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Suicide in Literature: How Opening the Conversation in Classrooms Could Save Lives

By: Paige McKinley
Sacred Heart University

ABSTRACT

Suicide is the second leading cause of death from ages 10-24. In the United States, an average of over 3,470 young adults in grades 9-12 attempt suicide every day. So why is *Romeo and Juliet* the only literature taught in high school classrooms that involves suicide? The current English curriculum is severely lacking in content pertaining to modern day issues, suicide being one of them. The following is a proposed unit on suicide in literature, to be taught at the 9th grade level. Studies show that 4 out of 5 students who attempt suicide display clear warning signs, so this unit is designed to educate students on warning signs, mental health, to open the conversation about suicide, and provide students with resources that could save lives.

OBJECTIVE

Provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of suicide, prevention, and awareness, and create an opportunity for students to discuss suicide in a safe and supportive environment.

UNIT OVERVIEW

Students will select two (2) Young Adult novels relating to suicide from the list provided. They will read and discuss their choice-books in book groups. Reading will be accompanied by "mini-lessons" on suicide and mental health. Students will use the information taught in the mini-lessons to read their choice-books through a more critical lens. At the end of the unit, students will write a paper comparing characters, themes and perspectives.

MINI-LESSONS & SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

Mini-lessons will be 10-15 minutes in length and serve the purpose of educating students on different aspects of suicide awareness and prevention. The first mini-lesson is the most crucial, as it will acknowledge the seriousness of the content that will be covered in this unit. The first mini-lesson will provide students with available resources if they are struggling with the content, suicidal thoughts, or mental health in general. It will be taught with the help of a school counselor, so students have an additional ally during the unit from the start, and know who to talk to if they need to. Mini-lessons will begin with statistics, general information and vocabulary that will be relevant in the unit and will progress in nature to match the pace of the students' readings.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

The following are National Common Core Standards as set forth by the Common Core State Standards Initiative that this unit fulfills:

English Language Arts Standards: Reading: Grade 9-10

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2](#) Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3](#) Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

English Language Arts Standards: Writing: Grade 9-10

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1](#) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10](#) Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

UNIT OUTLINE

Choice Book One

1. Students will each select a book from the list given.
2. They will work in book groups with other students who have selected the same book.
3. Each book group will create a reading schedule, assigning which pages or chapters they will read for which days, to which they agree to adhere to in order to complete the reading in a timely manner.
4. Students will each receive a journal and will create a journal entry for each chapter or section that they read (W.9-10.10). Their journal entry should include: their overall reaction to the chapters or pages that they read, and a question for their book group pertaining to the reading they completed.
5. Class each day will start with a different mini-lesson on suicide and mental health. Mini-lessons may include; identifying warning signs, healthy coping mechanisms, available support systems, and other relevant topics. Students will draw upon their knowledge from these mini-lessons to write a paper at the end of the unit.
6. After the daily mini-lesson, students break off into their book groups and discuss their assigned reading. Each student will ask the group their proposed question, and jot down answers group members offer in their journals.
7. Students will then spend time discussing the mini-lesson, and how it relates to their book, and record their thoughts in their journals. Journals will be collected at the end of class for participation.
8. Steps 4-7 will be repeated each class until all groups have finished reading their books.

Choice Book Two

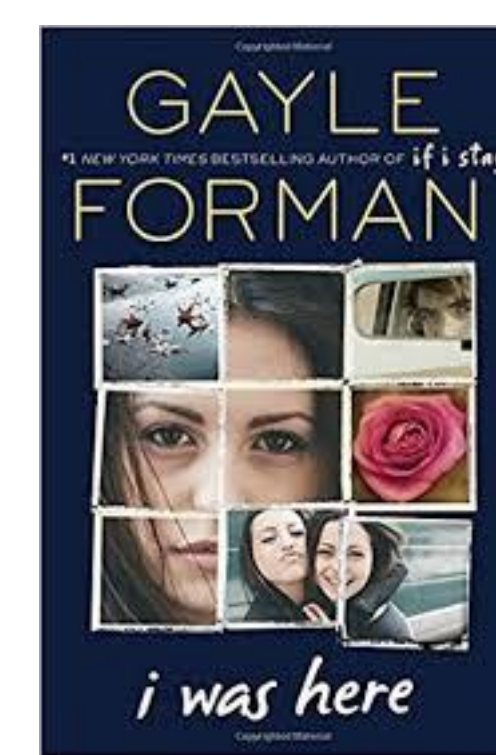
Students will select a second choice book. Students will repeat the steps above for their second choice book, but will read the second book at a slightly more accelerated pace. Students will use their existing knowledge from the mini-lessons to come up with discussion questions more relevant to suicide, and be able to analyze the books through a more informed lens. Students will dedicate more focus to literary aspects such as character development, plot advancement, and theme recognition/analysis.

Final Paper: The teacher will return the student's journals. Each student will use their journal entries to individually compose a paper comparing the two books that they read. The specific assignment will be as follows:

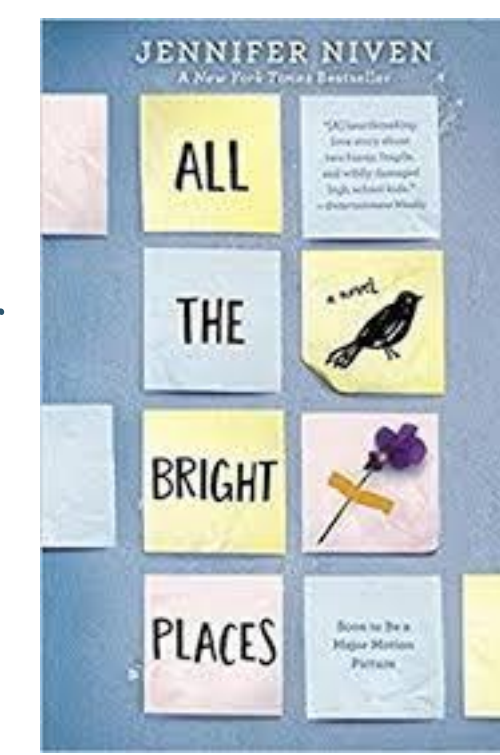
Read two (2) books from the list provided. Using information from the mini-lessons, compose a well-organized paper that compares and contrasts the two books. A strong paper will use evidence from the text (RL.9-10.1, W.9-10.1) to highlight similarities and differences between characters(RL.9-10.3), themes, and perspectives (RL.9-10.2.)

BOOKS

(see handout for in-depth summary, review, and recommendations)



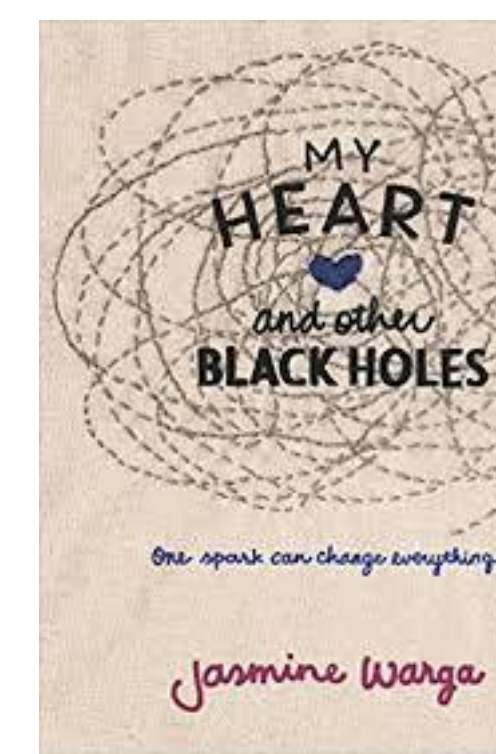
I Was Here
By: Gayle Foreman
POV: Loss to Suicide
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



All The Bright Places
By: Jennifer Niven
POV: Suicidal Ideation/Loss to Suicide
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



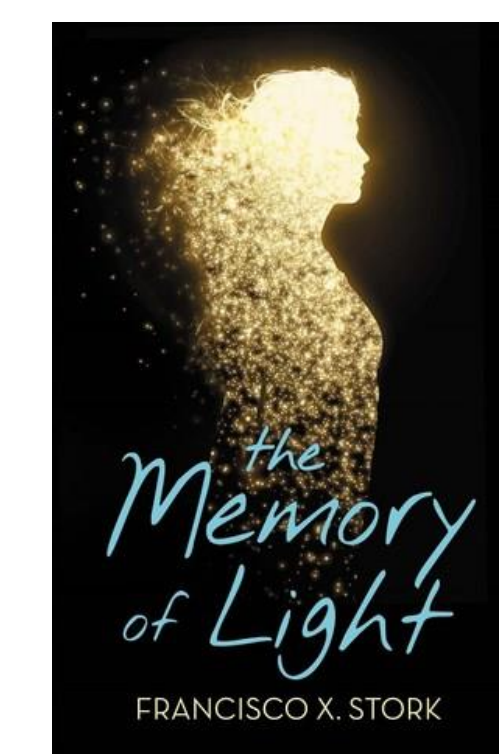
The Bell Jar
By: Sylvia Plath
POV: Suicide Attempt Survivor
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



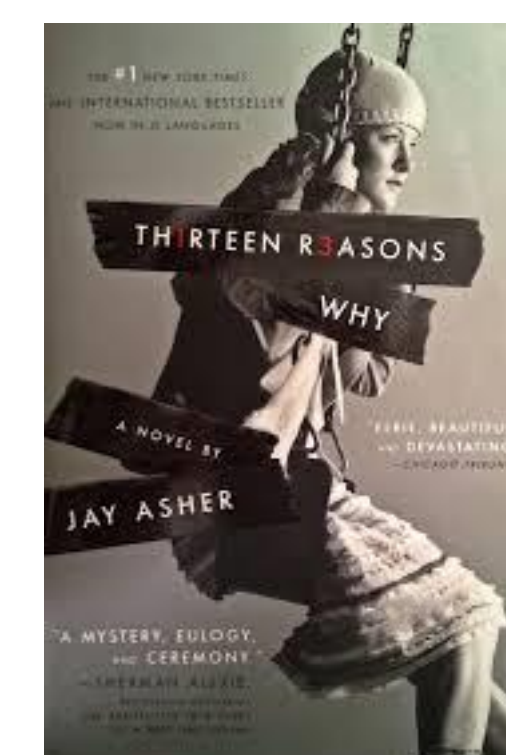
My Heart and Other Black Holes
By: Jasmine Warga
POV: Suicidal Ideation/Suicide Attempt Survivor
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



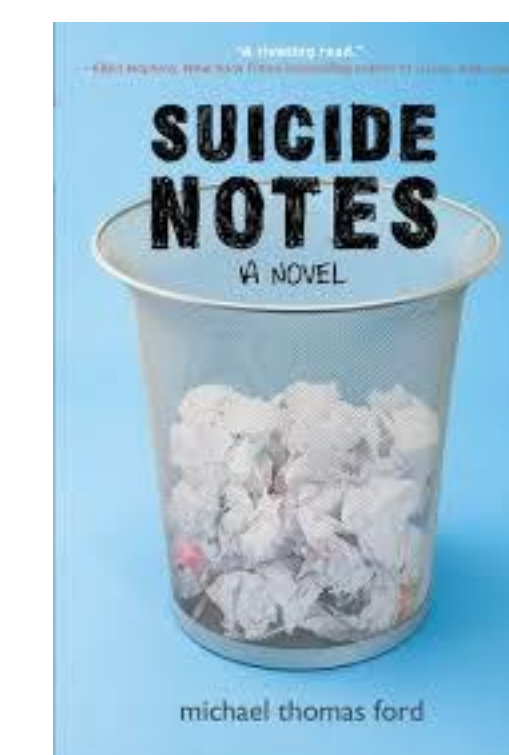
Girl, Interrupted
By: Susanna Kaysen
POV: Suicide Attempt Survivor
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



The Memory of Light
By: Francisco X Stork
POV: Suicide Attempt Survivor
Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use



Thirteen Reasons Why
By: Jay Asher
POV: Suicide Victim
Recommendation: Not Suitable for Classroom Use



Suicide Notes
By: Michael Thomas Ford
POV: Suicide Attempt Survivor
Recommendation: Not Suitable for Classroom Use

MY BOOK

Three Eighty One

By: Paige McKinley

POV: Suicidal Ideation/Suicide Attempt Survivor

Three Eighty One chronicles Alyson Summer's journey as a high school freshman as she grapples with the beginnings of depression, self-harm and suicide. The book is told in split perspectives between Alyson and her best friend Jay. It offers a unique dual-perspective of what it looks like from the outside for someone to struggle with mental health in a cruel and unforgiving high school environment, and what it is like to experience it first-hand.

I began writing *Three Eighty One* as a freshman in high school in 2010 as I struggled with my own depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. I wrote a chapter or two then, but didn't resume work on it until Fall of 2017. My hope for *Three Eighty One* is to create a story in which the reader can relate to either one of the characters if they are experiencing mental health issues, or if they are watching a loved one go through it, and learn from both characters' successes and failures.

PROJECT SEMICOLON

"Your Story Isn't Over Yet"

Why a Semicolon?

In writing, a semicolon is used where a sentence could have ended, but did not, and continues instead. In Project Semicolon, the semicolon represents where a life could have ended, but continued instead.

What is Project Semicolon?

Project Semicolon is a non-profit organization dedicated to suicide prevention. The mission of project semicolon is to "help reduce suicide in the world through connected community and greater access to information and resources."

How Does It Relate to the Unit?

Project Semicolon states that "suicide is preventable and everyone has a role to play in preventing suicide. My personal role in preventing suicide is creating this unit to bring student's attention to suicide, open the conversation conversation, and provide students with resources to combat suicide before they need them.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On January 24, 2016 one of my best friends, Megan Lynn Durand, committed suicide. It was the single most horrific event of my young adult life, as I mourned her loss among families, friends, and entire community. In the year that followed, four more students in the Acton-Boxborough community committed suicide. The youngest was only ten years old. My grief-stricken hometown was suffering a suicide epidemic, and I couldn't help but to think; what could have been done to prevent this? Using my background in English, and Education, this is how I hope to combat teen suicide.

I would like to dedicate this project to my sunshine, Meg Durand, and to every teenager struggling with mental health, and suicide.

You are not alone.