



Lights, Camera, Civics!

Discussion Guide



Discussion Guide: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

I. First Evening/First Half of the Program

1. Introductions. Who is in attendance? If a smaller group, each person is invited to share their first name, hometown/city, and occupation. Keep it very short; for example: “I’m Ken and I’m a freshman at UNH in Durham,” or “I’m Maria and I am a retired history teacher.” If a larger group, ask people to raise hands and identify if they are students, educators, or lawyers, and which county/communities they are from. Ask people to sign in. Mention food options.

(Approximately 7 minutes).

2. Welcome and purpose. Welcome the audience and thank the participants for carving out time to have these important and civil discussions. The New Hampshire Institute for Civics Education (with generous financial support from NH Humanities) has initiated *Lights, Camera, Civics!* to create intergenerational civil conversations about concepts of justice in New Hampshire, to improve civic knowledge through film, and to foster relationships between youth, educators, and lawyers, and the public. Its goal is to have film discussions like this one in each county of New Hampshire annually. Share and read aloud the collective commitments with thanks to NH Listens for its inspiration. Ask for consent from the group.

(Approximately 8 minutes).

3. Provide context for the film. Identify the time and place: the story takes place in the mid-1930s (during the Great Depression) in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama (the “Deep South.”). Discuss the legal context in which the events occurred (consult the legal back-up materials).

(Approximately 15 minutes).

4. Pose and post introductory questions. Consider these questions as you watch this film:

- What civic, legal, and social issues -- including that of discrimination -- addressed in the film still confront us today?
- How is justice portrayed in this film? How does it relate to your own understanding of justice?
- Consider issues of socioeconomic class tension and bias against certain demographics.

(Approximately 8 minutes).

5. Watch the first portion of film. Stop at approximately 1 hour and 12 minutes, immediately after the completion of Sheriff Tate's testimony. **Show movie with closed captioning.**

(Approximately 80 minutes).

First half should run no longer than 2 hours.

II. Second Half of Program

1. Repeat welcome, purpose, and collective commitments, if the second half of the movie is on a different day (see Section I(2), above). Sign in. Remind audience of collective commitments and the general questions posted at the outset of the movie.

(Approximately 7 minutes).

2. Show the last hour of the film. Show movie with closed captioning.

(Approximately 50 minutes).

3. Time to react. Before turning to an in-depth conversation about the civics, legal, and humanities issues raised by the film, we think it is important for audience members to express their immediate reactions to and feelings about the film. The team may wish to accomplish this by asking audience members to share their immediate thoughts with someone seated near them, or by simply eliciting comments. In either event, it should be clear that the discussion will shortly turn to a focused conversation about the questions presented.

(Approximately 8 minutes).

4. Post-film discussion. While the audience's concerns should guide the conversation, we recommend that the team identify one or two specific questions on which to focus during the discussion, based in part on their understanding of the demographics and interests of the audience. The discussion should be led primarily by the audience, with the team members ensuring that the conversation remains on topic and civil.

There should be multiple portable microphones employed for this discussion so that all audience members can hear all speakers. The high school student on the team might be able to recruit "runners," other students who can quickly bring the microphones to speakers.

Following are some ideas for specific discussion topics for *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

- In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, how does personal opinion affect the legal decisions of the jurors with respect to Tom Robinson, and that of the sheriff and Atticus with respect to Boo Radley? Is it ever acceptable to make a legal decision based on one's personal beliefs/feelings? Should personal morality be kept completely separate from legal decision-making? What is the relationship between personal definitions of justice and legal definitions of justice?
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* involves two different story lines: the story involving Tom Robinson, and the story involving Arthur "Boo" Radley. In one story, justice is pursued in the court system (the one place where, according to Atticus, a man ought to get "a square deal"), and not achieved; in fact, a miscarriage of justice occurs. In the other, justice is achieved (in that Boo is not prosecuted), but outside the court system. How can we reconcile these two stories and their outcomes? What can we say about our criminal justice system?
- What can we do when we believe the legal system or legal process is unjust?
- At what point/s should adults talk about these hard issues of justice with children and expose them to examples of injustice? Is middle school the "right" time?

- Atticus tells the children several times that they must walk in someone else's shoes before judging that person. For example, he tells Scout, “If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view [...] until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” Is this good advice? What role does compassion play in the criminal justice system?
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays a world in which a person of color is demonized and scapegoated, falsely accused of a serious crime, tried before an unsympathetic jury in an unsympathetic courthouse, punished without due process of law and, ultimately, killed by vigilantes for a crime he did not commit. How has society changed, and how has it stayed the same?
- How do time and place affect the way justice is carried out?
- Racism is obviously one of the central themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But the movie also explores the difficulties encountered by another minority population, those suffering or believed to be suffering from mental illness or some form of mental disturbance. Psychiatric care was very limited in the 1930s; seclusion and lobotomies were not uncommon. Do mental illness/disturbance still carry a social stigma? Was Boo mentally ill or just different; and why are people who are “different” frequently viewed as being disturbed and feared? How and why do Jem and Scout’s views of Boo Radley change during the movie and what can we learn from this change?

(Approximately 50 minutes).

5. Wrap-Up. Invite audience members to share their thoughts and reflections about the program. What did they learn today? What do they want to do next, given what they learned? Any observations about and lessons from how, if at all, the movie and/or book are being taught today in school? How might we continue to have discussions such as we had today? What other movies might we watch together?

(Approximately 10 minutes).

6. Evaluations completed. Thank everyone for attending and sharing their thoughts and ideas, and emphasize the importance of the evaluations. Collect evaluations, and send to Martha Madsen at: martha@constitutionallyspeakingnh.org.

(Approximately 7 minutes).

Second half should run no longer than 2 1/4 hours.

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