

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE
ENGLISH LITERATURE / WRITING
FOR *COLUMBINE* BY DAVE CULLEN

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I. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Plot/Structure

1. How does the author build and maintain suspense and mystery in the book? How does he deal with the fact that readers may know—or think they know—the outcomes or details of the book's events?
2. Identify at least nine major storylines this book contained. How easy was it to recall each story/character with so many intervening? What devices allowed you to remember them and helped you stay interested?
3. At what point in the book did you decide if you liked it or not? What helped you make this decision?
4. As you read the book, what surprises did you encounter? Why do you think you hadn't known about them before?
5. This book has a highly complex structure. Was it effective? Outline the primary structure of the book, and the use of additional techniques such as flashbacks within that framework.
6. How many times does the reader encounter murder over the course of the book? How long does each episode last and how far apart are they spaced? What is unique about each episode? Why did the author make these choices? How effective were they?
7. How does the author vary content and tone to affect the mood: eg, tragic passages intercut with hopeful scenes, or murder with redemption? Select a passage of 20 pages and identify each shift in mood. How does this affect the reading experience?
8. At what point in the narrative could one decision or one action have changed the outcome? Which characters had a chance to make a difference but didn't?

Character

9. Who were the most memorable characters? As the chapters alternated between killers and survivors, which did you find more compelling?
10. Which, if any, of the book's characters do you consider heroes? Which were villains or scapegoats (other than the killers)?
11. Provide a brief character sketch of each killer. Were they more similar or different? What drew them together?
12. Was one of the killers more dominant in causing the attack? If so, how did he coax or manipulate the other?
13. What do you make of the relationship between Eric and Dylan? Did this relationship remain consistent throughout the book? If there were shifts in their roles, can you pinpoint when and why this happened?
14. Were the concepts of psychopathy and depression useful in understanding why the killers behaved as they did? What are the limitations of those diagnoses? Do those psychological designations make either killer more or less culpable?
15. Did you ever feel sympathetic toward one or both of the killers? If so, where did this begin?
16. Who is responsible for what happened: just the killers, or others, too? Which characters had reason to feel guilty? Who do you think still feels guilty now?
17. Do any of the characters change or evolve through the course of the story? Do they change their view of the world and their relationship to it? If so, what events trigger such changes?
18. Compare *In Cold Blood*'s Dick and Perry to Columbine's Eric and Dylan. What similarities and differences do you find? How did Capote and Cullen's approaches to researching and telling their stories differ?

Form/Technique

19. Some readers have referred to Columbine as a "non-fiction novel." Do you think this description fits? What other books fall into this category? How does Columbine use the form differently? How well does it fare?
20. Was irony employed in the book?
21. How did the author use language or imagery to enhance the story or create the mood? Did it feel like you were in the presence of teenagers even when dialogue was not present? How was that achieved?
22. How would you describe the narrator's voice. How "loud" was it—ie, were dramatic moments hyped or understated? Was he generally objective or judgmental? What sort of attitude did he convey toward his characters? Did he respect them? How can you tell?
23. Cullen has been both praised and criticized for his use of very short sentences. How did you respond to this rhythmic variation? Was it effective? Compare his sentence rhythms to one other author you strongly like or dislike.
24. Were metaphors or other tropes used? What other literary devices were employed?
25. How heavily is dialogue used? Is it effective? Where did the author get this dialogue? Does he explain his process and his choices? Do you agree with them?

Setting

26. What was unusual about the setting of the book? Did it enhance the story?
27. Did Jefferson County feel like a “typical” American suburb, or more specific? What distinguished it?
28. How do Columbine High School and the community of Littleton compare with your own school and community? How likely is it that a similar event could happen where you are?

Theme

29. What are the primary themes of this book?
30. How was good vs. evil portrayed? Was the concept prominent in the thinking Eric? Dylan? The victims and survivors?
31. How did religion impact the story?
32. How inevitable was the attack?
33. Were the survivors powerless? Were their destinies inevitable?

Social Impact

34. Why is it important that books like Columbine be written and read? Who should read this book?
35. Do you think this book glorifies Eric and Dylan and perpetuates the legend that they wanted to leave behind?
36. With school shootings being featured regularly and predominately in the media for over a decade, does the public react differently to them now? Do students react differently? School personnel? Law enforcement? The press?
37. Describe some of the major myths about Columbine revealed in the book. How did the press get it so wrong? Did they learn anything from this? Does the book make you approach news coverage of other major events more skeptically? What sorts of questions do you ask?

Personal Impact

38. Do you remember where you were on April 20, 1999? How did you hear about the Columbine massacre? What were your initial thoughts?
39. What kind of impact did this book have on you?
40. What if you were able to meet the killers' parents. What would you want them to know? What if you could meet another character in the book. Who would you want to meet and what would you say to them?
41. This is dark material: was it difficult to read? What authorial choices made that easier or harder? Which passages were most difficult for you to read? Which scenes are most memorable?
42. Were you surprised by any of the revelations about the attack? Which ones? Were you surprised by the community reaction in the aftermath? How do you think your community would react after such an event?
43. Has this book changed how you would relate to your teen children or to teens that you have a close relationship with?

II. WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

A. ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THINKING

Problem-Solution / Research

1. Have students do initial Columbine reading, then investigate one controversial aspect of the event. Have them write a 5-12 page problem-solution essay proposing how one of the issues related to Columbine could be resolved. (Reading topics below can be referenced in the index of Columbine).
 - Perimeter, police response, SWAT team action & reaction time
 - Eric Harris as psychopath and why no one “knew”
 - Gun laws and minors

Suggested initial *Columbine* reading:

CH 2 “Rebels” (6-12); CH 4 “Rock ‘n’ Bowl” (16-18); CH 5 “Two Columbines” (19-25); CH 6 “His Future,” (26-28); CH 8 “Maximum Human Density” (32-36); CH 10 “Judgment,” (40-44).

Comparison and Contrast or Analysis

2. Have students look up 2-3 newspaper pieces on Columbine and have them write a 3-5 page essay.

Suggested reading:

- “The Columbine Killers” – David Brooks, *New York Times*
- “Fatal Friendship: How Two Suburban Boys Traded Baseball and Bowling for Murder and Madness” – Lynn Bartells and Carla Crowder, *Rocky Mountain News*
- “The Gunmen: A Portrait of Two Killers at War with Themselves” – Dirk Johnson and Jodi Wilgoren, *The New York Times*.

Cause-Effect

3. Research one of seven Columbine myths (bullying, Goths, jocks, outcasts, gays, third shooter, Trench Coat Mafia, Christian martyr) and write a cause-effect essay analyzing how the myth began and what effect it had on the investigation, public perception and aftermath of the shootings.

Suggested *Columbine* Reading:

CH 2 “Rebels” (6-12); CH 4 “Rock ‘n’ Bowl” (16-18); CH 5 “Two Columbines” (19-25); CH 6 “His Future,” (26-28); CH 8 “Maximum Human Density” (32-36); CH 10 “Judgment,” (40-44), plus Columbine myths: (149-52, 155-59); Eric Harris as a psychopath (239-148).

Compare and Contrast

4. Show Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and assign excerpts from *Columbine*. Have students write a compare and contrast paper on the movie vs. Cullen's book regarding what happened and who was involved.

Suggested *Columbine* Reading:

CH 2 "Rebels" (6-12); CH 4 "Rock 'n' Bowl" (16-18); CH 5 "Two Columbines" (19-25); CH 6 "His Future," (26-28); CH 8 "Maximum Human Density" (32-36); CH 10 "Judgment," (40-44), plus *Columbine* myths: (149-52, 155-59); Eric Harris as a psychopath (239-148).

5. Have students write a 3-5 page Compare and Contrast essay about the myths (bullying, Goths, jocks, outcasts, gays, third shooter, Trench Coat Mafia, Christian martyr) and reality of *Columbine*, in order to have them draw conclusions about culture and society.

Suggested *Columbine* Reading:

CH 2 "Rebels" (6-12); CH 4 "Rock 'n' Bowl" (16-18); CH 5 "Two Columbines" (19-25); CH 6 "His Future," (26-28); CH 8 "Maximum Human Density" (32-36); CH 10 "Judgment," (40-44), plus *Columbine* myths: (149-52, 155-59); Eric Harris as a psychopath (239-148).

Analysis

6. Have students write a 3-5 page essay analyzing the media coverage of the event.

Suggested *Columbine* Reading:

CH 2 "Rebels" (6-12); CH 4 "Rock 'n' Bowl" (16-18); CH 5 "Two Columbines" (19-25); CH 6 "His Future," (26-28); CH 8 "Maximum Human Density" (32-36); CH 10 "Judgment," (40-44), television coverage (52-3,56-7,64-7,140-42, 149-53,155-57).

Taking a Position

7. Assign "Shoot to Kill" (308-311 in *Patterns of Purpose*). Have student write a 2-3 page position paper arguing for either "shoot to kill" or perimeter responses to school shootings. (This paper could also be a compare/contrast).

Suggested *Columbine* Reading:

CH 12 "The perimeter" (52-57); perimeter (56-67, 58, 59, 64), swat teams (61-63, 81-2, 83-84, 96-7, 142-45,352-53).

Argument

8. Assign either David Brooks' op-ed or show *Bowling for Columbine*. Have students write a rhetorical analysis which discuss argument technique employed by Brooks and/or Moore.

Suggested reading:

- "The Columbine Killers" – David Brooks, *New York Times*

The Writing Process

9. Search online for one of the many interviews Cullen did about his process of writing the book. Choose one particular problem he faced and write a 1 page summary and response.

Research Practice

10. Locate 3-5 sources from *Columbine's* bibliography. Write an annotated bibliography for each. Include government documents and television and print news as unusual sources.
11. Research www.davecullen.com. Provide a bibliography for five different source materials posted there.

The Research Paper

12. Investigate High School Shootings. What is the problem? What is the solution?

Suggested reading:

- *Columbine*: CH 1-10.

13. Investigate violence in schools. Do a historical perspective. Has violence changed? If so, why?

Suggested reading:

- *Columbine*: CH 1-10.

B. CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Use these exercises to make students engage with the material creatively:

Voice

1. Rewrite the killers' suicide scene in chapter 52 in a completely different style/voice—eg, eliminating the graphic detail, or in a hyped, melodramatic style.
2. Investigate a piece of news—a real event—unrelated to Columbine. Write about it in the tone of a particular scene from *Columbine*. Develop characters and setting. Give them thoughts and dialogue based on your research.
3. Reread the first four paragraphs of chapter 43, where Linda Sanders considers the house in Laramie that she will never own with Dave. Now take a real or imaginary victim, and write a short lamentation about something dear to them which they will lose or never attain. Write in the third person, using the same quiet, detached tone of this scene.
4. Rewrite the final scene of the book (the last three paragraphs of chapter 53) in a radically different style and tone. Use the same event—the dedication of the memorial—but change the details presented or words spoken (inventing as necessary), to achieve a completely different effect: eg, exciting, glum, hopeful, tragic, ominous, foreboding, etc.

Character

5. Do a character sketch of one of the principal characters: Eric, Dylan, Mr. D, Patrick Ireland, Dave Sanders, Brian Rohrbough, Misty Bernall or Agent Fuselier. Write “He/she was the kind of guy who...” Think of actions and images not in the book. Put these characters in a different setting and write how they react.
6. Based on what you learned from the book, choose a principal character and write (invent) a story about them unrelated to the Columbine events. Make it hold true to their character. (You may write in first or third person). Principal characters include: Eric, Dylan, Mr. D, Patrick Ireland, Dave Sanders, Brian Rohrbough, Misty Bernall or Agent Fuselier.
7. Select a scene from the book that you found emotional (eg, Patrick Ireland attempting to walk and talk again; two eagle scouts trying to save Dave Sanders from bleeding to death; one of the parents trying to find their missing child April 20, etc.) Replace a primary character from that scene with another character from the book, and rewrite the scene as you imagine it unfolding with the new character. (Eg, replace Patrick Ireland with Dylan Klebold, or Misty Bernall with Rev. Marxhausen.)
8. Choose a major event from the book, and imagine what would have happened if it had turned out different (eg, Eric's parents found his arsenal, the Jeffco cops had exercised the search warrant on Eric's house, the big bombs exploded, Eric was wounded or killed in the early shootout with Deputy Gardner, a victim had been in another location in the school, the SWAT team had gone directly to Dave Sanders in Science Room 3 . . .) Write a scene based on the new/imaginary scenario . as it affected one primary character. Stay true to the character.

Point of View

9. Rewrite the killers' suicide scene in chapter 52 in the first person, as delivered by either Eric or Dylan. You may invent additional details, imagining what they saw, heard, smelled, thought and felt, and how they acted. Choose where to begin and end the scene, and what tone to strike. Is he elated, disgusted, anxious, remorseful . . . ?
10. Reread chapter 24, "Hour of Need." Rewrite the scene of Dylan's funeral four times in the first person, as told by each of his parents, his brother and Rev. Marxhausen.
11. Reread the short chapter 21, which portrays the early childhood of Eric. Rewrite it in the first person, from Eric's point of view. You may completely change the information presented in the chapter (inventing as necessary), or leave it largely unchanged. Think about what Eric would choose to tell the reader about his early life, and how he would present it. Now rewrite it again, as Dylan, thinking about how he would present Eric, and what he would know about Eric's youth before they met. (For an additional exercise, write it again as one of Eric's parents.)
12. Repeat the previous exercise with chapter 23, which portrays the early childhood of Dylan. Write it first as Dylan, then as Eric.
13. Rewrite the first paragraph of chapter 20 in the voice of the girl described in the photograph. Invent any necessary details to describe what she went through. Think about what she would choose to tell, and how she would deliver it.
14. Choose any emotional scene in the book, and rewrite it two times, both in the first person: once from the point of view of the primary character, and once from the point of view of a bystander or secondary character. (Example 1: Patrick Ireland going out the library window: write it once by him, and once by a member of the SWAT team racing to catch him. Example 2: Any parent searching for their child April 20: write it once as the parent, and once as a student or teacher observing them and briefly speaking with them. Example 3: Brian Rohrbough chopping down the crosses or trees: once as Brian, once as someone who planted the trees or wants the crosses to stay.) You may fictionalize additional details to flesh out the scene.
15. Rewrite chapter 1 in the first person of either Eric or Dylan, in the bleachers, describing Mr. D's speech and their reaction.

Genre

16. Write a poem or memoir about where you were when Columbine happened and how it affected you. (Or choose a more recent tragedy such as Virginia Tech.)
17. Choose a scene from the book and rewrite it in another form: eg, poem, song lyric, play, screenplay, etc.

Structure

18. Read the section “After & Before” from Columbine. Take a story you have previously written and split one of your narratives into alternating sections of “before” and “after” a pivotal event in order to learn how to sustain tension in a narrative.
19. Take a story you have previously written and recast it employing flashbacks. You may accomplish this by adding new backstory, or taking events already written and changing the chronology of when they occurred.

III. FURTHER READING SUGGESTIONS

A. NARRATIVE NON-FICTION BOOKS: KILLERS

- *In Cold Blood*
- *The Devil & The White City*
- *The Executioner's Song*

B. NARRATIVE NON-FICTION BOOKS: OTHER CHALLENGES

- *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*
- *The Professor & The Madman*
- *The Perfect Storm*
- *Blackhawk Down*
- *The Right Stuff*
- *What It Takes*

C. SUBJECT-MATTER READING

- {See the book's bibliography}

IV. BACKGROUND MATERIAL

A. AUTHOR BIO

{ See latest updates here: <http://davecullen.com/bio.htm> }

Dave Cullen is a journalist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Columbine*, an indelible portrait of the killers, the victims, and the community's response to tragedy.

Columbine won Barnes & Noble's Discover Award and the Goodreads Choice Award for Nonfiction. It is currently a finalist for the Edgar Award, LA Times Book Award, and the Audie. *Columbine* was named to two dozen Best of 2009 lists, including the New York Times, LA Times, Publishers Weekly, iTunes and the American Library Association. It was declared Best Education Book of 2009 by the American School Board Journal.

Cullen has contributed to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Times of London*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *Daily Beast* and the *Guardian*. He was recently featured on NBC's *Today Show* and ABC's evening *World News*.

Cullen is considered a leading authority on the Columbine killers, and has also written extensively on Evangelical Christians, gays in the military, politics, and pop culture. A graduate of the MA program at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Cullen has won several earlier writing awards, including a GLAAD Media Award, Society of Professional Journalism awards, the Jovanovich Imaginative Writing Award, and several Best of Salon citations. He is an Ochberg Fellow at the [Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma](#) at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Dave grew up in Chicago, and has worked in most regions of the U.S., as well as England, Kuwait and Bahrain. He worked as a computer systems developer for EDS and a management consultant for Arthur Andersen. He served as a Private and a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He moved to Colorado in 1994, and currently lives in Denver.

B. BOOK SUMMARY (from the book flap)

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold left an indelible stamp on the American psyche. Their goal was simple: to blow up their school, Oklahoma City-style, and to leave "a lasting impression on the world." Their bombs failed, but the ensuing shooting defined a new era of school violence-irrevocably branding every subsequent shooting "another Columbine."

When we think of *Columbine*, we think of the Trench Coat Mafia; we think of Cassie Bernall, the girl we thought professed her faith before she was shot; and we think of the boy pulling himself out of a school window-the whole world was watching him. Now, in a riveting piece of journalism nearly ten years in the making, comes the story none of us

knew. In this revelatory book, Dave Cullen has delivered a profile of teenage killers that goes to the heart of psychopathology. He lays bare the callous brutality of mastermind Eric Harris and the quavering, suicidal Dylan Klebold, who went to the Columbine prom three days earlier and obsessed about love in his journal.

The result is an astonishing account of two good students with lots of friends, who were secretly stockpiling a basement cache of weapons, recording their raging hatred, and manipulating every adult who got in their way. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold left signs everywhere, described by Cullen with a keen investigative eye and psychological acumen. Drawing on hundreds of interviews, thousands of pages of police files, FBI psychologists, and the boys' tapes and diaries, he gives the first complete account of the Columbine High School massacre.

In the tradition of *Helter Skelter* and *In Cold Blood*, *Columbine* is destined to be a classic. A close-up portrait of violence, a community rendered helpless, and police blunders and cover-ups, it is a compelling and utterly human portrait of two killers--an unforgettable cautionary tale for our time.

C. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

- Reviews (excerpts & links): <http://davecullen.com/columbine/reviews.htm>
- Book Trailer (approx 3 minutes): <http://davecullen.com/columbine.htm>
- Bibliography: <http://davecullen.com/columbine/bibliography.htm>