

To Kill a Mockingbird Research Topics

Life for Blacks in the South after the Civil War

1) Jim Crow Laws: Their History, Guiding Policies, and Impact on Blacks

- a) Explain what Jim Crow Laws were and how, where, and why they originated. Who was Jim Crow? What were the original laws and policies?
- b) What impact did Jim Crow laws have on blacks and what rights did they violate? How did whites and states defend Jim Crow laws?
- c) What connections do you see between Jim Crow laws and policies and the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

2) The Ku Klux Klan: Its History and Methods of Instilling Fear

- a) Explain where the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) originated in the United States. What was its mission and who were its members? Provide significant historical facts about the group.
- b) What impact did the KKK have on life in America (particularly on blacks and minorities)? What methods did the organization use in order to promote its agenda?
- c) What influence did the KKK have on local governments and people in power? How does this influence connect to what you are reading in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

3) Plessy v. Ferguson: A Landmark Case and Its Impact on “Separate but Equal”

- a) Explain and summarize the case (who was involved, what the case was about, when it occurred, and what the final decision was)
- b) Why was this case such a significant one in terms of its impact on life for blacks? How did it push the agenda of “separate but equal,” and how was this constitutional?
- c) What connections do you see between the circumstances of this case and the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

4) Lynching and Lynch Mobs: Citizen Enforcement of Jim Crow Laws and Nooses: Modern Day Symbolic Threats (the Jena Six) and Sundown Towns

- a) Give a brief history of lynchings in America and the origins of the lynch mob. What influence did they have on local governments and people in power?
- b) How did lynchings come to represent white hatred of blacks? Why were so many white people supportive of them? At their peak, how frequent were lynchings of black people by white lynch mobs in America? Where in the country were they most prominent? What were sundown towns? How were they connected to lynchings?
- c) Explain the recent re-emergence of the symbols of lynching (the Jena Six and others). What effect has it had on racial tensions in America?

Links: <http://www.vahistorical.org/civilrights/jimcrow.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow>

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aap/aaphome.html> (specifically “The Progress of a People” page with three sessions)

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/nyregion/21noose.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/profile2.html>

<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/> (WARNING: very graphic)

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/lee.html>

<http://www.splcenter.org/>

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/mock/intro.html>

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/links/misclink/plessy/>

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>

<http://www.landmarkcases.org/plessy/home.html>

<http://www.umass.edu/complit/aclanet/ACLAText/USLynch.html>

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lynching/lynching.htm

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/change.htm>

America and the World in the 1930s: The Time Period of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

5) The Stock Market Crash and the Great Depression: The Impact on Economic Prosperity for Blacks and Whites in America

- a) What was Black Friday? What caused the stock market to crash? Had it happened before? Where and when? Could the stock market crash have been prevented? How?
- b) What impact did the stock market crash have on Americans and life in America? Explain some of the tragic events that occurred immediately after the crash.
- c) Explain what the Great Depression was and its importance or prominence in American history. Who was president, and what policies affected the Great Depression?
- d) What factors led to the Great Depression? What was life like for Americans during the Great Depression? Who was hardest hit and how? What were some examples you can give to make the Great Depression real to today's audience?

6) The Dust Bowl: The Impact on Economic Prosperity for Blacks and Whites

- a) What was the Dust Bowl? Where did it take place and when? Who was directly affected by it?
- b) What impact did the Dust Bowl have on life in America? How is it connected to the Great Depression? Could it have been prevented? If so, how? Has anything been done since then to prevent it from happening again, or could it still happen?
- c) How did Herbert Hoover deal with this natural disaster and the people involved? What were Hoovervilles, and why were they called that? Who were the Okies? Explain the problems that arose in the country in places like California as a result of the Dust Bowl, the Okies, and migrant farming.

7) Herbert Hoover vs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Two Presidencies, Two Policies, One Era in American History

- a) When was Herbert Hoover president? What condition was the country in when he started as President? What were his major policies as president (economic and domestic policies, specifically)? What major changes happened in the United States while Hoover was president? What condition was the country in when he left office? What was

his legacy as president (Hooverilles and what he is remembered for)?

b) When was FDR president? What condition was the country in when he started as president? What were his major policies as president (economic and domestic policies, specifically)? What major changes happened in the United States while FDR was president? What condition was the country in when he left office? What was his legacy as president (the New Deal and what he is remembered for)?

c) Compare and contrast each presidency and the effect both had on the country. What were some famous quotes from each president? Explain the significance of these quotes.

8) The Rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany: Hitler's Rise to Power, the Formation of the Nazi Party, and the Treatment of Blacks in the United States Compared to Jews in Germany

a) Who was Adolph Hitler? When was he born, and what was his family like? Explain how he came into power in Germany (the condition of Germany before Hitler rose to power and Hitler's policies and beliefs that gained him a following).

b) Who were the Nazis? What were their beliefs and political philosophies that appealed to Germans and gave them popularity? Why were Jewish people the target of Hitler's and the Nazis' hatred (what they blamed the Jews for and why)? Explain how the Nazis gained a following and rose to power.

c) Compare the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany at this time to the treatment of blacks in America at the same time. Specifically look at the condition of Germany and the United States economically and politically, and explain laws in both countries that were created in each to target Jews and blacks.

Links: <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/mock/intro.html>

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/depression.htm>

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blyindexdepression.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX05.html>

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1523>

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1932>

<http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/politics/2008/09/10/the-most-consequential-elections-in-history-franklin-delano-roosevelt-and-the-election-of-1932.html>

<http://www.dcte.udel.edu/hlp/resources/roosevelt/hooverphilo.pdf>

<http://www.ecommcode.com/hoover/ebooks/browse.cfm>

<http://millercenter.org/academic/americanpresident>

<http://www.americanpresidents.org/>

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/>

<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>

<http://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007459>

<http://isurvived.org/NurnbergLaws.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/goebbels/peopleevents/index.html>

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/index.htm>

<http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/lessons/riseofhitler/>

Education for Blacks in the Early Twentieth Century

9) W.E.B. Dubois and the NAACP: Fighting Against Scientific Racism

- a) Who was W.E.B. Dubois? Give important biographical facts on his background. Why was he so important, and why is he a historical figure?
- b) What ideas did W.E.B. Dubois promote that focused on improving life for blacks in America and supporting their rights? What is scientific racism, and what were his views on it? Who were his main supporters, and who were his main opponents?
- c) What is the NAACP? What was W.E.B. Dubois' connection with the NAACP? What was the purpose or mission of the NAACP with Dubois' help?
- d) What impact did Dubois have on the education and the general welfare of Blacks in America? Do you agree with his views? Why or why not?

10) Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute: Up from Slavery

- a) Who was Booker T. Washington? Give important biographical facts on his background. Why was he so important, and why is he a historical figure?
- b) What was the Tuskegee Institute? Who founded it, and what was its purpose? What role did Booker T. Washington have at Tuskegee, and what did he accomplish while he was there?
- c) What ideas did Booker T. Washington promote that focused on improving life for Blacks in America and supporting their rights? Who were his main supporters, and who were his main opponents?
- d) How did Washington's views differ from those of W.E.B. Dubois? What impact did he have on things such as education and the general welfare of blacks in America? Do you agree with his views? Why or why not?

11) Brown v. Board of Education: A Landmark Case and Its Impact on Education Rights

- a) Explain and summarize the case (who was involved, what the main points of the case were, when it occurred, and what the final decision was). What problems did Linda Brown encounter in Topeka that eventually resulted in this case?
- b) What were segregated schools? Why were they created? What right does the Fourteenth Amendment give citizens?
- c) Why was Brown v. Board of Education such a significant case in terms of its impact on education and the rights of blacks? What was its connection to Plessy v. Ferguson?
- d) How did Brown v. Board of Education change the legal definition of *equality* and advance the Civil Rights Movement for blacks?

12) Education of Blacks in the South after the Civil War and Prior to the 1950s (leading up to Brown v. Board of Education): General History and Overview

- a) Explain the laws and policies regarding the education of Blacks during the Civil War. What were they, and how were they any different after the Civil War?
- b) For those blacks who were receiving an education, what were their schools like? What obstacles did they face in trying to get an education? Who or what opposed their opportunities to get an education?
- c) What effect did blacks' education or lack of education have on their abilities to compete with whites as equals in

the United States? How has that had a longstanding impact on equality between blacks and whites in the United States?

Links: <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/mock/intro.html>

<http://www.webdubois.org/>

<http://www.vahistorical.org/civilrights/naacp.htm>

<http://www.vahistorical.org/civilrights/btw.htm>

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aap/bookert.html>

<http://www.biography.com/search/article.do?id=9524663>

<http://www.landmarkcases.org/brown/background3.html>

<http://www.nationalcenter.org/brown.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/enlight/brown.htm>

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/index.html>

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/resources/index.html>

<http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=78827&sid=583725>

<http://www.vahistorical.org/civilrights/education.htm>

The Trial of Tom Robinson: The Death Penalty and Criminal Law

13) The History of the Use of Capital Punishment/Death Penalty in the United States

- a) For what cases was the death penalty initially used in colonial United States? Was it ever outlawed nationally? Why?
- b) What states currently use the death penalty, and what crimes are worthy of the death penalty in those states?
- c) Has the death penalty been disproportionately used between blacks and whites? Explain the disproportionality and factors that may explain it.

14) The Scottsboro Case: A Landmark Case and Its Impact on Capital Punishment Cases

- a) Explain and summarize the case (who was involved, what the charges were, when it occurred, and what the final decision was)
- b) Why was this case such a significant one in terms of its impact on capital punishment?
- c) What were the mistakes made in this case by prosecutors, defenders, and witnesses that indicate this may have not been a fair case? How does this case illustrate how race impacted the outcomes of many court cases?

15) Major Criminal Court Procedures and the Sixth Amendment: Right to Counsel (Atticus defending Tom Robinson) and Right to a Jury Trial (Right to a Jury of Your Peers)

- a) Summarize the major points of the Amendment, and explain the rights it ensures and protects for every individual charged with a crime.

- b) What challenges to the amendment have been raised, and how has the amendment been interpreted differently throughout history?
- c) In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom Robinson is a black man who has been charged with rape. His jury will be all white farmers. Based on your research on the Sixth Amendment, what are some problems you can see coming up in his trial that would show he won't be tried fairly and his rights may have been denied?

16) The Fairness of Capital Punishment: The Eighth Amendment, the Death Penalty, and "Cruel and Unusual Punishment"

- a) Summarize the major points of the Amendment and explain the rights it ensures and protects for every individual charged with a crime.
- b) Under the Amendment, how can capital punishment be viewed as "cruel and unusual punishment"? How is it viewed as falling outside this Amendment and therefore still used by certain states?
- c) How has your research changed or informed your own views on capital punishment? How has it changed your view of the prisoners sitting on death row who are facing capital punishment? What are some of the major obstacles that come up in death penalty cases that make them complicated instead of clear cut?

Links: <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/deathpenalty.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/index.html>

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/scottsb.htm>

<http://www.splcenter.org/>

<http://deathpenaltycurriculum.org/student/index.html>

<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment06/>

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/constitution/html/amdt6.html>

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/constitution/html/amdt8.html>

<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data/constitution/amendment08/>

<http://law.jrank.org/pages/6368/Eighth-Amendment.html>

http://www.law.cornell.edu/anncon/html/amdt8toc_user.html

http://www.capdefnet.org/hat/contents/intro_to_8th/3_intro_to_8th.htm

The Rise of Black Identity and Culture after The Civil War

17) The Great Migration: Blacks Moving from the South to the North after the Civil War

- a) What was the Great Migration? What started it? Where did it occur and when?
- b) How did the Great Migration change or affect life in places where blacks were migrating from and where they migrated to? What changes can we still see in America today as a result of the Great Migration?
- c) What effect did the Great Migration have on blacks who decided to stay and not join the migration? What connections does this have to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

18) The Harlem Renaissance: The Rebirth of Black Arts and Culture in the North

- a) What was the Harlem Renaissance? Where did it occur, and who and what did it involve? Name some major people involved and some results of it.
- b) How did the Harlem Renaissance change life for blacks in America? Can evidence of it still be seen in America today? If so, how and where?
- c) Does the result go against what many people in America believed about Blacks at the time and today? If so, how?
- d) How did the Harlem Renaissance affect the politics of the decades leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s?

19) The Black Church: The Rise of the Church in the Southern Black Community and in Educating and Organizing Black Communities for Civil Rights

- a) What were some of the earliest black churches in the United States? Who started or founded them? Give some history of some of these pioneering churches including dates, locations, Christian denominations, and early church leaders.
- b) What role did black churches (particularly in the South) play after the Civil War in educating African Americans? How did singing in the church help reading and literacy? Discuss “call and response” and early Negro Spirituals.
- c) What role did black churches play in organizing the Civil Rights Movement for in the Unites States? Who were some famous Civil Rights activists who were also church leaders? Explain how the black church was critical to educating and organizing blacks in the South after the Civil War.

20) The Evolution of Black Music: Negro Spirituals and Field Music to Modern Day Hip Hop

- a) Consider “Strange Fruit” written by Abel Meeropol and performed by Billie Holliday
- b) What were the early forms of black music? What were its roots, and how was it evolving with slaves in the United States?
- c) What were the messages, and what was the power of black music to its people in America, especially early on?
- d) What has been the evolution of black music from its roots to modern day styles such as hip hop? How has it influenced other kinds of music that have become popular in America? Who were some of the most influential pioneers of it throughout its history?

Links: <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/mock/intro.html>

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/545.html>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/reference/articles/great_migration.html

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/forum/february98/harlem_2-20.html

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/forum/february98/harlem2.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html>

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/intro.html>

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/woodson/woodson.html>

<http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=78827&sid=583725>

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_holiday_billie.htm

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/holiday_b.html

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/players.htm>

Beyond the Book: The Culture of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

21) Harper Lee's Biography: How Her Life Connects to Story She Wrote

- a) Provide a clear biographical profile of Harper Lee both as a person and as a writer. What are some myths about Harper Lee that exist but are not true?
- b) How did her childhood and upbringing influence her writing of this novel? What major characters, elements of its setting, and plot emerge directly from real experiences in her childhood?
- c) What connections did Harper Lee have to the Civil Rights movement? Was she trying to make some political and social statements with this book? If so, what were those statements? What impact has her book had on American culture?

22) The Film *To Kill a Mockingbird*: The Making of the Film, the Actors, and Its Impact

- a) Explain the goals the producers and directors had in making this film adaptation of the book. What were they trying to preserve, and what were they able to achieve?
- b) Who did they sign to play the key roles in the film? Explain their importance and share any later insights they had about the book and the film (from interviews or statements).
- c) What about the novel and story was changed in the film (how is it different)? What key elements of film should a viewer take note of to better appreciate the film and its production and existence as a piece of art? What impact has the film had on American culture and other film?

23) The Role of Women in 1930s South and Women Characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

- a) What was the typical role of women in the South in 1930s America? What limited rights did they have, and what were they expected to be in the South at this time?
- b) The character of Aunt Alexandra in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often thought of as a "proper" Southern lady. Based on your research, what was a proper woman of the South supposed to be like? What was the social code she was trying to uphold in the South? Look for descriptions of clothing, behavior, personality, and social roles.
- c) The character of Miss Maudie, the main characters' neighbor, is considered by many to be a woman who defied the typical role of women in the South. Based on your research, would a woman be doing and behaving like that be considered "improper" or "breaking the code" of a Southern lady? Are there any examples in history of such women? Who were they, and what did they do to break the code?

24) Civil Rights Defenders for Blacks: Atticus Finch as a Reflection

- a) Who were some of the key historical Civil Rights defenders during the real Civil Rights movement in America? What ideas were they trying to promote, and what support did they get?
- b) In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch is the father of the main character, Scout, and he is a defense lawyer for a black man, Tom Robinson. Despite all the racism and ignorance that surrounds him, Atticus fights strongly to defend Tom Robinson. What did white people who fought to defend the rights of blacks face in terms of

hate and violence? Find historical accounts of white defenders of blacks who faced the hate and violence. Explain who they were and the details of their experiences. Provide quotes when and if you can.

c) Based on historical accounts and opinions in research, have all black people looked at white people like the character of Atticus positively? Do some have negative perceptions of him as a character? Explain why.

Links: <http://www.neabigread.org/books/mockingbird/>

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070626171138/www.chebucto.ns.ca/culture/HarperLee/bio.html>

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070703033416/www.chebucto.ns.ca/culture/HarperLee/otherlinks.html>

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070707174818/www.chebucto.ns.ca/culture/HarperLee/film.html>

<http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/to-kill-a-mockingbird.html>

<http://www.frankwbaker.com/tkam1.htm>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/12111/?tqskip=1&tqtime=0416>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/12111/girl.html>

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/women.html>

<http://www.lib.unc.edu/stories/women/>

<http://www.medaloffreedom.com/GregoryPeckMockingbird.htm>

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/change.htm>

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/>

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/players.htm>