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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Outliers

by Malcolm Gladwell

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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 **Prestwick House**

P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938
www.prestwickhouse.com
800.932.4593

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Outliers

Note to the Teacher

Outliers is a nonfiction book that encourages readers to reevaluate how they view successful people in terms of intelligence, ambition, and personality traits. By providing insights about cultural and social opportunities, Gladwell offers an alternate perspective to the traditional explanation of how people from humble circumstances succeed through sheer talent and determination. *Outliers* examines a wide range of topics: the birth months of star hockey players, a commonality between Bill Gates and the Beatles, how the cultural background of pilots has a role in plane crashes, and why Asian students tend to score better in math than Western students do. All these subjects help illustrate how success is a confluence of luck, opportunity, effort, and cultural heritage.

Malcolm Gladwell was born in the United Kingdom in 1963 and grew up in Ontario, Canada. After receiving a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toronto, Trinity College, Gladwell moved to the United States where he began working as a reporter. He has been a staff writer with *The New Yorker* magazine since 1996. During his time at *The New Yorker*, Gladwell has written a number of articles that analyze research phenomena and society, offering new, often unexpected perspectives. Some of his articles have been expanded into nonfiction books, including his first, *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell's works have been popular bestsellers—*Tipping Point* has sold millions of copies and has been translated into twenty-five different languages. In 2005, *Time Magazine* named Gladwell one of its 100 most influential people.

All references come from the Back Bay Books edition of *Outliers*, copyright 2008.

Terms and Definitions

Allusion – a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader will recognize; **Example:** In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom speaks of “Chamberlain’s umbrella,” a reference to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

Anaphora – repetition of a word or group of words within a short section of writing; **Example:** “A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.” – Ecclesiastes 3:2

Anecdote – a brief story that is usually illustrative or humorous, similar to a vignette.

Black Humor – grotesque subjects like death, disease, war, insanity, etc. are presented humorously in order to point out their absurdity. **Example:** Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*

Culture – the ideas, customs, beliefs, skills, etc., of a given people at a given period of time

Epigraph – a short quotation that appears in front of a poem, a book, or a chapter, explaining something about what follows; **Example:** T.S. Eliot places a quotation from Dante’s *Inferno* before the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which gives the reader an additional method of understanding that Eliot’s poem deals with a person in Hell.

Irony – a perception of inconsistency, sometimes humorous, in which the significance and understanding of a statement or event is changed by its context; **Example:** The firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic Irony* – The audience or reader knows more about a character’s situation than the character does and knows that the character’s understanding is incorrect. **Example:** In *Medea*, Creon asks, “What atrocities could she commit in one day?” The reader, however, knows Medea will destroy her family and Creon’s by day’s end.
- *Structural Irony* – the use of a naïve hero, whose incorrect perceptions differ from the reader’s correct ones; **Example:** Huck Finn
- *Verbal Irony* – a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm; **Example:** a large man whose nickname is “Tiny”

Jargon – the speech or language used by a specific group of people based upon region or occupation

Objectives

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

1. reevaluate success in terms of factors beyond the individual.
2. analyze how Gladwell includes and orders material so as to create a narrative that effectively delineates his argument.
3. describe how Gladwell uses rhetorical questions and direct address to create a more conversational tone.
4. explain how arbitrary systems can create barriers that inhibit some people's chances at success.
5. analyze how Gladwell uses jargon without confusing or alienating readers.
6. discuss how the inclusion of charts and graphs elucidates Gladwell's arguments.
7. analyze how Gladwell cites outside studies and experts to support his claims.
8. explain why perceived advantages, such as intelligence, contribute to success, but only to a certain point.
9. identify how Gladwell analyzes the same data in various ways in order to support different points.
10. define the following literary terms and identify examples of them within the text:
 - allusion
 - anaphora
 - anecdote
 - juxtaposition
 - parallelism
11. elucidate how cultural values and practices are acquired and preserved.
12. define the term "epigraph" and analyze the author's inclusion of epigraphs in this work.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Throughout the book, Gladwell initially withholds information when detailing people or events before providing a more complete overview. Discuss the purpose and effectiveness of this narrative technique.
2. Describe how Gladwell makes connections between multiple ideas to formulate a cohesive narrative.
3. Discuss how Gladwell uses people's personal stories to create interest and illustrate his main ideas.
4. How does society create opportunities for success, and in what ways can these chances be arbitrary or exclusionary?
5. Analyze how culture shapes people's lives but can also be overcome.
6. Write a short essay detailing how luck or arbitrary circumstances have helped or hindered your own success.
7. Why do you think American society prizes intelligence? In your opinion, what other qualities ought to be more highly valued?
8. How can existing social and cultural institutions be altered to benefit a wider range of people?
9. Gladwell discusses how family can impart values and skills or provide opportunities for advancement. Analyze whether family background predetermines success.
10. Are certain cultures inherently more likely to produce greater numbers of successful people than others are? Use textual support to explain your answer.

Outliers

Introduction—The Roseto Mystery

VOCABULARY

advent – invention; coming into being
arrayed – ordered, arranged
brisk – quick; energetic; stimulating
compatriots – people from the same country
egalitarian – characterized by the belief in equal wealth and status for all
ethos – the values that guide people
flanked – placed on both sides of
flaunting – showing off
fractious – disagreeable; unruly; prone to anger
genealogies – ancestries, lineages
paesani – [Italian] villagers
physiological – relating to the biological functions and physical and chemical processes of an organism
preliminary – introductory; preparatory
terraced – made to have level areas of land along a slope

1. What does Gladwell include at the beginning of the book? Why do you think he includes it?

2. In what ways do the Italian immigrants bring their homeland with them?

3. Why were residents of Roseto, Pennsylvania, almost exclusively from the same region of Italy?

Chapter Three—The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1

VOCABULARY

abstruse – difficult to understand
amply – sufficiently; fully
attainments – achievements
chronometry – the science of the measurement of time
cognitive – relating to thought
converge – to come together
correlated – mutually related, so that one variable directly affects the other
divergence – a difference; a drawing apart
doled – gave out; distributed
erudition – knowledge acquired by studying
hindrance – an obstacle; a thing that makes a situation difficult
libidinous – lustful
mitigation – the act of lessening the severity of something painful
pendular – being like a pendulum
pinnacle – the top; apex
poised – composed; gracious; self-assured
robust – strong and healthy; stout
subversive – tending to undermine an established order
tabulated – organized information so it could be analyzed
threshold – the point at which something changes

1. Why does Gladwell introduce Christopher Langan by bringing up his appearance on the television show *1 vs. 100*?

2. What information does Gladwell provide to exemplify Langan's genius?

Part Two: Legacy

Chapter Six—Harlan, Kentucky

VOCABULARY

acquiesced – consented; agreed without protest
anarchic – lawless
confederate – an ally; an accomplice
contingent – a representative group
convened – assembled
deferential – respectful
depositions – formal statements, given under oath, to be used in court testimony
ethnographer – a person who studies human culture
heritance – [*archaic*] inheritance; something passed to an heir upon the owner's death
incredulous – expressing disbelief; skeptical
irascible – easily angered
jostled – bumped, pushed
lattice – a formation of thin wooden strips that cross each other
primeval – ancient; primitive; from the earliest age
remnants – the traces; the remaining parts
spawned – produced; created; gave rise to
steeped – immersed in some encompassing influence
subpoenaed – obtained to be issued in court as evidence
unequivocal – clear; having one interpretation
virulent – violent; severe; hateful

1. Why does Gladwell provide detailed descriptions of the Cumberland Plateau?
