

Family Paideia Seminar Plan

Text: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” by Charles Dickens

Ideas, Values: Conflict, Human, Language, Paradox, Story

Pre-Seminar Content

Big Ideas Chat:

Discuss the idea of paradox; with younger children, talk about how something can be both good and bad at the same time.

Consider reading a common translation of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 from the Christian *Bible* (http://biblehub.com/esv/ecclesiastes/3.htm). Discuss the structure of the text and how it exemplifies the idea of paradox.

1st Read:

Distribute the text and go through the following steps before reading the paragraph:

1. Note that this is the first paragraph of the classic novel by Charles Dickens titled *A Tale of Two Cities*.
2. Play a game by counting the number of sentences in the paragraph (1). Then count the number of words in the paragraph (119).
3. Discuss possible reasons that a paragraph this long consists of only one sentence. What does it say about the paragraph and about the sentence?

Read the paragraph aloud while family and/or friends listen. Check for any words that are unknown, to talk about them after you finish reading the story..

Vocabulary:

Discuss the unfamiliar words in the story. Explain what they mean, figure them out from the sentence, or look them up in a dictionary.

2nd Read:

Ask someone else to read the paragraph aloud again.

Make a list of the opposites in the paragraph on a piece of paper (best vs. worst, wisdom vs. foolishness, etc.) and discuss what just those words might be telling you.

Pre-Seminar Process:

* Share why you are having the discussion.

(Sample script from our classroom Paideia Seminars: Modify to fit your household.)

*“A Paideia seminar is a collaborative, intellectual dialogue about a text, facilitated with open ended questions.”*

*“The main purpose of seminar is to arrive at a fuller understanding of the textual ideas and values, of ourselves, and of each other.”*

* Describe what you want to accomplish.
* Set a Family Goal.
* To balance the talk time
* To refer to the text
* To ask a question
* To speak out of uncertainty
* To build on others’ comments

Seminar Questions:

* Opening (Identify main ideas from the text):
  + Of the seven paradoxes that open this paragraph, which is the most challenging? (Each person share their response, maybe starting with the youngest person in the group if they’re comfortable and advance by age. Don’t tell “why” until after everyone has had a chance to answer.)
* Why is that one so challenging? (Anyone can share)
* Core (Analyze textual details):
* What does Dickens mean by “it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity”? How can it be both?
* Based on the text, what is the relationship between *wisdom* and *Light*? Between *foolishness* and *Darkness*?
* Why do you think Dickens repeated the same rhetorical pattern seven times to open the paragraph?
* What does Dickens mean (near the end of the paragraph) by the period’s “noisiest authorities insisted” that it be described “in the superlative degree of comparison only”?
* Why do you think Dickens chose to compose this entire paragraph as one long sentence?
* Closing (Personalize and apply the ideas):
  + How is the time that Dickens is describing like the time in which we are living? How is it different?

Post-Seminar Process:

*“Ask each person what they liked most about the discussion.”*

* Have the family do a quick check of the discussion goal.

Post Seminar Content:

* Transition to Writing:

Think about what everyone in your group said in response to the closing question: how would you use the pattern of this famous paragraph to describe your own times?

Break the family group up into smaller groups of two (or, if necessary, three) and make a list of opposites that describe the current times. Begin with “best vs. worst” and go on from there to create your own list.

* Writing:

After reading and discussing “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” work with a partner to write a similar paragraph in which you describe the times in which you are living.

Share your paragraph with the whole group.

This Paideia Lesson Plan was created by:

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\*Text is attached if open sourced.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”

Charles Dickens

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.