

Strategies for Addressing Racist and Dehumanizing Language in Literature

Teaching a text that includes racist slurs, derogatory words, anachronous language, and/or dialect can elicit fear and anxiety in educators, who know that unless we prepare to address such language with intention and care, we risk causing harm and creating inhospitable classroom environments where students may feel like they don't belong and where they cannot learn. For this reason, an important first step is to read, watch, or listen to each text we plan to use with our students. If we realize that we will be asking students to hear, process, and discuss passages with dehumanizing language on a regular basis, it is important that we reflect on the purpose of the text and its cost to students' emotional well-being. We then need to develop a plan for how we will address instances of racist and dehumanizing language, as well as how we will provide the care and intention needed to respectfully engage with regional dialects and hybrid language that may appear in a text.

While this list is in no way exhaustive, the following recommendations can help you prepare to teach a challenging text:

1. Consider your own identity and relationship to the words or dialects in the text, acknowledging that approaches and strategies that may work for another teacher may not work for you. Try to educate yourself and develop your own classroom approach by consulting with colleagues, administrators, community members, or parents so that it becomes a collaborative effort appropriate for your context.
2. When you are creating a [classroom contract](#) at the outset of the year, survey students or give them a chance to let you know how they feel about the “N” word and other dehumanizing language that may appear in the texts they will study in class. Invite them to help you determine the approach the class will take to reading aloud and talking about these texts. Include these norms for handling racist and dehumanizing language in your classroom contract and revisit them before engaging with any challenging passages in the text.
3. If, after surveying and contracting with your students, you have determined that your approach will include a close reading of passages that contain racist or

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derogatory language, consider using audiobooks rather than reading these sections aloud in class. Always review your contract beforehand and let students know in advance if they will be hearing dehumanizing and racist language. You might establish a protocol, such as letting students step out, for students who choose not to hear such language on a given day. It is also important to consider the identity of the actor reading the text and their relationship to the challenging language in the text when selecting audiobooks. Preview the sections you plan to share with your students so that you know how the actor treats the language. Never play something in class that you have not already listened to and prepared to contextualize and guide your students in processing.

4. Help students understand that dialect and accents are celebrated parts of people's identities and cultures. To avoid instances where a student might choose to turn a read-aloud of a passage or scene into a disrespectful performance piece, model with your own practiced reading or use audiobooks or video of a professional performance.
5. Avoid singling out English Learners and multilingual students to read words or phrases in the text that are in their home language. Use audiobooks or read these sections yourself, acknowledging to your students that while you may not speak the language, you will be reading with the utmost care and respect. Without singling out any one student, offer an open invitation to anyone who may wish to help out with pronunciation. You may find that your multilingual students jump at the opportunity to help when you empower them with the choice to decide for themselves.