

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 1



Key Paragraph, p. 5

“People moved slowly then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself” (p. 5).

Writing Prompt

Scout describes Maycomb as a very relaxed, slow-paced town. The outside world feels very far away to its citizens, and no one is in a hurry to live their lives. Is this different from the town that you grew up in, or the town you live in today? Would you rather grow up in a town like Maycomb, or in a big city like Los Angeles?

Write a paragraph for or against the statement “Maycomb is a great place to grow up.” What changes would you make in order for the town of Maycomb to better suit your needs? Be sure to support your argument with sufficient evidence from the text and relevant, real-world experiences.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 2



Key Passage, p. 20

“The Cunninghams never took anything they can’t pay back – no church baskets and no scrip stamps. They never took anything off of anybody, they get along on what they have. They don’t have much, but they get along on it” (p. 20).

Key Passage, p. 20-21

“One morning Jem and I found a load of stovewood in the backyard. Later, a sack of hickory nuts appeared on the back steps. With Christmas came a crate of smilax and holly. That spring when we found a cokersack full of turnip greens, Atticus said Mr. Cunningham had more than paid him” (p. 20-21).

Writing Prompt

Smilax is a slender vine with glossy foliage that is used in floral arrangements and decorations. Holly is also used during Christmastime as a festive decoration. Also, turnip greens are a staple in most Southern collards, and are used in many vegetable dishes. By leaving these items at the Finch’s house, the Cunninghams work to repay the debt that they owe Atticus.

Throughout the novel, the Cunninghams are described as hardworking folks who are economically challenged. Unwilling to accept charity from Miss Caroline, or anyone for that matter, the Cunninghams find an alternative way to pay off their debt.

Write a paragraph arguing for or against the Cunninghams’ method of paying back services. Do you think that the Cunninghams should put their pride aside and rely on the charity of others? How much effort does this family exert in order to repay their debts through serviceable acts? Do you feel that they should continue paying others by exchanging goods and services?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 3



Key Paragraph, p. 41

“Atticus’s arrival was the second reason I wanted to quit the game. The first reason happened the day I rolled into the Radley front yard. Through all the head shaking, quelling of nausea and Jem-yelling, I had heard another sound, so low I could not have heard it from the sidewalk. Someone inside the house was laughing” (p. 41).

Writing Prompt

Scout hears laughter coming from the Radley house and becomes frightened. As readers, we can assume that Boo Radley’s laughter is provoked by the Finch children’s game, which suggests that he often watches them play.

Do you believe that Boo Radley is laughing out of malevolence or good-natured humor? **Write a short argumentative paragraph claiming that Boo is either mocking the Finch children or simply amused by their actions. How has your opinion of this character changed since the beginning of the story?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 4



Key Passage, p. 45

“Do you think they’re true, all those things they say about B—Mr. Arthur?”

‘What things?’

I told her.

‘That is three-fourths colored folks and one-fourth Stephanie Crawford,’ said Miss Maudie grimly.

‘Stephanie Crawford even told me once she woke up in the middle of the night and found him looking at her. I said what did you do, Stephanie, move over in the bed and make room for him? That shut her up a while’” (p. 45).

Writing Prompt

Jem, Scout, and Dill were all terrified when they were running away from the Radley House. Everyone gets scared sometimes, whether it’s of a person, a scary movie, a frightening real-life experience, or an imaginary creature under the bed. However, the more information one gains about a scary person or situation, it is easy to have a more balanced perspective and the fear is dispelled.

Write a paragraph that argues in favor of or against Boo Radley’s character traits and overall personality, based on the information that has been provided to us, as readers. Is he more mysterious than he is scary? If so, how do the conflicting/inconclusive descriptions of the character add to this perception? Has your opinion of Boo changed since the first chapter of the novel? Is he a figure that the Finch children should be frightened of? Or is he misunderstood? Using evidence from the text and personal experiences, support your claims.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 5



Key Paragraph, p. 57

“Jem stayed moody and silent for a week. As Atticus had once advised me to do, I tried to climb into Jem’s skin and walk around in it: if I had gone alone to the Radley Place at two in the morning, my funeral would have been held the next afternoon. So I left Jem alone and tried not to bother him” (p. 57).

Writing Prompt

When Scout is confused by Jem’s moodiness, she tries to see things from his point of view by “climbing in his skin and walking around in it.” Think of a time when you had a disagreement with someone or you had trouble understanding someone’s point of view. Do you think it would have been helpful to try to see the situation from their side?

Think back to a conflict you have experienced with a family member or friend. Does looking at the situation from the other person’s perspective help you to gain insight or help solve the conflict? How did it change your mind? Write a paragraph arguing in favor for or against this strategy as a problem-solving technique.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 6



Key Paragraph, p. 88

“But do you think I could face my children otherwise? You know what’s going to happen as well as I do, Jack, and I hope and pray I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb’s usual disease. Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand...I just hope that Jem and Scout come to me for their answers instead of listening to the town. I hope they trust me enough...Jean Louise?” (p. 88).

Writing Prompt

Atticus tells Scout that he isn’t going to win Tom Robinson’s court case, but he took the case anyway. Why do you think Atticus did that? Is it worth defending Tom Robinson even if Atticus knows that he will not win? Imagine you are Atticus’ son/daughter. How does his decision to support Tom Robinson change the way others in Maycomb view you?

Write an argumentative letter to Atticus either supporting or criticizing his decision to take on Tom Robinson’s case. What do you think is the right action for his family? How do you think this choice will affect his family? Why do you feel this way?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 7



Key Paragraph, p. 112

“She was. She had her own views about things, a lot different from mine, maybe...son, I told you that if you hadn’t lost your head I’d have made you go read to her. I wanted you to see something about her—I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew” (p. 112).

Writing Prompt

Our theme for this quarter is Change Requires Effort. Mrs. Dubose made a giant change in her life before she died, and it certainly took a lot of effort, as well as the courage that Atticus described. She had a vision, a plan, and the effort necessary to free herself from her addiction, even though it was too late to save her life. Do you know anyone like Mrs. Dubose – someone who put forth great effort to change her or his life?

Write a letter to a person in your life whose effort to change has made an impression on you. In this letter, you will argue on behalf of this person’s dedication to a particular cause and defend them from criticism that they may have received from others. Describe the effort you have seen this person make and identify what they strive to change. Was it a positive change? Did it help his/her community in some way? How did this affect your life or your outlook on life?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 8



Key Paragraph, p. 126

“It’s not necessary to tell all you know. It’s not ladylike – in the second place, folks don’t like to have somebody around knowin’ more than they do. It aggravates ‘im. You’re not gonna change any of them by talkin’ right, they’ve got to want to learn themselves, and when they don’t want to learn there’s nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or talk their language” (p. 126).

Writing Prompt

Scout notices that Calpurnia speaks differently around black people than she does when she is around white people. How does Calpurnia explain her “two languages”? Have you ever changed the way that you spoke depending on your audience?

Drawing on your own personal experience, **write a short paragraph that argues that people do, in fact, change the way they speak depending on their audience. For instance, take into account the way in which you speak at school. Is it different from the way you speak at home? At school? At work? Is having a different set of language “rules” for different situations a good idea? Is there a time when you’ve had to change what words you use? Did it take a lot of effort? Did the change accomplish the results you intended it to have?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 9



Key Paragraph, p. 134

“His curtness stung me. The comb was midway in its journey, and I banged it down. For no reason I felt myself beginning to cry, but I could not stop. This was not my father. My father never thought these thoughts. My father never spoke so. Aunt Alexandra had put him up to this, somehow. Through my tears I saw Jem standing in a similar pool of isolation, his head cocked to one side” (p. 134).

Writing Prompt

Aunt Alexandra seems to think that Scout needs to be turned into a lady. For a girl in the 1930's, the standard of dress and behavior was radically different from that of a boy. Scout rebels against conforming to societal expectations from a very young age. Do you rebel against what others expect of you?

Think about a time when someone tried to change you into something you did not want to be, and write a paragraph either arguing for or against such interventions. What was the situation and how did you react? Were you willing to put in the effort to change in this situation? Should people try to change others, or should they always accept them for the way that they are?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 10



Key Paragraph, p. 147

“The Levy family met all criteria for being Fine Folks: they did the best they could with the sense they had, and they been living on the same plot of ground in Maycomb for five generations” (p. 147).

Writing Prompt

Scout describes her community’s definition of what makes people “Fine Folks.” In Maycomb, Fine Folks (or good citizens) are people who have lived in the community for a long time and are hard working. What do you think makes “Fine Folks?”

Write a paragraph arguing in favor of or in opposition against Scout’s definition of “Fine Folks.” What kind of people do you want in your community? Does their money, ethnicity, or gender matter? Do you think it is important to have qualities that would place you in the category of Fine Folks? How would you go about obtaining the qualities that make you Fine Folks? Do you personally know anyone you would classify as a “Fine Folk?”

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 11



Key Paragraph, p. 163

“This was news, news that put a different light on things: Atticus had to, whether he wanted to or not. I thought it odd that he hadn’t said anything to us about it—we could have used it many times in defending him and ourselves. He had to, that’s why he was Doing it, equaled fewer fights and less fussing. But did that explain the town’s attitude? The court appointed Atticus to defend him. Atticus aimed to defend him. That’s what they didn’t like about it. It was confusing” (p. 163).

Writing Prompt

For the first time, Scout realizes that Atticus is Tom Robinson’s court-appointed defender; in other words, he has no choice but to serve as Tom’s attorney. At the same time, she is confused, because the townspeople are angry that Atticus is doing his best to defend his client.

Pretend you are Jem or Scout. **Write an argumentative letter to the editor of *The Maycomb Tribune* explaining why your father should do his best to defend Tom Robinson. What is Atticus’ responsibility to his client? Does he have a moral obligation? What change is Atticus trying to make in the legal system? Why is it important to stand up for what is right, even though it might be difficult? Can you recall a time in your life when you stood up for something that you believed in? What kinds of challenges did you face? Were you successful in accomplishing your goals? What type of change occurred as a result?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 12



Key Paragraph, p. 177

"I was becoming nervous. Atticus seemed to know what he was doing – but it seemed to me that he'd gone frog-sticking without a light. Never, never, never, on cross-examination ask a witness a question you don't already know the answer to, was a tenet I absorbed with my baby-food. Do it, and you'll often get an answer you don't want, an answer that might wreck your case" (p. 177).

Writing Prompt

Change Requires Effort. Change is possible. Change requires three things: A Vision; A Plan; Effort. Change requires changing bad habits to good habits. Change requires one step at a time. How does Atticus show that change requires effort?

Write a paragraph in which you describe the change Atticus is trying to bring about in his community; using specific examples from the text, argue in favor of his efforts. Do you think that Atticus is trying to change something that needs to be changed? Do you think that the people around him will accept that changes that he is trying to bring? Is change worth fighting for, even if the fight is hopeless?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 13



Key Paragraph, p. 188

“Then she burst into real tears. Her shoulders shook with angry sobs. She was as good as her word. She answered no more questions, even when Mr. Gilmer tried to get her back on the track. I guess if she hadn’t been so poor and ignorant, Judge Taylor would have put her under the jail for contempt she had shown everybody in the courtroom. Somehow, Atticus had hit her hard in a way that was not clear to me, but it gave him no pleasure to do so. He sat with his head down, and I never saw anybody glare at anyone with the hatred Mayella showed when she left the stand and walked by Atticus’s table” (p. 188).

Writing Prompt

Atticus slowly and deliberately shows the jury and the observers in the courtroom that Mayella’s story is inaccurate. As readers, we finally know more information about Tom Robinson, and we have heard Mayella’s side of the story. Taking this information into account, what do you think will happen next in the novel?

Imagine you are Scout, corresponding with a pen pal who is not present at Tom Robinson’s trial. Write a letter in which you predict what the outcome of the case will be. Using the information Mayella has presented, construct an argumentative claim to your pen pal in which you take a stance either supporting her testimony or rejecting her innocence. What do you believe should happen to Tom Robinson? What do you think will actually happen?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 14



Key Paragraph, p. 195

“It occurred to me in their own way, Tom Robinson’s manners were as good as Atticus’s. Until my father explained it to me later, I did not understand the subtlety of Tom’s predicament: he would not have dared strike a white woman under any circumstances and expect to live long, so he took the first opportunity to run—a sure sign of guilt” (p. 195).

Writing Prompt

The realization that Tom might be convicted despite his innocence is too much for Dill to handle. Jem, on the other hand, seems quite sure that Tom will be acquitted. Who do you think is right? If you were a member of the jury in this case, who would you believe? Why?

Write an argumentative paragraph from the point of view of one of the jury members expressing your decision in the case. In this paragraph, use the information you’ve ascertained from the trial thus far and argue either for or against Tom’s innocence. In your eyes, is Tom guilty of innocent? How should he be treated? Keep in mind the prejudices in the South against black people at the time, and also remember the reputation that the Ewells have in Maycomb.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 15



Key Passage, p. 211

“A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. The foreman handed a piece of paper to Mr. Tate who handed it to the clerk who handed it to the judge...

I shut my eyes. Judge Taylor was polling the jury: ‘Guilty... guilty.... guilty.... guilty....’ I peeked at Jem: his hands were white from gripping the balcony rail, and his shoulders jerked as if each “guilty” was a separate stab between them” (p. 211).

Writing Prompt

How did you feel when you read that Tom Robinson was convicted of attacking and raping Mayella Ewell? Why do you think the jury convicted Tom Robinson?

Imagine that you are Jem and have been consistently keeping a diary throughout the hearing. Write a diary entry expressing your reaction to the outcome of the case. Argue why you feel Tom Robinson a) should be convicted of physically assaulting Mayella Ewell or b) is innocent of the crime. Present your argument with clear and concrete details. How did you react to the news of Tom’s conviction? Do you think it is just or unjust?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 16



Key Paragraph, p. 220

“‘If you had been on that jury, son and eleven other boys like you, Tom would be a free man,’ said Atticus. ‘So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process. Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom’s jury, but you saw something come between them and reason. You saw the same thing that night in front of the jail. When that crew went away, they didn’t go as reasonable men, they went because we were there. There’s something in our world that makes men lose their head—they couldn’t be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it’s a white man’s work against a black man’s, the white man always wins. They’re ugly, but those are the facts of life’” (p. 220).

Writing Prompt

As young people in Alabama, Scout and Jem will have the opportunity to affect great change in their community and society. If you were Scout or Jem, what would you like to change about the world in which you live?

Imagine that you are Scout or Jem, and write a letter to Tom Robinson in jail. What would you want to say to him about the trial? Outline for him your plan to change the community. What is your vision, your plan, and the effort you will put forth? As a concluding statement to Tom, create an argument as to why you believe his sentence is just / unjust. Provide your own opinions and support these ideas with evidence from the text and draw on personal experience.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 17



Key Paragraph, p. 233

“Mrs. Merriweather nodded wisely. Her voice soared over the clink of coffee cups and the soft bovine sounds of the ladies munching their dainties. ‘Gertrude,’ she said, ‘I tell you there are some good but misguided people in this town. Good, but misguided. Folks in this town who think they’re doing right, I mean. Now far be it from me to say who, but some of ‘em in this town thought they were doing the right thing a while back, but all they did was stir ‘em up. That’s all they did. Might’ve looked like the right thing to do at the time. I’m sure I don’t know, I’m not read in that field, but sulky.... dissatisfied.... I tell you if my Sophy’d kept that up another day I’d have let her go. It’s never entered that wool of hers that the only reason I keep her is because this depression’s on and she needs her dollar and quarter every week she can get it” (p. 233).

Writing Prompt

Some of the women in Aunt Alexandra’s missionary group seemed to think that defending Tom Robinson was a waste of Atticus’ time. In fact, they believe it only made the black people in town more unhappy and difficult to work with.

Do you think that Atticus wasted his time defending Tom Robinson? Pretend you are Scout, and write an argumentative monologue in response to the above speech from Mrs. Merriweather. What should Scout say? How would you defend your father? How would you contradict her opinion of the black community? What kind of effort would you put forth in order to articulate and support your vision? Remember: Scout is trying harder to be a lady. Use words appropriate to the occasion and situation.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 18



Key Paragraph, p. 247

“Well, coming out of the courthouse that night Miss Gates was – she was goin’ down the steps in front of us, you musta not seen her – she was talking with Miss Stephanie Crawford, I heard her say it’s time somebody taught ‘em a lesson, they were getting’ way above themselves, an’ the next thing they think they can do is marry us. Jem, how can you hate Hitler so bad an’ then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home—” (p. 247).

Writing Prompt

Scout is confused, because Miss Gates speaks against Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, but supports prejudice in her own hometown. Is Scout right in questioning Miss Gates’ statement about persecution? Is it okay for Miss Gates to dislike Hitler for her persecution of Jews, but then agree with prejudice against black people in America?

Despite our knowledge of history, in today’s time, injustice continues. Not only does prejudice exist, but genocide, starvation, and murder are still part of the modern world. How can you, as an individual, change an injustice in the world around you? **Pick one injustice that is present in your community and construct a plan aimed at changing it. Write a paragraph that argues in favor of your plan to change one injustice in your life. How can you fight against prejudice in your own community? What is your vision? Describe your plan in detail and also provide necessary the effort you will put forth to make your plan a viable and effective option.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 19



Key Paragraph, p. 267

“Come in, Heck,’ said Atticus. ‘Did you find anything? I can’t conceive of anyone low-down enough to do a thing like this, but I hope you found him’” (p. 267).

Writing Prompt

Atticus, who rarely speaks badly of anyone, shows contempt for anyone who would harm children. If Bob Ewell was angry that Atticus had given him a bad reputation in Maycomb, why did he attack Jem and Scout? Wouldn’t that just make him look even worse in the eyes of the community?

Construct an argumentative paragraph about your opinion of someone who takes revenge on an enemy’s family, especially children. Is pride worth fighting for? Or in this case, dying for? Does anything justify harming a child? Would you consider Bob Ewell to be a bad person? Why or why not? What steps could Bob Ewell have taken to become a better person? What efforts could he have put forth to change?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

To Kill a Mockingbird, Day 20



Key Passage, p. 278

“He had to stoop a little to accommodate me, but if Miss Stephanie Crawford was watching from her upstairs window, she would see Arthur Radley escorting me down the sidewalk, as any gentleman would do.

We came to the street light on the corner, and I wondered how many times Dill had stood there hugging the fat pole, watching, waiting, hoping. I wondered how many times Jem and I had made this journey, but I entered the Radley front gate for the second time in my life. Boo and I walked up the steps to the porch. His fingers found the front doorknob. He gently released my hand, opened the door, went inside, and shut the door behind him. I never saw him again” (p. 278).

Writing Prompt

As Scout finally meets and befriends Boo Radley, she makes an important discovery about character. She has changed from a child to a young woman who is beginning to understand that people are more than what they seem on the outside. In what other ways had Scout changed throughout the book? Would you agree that this novel is a coming of age narrative for the Finch children?

Write a paragraph arguing that Scout has undergone a transformation Scout from the beginning of the novel to the end. How did she change? In what ways did she stay the same? What kind of effort did she put forth in order to achieve this change? Did she have a vision/plan, or did the change happen externally? What did she learn about people and the world? What kind of person will she become?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Final Writing Project



What makes you a good citizen?

Before the lesson today, have students discuss the responsibilities of citizenship. How can they affect change in their communities?

Final Writing Product:

What do you want to change in your community? Do you want to improve something at school? Do you want to change a law? Do you want to make your community better by helping a specific group of people?

For your final writing task, **write an argumentative letter to the opinion section of a newspaper. In this letter, a) identify an aspect of your community you wish to change, b) argue that the change you propose is necessary to promote a healthy and just society c) outline your idea and provide support for your argument, and d) provide a counterargument in the concluding statement.**

Share with them your vision, your plan, and the effort you would be willing to put forth to make the change. What assistance might you need to carry out your plan? Who would your plan help? Be sure to keep the audience of your letter in mind, and be specific about what your readers can do to help you in your effort to make this positive change happen. Make sure you research the issue you wish to change and gather appropriate information that will further your argument before you begin your letter. Also, try to maintain a formal tone throughout your letter. Students may build off the ideas presented in the writing prompt from Day 18 as inspiration, or may chose to focus on a different option.