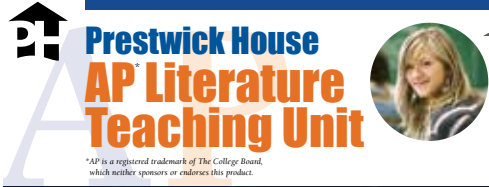




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Outliers

by Malcolm Gladwell

Written by Lisa Tetrault

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ISBN 978-1-62019-234-4
Item No. 309955

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?

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.

5. How is the juxtaposition of Oppenheimer's impressing General Groves with the exchange between Langan and his calculus professor a transition to Gladwell's discussion of practical intelligence?

6. How does Gladwell define "practical intelligence"?

7. What does Gladwell achieve by formatting the interaction between Alex and the doctor like a screenplay?

8. Explain the thematic significance of the anecdote about the Oppenheimers and the observations from the Langan family members.

9. What is Gladwell's probable reason for ending this section with a return to data about Terman's geniuses?

6. What benefits does Gladwell claim the KIPP school provides teachers and students?

7. Note the shift in perspective in sections five and six. What is the effect of this different point of view?

8. To what extent is *Outliers* a platform Gladwell uses to advocate for KIPP schools?

9. How does Gladwell tie the various components of *Outliers* together?

10. What lesson does the author want readers to take away?
