

SECONDARY LESSON PLAN

Who Decides What We Can Read?

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVEL: 6 - 8

SUBJECT: Social Studies, English Language Arts

LENGTH OF TIME: This lesson was designed for a standard class period of 50 minutes. Adaptations and extensions for a block period are included at the bottom of this lesson.

GOAL: Students will explore the history of censorship, discovering that banning media can be a tool to silence marginalized voices rather than simply "protecting" readers.

OBJECTIVES:

- Examine a 1950s magazine cover to understand how the government historically tried to silence LGBTQ+ voices.
- Identify who has the power to censor reading material, comparing the 1950s versus today.
- Compare the 1950s government censorship of LGBTQ+ magazines to modern, local efforts to ban books by Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ authors.
- Answer the essential question—"Who decides what we read?"—using facts from history and modern examples.

EDUCATORS' NOTES:

- + **The Core Concept:** This lesson connects historical LGBTQ+ censorship to modern book bans, helping students understand the negative impacts of book banning and that diverse, representative stories have always been a vital part of American history. This lesson equips students with the tools to notice when Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ authors are being unfairly targeted, empowering them to advocate for inclusive libraries where no single group gets to dictate what everyone else can read.
- + **Cross-Curricular Adaptability:** While this lesson focuses on Social Studies & English-Language connections see the bottom of the lesson for suggested cross-curricular connections.

MATERIALS:

+ Lesson visuals and instructions

- + [Who Decides What We Read?](#)

+ Welcoming Schools Resources

When discussing censorship and diverse literature, be prepared to address identity-based bullying and stop discriminatory comments. These resources will help you respond to bullying and provide guidance on preventing it. In addition, Welcoming Schools has resources on advocacy, including a guide on "Confronting Censorship in Our Schools."

- + [What to Say to 'That's So Gay' & Other Anti-LGBTQ+ Comments](#)
- + [Bullying Intervention: What to Do When You Witness Bullying](#)
- + [Welcoming Schools Advocacy and Education Policy Resources](#)

THE LESSON

1) THE HOOK: WHO DECIDES WHAT WE CAN READ? (5 MIN)

Begin the lesson by asking students to think about who has decided what they can read throughout their lives. Ask them to share their answers, and ask them to think about why the people they have identified have the power to decide what they read. Then, take a minute to highlight key vocabulary to prepare them for the lesson.

+ Slides Resource: [See Slide 1](#)

2) DIRECT INSTRUCTION/GUIDED PRACTICE: SEE, THINK, WONDER ANALYSIS (10 MIN)

Let students know that you will be modeling a strategy called See, Think, Wonder that they will be using to practice their analysis skills. Show the ONE Magazine cover from October 1954, and let students observe for a minute. Then, model the strategy:

+ **See:** “I see in small print that ‘You Can’t Print It!’ was said by ‘One’s Legal Counsel’.”

+ **Think:** “It seems that lawyers are involved in some censorship issue in this image.”

+ **Wonder:** “I’m curious what can’t be printed.”

+ Slides Resource: [See Slide 2](#)

As a whole class or in small groups, ask students to use See, Think, Wonder to further analyze the visual. Have at least one student share one of their wonders. Explain that sometimes learning about history or doing research helps them with their “wonders” when they are analyzing visuals (or other texts).

3) DIRECT INSTRUCTION/GUIDED PRACTICE: WHO DECIDED WHAT WE COULD READ IN THE 1950s? (10 MIN)

Continue the lesson by explaining that some of their wonders may be answered with historical context. Share the timeline on Slide 3, and read the first two events on the timeline to the class. Point out the question: **“Who decided what could be read in this timeline?”**

Tell students you are going to do a think-aloud so they can see how you are using what you learn on the timeline to help you answer the question: “So, if the ONE organization was a gay rights organization according to the first box, I’m going to guess that the magazine cover on the previous slide was probably for LGBTQ+ readers. The second box isn’t really about reading, but it does show that the nation’s government wasn’t being fair to LGBTQ+ people, so I’m wondering if the rest of the timeline will be about government censorship.”

Next, assign each student/group the 3rd and 4th box or the 5th and 6th box, and ask them to think about how the historical information on the timeline helps them answer the question. Allow time for discussion as appropriate.



Finally, ask students to help you sort the historical example they just learned about into the right category, as shown on Slide 4. The examples are “The US Postal Service in the 1950s decided no one in America can receive a magazine about LGBTQ+ people through the mail,” and “The US Supreme Court ruled that ONE Magazine couldn’t be held by the US Postal Service because LGBTQ+ topics aren’t all ‘obscene’.”

Ask students if ONE Magazine was censored by **personal choice, parental/family choice, local school/community choice, or state/government choice**. Show students that the examples both go into the last category (by drawing on the board, moving the text box on the slide, etc).

+ Slides Resource: [See Slides 2, 3, and 4](#)

4) INDEPENDENT PRACTICE: SEE, THINK, WONDER ANALYSIS (15 MIN)

Let students know that they have seen you model and they have practiced their analysis skills, so now they will do a See, Think, Wonder on another visual text, but this time the visual is more contemporary. Individually or in small groups, assign one of the American Library Association infographics (shown on Slides 5-6). If doing the activity in small groups, give students at least one minute of quiet time to read and observe their visual. Then, give them time to share or write their thoughts using the sentence starters for See, Think, Wonder.

Before moving on, take a minute to display both visuals and ask students to share what they think was most important from each visual regarding the question, “Who decides what we can read?” Be sure to point out how the terms “**pressure groups**” and “**organized campaigns**” are used, as well as the prevalence of Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ representation in the 2025 banned books infographic.

+ Slides Resource: [See Slide 5 & Slide 6](#)

5) COLLABORATIVE CLOSURE: WHO DECIDES WHAT WE CAN READ SORTING ACTIVITY (5 MINUTES)

Bring the class together and display the sort with the three additional examples (See Slide 7):

- A group of parents decides a book about a Black teenager's experience with police and another about a gender diverse character is "divisive," so they demand the school board remove them from the library for all students. **(Local School/Community Choice)**
- You check out a book that your librarian at school recommended because you liked another book by the same author. You read a couple of pages and think it's boring, so you return it. **(Personal Choice)**
- A 7th grader really wants to read this young adult thriller her friend just finished, but her mom tells her that she isn't allowed to read that author yet. **(Parental/Family Choice)**

Point out that earlier in the lesson, the class placed examples under “**State/Government Choice**” because the US Postal Service, part of the federal government, made the choice to keep people from reading ONE Magazine, and then the US Supreme Court stopped this censorship. Now, students will collaboratively review the three additional examples and determine where they go in the chart (categories for each example are included in parentheses above).



Transition to the next section of the lesson by highlighting that book challenges are increasing around the country, and our history shows how some groups of people have been, and continue to be, targeted by censorship because others don't want them to be visible.

+ Slides Resource: [See Slide 7](#)

6) INDEPENDENT REFLECTION: EXIT TICKET (5 MIN)

Provide students quiet time to think about the exit ticket prompt:

- Think back to our question from the beginning of the lesson: Who decides what we can read?
- What did you learn about this question? Who do you think should have the right to decide what others read?

+ Slides Resource: [See Slide 8](#)

Have students share one idea from their exit ticket with a partner and/or have students share thoughts from their exit ticket.

HOW TO ADAPT FOR A BLOCK PERIOD (90 MIN)

- + **Get Students Moving and Talking:** Turn the Sort Activity into a kinesthetic activity. Instead of simply dragging text boxes on a slide during the Collaborative Closure, get the students out of their seats. Label the four corners of the room with each category heading. Give each student one of the scenarios and have students physically walk to the spot on the line where they think the scenario belongs.
Optional: Have them discuss the following questions: "Who holds the power in this scenario, and whose power is being taken away?" and "What is the danger of letting one group make this decision for everyone else?"
- + **"Banned Book Resume" Gallery Walk:** Print the official ALA "Book Resumes" (linked directly in the ALA infographic and on the [website](#)) for frequently challenged books and display them around the room. Have students circulate with a clipboard to perform a targeted See, Think, Wonder on at least three of the book resumes. Ask them to pay attention to the professional library awards and positive reviews the books have received ("See") and consider the real reasons pressure groups might actually be targeting them ("Think"). Conclude the activity by having students discuss their findings, grounding the essential question of "Who decides what we read?" in real-world examples of diverse stories currently facing censorship.

HOW TO ADAPT THE LESSON FOR OTHER SUBJECTS & DIVERSE LEARNERS:

- + Math / Data Literacy:** Focusing on the numbers behind the bans, students will review the latest data from another organization that tracks book challenges, [PEN America](#), regarding which books are being banned.
 - + Activity:** Have students review the data outlined in [“The Normalization of Book Banning”](#) and create data visualizations of their choice (pie charts, bar graphs, etc.) based on the information presented.

- + English Language Arts (ELA):** For ELA, this lesson centers on understanding audience and argument. Middle schoolers are highly motivated when writing to a real person in their own community.
 - + Activity:** Have students write a persuasive "Letter of Support" to their school librarian(s). Students will choose one frequently challenged book (or a book they think could be challenged) and write a letter persuading the librarian to keep it on the shelf (or add it to the school library if it is not already available). Students will focus on explaining why having diverse choices makes the school a better, more welcoming place.

- + Social Studies:** To help students understand our rights and how community rules are made to protect everyone fairly, they will work on creating a “Bill of Reading Rights”.
 - + Activity:** Students will work together to draft a “Student Bill of Reading Rights” for your school library. Students will brainstorm at least 3-5 “laws” that guarantee every student has the right to find books that represent their families, identities, and interests without fear of censorship.

- + Art & Graphic Design:** Just as the creators of ONE Magazine used bold text to make a statement, students can use graphic design and typography to share a powerful message.
 - + Activity:** Students will design a laptop sticker or water bottle decal that promotes the freedom to read. They can use bold typography and simple imagery to create slogans like “Let Everyone Read”, turning their art into a visible show of support for their school library and diverse stories.
Optional: Depending on the accepted medium, older students can create a short video “edit” for TikTok or Instagram that emphasizes the importance of the freedom to read and/or the impact of censorship.