl who manifests enormous physical and moral strength. She is both murderer and victim, somehow representing female strength and female vulnerability all mingled and entwined, dangerously, ambiguously, into one. She is Pippi Longstocking. She is the girl with the dragon tattoo. She is mesmerizing.

Who are your favorite female characters from literature? What do they have in common? Are the best not “exactly likable”? Make a list, then see how it stacks up to [lists like this one](#). You might then create a [female-character tournament bracket](#) to battle it out for Best, or write the script for a fantasy talk show in which several of these characters get together to talk about their physical, moral, intellectual and romantic challenges.

Suzanne Collins’s Influences and Sources

In [“Suzanne Collins War Stories for Kids,”](#) Susan Dominus reports that Ms. Collins’s primary influence was Greek mythology, especially the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which the people of Athens are required by their Cretan adversaries to offer up seven boys and seven girls for sacrifice to the deadly Minotaur, a half-human monster who lives in a maze.

“I was also heavily influenced by the historical figure Spartacus,” Ms. Collins says in the piece. “Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war.” Ms. Collins’s father, who served in Vietnam, often took the family to visit battlefields, and recited poems like the World War I classic [“In Flanders Field,”](#) also deeply influenced her.

Read Ms. Dominus's piece, and watch some of the [interviews](#) with Ms. Collins that Scholastic has posted, then identify places in the novels where you see evidence of some of these influences. How does "The Hunger Games" tell the mythic tale of a hero's journey? What novels or nonfiction pieces have you read about war, and to what extent does "The Hunger Games" fit that genre? What do you think of [Ms. Collins's assertion](#) that the death of certain popular characters "have to be" since "This is not a fairy tale; it's a war, and in war, there are tragic losses that must be mourned"?

War ... and the High School Cafeteria

Laura Miller, writing in *The New Yorker*, suggested that "The Hunger Games" can be read as "a fever-dream allegory of the adolescent social experience" in which there is pressure to conform and vie for popularity. In [Susan Dominus's article](#), however, Ms. Collins says she rejects that theory: "I don't write about adolescence," she says. "I write about war. For adolescents."

Do *you* see parallels between the world of the "Hunger Games" and the world of your high school? How might you transform details from your everyday life into a dystopian fantasy? For inspiration, check out what the [student writers on Figment](#) have done.

From Reality TV to the Panem Arena

Collins has said that the premise for "The Hunger Games" came to her one evening when she was channel-surfing and flipped from a reality-television competition to footage from the war in Iraq. An overt critique of violence, the series makes warfare deeply personal, forcing readers to contemplate their own roles as desensitized voyeurs.

—From [Suzanne Collins's War Stories for Kids](#)

In how many ways are the Hunger Games of the novels and today's reality shows similar? Do you recognize some of your own reactions when you watch elimination games like "Survivor" or "American Idol" in the reactions of viewers to the Hunger Games? (As Charles McGrath put it in [an essay](#) about the wide appeal of this trilogy, "We like for there to be winners, but even more we love for there to be losers, as long as they're not us.")

How is reality TV changing our world? [Why do we like reality shows so much?](#) In general, do you think your generation is significantly more desensitized to violence because of the availability of violent images on television and the Internet?

As a thought experiment, try choosing a real person participating in a reality TV elimination game and write an imagined diary entry that tells, Katniss-style, how he or she really feels about the contest.

Delineating Dystopias

Many readers — and perhaps *all* English teachers — see strong echoes of other dystopian literature in "The Hunger Games," whether classroom staples like Shirley Jackson's short story

[“The Lottery,”](#) and novels like “1984,” “Brave New World,” “Fahrenheit 451” and “Lord of the Flies,” or contemporary fiction like Margaret Atwood’s “Handmaid’s Tale.”

One obvious idea: an essay or infographic comparing “The Hunger Games” with one or more of these other works. Less obvious ideas: A student-created library display headlined “If You Liked ‘The Hunger Games,’ You’ll Love...” with student-created book jackets advertising both classics and current young-adult and adult fiction with similar themes; a school-wide dystopian fiction trivia game; or a dystopian-fiction version of the [“tape a name on your forehead” game](#).

For help, you might consult our lesson plan, [Dark Materials: Reflecting on Dystopian Themes in Young Adult Literature](#)

Hunger Games Art and Simulations

Via teacher Tracee Orman’s site, [hungergameslesson.com](#), and her related [Pinterest board](#), neither of which are affiliated with the novels or film, you can find a great deal of student (and adult) Hunger-Game-themed art that might inspire your own projects.

There are examples of [Hunger Games propaganda posters](#), [dioramas](#), [Tribute and District Cards](#), maps of the [arena](#), [pictures of original “Capitol-Created Muttations”](#) and even student-choreographed modern [dances](#).

Some schools are so Hunger-Game-enamored that they have staged versions of the Games themselves. At [River Bend Middle School](#), laser tag stands in for more deadly games. Students at [Colorado State University](#) use pool noodles, hula-hoops and water balloons, and at the [Bristol Eastern High School library](#) competitors decorate cakes and take geography tests.

From Novel to Film

In general, have you been satisfied by film translations of novels you have loved? What are the best examples you can think of? The worst? To what extent does seeing film versions replace the images you’ve built up in your own imagination while reading?

Watch the “Hunger Games” film trailer, posted above. Judging from it, how well do you think the film will capture the tone, characters, setting and spirit of the book? Next, [read about](#) all the ways in which the film’s producer, director and star hope to “honor what the book is about” in the film version. If you could have given the cast and crew “notes” about the book before they began the film, what would you have wanted to tell them? What scenes, characters, lines of dialogue and description do you think are essential? What do’s, and don’ts, would you have suggested for making the book into a movie? Why?

To go further, try “translating” a scene into film yourself, whether simply by [storyboarding](#) a pivotal moment or by [doing what these fans did](#) and creating your own trailer. What aspects translate easily to film? What aspects resist the medium? What tricks might you use to translate Katniss’s unspoken thoughts and emotions in the novel to film?

Mastering Real-Life Skills

Research one of the skills Katniss and the other contestants must rely on to survive, whether hunting, archery, identifying edible plants, basic first aid, camouflage or anything else. Videotape a tutorial to teach others your age “how to.” Do you think people today still need these kinds of skills? Why or why not?

Or, do what this school does and [create a field day](#) with training games and skill stations — though we don’t, of course, recommend making one of them hand-to-hand combat.

Telling the Story From a New Point of View

A classic English-class exercise, the point of view piece asks writers to re-imagine a story from the perspective a new narrator. To start, brainstorm three lists: *Who* else could tell the story (anyone from Prim to Peeta to an anonymous viewer in the Capitol); *When* in the plot you might set the new piece (Before the first novel begins? After the last one ends? In a “missing chapter” never published?); and *How*, or in what format, you might write the piece (Letter? Poem? Obituary? Facebook update?). Then, choose one option from each column and write. (For instance, if you choose “Katniss’s father” “before the books begin” and “diary entry,” you might write a diary entry from his point of view that express feelings about his family, or working in the mines.) When everyone in the class has finished, take turns reading them aloud and have listeners guess from whose point of view the new piece is written.

Panem on Social Media

As we’ve suggested in [other lesson plans](#), using Twitter and Facebook can be make for engaging projects for studying literary works (or [historical events](#)).

Set up a class “Hunger Games” Twitter account like, for example, the Royal Shakespeare Company recently did to [tell the story of Romeo and Juliet](#), and tweet from different character’s points of view. Or create [real, or fake, Facebook pages](#) for the various characters. You might even consider creating [Pinterest](#) boards for each character or district, finding images that symbolize aspects of each. How would the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta and Gale play out on these platforms?

(Or, go old-school and send a snail-mail [postcard](#) from a character in the Arena back to the home district.)

Debating Big Questions

In [“The Kids’ Books Are Alright,”](#) Pamela Paul talks about an adult reading group devoted to “kidlit” and comprised of many well-known writers, book editors and agents:

“We take these books seriously,” said [Lev] Grossman, whose latest novel, “The Magicians,” has been described as an R-rated Harry Potter. His group recently devoted two sessions — “among the most contentious and shouty we’ve had” — to “The Hunger Games.” Is Katniss a feminist

hero? Is she a tool of the state? Is this a conventional romance or a subversion of the genre?
“Everybody had an opinion,” Grossman added.

What big questions — about the characters, or about violence, survival, poverty, politics, power, authority, entertainment, celebrity, love, family, loyalty, leadership, male and female roles, good and evil, or anything else — does this book raise for you? Brainstorm a list with others, and then choose one broad question or theme that interests you to explore beyond the books themselves. How is this question or theme present in other works of literature or film? How do you see it resonate in the real world? You might read a week’s-worth of The New York Times to see how many articles and essays you can find in which the same issues are explored. At the end, write an [I-Search paper](#) documenting your quest and what you discovered along the way. Or, choose one question as a class, investigate it together, then stage a debate about it.

“Hunger Games” and Other Challenged Books

“Hunger Games” appears on the A.L.A.’s top-10 most-challenged books lists from both [2010](#) and [2011](#). We have [many, many ideas for celebrating banned books](#), but here is a simple one: If your school district challenged “The Hunger Games,” what case could you make for it? Consider creating a book club, library display, or social media campaign around this book and others on the list (“Brave New World” and “Twilight” also appear) in time for September’s Banned Books Week.

Update | March 21: Helping the World

Fixes, a Times blog that looks at solutions to social problems, has a post about [how fans of YA fiction are helping to change the world](#):

[Andrew] Slack, who started out as a comedian, founded the Harry Potter Alliance [and] has motivated Potterphiles to send five cargo planes with \$123,000 worth of relief supplies to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, donate more than 88,000 books across the world, raise awareness about net neutrality and genocide and make forays into politics — taking on Maine’s 2009 ballot initiative that sought to repeal same sex marriage.

Now, through their [“Hunger is Not a Game” social campaign](#), done in collaboration with Oxfam, they are hoping to get “Hunger Games” fans involved.

What “fan activism” would you be willing to participate in? How can you “think global, act local” by taking a large problem and doing something immediate in your community to help? You might borrow strategies these key strategies from the Harry Potter Alliance:

There are a few key strategies that make fan activist campaigns like The Harry Potter Alliance successful: invest deeply in the literary themes, prize weirdness, honor the power of cohesive online communities and link to larger organizations that can implement the big ideas of plot-fueled real world advocacy. It’s essential that fans see their own power, or as Slack puts it, “We all yearn to be told we are magical.”

Resources From The Times, The Learning Network and the Web

Articles and Opinion Pieces From The New York Times

[“Hunger Games” Movie Review | The Fight of Her Life](#)

[Manohla Dargis and A.O.Scott | A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia](#)

[Suzanne Collins’s War Stories for Kids](#)

A 2011 Magazine piece about Suzanne Collins, the trilogy, its fans and more

[‘Hunger Games’ Fans Camp Out for a Glimpse of the Stars](#)

Arts Beat blog post from March 20, 2012

[Peer Pressure? How About, Like, Fighting to Death?](#)

A March, 2012 article about the making of the first “Hunger Games” movie

[How ‘Hunger Games’ Built Up Must-See Fever](#)

March, 2012 article about the social marketing and other online techniques Lionsgate used to excite fans

[Inside the List: The Hunger Games](#)

A Feb., 2012 piece looking at the continuing popularity of the trilogy on the New York Times Bestseller lists.

[Room for Debate | The Dark Side of Young Adult Fiction](#)

Seven experts discuss the dystopian trend in young adult literature

[Room for Debate | The Power of Young Adult Fiction](#)

Seven experts on the popularity of the genre

[No More Adventures in Wonderland](#)

2011 Op-Ed piece about the savagery in current children’s literature.

[The Kids’ Books Are All Right](#)

An essay about why middle-aged readers are reading books like “The Hunger Games”

[Teenage Wastelands](#)

A 2011 essay about young adult dystopias, focusing on “The Hunger Games”

[Scary New World](#)

John Green reviews “The Hunger Games” in 2008

[Constant Craving](#)

Gabrielle Zevin reviews “Catching Fire” in 2009

[Survivor](#)

Katie Roiphe reviews “Mockingjay” in 2010

Lessons and More From The Learning Network

[Fill-In | “Hunger Games” Fan Mania](#)

Fill in the 30 blanks in this article about fans camping out to meet the “Hunger Games” actors.

[Lesson Plan | Dark Materials: Reflecting on Dystopian Themes in Young Adult Literature](#)

[Lesson Plan | 10 Ways to Use The New York Times for Teaching Literature](#)

[Lesson Plan | Big Brother vs. Little Brother: Updating Orwell’s ‘1984’](#)

[Student Opinion Question | What Are Your Favorite Young Adult Novels?](#)

[Student and Teacher Survey | What You’re Reading This Summer: The Results of Our Survey \(2011\)](#)

Resources From Around the Web

[Suzanne Collins’s Web Site](#)

[Scholastic Video Interviews | Suzanne Collins](#)

[Scholastic U.K. site | The Hunger Games](#)

[Scholastic U.S. site | The Hunger Games](#)

[HungerGamesMovie.org](#)

[Scholastic Discussion Guide \(PDF\): The Hunger Games Trilogy](#)

[HungerGamesLessons.com](#)

[Hunger Names: Find out your district, name and fate in the arena](#)

[The Hunger Games and World Food Programme](#)

[The Harry Potter Alliance’s Imagine Better Project to Fight Hunger](#)

[Figment | Would You Survive The Hunger Games?](#)

[The Awl | What If The Hunger Games Were Real?](#)

[The Muppets | “Hunger Games” Parody](#)

[Vulture | Play ‘Spot the Difference’ With The Hunger Games!](#)

[The New Yorker | Counterinsurgency and “The Hunger Games”](#)

“Hunger Games” Fan Art From Around the Web

[YouTube | Fan-Made Hunger Games Trailer](#)

[Figment | Hunger Games Playlist](#)

[Audio Drama | The Katniss Chronicles](#)

[Deviant Art | “The Hunger Games”](#)

[YouTube | Hunger Games Flame Nail Art How-To](#)

[YouTube | Hunger Games Lego Trailer](#)

[YouTube | Dress as Katniss For Halloween](#)

[100 Things To Do Before Hunger Games](#)

[Hunger Games Reader Podcast](#)

[My Hunger Games | Fan Art](#)

[Audition Call for The Hunger Games Musical Online](#)

[Welcome To District 12 | A Visual Aid of the Arena](#)

[Figment | Original Student Writing Tagged “Dystopia”](#)

[Fan Site | Down With the Capitol](#)

[Podcast | The Hunger Games Fireside Chat](#)

[Fan Site | mockingjay.net](#)

[You Tube | Hunger Games Trailer Spoof](#)