

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Outliers

by Malcolm Gladwell

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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.

Despite KIPP's evident success, however, the program has been met with criticism. Some skeptics claim that high attrition rates may account for KIPP's performance record; low-scoring students leave, but, unlike in public schools, they are not replaced. Ira Nichols-Barrer, et al., examine this concern in their article "Does Student Attrition Explain KIPP's Success?" These researchers found that "patterns of student attrition are typically no different at KIPP than at nearby public middle schools." In both types of school, "substantially lower-achieving" students leave. Although KIPP schools replace fewer of these students in seventh and eighth grade, the attrition rate "cannot account for KIPP's overall impact on student achievement."

Another, more substantiated complaint is criticism of KIPP's disciplinary policy. KIPP schools are considered "no-excuses" charter schools. Students are expected to follow strict disciplinary policies such as walking down the hall in straight, quiet lines and remaining silent in the cafeteria. They are issued demerits and detentions if they do not comply. While "no-excuses" advocates argue that these policies are necessary for creating orderly, structured learning environments and teaching appropriate behavior, some people find the policies troubling. Charter school expert Alfred Chris Torres states, "Reports of extremely high suspension rates and questions about the lawfulness of disciplinary practices in 'no excuses' schools...have only increased such concerns over disciplinary practices." Torres also asserts that "no-excuses" policies contribute to high teacher turnover; "up to one in every three or four teachers [in 'no-excuses' schools] leave annually." Teachers who find strict behavioral rules difficult to enforce, demeaning, or compromising to their autonomy are prone to experience burnout. Many KIPP instructors are new teachers, and the sixty- to eighty-hour workweek, especially when combined with strict expectations, can be overwhelming. KIPP academies are addressing these issues. Torres states that KIPP schools in San Francisco "have adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline." KIPP administrators are acknowledging and working to improve disciplinary policies and teacher retention. While Gladwell recognizes that KIPP is not an ideal educational system, he asserts that its potential benefits outweigh its faults.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the significance of the work's title.
2. Consider the changes Korean Airlines made and how KIPP Academy differs from traditional American schools. Discuss whether changes to individual institutions could precipitate larger cultural shifts—and why or why not.
3. Discuss how Gladwell uses personal stories to create interest and illustrate his main ideas.
4. Evaluate the evidence Gladwell presents to support his claims and whether he creates a sound persuasive argument.

Outliers

Introduction—The Roseto Mystery

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

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

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...”?

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

Chapter Four—The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2

1. How do the parallelism, anaphora, and epistrophe in the opening paragraphs of section one affect the reader's viewpoint?

2. For what likely reason(s) does Gladwell let Langan, for the most part, recount his college experience instead of giving a summary?

3. Describe how the tone shifts from section one to the beginning of section two. How does the author achieve this tonal shift?

4. When relating the incident of Robert Oppenheimer's trying to poison his tutor, what does Gladwell achieve by repeating Oppenheimer's "on probation" but phrasing it as a question?

Part Two: Legacy

Chapter Six—Harlan, Kentucky

1. Note the dark humor at the end of section one. How does it help characterize the culture that existed in Harlan, Kentucky?

2. How do the direct address and the hypothetical scenario Gladwell offers affect the reader?

3. How does procatleipsis bolster Gladwell's rebuttal to objections to his argument?

4. In what way does the idea of "cultural legacies" expand on Gladwell's earlier points?
