

## SparkNotes Guided Discussion

### TIME

This lesson is to be implemented in one 50-minute period on Thursday, February 3, 2011.

### SETTING

11<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom with 25 students

### THEORY INTO PRACTICE BACKGROUND

1. The idea of using popular online study guides was first inspired by Nate Meyer, my former cooperating teacher with whom I worked in Spring 2010. At the time, he was teaching an abridged version of *The Odyssey* and encouraged us to use SparkNotes to refresh our memories for his lesson. When I asked him if he frequently consults study guides, he responded that he occasionally does in order to refresh his memory before a lesson, but has found many inaccuracies in information and analysis. He then said that he checks whether or not students have been keeping up with their readings by providing them a SparkNotes summary and asking them what is missing from them. Although one reason for incorporating SparkNotes into my lesson is to informally check if students are keeping up with their readings, I don't plan to use them in a conniving way and "trick" my students. Rather, I do want them to understand that they should be weary in consuming everything they read online—that while they can be extremely concise and informative, are oftentimes superficial and lack depth.

Another source of inspiration came from Jim Burke's *The English Teacher's Companion: a Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession* wherein he suggests that teachers should "Allow [students] to use Cliffs Notes...such study aids provide much-needed support for the student whose language ability makes it difficult enough to understand most English reading, not to mention dialects and slang used by writers such as Mark Twain or J.D. Salinger" (Burke 382). I would introduce this in my classroom—not only to support language learners—but also to let students know that I am aware that such tools exist. Oftentimes it almost seems "taboo" to talk about SparkNotes or Cliffs Notes, but I hope using these study guides as a part of my lesson will help my students understand the role of supplementary tools in the classroom. They are intended to guide and support, but not replace.

2. Prior to this lesson, students have read up to Ch. 6 in the novel and have been quizzed on their understanding of Ch. 1-6. Through a pre-novel activity, students have already familiarized themselves through short stories written by J.D. Salinger, and have discussed the narrative voice of Holden. Other topics of discussion include setting, implied event leading up to the novel, Holden's love for books, memories, and family.

3. The purpose of the SparkNotes summaries is to help students understand that they should view online study guides with a grain of salt. Although they may seem like a great alternative to 50 pages of reading, the kind of information and details that are left out from study guides are critical in their understanding of the novel. Students are to read and evaluate the accuracy and sufficiency of the summaries, and in the end, be able to edit them to produce more informative and meaningful summaries.
4. This lesson, which ultimately helps students understand the role of supplemental aids in the classroom and their learning, will be valuable as students continue their reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*. If students have been using online study guides as substitute for their actual reading, they may be encouraged to think twice, since we have, as a class, recognized it as insufficient to replace the actual reading. Moreover, the kind of critical thinking and analysis this lesson provides will help students engage in their readings more critically and meaningfully.

### **OBJECTIVES**

After this class, students will be able to (1) critique a popular online study guide by detecting inaccuracies and evaluating the sufficiency of provided information; (2) discuss and evaluate the role of online study guides in their reading and learning of literature; (3) practice writing informative and meaningful summaries by becoming “editors” and modifying the original Sparknotes summaries.

### **MATERIALS**

- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger
- SparkNotes Summary for Ch. 7-8 (Worksheet #1)
- “SparkNotes Editors” Homework Assignment (Worksheet #2)
- “SparkNotes Editors” Rubric / ELL Alternative (Worksheet #3)

### **PREPARATION**

- Predetermine 7 groups of 3 and 2 groups of 2
- Make copies of the SparkNotes summary and homework assignment

### **PROCEDURE**

#### **Before Class**

- Stand by door and distribute the SparkNotes summary for Chapter 7-8 as students walk in.

#### **Introduction of Lesson: 13 min.**

- 3 min Students to silently read the SparkNotes summary for Chapter 7

- *10 min* Discuss what information / important details are missing from the summary. What are some things in Ch. 7 that doesn't appear in the SparkNotes summary? Why is this important? Is any of the information inaccurate? As students respond, ask related questions from Chapter 7, such as, Why does Holden come to Ackley's room after getting into a fight with Stradlater if he thinks Ackley's "even more stupid than Stradlater" (61)? Why does Holden want to hear about Ackley's life when he doesn't want to discuss personal things with him? How many times does he mention how lonesome and depressed he is in this chapter? Should we or should we not take this with a grain of salt? Why do you think Holden gets sad almost every time someone gets him a present?
- *3 min* Briefly discuss what their responses to the abovementioned questions indicate about Holden as a character. What is his mental / emotional state at this point?

### **Lesson Instruction:**

- *10 min* Break students off into predetermined groups. Have students read the provided SparkNotes summary for Chapter 8 as a group. Then, they should discuss and write down what important details / information is missing from the summary. They should also discuss and write down *why* these missing details are important in their understanding of the novel, if they are. These are to be turned in at the end of class.
- *15 min* Groups share their findings with class. As it comes up, ensure to ask questions these following questions related to Chapter 8: Why does Holden think that he'd be giving Mrs. Morrow his whole life story if he told her his real name? About what does Holden lie to Mrs. Morrow? Is Holden a phony for saying these things? How would you describe Holden's feelings for Mrs. Morrow? Briefly discuss what their responses to the abovementioned questions indicate about Holden as a character. What is his mental / emotional state at this point?
- *4 min* Discuss how they now feel about SparkNotes and its place in literature and learning. What is the degree to which you should rely on SparkNotes? When is SparkNotes acceptable / unacceptable?
- *10 min* Distribute the "SparkNotes Editors" homework assignment. Students are to become the new editors of SparkNotes and create a better summary for Ch. 7 and 8. What would they add, omit or fix from the original summaries? Students have the rest of class time to get started.

### **Closure/Wrap-Up**

- Collect small group discussion notes. Dismiss students.

### **DISCUSSION IDEAS**

#### Chapter 7

- Why does Holden come to Ackley's room after getting into a fight with Stradlater if he thinks Ackley's "even more stupid than Stradlater" (61)?
- Why does Holden want to hear about Ackley's life when he doesn't want to discuss personal things with him?
- How many times does he mention how lonesome and depressed he is in this chapter? Should we or should we not take this with a grain of salt?

- Why do you think Holden gets sad almost every time someone gets him a present?
- Sparknotes says that Holden is annoyed by Ackley's "phoniness." Is this the same impression you got?
- What are some things in Ch. 7 that doesn't appear in the SparkNotes summary? Why is this important? Is any of the information inaccurate?

#### Chapter 8

- Why does Holden think that he'd be giving Mrs. Morrow his whole life story if he told her his real name?
- About what does Holden lie to Mrs. Morrow? Is Holden a phony for saying these things?
- How would you describe Holden's feelings for Mrs. Morrow?
- What are some things in Ch. 8 that doesn't appear in the SparkNotes summary? Why is this important? Is any of the information inaccurate?
- What is the degree to which you should rely on SparkNotes?
- When is SparkNotes acceptable / unacceptable?

### **BILINGUAL/ESL AND ENGLISHES ACCOMMODATIONS**

#### Spanish

- The ELL whose L1 is Spanish will be accommodated in these following ways:
  - ✓ Spanish-English and English-Spanish dictionaries will be provided in the classroom as his L1 resource. He may refer to these whenever necessary.
  - ✓ Since he may not know what SparkNotes is, I can explain what it is as students silently read the summary for Ch. 7. This is a good way to introduce SparkNotes to him, since it's something that he can use to support his nightly readings.
  - ✓ He will be assigned in one of the groups of 2, and I will join this group as to assist him and his partner in discussing the study guide in relation to the novel.
  - ✓ He will be evaluated on an alternative rubric—one with different expectations for the mechanics/grammar component.

#### African American English

- Students who speak African American English will be accommodated in these following ways:
  - ✓ Students will be free to participate in class and small group discussions in whichever dialect that is comfortable for them. Because students are taking on the role of an editor for SparkNotes, this particular lesson is one through which students should practice Standard written English. This homework assignment will be the *only* part of the lesson that will require the use of Standard written English. If they do not, points will be deducted from the "Audience" domain of the rubric (*not* grammar & mechanics).

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION ACCOMMODATIONS**

“*Asperger’s disorder* is characterized by severe, sustained, and often lifelong impairments in social interactions and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities” (Rosenberg et al 263).

- The student with Asperger’s disorder will be accommodated in these following ways:
  - ✓ Student will be provided with an agenda of the day’s lesson, which outlines the instructional activities, so that they know what to anticipate when they come to class.
  - ✓ Student will receive all of the questions for Chapters 7-8 in advance, so they know what to anticipate.
  - ✓ When introducing the activity, I will use language that is direct and literal, avoiding unnecessary idioms and irony, which may cause confusion.
  - ✓ Student will be assigned with group members who are helpful and can serve as good role models for social behavior.

## **ASSESSMENT**

- Students will be informally assessed on their participation during class discussions. These discussions will be especially helpful to check if students are keeping up with the assigned readings, since they won’t be able to participate in depth unless they’ve completed their readings (not via SparkNotes). I will also collect the group activity and informally grade them (check system) for student understanding.
- Students will receive a formal grade for the “SparkNotes Editors” homework assignment based upon a rubric (Worksheet #3).

## **EXTENSION IDEAS**

- As an extra credit opportunity, students can work on the Analysis part of the study guide and turn it in attached to their summaries.
- As an alternative website, students can read and critique the information provided by Wikipedia.com. This would be more appropriate, however, as an end-of-the-novel activity.

## **SOURCE OF ACTIVITY**

This idea is primarily inspired by my former cooperating teacher, Nate Meyer. When I observed in his classroom, he told me that he sometimes uses SparkNotes as a way to ensure that students aren’t *only* reading online study guides, but actually doing the readings.

## **RESOURCES AND REFERENCES**

Burke, Jim. *The English Teacher's Companion: a Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession*. 3 ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

“Illinois State Board of Education: Illinois Learning Standards.” *ISBE.state.il.us*. Illinois State Board of Education, 2009. Web. 9 Dec, 2010.

Rosenberg, M.S., *Special Education for Today's Teachers: An Introduction*. NJ: Pearson, 2010. Print.

Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951. 277. Print.

“The Catcher in the Rye.” *Sparknotes.com*. Sparknotes, 2010. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.

## **ILLINOIS STATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS GOALS**

- **Goal 1: Apply reading strategies to improve understanding and fluency.**
  - 1.B.5a** Relate reading to prior knowledge and experience and make connections to related information.
    - ✓ This goal is met as students refer to their assigned reading from the previous night (Chapter 7-8) and compare it to the SparkNotes summaries. They are to detect and discuss any inaccuracies or insufficiencies they find in the provided summaries. Using this discussion as the foundation, students then discuss the role of online study guides in the English classroom.
  
- **Goal 2: Read and interpret a variety of literary works**
  - 2.B.5a** Analyze and express an interpretation of a literary work
    - ✓ Students accomplish this goal by discussing—both in small groups and as a class—the discussion questions from chapters 7 and 8. Through these questions, students are to interpret certain things that Holden does, thinks or says, thus gaining a better understanding of Holden’s diminishing mental and emotional stability.
  
- **Goal 3: Communicate ideas in writing to accomplish a variety of purposes.**
  - 3.C.5a** Communicate information and ideas in narrative, informative and persuasive writing with clarity and effectiveness in a variety of written forms using appropriate traditional and/or electronic formats; adapt content, vocabulary, voice and tone to the audience, purpose and situation.
    - ✓ Students achieve this goal through the “SparkNotes Editors” homework assignment. They are to assume the role of new editors for the popular online study guide site and edit the original summaries to make them more accurate and informative. The content, voice, tone and vocabulary should be fitted to this particular situation and purpose.

# SparkNotes Summary

## Worksheet #1

### *Chapter 7*

Holden talks for a while with Ackley and then tries to fall asleep in the bed belonging to Ackley's roommate, who is away for the weekend. But he cannot stop imagining Jane fooling around with Stradlater, and he has trouble falling asleep. He wakes Ackley and talks with him some more, asking whether he could run off and join a monastery without being Catholic. Ackley is annoyed by the conversation, and Holden is annoyed by Ackley's "phoniness," so he leaves. Outside, in the dorm's hallway, he decides that he will leave for New York that night instead of waiting until Wednesday. After passing a few days there in secret, he will wait until his parents have digested the news of his expulsion before he returns to their apartment. He packs his bags, dons his hunting hat, and begins to cry. As he heads into the hallway, he yells "Sleep tight, ya morons!" to the boys on his floor before stepping outside to leave Pencey forever.

### *Chapter 8*

Holden walks the entire way to the train station and catches a late train to New York. At Trenton, an attractive older woman gets on and sits next to him. She turns out to be the mother of his classmate, Ernest Morrow. He dislikes Ernest immensely but tells extravagant lies about him to his mother, claiming that he is the most popular boy on campus and would have been elected class president if he'd let the other boys nominate him. Holden tells her his own name is Rudolph Schmidt, which is actually the school janitor's name. When she asks why he is leaving Pencey early, Holden claims to be returning to New York for a brain tumor operation.

# SparkNotes Editors!! (6 points)

## Worksheet #2

Using our discussion from today's lesson, your task is to become the new editors of the #1 online study guides that students use: SparkNotes. Read the summaries for Ch. 7-8 one more time. What important details are missing from these summaries? Is the information accurate? How can you make this more informative and meaningful? Remember that you are an editor; in writing your summaries, consider your tone, voice, overall writing style and audience.

After you have made the necessary modifications, write a short 1 paragraph rationale explaining why you've made the changes that you did.

**This homework assignment is due tomorrow, Feb. 4, 2011.**



# SparkNotes Editors!! Rubric

## Worksheet #2

Components	Points
<b>Appropriate Modifications</b> Makes modifications that enhance the quality of the summary, making information more accurate and meaningful.	/3
<b>Audience</b> Summaries consistently use vocabulary, tone, and overall style that is appropriate with the audience.	/1
<b>Mechanics and grammar</b> Summaries are free of grammar/mechanical errors.	/1
<b>Rationale</b> Includes a 1 paragraph minimum rationale explaining the modifications made.	/1.

## SparkNotes Editors!! Rubric (ELL Alternative)

Components	Points
<b>Appropriate Modifications</b> Makes modifications that enhance the quality of the summary, making information more accurate and meaningful.	/3
<b>Audience</b> Summaries consistently use vocabulary, tone, and overall style that is appropriate with the audience.	/1
<b>Mechanics and grammar</b> Summaries include minimal errors that do not hinder readers' understanding of information.	/1
<b>Rationale</b> Includes a 1 paragraph minimum rationale explaining the modifications made.	/1.