

An Integrated Skills Lesson Plan for “Maps and Legends” by Michael Chabon

In “Maps and Legends,” author Michael Chabon reflects on growing up in Columbia, Maryland, one of America’s completely planned cities. He writes about how he felt as a youth moving to this city that was still in the early stages of construction. He describes his childhood thoughts and dreams, and the discoveries he made growing up there. And throughout the essay, he reflects on how the experience changed him and helped him become the writer he is today. Chabon’s essay and the following lesson plan guide students to reflect on and examine important moments in their own lives through the use of the English language.

Description:

This lesson plan is designed for EFL instructors who teach high intermediate to advanced English language learners. It is based on an authentic, contemporary essay, “Maps and Legends” by Michael Chabon, an accomplished American novelist and short story writer. The lesson plan includes various tasks and activities designed to assist you, the instructor, in developing your students’ English language skills as well as increasing their understanding of American culture. Students will study Chabon’s essay, complete tasks both individually and in pairs or groups, and participate in activities that develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The lesson is divided into five steps: Preparing to Read, Reading the Text, Understanding the Text, Making Connections Beyond the Text, and Integrating Language Skills.

You can choose the parts of the lesson that you find most appropriate and useful for your class. Approximate times for each part of the lesson are included, but these times may vary, depending on the individual class or teaching situation.

Step 1: Preparing to Read “Maps and Legends” (15 minutes)

In order to prepare your students to read Chabon’s essay, follow the suggested steps below.

- A. Through oral discussion, introduce the subject of the essay: Neighborhoods we lived in as children.
 1. Tell your students about the neighborhood you grew up in, its location and appearance, the people who lived there, the other children you played with and the games you played together, a favorite place you frequented, a memorable event that took place there, etc. Encourage them to ask you questions about your neighborhood.

2. Ask your students to think about the neighborhoods they grew up in. Then elicit their responses to the following questions. You may ask your students these questions directly, or have students ask each other in pairs or groups.
 - a. What did your neighborhood look like? Did it have a name?
 - b. Who lived there? Did you have close family members nearby? Who were your friends?
 - c. What kinds of activities did you do with your friends and family?
 - d. What was special about your neighborhood?
 - e. Did any memorable event occur while you were living there? If so, tell about the event and explain why it was memorable to you.

B. Introduce the Lesson

Explain to your students that they will be reading an essay called “Maps and Legends” by Michael Chabon, a popular American writer who has written about how growing up in his neighborhood in Columbia, Maryland, influenced him to become a writer. Assure them that if they do not fully understand this essay on the first reading, after reading it a second and possibly third time and analyzing the author’s ideas carefully, they will gain a better understanding of the writer’s message as well as experience many opportunities to communicate in English and improve their language skills.

Step 2: Reading the Text *(15–30 minutes depending on students’ abilities)*

Give your students photocopies of the essay (and Glossary) from this issue of the *Forum*. You can also have students access the essay online at: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/>. Note: the online version does not have the numbered paragraphs and Glossary mentioned in some exercises below.

A. Review the during-reading tasks below with your students. Then ask them to complete the tasks as they read the essay silently.

1. Circle unfamiliar words or expressions.
2. Underline ideas they do not understand.
3. Make notes in the margins about sections of the essay they would like to discuss or ask about.

B. Ask your students to read the definitions of their circled words in the Glossary provided or to look up the unfamiliar words in a dictionary. If they have access to the Internet, students can use one of the following on-line dictionary sites.

- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: www.bartleby.com/61
- Merriam-Webster On-line–The Language Center: www.m-w.com/

C. Ask your students to carefully read the essay a second time for better understanding.

Step 3: Understanding the Text

You may assign the following questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework. To prepare your students for oral discussion, follow the steps listed below.

1. Arrange your students into pairs or groups of three to four students.
 - a. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to read the questions aloud.
 - b. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to record the answers.
 - c. Ask each group to choose other members to present the answers to the class.
2. Give your students a fixed time period to discuss the questions and complete the tasks in Step 3 before presenting their responses to the class.
3. Call on each group to present their responses to the class.

A. Comprehension Questions (15–20 minutes)

1. Where did Michael Chabon’s parents buy a new home in 1969?
2. Who is James Rouse?
3. Where was “the Plan,” described in paragraph 5, displayed?
4. What does Chabon see in the slide show that he describes in paragraph 6?
5. In paragraph 10, find the name of the neighborhood Chabon’s family moved into.
6. Where does the author say he put the map of Columbia?
7. In paragraph 13, Chabon states that some critics believe the “grand experiment” of Columbia had failed. What reasons are given for this failure?
8. What does Chabon say about childhood in the last paragraph of the essay?

B. Vocabulary and Idioms (15 minutes)

Explain to your students that scanning is a reading skill that is useful for quickly finding specific information such as new vocabulary words or idiomatic expressions. To scan, students should read through a text quickly as they search for specific words, expressions, names, or numbers.

Explain that guessing the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary words and expressions using the surrounding context is an important skill for improving reading comprehension. This activity will also make students better readers. To understand the meaning of a word as it is used in a reading, students should read at least twice the sentences surrounding the unfamiliar word and use their understanding of these sentences to make a guess at the intended meaning. Tell your students that they may not guess the precise meaning, but even a general understanding of an unfamiliar word can improve their comprehension of a text.

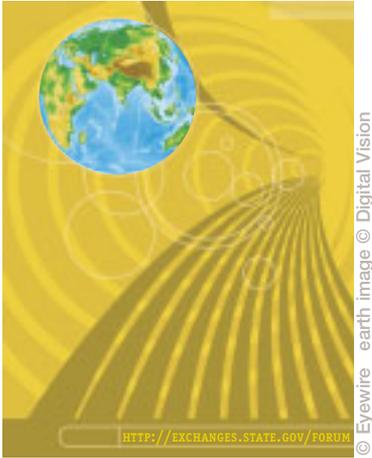
Ask your students to practice the skills of scanning and guessing words from context as they complete the tasks in this section.

1. Writers sometimes put together words that seem to be opposite or contradictory in meaning in order to emphasize a point. This type of writing is a figure of speech and is called an oxymoron. Some examples of oxymorons are *sweet sadness*, and *bright darkness*. Find examples of oxymorons in paragraphs 3 and 4 of Chabon's essay. Discuss the meanings with your classmates and teacher. [pragmatic dreamer (3), terrible optimism (4)]
2. Chabon describes Columbia's famous Covenant in paragraph 6. Use the context surrounding this term to find the meaning of this word. Restate the meaning in your own words.
3. Find the word *alliterative* in paragraph 9. Look at the first letters of each pair of words in the parentheses that follow *alliterative*. What pattern do you notice? Use your understanding of this pattern to guess the meaning of this word. Find another example of alliterative writing in paragraph 3. Why do you think Chabon used alliteration in this paragraph?
4. Scan paragraph 11 to find the word *foray*. Try to guess the meaning of this word using the context. Then, list one or two synonyms (words that are similar in meaning) for this word.

C. Dictionary Practice (15 minutes)

Tell your students that they will practice using the dictionary as they complete the tasks in this section. They may use the on-line dictionary sites listed under Step 2.

1. Find the expression *deep pockets* in paragraph 4. Use the dictionary to find its meaning. Then reread the paragraph and answer the following question: What allowed the men in the Working Group to "experiment on an enormous scale" and create a plan for building the city of Columbia?
2. Scan paragraph 6 to find the word *integral*. Use your dictionary to find the best definition for this word as it is used in the paragraph. How is it pronounced? Use your dictionary's pronunciation guide for help.
3. Find the term *loci* in paragraph 9. *Loci* is a plural noun. Use your dictionary to find the singular form. What is the meaning of this word?
4. Find the expression *churn up* in paragraph 10. What part of speech is *churn up*? Look up the word *churn* in a dictionary. Write down the definition that best fits the meaning of *churn* as it is used in paragraph 10. *Churn up* is a phrasal verb, or a two-word verb. The meaning of a phrasal verb is slightly different but usually related to the meaning of the main verb. Using the dictionary definition of *churn* and the context surrounding *churn up*, write your own definition for the phrasal verb *churn up* as it is used in the paragraph.
3. Scan paragraph 11 to find the word *pseudo*. Look up the definition in your dictionary. How is it pronounced? Use your dictionary's guide to pronunciation for help.



WEB SITES OF INTEREST

Michael Chabon

<http://www.michaelchabon.com/>

This is a good site for viewing a variety of Chabon's writings, including "Maps and Legends."

Civil Rights Movement

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohm/exhibit/aopart9.html>

This site takes the reader through the years and headline events of the Civil Rights Movement, which changed lives and the way people think.

Columbia, Maryland

<http://www.columbia-md.com/>

Sponsored by the city of Columbia, this web site features information and pictures about Columbia, Maryland, its history, opportunities, and current developments.

James Rouse

<http://www.therousecompany.com/whoweare/history/>

James Rouse was the man behind the building of Columbia, Maryland. This web site provides a history of Rouse's company and contains many links to related topics.

D. Discussion Questions (15 minutes)

For instructions on how to present these questions for oral discussion, refer to the steps provided above for part A, *Comprehension Questions*.

1. How does Chabon feel about being moved to the new city of Columbia, Maryland, when he was six years old? Why do you think he feels this way?
2. How did James Rouse envision the city of Columbia? Describe the physical "Plan" Rouse's team created for the city.
3. An important element of the "Columbia Experiment," as Chabon refers to this planned city, was its *integrated* neighborhoods. How were Columbia's neighborhoods integrated?
4. What truths did Chabon discover about Columbia when he eventually moved away? How did this discovery affect him?

Step 4: Making Connections Beyond the Text (15–20 minutes)

You may assign questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework.

1. Have you ever moved to a new town, city, neighborhood, or house? What were some of the things you hoped for? What were some things you were afraid of?
2. Chabon was influenced by the map he received when he was young. Tell about something you received when you were young that influenced you. Explain how it influenced you.
3. Chabon feels that the neighborhood he grew up in "made [him] into the writer" that he is today. Do you think that we, as children, are shaped by our childhood surroundings? Explain with examples from your personal experience.
4. If you had the ability to design and build your own city or neighborhood, what would you include and what would you exclude? Why would you make these choices?

Step 5: Integrating Language Skills

You may assign your students one of the following projects or ask them to choose a project to complete individually or in a group of three or four students. Ask your students to complete their projects as written reports or to prepare oral presentations.

1. Draw a map of your neighborhood or the community where your school is located. Label the buildings and streets. Write a short description of the neighborhood. Explain the street names. Why do you think these names were chosen? Include a description of any special features you have in your neighborhood (a statue, a park, a famous landmark, etc.). And tell about your favorite place to visit.

2. Interview your family members and friends to find out what characteristics create an ideal neighborhood. Prepare a set of four to five questions ahead of time to bring to the interviews. Ask questions such as the following:

- What do you like best about your neighborhood?
- What should be improved?

Be sure to interview five to ten people. Put your findings on a large poster and present your results to your classmates. Then ask your classmates to make conclusions about what characteristics people seem to favor for an ideal neighborhood.

3. With one to three other classmates, design your own neighborhood.

First, agree on what would make an ideal neighborhood. Decide on common principles and beliefs the residents would live by. Then decide what physical characteristics the neighborhood should have (shops, houses, schools, a religious building, a medical clinic, etc.). Finally, prepare a presentation of your “Plan” for your classmates.

4. Use the Internet or library resources to find more information about one of the following subjects: Michael Chabon, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the history of urban planning, James Rouse, or Columbia, Maryland. Write a report or prepare a presentation of your findings for your classmates.

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