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# Sample



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Malcom Gladwell's  
**Outliers**

AP  
Item No. 309948

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**Teaching Unit**

**Outliers**

by Malcolm Gladwell

Written by Lisa Tetrault

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## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. analyze how Gladwell organizes and develops case studies, anecdotes, and data in order to create a narrative that effectively structures and supports his argument;
2. explain the effects of the literary and rhetorical devices used in the work;
3. evaluate the logic and reasoning of Gladwell's arguments;
4. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
5. respond to writing prompts similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
6. offer a close reading of *Outliers* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the work.

## Introductory Lecture

### GENRE

*Outliers: The Story of Success* is a nonfiction work. While fiction tells imagined stories, nonfiction writing is about facts or real events; however, nonfiction is not necessarily true, it just has a claim of truth. The author shapes his or her message by carefully choosing which information to include and which to exclude. The emergence of the subgenre “creative nonfiction” has blurred the line between fiction and nonfiction. Creative nonfiction writers use literary styles and techniques to present narratives grounded in actual events and persons. Although creative nonfiction may contain re-created dialogue or composite characters, it still remains essentially fact-based.

Malcolm Gladwell is credited as having pioneered a genre of nonfiction that book reviewers now refer to as “Gladwellian.” His works, including *Outliers*, are narrative-driven popular social science. *Outliers* examines academic theories from sociology and psychology through a narrative lens, which allows a broader audience to understand these complex theories. Gladwell cites case studies, academic texts, experts, and other data, but he relies primarily on anecdotes to provide his examples and evidence. The tone of his work is more conversational than academic. In an interview on *The Brian Lehrer Show*, Gladwell states, “I am a story-teller, and I look at academic research...for ways of augmenting story-telling.” His role as story-teller is arguably the most prominent feature of works like *Outliers*.

*Outliers* is also a form of social commentary. Gladwell examines social systems and cultural values and reveals how they are flawed. He also recommends how these systems and values could be changed so they benefit more people than they currently do. Since Gladwell makes such recommendations and uses rhetorical devices to convince readers to accept his arguments, *Outliers* can be considered a piece of persuasive writing.

### CRITICISM

A number of critics have asserted that, although Gladwell presents his work as having an academic basis, his arguments and evidence do not conform to scientific standards. Gladwell provides anecdotes and case studies that support his claims, but some critics and academics question whether he purposefully ignores other data that conflicts with or otherwise complicates his arguments. For example, in *Outliers*, Gladwell argues that relatively older students excel in school; however, David Leonhardt points out in his *New York Times* review that, “the research on this issue...is decidedly mixed.” Similarly, Gladwell credits the Beatles’ success, in part, to their playing extensively in Hamburg, Germany, but other bands that played for just as long on the Hamburg circuit did not rise to stardom. Gladwell does not acknowledge these inconsistencies.

# Outliers

## Introduction—The Roseto Mystery

1. What is the narrative purpose of the definition given at the beginning of the book?

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2. How does Gladwell establish the similarities between Roseto Valfortore, Italy, and the region the Rosetans settle in the United States?

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3. What does Gladwell achieve with the use of the direct address to the reader in the following line: “If you had wandered up and down the streets of Roseto in Pennsylvania in the first few decades after 1900, you would have heard only Italian...”?

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4. Identify where and how the tone shifts in the introduction.

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5. Gladwell compares Flom to Bill Joy and Bill Gates. What is the effect of this comparison?

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6. Gladwell describes how Maurice Janklow did not become particularly successful, while his son Mort made great achievements. How does this account support Gladwell's earlier points? What general point does this detail support?

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7. What is significant about Gladwell's bringing up Terman's geniuses again?

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8. How might Gladwell's re-analysis of the Terman study be at the heart of a good deal of the criticism his book has received?

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### Chapter Nine—Marita’s Bargain

1. Explain the purpose of Gladwell’s telling us that students at KIPP Academy “are taught to turn and address anyone talking to them in a protocol known as ‘SSLANT.’”

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2. How does Gladwell provide agricultural explanations for cultural legacies to American educational reforms?

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3. How does Gladwell connect the educational achievement gap to Lareau’s study on parenting?

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4. Does Gladwell hold parents or schools accountable for preventing students from falling behind during summer vacation?

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5. In what ways is KIPP trying to disentangle itself from the cultural legacy of American schools? What culture is it more similar to?

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