

Climate Change and Critical Literacy

11th Grade Language and Literature Climate Mini-Unit

By Abby Hartzell, Secondary ELA Instructor, Hopkins, MN, USA

Abstract

This 11th Grade Language & Literature Climate Mini-Unit was created to develop 11th grade students' climate and critical literacy skills through analysis and discussion of multi-genre climate texts. The unit covers several state standards related to media literacy in reading and inquiry-based writing. After completing this unit, students will understand the widespread, inequitable impacts of climate change and are equipped to engage with climate-related media and literature through a critical lens.

Keywords

[critical media literacy](#), [multigenre texts](#), [multimodal texts](#), [Anthropocene](#), [Holocene](#), [ecosystem](#), [sustainability](#), [biodiversity](#), [mass extinction](#), [greenwashing](#)

Overview

In what follows, I share my experience of collaboratively designing and teaching a three-week climate change unit to four sections of standard-level 11th grade English at a Title 1 public high school in the suburbs of Minneapolis in spring 2023. My co-teacher and I were excited to develop our students' climate literacy after we took a graduate course at the University of Minnesota titled "Adolescent Literature, Youth Activism, and Climate Literacy" for our master's in education program. We decided to fill a three-week gap at the end of the trimester with a mini unit in which students would learn about the facts of climate change, critically analyze various climate related texts, and engage in discussions about activism and personal/collective responsibility.

The unit centered around a question: "What is climate change and how can I engage critically with this issue?" Each lesson built upon the previous lessons to help students engage with the question and eventually develop their own responses. While teaching the unit, I was delighted by the level of engagement we saw in students.

Even though the school year was coming to a close and the weather was warming up, most students expressed genuine curiosity about climate impacts and solutions. They asked nuanced questions ranging from the responsibility of the camera crew to help the dying walruses they were filming to the plausibility of converting the electrical grid to 100% renewable resources. During our all-class discussion, students drew connections between the racial justice unit we had completed previously and the climate justice social media posts they had just analyzed.

Overall, teaching this unit reminded me of two important truths about my own experience as a teacher. First, when I am personally passionate about a topic, students tend to reflect back the same level of energy. Second, making space for students to ask challenging questions and dive beneath the surface of the texts we read can take a lesson in exciting new directions. I cannot wait to see how these students apply their climate literacy in the future, and I hope they never lose their curiosity and critical lenses.

Narrative Framing

In the first part of the unit, students analyzed a series of climate narratives representing a range of genres. They first watched David Attenborough’s documentary [A Life on Our Planet](#) for an accessible framing of the problems and solutions associated with climate change. Students honed their critical literacy skills by analyzing the short story “Hermie” by Nathaniel Rich; the picturebook [We Are Water Protectors](#) by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade; climate justice tweets by Vanessa Nakate, Urban Air Quality, Mark Ruffalo, and Climate Justice Alliance; videos from the Climate Stories Project; and a slam poetry video by Solli Raphael and Greenpeace. The unit culminated with lessons dedicated to analyzing corporate sustainability statements from Target, Nike, and Starbucks; the song “Colors of the Wind” from Disney’s *Pocahontas*; and a podcast with Jane Goodall and Ayana Elizabeth Johnson.

At a Glance

Title	<i>11th Grade Language & Literature Climate Mini-Unit Critical Literacy and Climate Change</i>
Unit Time	3 weeks Block schedule: One 50 minute and two 70 minute classes per week
Grade Level(s)	11 th grade
Core Text	David Attenborough’s documentary A Life on Our Planet
Supporting Texts	“Hermie” by Nathaniel Rich We Are Water Protectors by Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade

	<p>Climate justice tweets by Vanessa Nakate, Urban Air Quality, Mark Ruffalo, and Climate Justice Alliance</p> <p>Videos from the Climate Stories Project</p> <p>Slam poetry video by Solli Raphael and GreenPeace.</p>
Climate Literacy Terms	<p>Anthropocene, Holocene, ecosystem, sustainability, biodiversity, mass extinction, greenwashing</p>
Objectives	<p>Each lesson builds upon the previous lesson to help students engage with the question: “What is climate change and how can I engage critically with this issue?”</p>
Materials and Resources	<p>Unit Calendar with links to resources and slides</p>

Going Forward

I thoroughly enjoyed designing and teaching this unit. One of my personal highlights was the last day of school when I led students in a discussion about the difference between individual and collective action. I asked students to come to a consensus at their table groups about which is more powerful: changing your personal behavior to combat climate change from the ground up or changing laws to combat climate change from the top down. It was exciting to listen to students debating the merits of each. Ultimately, most groups decided that collective action was far more powerful.

After discussion, I led students in an activity I call “Blue Marble,” for which I gave each student a physical blue marble that represents the Earth. I then explained the metaphor: the Earth is a tiny blue marble in space. We must do what we can to protect it and make it a better place, so what can you do for our only home? Students rolled their blue marbles in their palms as they considered this question. I started by sharing that my own blue marble action is teaching climate literacy. As each student then shared their own actions, I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. After such a rich conversation about individual versus collective action, I was hoping students would think beyond classic individual actions, but most students said they planned to “use a reusable straw” or “drive less just for fun.” This response left me feeling motivated to engage students in the debate about individual versus collective action sooner in the unit so it could help help them reflect on their own power to influence collective change.

I have since started working at a different high school. Recently, my former colleague told me that one of our students from last year, now a senior, dropped by her room to say hi. At the end of their conversation, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue marble. A full summer vacation later, he still remembered the activity and his own, albeit small, commitment to taking care of our planet.