

Why are Children's and Young Adult Books Challenged and Banned?

Compelling Question: Why are some children's books banned?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	45–60 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R2 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL2, SL4 Language: L3, L4, L6	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Relationship Skills Responsible Decision-Making
MS	HS			



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Diverse Books Matter](#)
- [On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters](#)
- [The First Amendment and Our Freedoms](#)

Other Resources

- [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#)
- [Books Matter: Children's Literature](#)
- [Diverse and Complex Narratives Cultivate Empathy and Action](#)
- [Schools are Using Anti-Critical Race Theory Laws to Ban Children's Literature](#)

Key Words

abhor
 abide
 ban
 captivated
 censorship
 challenge
 controversy
 conventional
 dystopian
 freedom
 lawsuit
 publicity
 restricted
 vandalize
 vast

LESSON OVERVIEW

Challenging and banning books goes back centuries. In recent times, children's and young adult books have been challenged and banned. The reasons and explanations are many and varied and include profanity, "values," restriction of LGBTQ+ content, political viewpoints, sexual content/references, "divisive language," anti-racism, conflicts with a religious viewpoint, and more. Every year, the American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom compiles a list of the most challenged books and the cited reasons for that year and disseminates that list widely. Since the 1980's the ALA has sponsored "Banned Books Week," an annual event celebrating "the freedom to read." It is usually held during the last week of September and spotlights current and historical attempts to censor and ban books in libraries and schools.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about this history of book banning in the U.S., reflect on experiences they've had with book challenges and bans, and examine and analyze a list of challenged books.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn more about historical and present-day book banning practices.
- Students will reflect on their own experiences with book challenges and bans.
- Students will examine why books are challenged by studying one year of the most challenged books and understand more about those challenges.
- Students will explore ideas for challenging book bans.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- "Jason Reynolds Named Honorary Chair of Banned Books Week 2021" YouTube video (2021, 2:58 min., Banned Books Week, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7b4F2PrMY6c&t=143s)
- "The little-known history of banned books in the United States" (Reading Partners, September 28, 2020, <https://readingpartners.org/blog/history-banned-books-week/>), one copy for each student
- "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists" (American Library Association's Banned & Challenged Books, www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10)

- American Library Association: [Censorship by the Numbers](#) (prepare to be displayed)
- [Challenged Books Worksheet](#) (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Experiences with Book Challenges

1. Begin the lesson by asking: *Have you ever been told by someone you couldn't read a certain book? What happened?* Ask a few students to share.
2. Have students turn and talk with someone sitting near them, responding to some or all these questions:
 - Have you ever been told (by a parent, family member, teacher, friend) that you couldn't read a particular book?
 - Why did the person say you couldn't read the book?
 - Did you listen to them or read it anyway?
 - How did you feel?

Give students 4–5 minutes for this sharing (2 mins. each) and then ask some students to explain what they shared with their partner.
3. Ask students: *What does it mean to challenge or ban books? Have you ever heard of Banned Books Week?*
4. Explain that during this lesson, we will discuss banned or challenged books. Ask: *What do you think are some of the reasons that books get challenged or banned?* As students share, record their responses on a semantic web on the board/smart board, or invite students to share their responses using their phones on [Mentimeter](#) (use “Word Cloud” type and allow 3–5 responses each). Have students look at the word web or cloud and share their thoughts and reflections about what they see.



Information Sharing: What are Banned and Challenged Books?

1. Show the video “[Jason Reynolds Named Honorary Chair of Banned Books Week 2021](#).”
2. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What is Jason Reynolds saying?
 - What is his point of view?
 - What do you agree with? What do you disagree with?
 - What does “Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us” mean to you?
3. Write the words **ban**, **challenge** and **censor** on the board/smart board. Give students 5-7 minutes to come up with their own definitions of each of the words, using available print and online dictionaries and other online research. Have a few students share their definitions and briefly discuss how each of the words relates to the others and how they are different.

Note: These definitions could be shared as well.

Challenge: To object to as bad or incorrect.

Censor: To examine books, movies, etc. in order to remove things that are considered to be offensive, immoral, or harmful to society.

Ban: To forbid (someone) from doing or being part of something.
4. Explain that a book is “challenged” when someone tries to remove or restrict people’s access to it. A book is “banned” when the challenge is successful and access to the book becomes restricted, difficult or impossible. Books can be removed from classrooms, schools, libraries or online platforms.

5. Share some or all the following information and explain that students will learn more by reading an article later in the lesson.
 - Book banning has taken place over centuries. From differing political viewpoints to religious and cultural expression, there are many reasons given for why certain books are challenged and banned. These explanations often have a larger context and reflect what’s happening in society.
 - The American Library Association (ALA) is critical of censorship and works to ensure free access to information and books. Every year, ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) compiles a list of the “Top 10 Most Challenged Books” in order to inform the public about book banning and censorship in libraries and schools. The OIF receives reports from libraries, schools, and the media on attempts to ban books in communities across the country. (Explain that later in the lesson, students will look at some of these “top 10 challenged book” lists.)
 - The Top 10 lists are only a snapshot of book challenges. Surveys indicate that 82-97% of book challenges, which are documented requests to remove materials from schools or libraries, are unreported and receive no media attention.
 - Since the 1980’s, the ALA has sponsored “Banned Books Week,” an annual event celebrating “the freedom to read.” It is usually held during the last week of September and spotlights current and historical attempts to censor and ban books in libraries and schools. It brings together the entire book community—librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types—in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those some may consider untraditional, unorthodox or unpopular.
6. Share the [Censorship by the Numbers](#) graphic from the American Library Association that reflects different reasons for book challenges. You can have students compare this graphic to the web cloud that they created in the beginning of the lesson. Ask students: *What do you notice? What do you wonder?*



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of “[The little-known history of banned books in the United States](#)” to all students. Provide 10–15 minutes for students to read it silently or read aloud together with students taking turns reading.
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:
 - What are some of the big ideas discussed in this article?
 - Why do you think efforts to ban books is centuries old?
 - The article discusses a 1982 Supreme Court case ruling that school officials “cannot ban books solely based on their content.” What do you think it meant by this ruling? How do you think schools and libraries can get around that rule?
 - Why do you think there is Banned Books Week? Why is this needed?
 - What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
 - What in the article challenged your thinking?
 - What more do you want to know?

Small Group Activity

3. Explain to students that they are going to work in small groups to learn more about specific books that have been challenged or banned. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 each and distribute to each student a [Challenged Books Worksheet](#).
4. Explain that each small group will engage in the following process:
 - a. Have each group select a year from ALA’s [Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists](#).

- b. Assign a recorder and reporter for your group. Have the recorder complete the worksheet during the discussion; however, encourage all students in the group to also take notes on their copy of the worksheet. The reporter will share back with the whole class.
- c. As a group, read over the list of the top ten challenged books for that year and respond to some or all the following questions:
 - What do you notice?
 - What do you wonder?
 - What are some of the reasons cited for challenging the books on the list?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about those reasons?
 - Are there any patterns or common themes you notice on the list of books and reasons cited? What are those patterns or themes?
 - Have you read any of the books on the list? If so, do you agree with that book being on the list?
- d. Choose one (or more) of the books on the list to analyze further. First, look at the reasons cited on the list and explain in your own words what each of them mean. For example, for *All American Boys* in 2020, “too much of a sensitive matter right now.” Explain what this means. Include any present-day context that may be important or relevant.
- e. Find one or two articles that describe that book being challenged, removed or banned from a school or library. (Examples: www.liherald.com/stories/summer-reading-choice-stirs-controversy-in-sewanhaka-central-high-school-district,126813 or www.kansas.com/news/local/education/article175625361.html)

Then respond to some or all the following questions:

- Why was the book challenged or banned? What are the reasons given?
 - What is the perspective of those who challenged or banned the book?
 - What is the perspective of those who disagree with challenging or banning the book?
 - Do you think there are any underlying reasons why this book was challenged?
 - Do you think the book should be challenged or banned? Please explain.
 - If you disagree with the banning, what actions can you take to express your point of view?
5. Reconvene the class and have each group’s reporter share information about the list they analyzed and a short summary of what was discussed in their group.
 6. After all the groups have shared with the class, ask: *If we disagree with a book being challenged or banned, what can we do about it?* As students share their responses, record their ideas on the board/smart board. You can add ideas from this list, “[5 Things You Can Do to Support the Right to Read](#)” which includes:
 - Know Your Rights.
 - Be Prepared.
 - Stay Informed.
 - Report Censorship.
 - Speak Out.

Closing

Have students share one new thought or idea they have had as a result of today’s lesson.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“Banned and Challenged Books”](#) (American Library Association)
- [Banned Books Week](#)
- [“Banned Books Week: We defend 30 challenged books including 'Beloved' and '1984'”](#) (*USA Today*, September 27, 2021)
- [Books Behind Bars](#) (PBS American Experience, September 2017)
- [“Calls to Ban Books by Black Authors Are Increasing Amid Critical Race Theory Debates”](#) (Education Week, September 30, 2021)
- [“During Banned Books Week, Readers Explore What It Means To Challenge Texts”](#) (NPR, September 30, 2021)
- [“Why Your Kid Should Read Banned Books”](#) (*The Washington Post*, September 27, 2019)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language
L3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Challenged Books Worksheet

Group Members:

Year Selected: _____

1. On your list of most challenged books, respond to some or all the questions:
 - a. What do you notice?

 - b. What do you wonder?

 - c. Are there any patterns or common themes you notice on the list? What are those patterns or themes?

 - d. What are some of the reasons cited for challenging the books?

 - e. What are your thoughts and feelings about those reasons?

 - f. Have you read any of the books and if so, do you agree with that book being on the list?

2. What book from the list did you select to analyze further?

What words or phrases are used to describe the reason for that book being challenged? What does it mean?

3. From the article(s) you read, respond to some or all the questions:
- a. Why was the book challenged or banned? What are the reasons given?

 - b. What is the perspective of those who challenged or banned the book?

 - c. What is the perspective of those who disagree?

 - d. Do you think there are any underlying reasons why this book was challenged?

4. Do you think the book should be challenged or banned? Please explain your reason. (If your group was divided on the answer, share those reflections.)

5. If we disagree with the challenge or banning of a book, what can we do about it?