

Lesson Plan: Competing Loyalties and Difficult Decisions English

Lesson Plan

Title	Competing Loyalties and Difficult Decisions
Subject	English
Grade(s)	11-12 (or more mature 9-10 graders)
Standards	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3
Keywords	Spanish Civil War, International Brigades, non-intervention, decision-making
Essential questions	How does one deal with conflicting loyalties? How does one make difficult decisions? What is the advantage of discussion and negotiation over war?
Synopsis	This lesson will ask students to view a videoclip about Americans who went to fight in the Spanish Civil War and then read three letters by Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans. Along the way, they will learn about how to logically craft a persuasive letter, how and why difficult decisions are made, how self-identity both constructs and conflicts the individual, how others have negotiated competing loyalties and how others have judged their lives to be worth living. Students will then be asked to consider many of these fundamental moral and ethical questions in journal entries and a persuasive letter.
Standard Alignment(s) used	Common core State Standards
Recommended Teacher Background	The teacher may wish to amplify his or her background knowledge on the Spanish Civil War and the involvement of the International Brigades, beginning with the ALBA website: http://www.alba-valb.org/history/spanish-civil-war
Connection to other disciplines	This lesson has connections to history, social studies, Spanish and ethics. Some schools' family and consumer sciences departments also offer courses on decision making that could afford a curricular connection as well.
Number of class periods	

Standards

Objectives	Standards addressed
Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.5

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

Primary Sources

- [Letters](#)
- [Letter: Lardner to Mother \(1938\)](#)
- [Final assignment and rubric](#)

Assessment

Pre-Assessment, Activation of Prior Knowledge:

This lesson assumes some familiarity with major world history events of the 1920s and 1930s, although this can also be filled in for them. No specific knowledge of the situation in Spain is necessary. This knowledge can be supplied by *The Good Fight* clip listed in Step 2a, below. Students are expected to have reached a maturity level that would allow them to discuss their identity, assess their decision-making skills, and revisit events in their past. It may be better suited to a class that is already up and running, where some trust has been built among the students.

Lesson Activities:

1. Lead-In/Hook:

Play *The Good Fight* (31'39"-32'54") to see Milt Wolff and Bill Bailey discuss their decision to go to fight in the Spanish Civil War and how they were going to tell their families. Bring into focus the question of how their loyalty to a cause conflicted with their loyalty to their family. Ask them to recognize that we belong to different collectives (family, friend group, occupation, class, ethnic group, etcetera) and that sometimes these collectives have interests that are in conflict. Finally, ask students if they have ever found themselves in a similar situation. Ask them what interests were in conflict? Ask them how they 'broke the news' to whomever was affected by their decision?

2. Step by Step:

1. **Background Knowledge** – If desired, give students some background for the Spanish Civil War by also showing 3'38" through (at least 20'45" or) 22'48" of the *Good Fight*. This segment will show students the historical context, including events with which they will be familiar, the Great Depression, the growth of the Nazi Party and Isolationism, before introducing them to the Spanish situation at 13'50" and finally explaining the neutrality of other nations.
2. **Reading 1** – The first text for students to read will be Hy Katz's letter to his mother. Ask students to read the letter and then outline how he justifies his decision to his mother. Provide or encourage students to research any unknown historical or literary references. Ask students to compare this letter to what they saw in the video.
3. **Writing Assignment 1** – Hy Katz roots his rationale for fighting in his identity as a Jew and as a progressive in paragraph 5, and as a Jew and oppressed man in the final paragraph. Ask students to journal about the roots of their own identity. Who are they? What becomes important to them because of how they identify themselves? What positions does that identity make them take? What does that identity make them willing to fight for? How does prizing one collective identity over another bring them into conflict? Encourage students to share and discuss what they have written.
4. **Reading 2** – The second text is Sam Levinger's farewell letter, which he himself describes as "clumsy". Ask students to analyze the two different styles of writing, to cite textual evidence of how Katz's letter is structured and logical, and how Levinger's is more disorganized and jumpy. Ask the students to analyze the different purposes of the two letters might relate to their styles.
5. **Writing Assignment 2** – Key students in to the fourth paragraph and have them write a reaction to it. In their reaction, they should consider: How they would feel if faced with the prospect of death? What Levinger means when he says "except for the last six months they were pretty useless"? How can one make one's life useful? How should one live? How does one live so that "there is absolutely nothing to regret"? Encourage students to share and discuss what they have written.
6. **Reading 3** – The final text is James Lardner's letter. Like Katz, Lardner writes to a mother who already knows where he is and his mission is to lay out the reasons why. Unlike Katz, his reasons are all over the place, which outlines an essential point of war and decision making, that often a decision to do x or y involves a myriad of other unrelated factors. Students will consider them in the writing assignment below, after they have read the letter, and been asked to cite evidence of his stubbornness he offers in the beginning and the rhetoric of humility he uses at the end.
7. **Writing Assignment 3** – Consider a major decision to be made or that you have made. Think of all the factors that may go into it. Like Lardner, list no less than sixteen reasons for doing something, highlighting those you think to be the most important. Also, write at least three reasons why not to do that same thing. Encourage students to share and discuss what they have written. At some point, try to get students to consider the inherent advantage of discussion and negotiation over war, namely, that negotiation offers the possibility of putting a mountain of issues on the table for debate, whereas war distills all sides and possibilities down to two options, for or against.

3. Closure:

Final Writing Assignment – Have students revisit a situation in their lives where it seemed there were only two options (or to imagine something similar). Their goal is to recreate a new third option, a way out of binary, either-or, for-against, thinking. Then, have them present this solution to a person who may not be disposed to receiving it well in a persuasive letter, modeling themselves after the analytical style of Katz and Lardner.

Differentiation: For students with reading difficulties, readings can be shortened, for example, to the last paragraph or two of Katz's letter, the fourth paragraph of Levinger's and the list written by Gardner. Writing assignments could also be shortened, lengthened, or turned into topics for discussion, depending on students' abilities.

Post-Assessment:

Students can be evaluated based on their class participation and journal entries. The final writing assignment should also be graded, and this could be done using the holistic rubric found on the writing prompt handout. The rubric could also be adapted into an analytical format if the instructor so desires.