



Navigating Toward Self-Evident Truths in *Huckleberry Finn*

By Kobi Nelson

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will consider the tension between performative language and authentic language in Chapters 16–30 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Through a series of scaffolded learning activities, students will work independently and with others to identify language that is authentic and performative. Students will also reflect upon the ways in which Twain's language shapes the meaning of the story and affects readers' interpretations—keeping an eye focused on the Declaration's principle that “all men are created equal” while deepening their understanding of America's historical difficulties in universally applying this principle to everyone. To conclude this lesson, students will have the opportunity to write creatively and take the perspective of Huck, Jim, or a fictional outsider. Writing the essay will help them think critically about the effect of Twain's writing on his audience.

Note: This lesson is the 3rd in a 4-lesson series.

Essential Questions

- How does Mark Twain's language affect the meaning of the story of *Huckleberry Finn* and, as readers in the 21st century, how do we approach the language he used in the 19th century?
- How do the stories of Jim and Huck grapple with the Founding principles put forth in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal”?
- How do Huck's internal conflicts reveal the tension between individual moral insight and societal definitions of right and wrong?
- How does Huck and Jim's journey illuminate the unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze how Twain's language choices shape the meaning of the story and influence readers' interpretations.
- Examine Huck's internal conflicts as they reveal the tension between personal moral insights and societal definitions of right and wrong.
- Explore how the experiences of Jim and Huck illuminate the historical difficulties in universally applying the Declaration's principle that "all men are created equal."
- Critically discuss authentic and performative language complexities as they relate to character development and the societal norms/expectations during Twain's life.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.A.** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, and that character's motives.
- **CHA 1.D.** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **NAR 4.A.** Identify and describe the narrator or speaker of a text.
- **NAR 4.B.** Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.
- **FIG 5.B.** Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- **LAN 7.D.** Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- [The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)
- Read and Ruminare Journals (see opening mini-lesson for guidelines)
- You Decide: Authentic or a Performance? Student Worksheet – 1 per group

Warm-Up

The goal of this Warm-Up is to get students to think about what it means to "perform" versus what it means to be "natural" or "authentic."

WATCH AND RESPOND

Choose 1 of the animal categories in the following table and show students 1 video from the "Natural Tendencies" column and 1 from the "Performing" column.

Animal	Natural Tendencies	Performing
Horses	"Wild Horses 8 2025 Northern Nevada"	"Trail Ride with Roman the Mustang" OR "Muse's Hamilton Freestyle"
Dogs	"Alaskan and Siberian Huskies Howling in the Arctic Wilderness" "A Big Day Out with a Pack of Huskies"	"Anatomy of a Sled Dog Team"

While students are watching, have them respond to the following questions:

- In the first video, where the animal was showing "natural tendencies," what did you notice? How do their behaviors seem to reflect their true instincts and emotions?
- In the second "performing" video, how do the animals' actions appear to be influenced by human interaction or expectations? Do you think they are being natural, or are they adapting to perform for an audience?
- How does the environment in the first "natural tendencies" video differ from the environment in the second "performing" video? How do these contexts influence the animals' behavior?
- Can you relate to the concept of performing versus being authentic in your own life? Share about a time when you felt you had to "perform" in front of others versus a time when you felt you could be your true self.

Discuss

Ask students to share their responses with another student or in small groups. Then facilitate a discussion with the whole class about the difference between "performing" and being "authentic."

SAY

As we think about performance versus authenticity, consider that different individuals, communities, and cultures may have different ideas about what constitutes "authentic" behavior. What a specific community sees as genuine expression, a different community might view as performance, and vice versa. Keep this idea in mind as we read and analyze characters in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

STEP 1

Post this phrase from the Declaration of Independence on the board. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” Then ask students to talk with a partner about the following question:

How does this principle from the Declaration of Independence relate to the characters in *Huckleberry Finn*?

*Note: If needed, remind students of this point made in the “Equality” section of Sphere Education’s [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#). Allan Carey writes: “The Founders argued that outside of a system of government, what they would call the state of nature, no one is born to rule, and no one is born to be ruled. Instead, all people are equally free.”

STEP 2

Give students time to discuss, and then facilitate a whole-group discussion with the class. Guide students toward a discussion about how Twain makes the historical difficulties of applying this principle explicit and visible through the characters of *Huckleberry Finn*—particularly in the relationship between Jim and Huck.

*Note: It’s important to remember that the Founders who wrote “all men are created equal” were limited in their application of this principle. As Allan Carey writes: “The Declaration of Independence and the broader revolution expanded freedom and equality further than ever before but still fell far short of what a contemporary reader would expect. In particular, enslaved people, women, indigenous communities, and the poor were often denied the very rights so celebrated in the Declaration.” However, this fact does not negate the Founders’ intent nor their continued efforts (and our continued efforts) to try to better live up to the Declaration’s promise. The goal of this series of lessons is to help students explore how Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* shows how American society grappled with the principles of the Declaration in its own time and place.

PREVIEW

STEP 1

Divide students into small groups. Give them the You Decide: Authentic or a Performance? Student Worksheet. All the passages in the far left column are from text that students have yet to read (Chapters 15–30). Ask students to work together to read the passages in the table only (make sure they don't look up the passages in the book and find their exact context). Tell them to decide whether each passage is an example of authenticity or performance and explain their thinking. Remind students to be thoughtful in this exercise because the characteristics we identify as “authentic” or “performative” can vary significantly across individuals, cultures, communities, and historical periods.

Passage	Does the passage show a character being authentic or performing?	Explanation
“I never knowed how clothes could change a body before. Why, before, he looked like the orneriest old rip that ever was; but now, when he'd take off his new white beaver and make a bow and do a smile, he looked that grand and good and pious that you'd say he had walked right out of the ark.”		
“Mary Jane she set at the head of the table, with Susan alongside of her, and said how bad the biscuits was, and how mean the preserves was, and how ornery and tough the fried chickens was—and all that kind of rot, the way women always do for to force out compliments; and the people all knowed everything was tip-top, and said so—said, ‘How <i>do</i> you get biscuits to brown so nice?’		

and 'Where, for land's sake, <i>did</i> you get these amaz'n pickles?' and all that kind of humbug talky-talk, just the way people always does at supper, you know."		
"Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he <i>was</i> most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, <i>me</i> . I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way."		
"I was powerful glad to get away . . . and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft."		

STEP 2

Facilitate a whole-group discussion about the previewed text.

Ask

- To what extent does each passage show a character performing for others and/or being authentic?
- What types of language portray thoughtfulness about the principle in the Declaration that all men are created equal? Does this language seem to be authentic or performative?

BRAINSTORM

Have students work with a partner to identify characteristics of language that is performative and language that is authentic. Ask students to create a 2-column chart, such as the following, and brainstorm characteristics of performative language versus authentic language. Some characteristics that students might identify are noted. Keep in mind that many characteristics of language can differ depending on cultural background and context.

Characteristics of Performative Language	Characteristics of Authentic Language
● Exaggeration and hyperbole ● Professional or formal tone ● Ceremonial ● Questions posed for rhetorical effect ● Flattering words and compliments ● Dramatic gestures or intonation ● Lack of genuine thought/canned phrases ● Use of metaphors/analogies to make a point ● Storytelling to illustrate a point ● Polite words and phrases ● Vulnerability to a certain extent (if it enhances the performance)	● Clear and straightforward ● Professional and formal in certain contexts but generally more informal ● Sincere, honest, and respectful ● Rhetorical questions to prompt thought ● Sharing personal stories/anecdotes ● Everyday language that doesn't feel stiff ● Vulnerability and expression of complex emotions ● Engaging with others' ideas/emotions ● Empathy ● Natural and relatable

*Note: Be sure to let students know that performative and authentic language are not an either/or binary. There are times when performative language is appropriate and authentic language is also appropriate. The point of this exercise is to help students identify characteristics so they can make better sense of Huck's struggle with *performing* socially (being polite, going to church, being quiet when he's "supposed to," saying what he knows he "should" say, etc.) and being *authentic* (saying what he wants, telling "stretchers," thinking with his conscience about freeing Jim, listening to Jim with empathy, etc.). Twain is getting at something here that illuminates the larger societal struggle of his time—particularly related to the self-evident truth that "all men are created equal" and the societal difficulties of applying that principle universally to everyone.

DURING READING

Discuss the difference between authentic and performative language. Explain that this tension between performing and being authentic contributes to the moral conundrums Huck tries to navigate in Chapters 16–30. Note for students that Twain makes Huck both an astute observer and a participant in social norms. Why does Twain do this? How does this tension for Huck affect his relationship with Jim? How does this tension between performing and being authentic reflect the larger American attempt during Twain's time to better live up to the principle that “all men are created equal”?

ESTABLISH A PURPOSE

- Tell students that while they are reading, they will complete 7–10 Read and Ruminare Journal entries for these chapters. See the opening lesson, “Unpacking Language and Meaning in *Huckleberry Finn*,” for guidelines regarding these entries.
- You may ask them to specifically note language that shows authenticity or performance by Huck, Jim, or other characters in the selected chapters.

READ ACTIVELY

- Have students read Chapters 16–30 of *Huckleberry Finn* and complete their journal entries.
- Remind students to annotate their text with questions and mark any details that give them new insights or information about the characters or setting of the story.

AFTER READING

Engage in a whole-group discussion about Chapters 16–30. Check in with students.

SAY

As we discuss authenticity and performance, let's remember that we're analyzing these concepts through multiple lenses—not just assuming 1 “correct” interpretation.

Then facilitate a discussion with the class.

Ask

- What did you notice about the language used in these chapters? What did it reveal about Huck's character?

- What was the effect of having Huck as both an observer and a participant in the societal norms he encountered? How did this affect his own thinking (his conscience)?
- What perspectives missing from Twain's exploration of authenticity and performance would you include? How would you include them?
- What do you think Twain was trying to convey through language in these chapters?

WRITE AN ESSAY

Give students the following creative writing options and allow them time to write and respond to any of these prompts on a physical or digital document.

CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS

- Write a fictional letter from Huck to Jim that is written after the events of these chapters. This letter should reflect on their journey together and share Huck's thoughts on the differences between authenticity and performance, especially considering the principle of equality. Include reflections on 2–3 specific scenes in Chapters 16–30, and have Huck share how his understanding of equality has grown and changed because of his experiences.
- Write a monologue from the perspective of Jim that reflects on his relationship with Huck and other characters in Chapters 16–30. Specifically write about Jim's experiences as an enslaved person who longs for freedom and must navigate his own unique way between authenticity and performance, particularly in the midst of societal roles that have been placed upon him. In his monologue, be sure to have Jim refer to 2–3 specific scenes or experiences from Chapters 16–30.

*Note: Approach this prompt with care and humility. Focus on what the text explicitly shows us about Jim's thoughts, experiences, and humanity. Avoid making assumptions about his internal experience based on stereotypes, and remember that no single perspective can fully encapsulate the complexity of experiences in a racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group.

- Imagine you are a traveler who happens to come across Huck and Jim on their journey down the Mississippi River. Write a series of journal entries that document your observations about their relationship and include thoughts about the roles that authenticity and performance play. Remember, you cannot see inside Huck's head, so you will have to rely on his actions and conversations with Jim as indicators of his

beliefs and biases. As you write, refer to 2–3 scenes from Chapters 16–30 and then reflect on your own thoughts and feelings as you witness their interactions.

Closing

In closing, ask students to reflect on the following questions:

- Language is clearly a huge factor in understanding the explicit message and implicit message in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What is the explicit message? What is the implicit message? How does Twain use language to convey these messages? Does he convey these messages effectively?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the language used in *Huckleberry Finn*? If you were to rewrite the story today, what would change? Would you keep the tension between performative and authentic language? Why or why not?
- To what extent do you think that *Huckleberry Finn* was a way for Twain to illuminate the challenges in applying the principles of the Declaration equally and universally in America? To what extent do you think Twain was criticizing the ways his society was not living up to the promises in the Declaration? Explain.

You Decide: Authentic or a Performance?

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Each of the following passages are from Chapters 16–30. You have not read these yet, so you will have to make an educated guess about the context. For this assignment, work with a partner to read each passage on its own terms (but don't look up the passage and find its exact context), decide whether the passage is an example of authenticity or performance, and explain your thinking.

Passage	Does the passage show a character being authentic or performing?	Explanation
"I never knewed how clothes could change a body before. Why, before, he looked like the orneriest old rip that ever was; but now, when he'd take off his new white beaver and make a bow and do a smile, he looked that grand and good and pious that you'd say he had walked right out of the ark."		
"Mary Jane she set at the head of the table, with Susan alongside of her, and said how bad the biscuits was, and how mean the preserves was, and how ornery and tough the fried chickens was—and all that kind of rot, the way women always <i>do</i> for		

to force out compliments; and the people all knowed everything was tip-top, and said so—said, 'How do you get biscuits to brown so nice?' and 'Where, for land's sake, <i>did</i> you get these amaz'n pickles?' and all that kind of humbug talky-talk, just the way people always does at supper, you know."		
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"I was powerful glad to get away . . . and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft."		