In Cold Blood Unit Overview & Activity During Reading

In Cold Blood is a non-fiction book first published in 1966, written by American author Truman Capote; it details the 1959 murders of Herbert Clutter, a farmer from Holcomb, Kansas, his wife, and two of their four children.

When Capote learned of the quadruple murder, and before the killers were captured, he decided to travel to Kansas and write about the crime. He was accompanied by his childhood friend and fellow author Harper Lee (author of To Kill a Mockingbird), and together they interviewed local residents and investigators assigned to the case and took thousands of pages of notes. The killers, Richard "Dick" Hickock and Perry Smith, were arrested six weeks after the murders, and Capote ultimately spent six years working on the book.


Some critics consider Capote's work the original non-fiction novel, although other writers had already explored the genre, such as Rodolfo Walsh in Operación Masacre (1957). The book examines the complex psychological relationship between two parolees who together commit a mass murder. Capote's book also explores the lives of the victims and the effect of the crime on the community in which they lived. In Cold Blood is regarded by critics as a pioneering work of the true crime genre, though Capote was disappointed that the book failed to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Our study of the novel will include an analysis of rhetorical strategies that Capote uses to characterize the main "characters," as well as the Kansas town where the crime took place, and the crime scene in the novel; look at the characteristics of non-fiction; and respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement exam. In addition, we will view the film Capote, a film about Truman Capote and the time surrounding his writing of In Cold Blood. The film is rated R, and we will be watching it in its entirety. You may wish to wish the following site to see details for why this movie received an R rating: http://www.kids-in-mind.com/c/capote.htm. If you feel uncomfortable in your child viewing the film, please e-mail me at skizlyk@lewispalmer.org. Your student will be provided with an alternative activity.
Exercising Capote’s Manipulation of Language for Sections I & II of *In Cold Blood*

With non-fiction, especially imaginative nonfiction, such as *In Cold Blood*, the question of “what is the author’s purpose?” can be challenging. Maybe there is a global or local message to convey as in *Fast Food Nation*. Perhaps the author wants to prompt an action or generate a movement such as Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. Or, as in Capote’s case, perhaps the writer has so many agendas that the discussion of intentions is endless.

In order to begin analyzing Capote’s purpose in writing the novel, the effects of his writing style, and a review of rhetorical strategies, pick out one of the topics in the following chart to fill out completely as you read Sections I and II of *In Cold Blood*. Your chosen section and the reading of sections 1 & 2 will be due on 4/30 & 5/1. Bring your book to class every day, as we will have some time to read most days in class.

The following are definitions to help remind you of the rhetorical devices that you will be using for this assignment.

- **Details** – This term refers to specific details or examples that support your thesis, or main point, that you’re trying to make. For example: My thesis: Romeo is a tragic hero. One detail to support that: He has a tragic flaw because he’s impatient and rash when he kills Tybalt.

- **Figurative Language** – language or speech that should not be taken literally; place there to create a vivid description. For example: Magically, the young horse galloped like a king across the dark green field that seemed delighted at his presence. (simile)

- **Diction** – Word choice. For example: If you were to write, “You better shut up.” I might suggest you correct your diction with, “It might behoove you to remain silent.”

- **Syntax** – Sentence Structure; the way a sentence is organized. For example: These two sentences have a different syntax which makes them sound unique. Coming to class, Josh is often late. Josh is often late coming to class.

- **Tone** – writer’s attitude towards a subject or audience. I’m using the first line from Kaye Gibbons’ *Ellen Foster* as an example: “When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy.” The tone of these sentences – cold, bitter