This is a PDF version of a digital tool I created called “Should I Teach This Book?” that was designed to help teachers—especially secondary English Language Arts teachers—decide if and when to use canonical literature or other texts in their classroom.

Through a series of yes/no questions with links to supplementary resources, teachers investigate how to responsibly teach, replace, or supplement readings to build a more balanced, representative, anti-racist curriculum (for a more detailed explanation why I created this tool, see my article *Whitesplaining the Canon*).

“Should I Teach This Book?” is a work in progress. If you have suggestions regarding links and resources or other feedback on ways to improve this tool, I would love to hear from you!

Thank you for using and sharing this resource.

[Link to online quiz](#)

Michelle Jewett
[michellejewett.com](http://michellejewett.com)

**Should I teach this book?**

*Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?*

**NO**

Does the book contain all white characters?

**NO**

Consider teaching this book after determining its appropriateness for your particular student population. Items to consider include, but are not limited to: student backgrounds and interests, the book's language, relevance, and potential to engage students; how disability, gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are portrayed and/or omitted and how this might be examined; what skills and concepts you intend to teach with the book and how these will be scaffolded; differentiation and instructional strategies most appropriate for this book; how student choice and inquiry will be integrated into instruction; and how you will examine intersectionality in your students and the book's characters (see *Teaching at the Intersections*). Consult the rest of this flowchart for additional support.
Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

NO

Does the book contain all white characters?

YES

Will you follow this book with one written by a non-white author that includes non-white characters who have agency, are complex, and central to the text?

NO

Do not teach this book. Watch A Visual Argument for Ethnic Studies and read Why NCTE Supports Ethnic Studies Initiatives to understand why our students need culturally representative literature and how they benefit from it (Los Angeles Unified made it a graduation requirement). This is necessary no matter the demographics of your students. See The Danger of a Single Story and read Why White Kids Need Diverse Children’s Books, Where are the people of color in children’s books? and “You can’t do that! Stories have to be about White people” for perspectives on how monoculture damages all students. Here’s two teachers explaining why they altered their reading lists Why I don’t want to assign Shakespeare anymore (even though he’s in the Common Core), Why I Teach Diverse Literature and here’s how this Teacher of the Year made it happen Extending Student Voice and the WinS Experience to a Social Experiment.

Consider teaching this book after determining its appropriateness for your particular student population. Items to consider include, but are not limited to: student backgrounds and interests, the
book’s language, relevance, and potential to engage students; how disability, gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are portrayed and/or omitted; what skills and concepts you intend to teach with the book and how these will be scaffolded; differentiation and instructional strategies most appropriate for this book; how student choice and inquiry will be integrated into instruction; and how you will contextualize whiteness in this text (see "Why Talk About Whiteness?" and its Toolkit). Consult the rest of this flowchart for additional support.

RESTART QUIZ

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

YES

Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

NO

Do not teach this book until you do. It’s essential that you understand institutional racism and the key elements of systemic racism first. Here are a few other sources for historical context: The Case for Reparations, American Racism in the 'White Frame', We Can’t ‘Get Over It’: 4 Ways Understanding Past Wrongs Can Create Better Indigenous Allies, Latino Civil Rights Timeline, 1903 to 2006 and the Race Forward video series Life Cycles of Inequity. In addition, search out resources tied to the book you want to teach for its specific historical context. Consult the rest of this flowchart for additional support.

RESTART QUIZ

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

YES

Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

YES

Will you spend more than one class period critiquing the racism in the book and connecting it to contemporary issues?

NO

Do not teach this book yet. You will need to research your specific title to prepare critiques first. Here are examples from two of the most commonly taught books in high school ELA classes: Atticus Finch was never a hero: “This book taught white people how to talk about race, and it did so badly” and warmly
embrace a racist novel (to kill a mockingbird) and Teaching Huck Finn: Novices need not apply and Huckleberry Finn and the "N Word". You will need to research specific contemporary issues that connect to this text, as well. Here are a few places to start, depending on the book: NCTE's Statement Affirming #BlackLivesMatter and its Resolution on Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline. If looking for statistics, here are 5 key takeaways about views of race and inequality in America, 15 Charts That Prove We’re Far From Post-Racial and Ten Myths About Immigration.

RESTART QUIZ

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

YES

Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

YES

Will you spend more than one class period critiquing the racism in the book and connecting it to contemporary issues?

YES

Will you invite students to critique the book and its language while maintaining a safe place for non-white students when doing so? This includes listening to and deferring to non-white students; not expecting any individual student to become a spokesperson for an entire race, ethnicity, or group; providing non-white students with the option not to read the book (asked confidentially); and not singling out or requiring non-white students to speak, if they elect not to.

NO

Do not teach this book until you're ready. Here's guidance on how to run such discussions Uncomfortable Conversations: Talking About Race In The Classroom and Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics With Students and here's why these conversations are necessary despite our discomfort How silence can breed prejudice: A child development professor explains how and why to talk to kids about race, Teaching Race in Schools in the 21st Century, and What Do American Teens Want? Less Racism.

RESTART QUIZ

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

YES
Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

YES

Will you spend more than one class period critiquing the racism in the book and connecting it to contemporary issues?

YES

Will you invite students to critique the book and its language while maintaining a safe place for non-white students when doing so? This includes listening to and deferring to non-white students; not expecting any individual student to become a spokesperson for an entire race, ethnicity, or group; providing non-white students with the option not to read the book (asked confidentially); and not singling out or requiring non-white students to speak, if they elect not to.

YES

Are you willing and able to correct the common misperceptions of white students, especially those who show anger, get defensive, or become upset during these discussions?

NO

Do not teach this book until you can. These conversations can be challenging so be prepared. Here’s a video contextualizing the myth of reverse racism and here’s an article on what to say when a student says “That’s Racist Against White People!”. Here’s how to spot a microaggression and what to do. Here’s why there’s no double standard when using the n-word and Why Refusing to ‘See Color’ Doesn’t Actually Mean You’re Not Racist. Here’s The Problem with the ‘Some of My Best Friends Are Black’ Defense and How To Tell Someone They Sound Racist with respect. Here’s why racially coded language and saying "All Lives Matter" erode relationships and trust. Here’s a good explanation of cultural appropriation and why it’s a problem. Finally, here’s Why It’s So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism and why we must do it, anyway.

RESTART QUIZ

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

YES

Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

YES
Will you spend more than one class period critiquing the racism in the book and connecting it to contemporary issues?

**YES**

Will you invite students to critique the book and its language while maintaining a safe place for non-white students when doing so? This includes listening to and deferring to non-white students; not expecting any individual student to become a spokesperson for an entire race, ethnicity, or group; providing non-white students with the option not to read the book (asked confidentially); and not singling out or requiring non-white students to speak, if they elect not to.

**YES**

Are you willing and able to correct the common misperceptions of white students, especially those who show anger, get defensive, or become upset during these discussions?

**YES**

Will you follow this book with one written by a non-white author that includes non-white characters who have agency, are complex, and central to the text?

**NO**

Do not teach this book. Watch [A Video Argument for Ethnic Studies](#) and read [Why NCTE Supports Ethnic Studies Initiatives](#) to understand why our students need culturally representative literature and how they benefit from it (Los Angeles Unified just made it a [graduation requirement](#)). This is necessary no matter the demographics of your students. See [The Danger of a Single Story](#) and read [Why White Kids Need Diverse Children’s Books, Where are the people of color in children’s books?](#) and “You can’t do that! Stories have to be about White people” for perspectives on how monoculture damages all students. Here’s why these two teachers altered their reading lists [Why I don’t want to assign Shakespeare anymore (even though he’s in the Common Core)](#), [Why I Teach Diverse Literature](#) and how this Teacher of the Year made it happen [Extending Student Voice and the WinS Experience to a Social Experiment](#).

**RESTART QUIZ**

Does this book use the n-word or include non-white characters who are one dimensional and without autonomy?

**YES**
Do you have an understanding of the history of racial oppression of non-whites in the U.S. and can contextualize the racism in the book for your students?

YES

Will you spend more than one class period critiquing the racism in the book and connecting it to contemporary issues?

YES

Will you invite students to critique the book and its language while maintaining a safe place for non-white students when doing so? This includes listening to and deferring to non-white students; not expecting any individual student to become a spokesperson for an entire race, ethnicity, or group; providing non-white students with the option not to read the book (asked confidentially); and not singling out or requiring non-white students to speak, if they elect not to.

YES

Are you willing and able to correct the common misperceptions of white students, especially those who show anger, get defensive, or become upset during these discussions?

YES

Will you follow this book with one written by a non-white author that includes non-white characters who have agency, are complex, and central to the text?

YES

Consider teaching this book after determining its appropriateness for your particular student population. Items to consider include, but are not limited to: student backgrounds and interests, the book’s language, relevance, and potential to engage students; how disability, gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are portrayed and/or omitted and how this might be examined; what skills and concepts you intend to teach with the book and how these will be scaffolded; differentiation and instructional strategies most appropriate for this book; how student choice and inquiry will be integrated into instruction; and how you will contextualize whiteness in this text (see "Why Talk About Whiteness?" and its Toolkit). Consult the rest of this flowchart for additional support.