

Teaching *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

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Mark Twain's classic boyhood tales of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) provide a colorful slice of life in the author's fictional St. Petersburg, Missouri, based on Twain's own childhood in Hannibal. Twain's signature humor and memorable characters continue to resonate with readers more than a century after their publication.

Many schools have opted not to include Twain's novels in their curriculum, citing racially offensive language and stereotypes, while others have embraced the opportunity to use engaging literature to critically consider the historical context and Twain's critique of these issues. For those who choose to include Twain's work in their classrooms, The Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum has a wide range of [educational and pedagogical materials](#) created by educators at the [Mark Twain Teachers' Workshop](#). These include several excellent lesson plans for teaching *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year.

Included below are six lesson plans that focus on two central themes: 1) the novel's place connection with larger arts and humanities traditions and 2) the inspiration Twain drew from Hannibal and Missouri. These plans are tailored for a wide variety of ages and grade levels and can be further adapted to meet the needs of additional learners. Together these lesson plans demonstrate how the text can serve as a flexible and enduring instructional resource that supports student creativity, interdisciplinary learning, and historical inquiry.

Arts and Humanities

An arts-based approach to teaching *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* provides teachers and students with experiential and engaging ways of connecting with the novel through music, performance, and empowering students to tell their own stories.

[“Tom Sawyer in Song”](#)

Created by: Angela Maier
Grade Level/Course: 5th Grade Music

“Tom Sawyer in Song” is an extended unit plan that introduces students to a set of key scenes from Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, including the fence painting and cave scenes,

paired with quotes from Twain about the importance and impact of music, which serves as the foundation for students' learning and performing songs from David Friedell's *Tom Sawyer*. Maier highlights the interconnection between literature and music, including the role of emotion and empathy in performance, which invites students to engage with Twain's characters on a personal level. One of the key features of this lesson plan is the opportunity for cross-curricular engagement between classroom and specials teachers. Additionally, the plan intentionally incorporates literary analysis and writing into the specials curriculum. This interdisciplinary approach makes the lesson unique, particularly within a school district that emphasizes full immersion into a topic across multiple subject areas.

[“Characterization, Setting, and Dialect for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*”](#)

Created by: Deena Irwin and Gerri Nielsen

Grade Level/Course: 7th/8th Grade English Language Arts (ELA)

Twain is famous for the colloquial and conversational dialect of his characters, with the words they use and the way they speak reflecting who they are. Irwin and Nielsen's extended unit plan on “Characterization, Setting, and Dialect for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*” draws 7th and 8th grade students' attention to this innovative use of language, combining close reading of specific words and linguistic strategies with more expansive consideration of characterization and setting throughout the novel. This is a highly comprehensive lesson plan that allows teachers to address several critical standards within a relatively short period of time, all while connecting the content to a common text. The use of collaborative groups is also a key component, as it promotes increased student engagement, particularly among middle school students.

[“Growing Up with Tom and Friends”](#)

Created by: Joy Dewing

Grade Level/Course: 11th Grade English Language Arts (ELA)

Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* very effectively provides a glimpse into the rambunctious boy's life and adventures around St. Petersburg, presented with humor and exaggeration. With her unit plan “Growing Up with Tom and Friends,” Dewing provides teachers with a foundation that draws on Tom Sawyer, Twain's larger body of work, and other writing in the same genre to provide students with the tools to create their own humorous memoirs. It capitalizes on students' sense of nostalgia, encouraging them to reflect on Twain's writing by drawing comparisons to their own childhood experiences and engaging in writing of their own. The lesson is further enriched through small-group and whole-class discussions, hands-on activities, and the incorporation of Canva, a popular graphic design tool that resonates with today's students.

Collectively, each of the lessons above illustrate how arts integration and student-centered creativity can deepen literary analysis while making the texts more meaningful for students.

Hannibal and Missouri

The setting and descriptions in Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* are firmly grounded within the place that inspired it: Hannibal, Missouri. Several lesson plans from The Mark Twain Teachers' Workshop focus on this unique sense of place to effectively draw the students' attention to the significance of setting on both authors and the stories they tell.

[“Twain’s Flora and Fauna: Then and Now”](#)

Created by: Gabrielle Wood

Grade Level/Course: 7th and 8th Grade Missouri Conservation

Wood's mini unit plan takes Twain out of the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom where he is most traditionally found to ground his fiction within the natural world, with a focus on native Missouri flora and fauna, situating Twain's work within larger conversations about ecology and the human impact on local ecosystems. This lesson plan bridges the gap between fact and fiction by combining Twain's descriptions of the natural world in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) with students' own hands-on research of a local plant or animal. It provides an additional interdisciplinary opportunity for teachers to collaborate or to develop a unit within a single classroom that extends across multiple subject areas. It also allows tactile learners to actively engage with their surroundings and deepen their understanding through movement, observation, and hands-on interaction with the natural world around them.

[“Strong Temptations aka Fence Painting Scene”](#)

Created by: Lisa Baughman

Grade Level/Course: 9th-12th Grade English Language Arts (ELA)

Baughman's unit plan builds upon a class field trip to The Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum in Hannibal, Missouri, though there are online scavenger hunt and film clip activities that could be easily implemented for teachers and schools who are out of field trip range. Baughman combines local historical information, student experience, and close reading of Twain's novel to help students build a complex, interconnected understanding of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Each interactive lesson challenges the student to move beyond the text and make real-world connections to what they are learning. This authentic unit is especially supportive of diverse learners as it includes scaffolding, multiple modalities of instruction, and movement-based activities. The intentional cooperative learning strategies facilitate increased engagement and comprehension.

[“Drawing Inspiration from Mark Twain’s Beloved Mississippi River”](#)

Created by: Tricia Rozanski

Grade Level/Course: 12th Grade English Language Arts (ELA)

The Mississippi River is featured prominently in much of Twain’s work, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and the author’s memoir of his steamboat captain days in *Life on the Mississippi*. Rozanski’s lesson plan on Twain and Mississippi River focuses predominantly on *Life on the Mississippi*, though this is presented in conversation with Twain’s biography and larger body of work. Close reading and discussion of Twain provide students with examples of imagery and description, which serve as a foundation for their own descriptive writing essay. This immersive experience emphasizes active and collaborative learning through peer discussion, editing, and shared interpretations.

It’s easy to see that Twain’s writing remains both relevant and well-suited for instruction at a variety of age and grade levels. The opportunities for incorporating additional resources and fostering cross-curricular engagement are virtually endless, all while following instructional standards and best practices. Although this collection represents only a sample of the lesson plans available, these examples can serve as the foundation for anything from a mini-lesson to an extended unit. Additionally, the included resources may serve as an inspiration to countless teachers as they develop their own engaging instructional experiences.

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