

Green Literacy Thematic Unit Planning Template: Completed “How Landscapes Shape Us” Unit

Name: **Daniel** (five years of teaching experience)

Grade level: **Third grade**

School context: **Rural**

PHASE 1: ENGAGE

Develop Your Thematic Question

Here are some guiding questions to consider as you develop your thematic question. Reflect on these prompts to clarify your focus.

1. Brainstorm

- What issue that could lead to a big idea about the environment are you most passionate about exploring with your students?

My students are rural kids. They love technology and embrace it just like anyone else. I want them to think beyond the screens and explore how they're connected to the land—not just because they live on it, but because it's part of who they are. I want them to reflect on a special place in nature that means something to them and start observing the environment around them in new and thoughtful ways. It's about helping them see their relationship with nature as deeper and more personal, beyond the routines of everyday life.

- What current events or real-world examples resonate with you and can help bring environmental issues to life for your students?

One thing that really stands out to me is how the land around us is changing. Places that used to feel wild and untouched now seem more worn down; there are fewer trees, more empty fields, and less space for the things we used to take for granted, like the creek where we'd fish or the woods we'd explore.

2. Prioritize

You might have more than one environmental issue you'd like to explore with your students. Now, think about which one will create the most meaningful conversations and learning.

There's the mindset in the community. Don't get me wrong, people here care about the land—they depend on it—but there's resistance to change. Talking about pollution or conservation sometimes feels like I'm stepping on toes because no one wants to admit how certain practices might be part of the problem. I may have to figure out ways to engage without rubbing parents the wrong way. As for my willingness to engage with the topic, I'm all in. Teaching about environmental issues is personal for me—I want my students to feel proud of their community and motivated to protect it.

Through this brainstorming and prioritization process, write your thematic question. Some stems that might be useful are:

- How can/do . . . ?
- What might . . . ?

Write your thematic question here.

How do landscapes shape us? A question like this is a big-picture idea and can bring my students and our school community together.

See page 38 in the book for more information on creating thematic questions.

Foster Your Thinking Through Commentary

First, review the following questions and respond to a few or all of them. Use a list or brainstorm freely to capture your ideas.

- Whose voices or stories do you need to hear to understand this issue, and why are they important to you?

I'd like to find out more about the Native Americans' presence and how they took care of the land around our town. I think my students might be interested in writing land acknowledgment statements.

- What unfair systems or problems do you want your students to think about when learning about this issue, and how can you help them ask questions and find ways to make things better?

I want them to consider why some places have better access to clean water, healthy soil, or support for sustainable farming practices than others do.

- Whose experiences or ideas are sometimes left out when this issue is talked about, and how can you share those voices in your classroom to help everyone learn more?

Many families here have roots in farming, and the land once supported small, independent farms where people worked closely with nature. However, over time, many of these farms were lost to large companies that took over the land for industrial-scale farming or development.

From your responses, begin to find springboards that will help you develop commentary that deepens your thematic exploration.

Springboards to Support Commentary

- Springboard 1: **Writing a land acknowledgment statement**
 - Title or source: **Local library**
 - Key insights: **I learned about the history of Native American people in our areas and their respect for landscapes, food they grew, and customs with stories about the land.**
- Springboard 2: **Getting my students to observe nature**
 - Title or source: **Meditation ideas (Brown University and Jon Kabat-Zinn)**
 - Key insights: **Meditation may help my students observe their natural surroundings better.**
- Springboard 3: **Learning about the history of the farming areas**
 - Title or source: **Local library**
 - Key insights: **I found out information about farming in our area.**

See page 40 in the book for more information on developing springboards for commentary.

PHASE 2: EMPOWER

Cultivate a List of Green Reads and Views

Consider the three cycles of comprehension as you choose your strategies: simple comprehension (retell and summarize), criteria comprehension (support thinking), and perspective comprehension (investigate explicit and implicit perspectives and move to systems thinking).

Select texts and digital media that flow from your thematic question and your commentary research. If you need help finding texts or digital media, consult **go.SolutionTree.com/literacy**, our companion website (www.greenliteracy.org), or your school or local librarian.

What types of texts or stories (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, or multimedia) can you use to help your students connect emotionally and critically to this environmental issue? What is the author's message?

Green Reads
Title: Home, and Other Big, Fat Lies by Jill Wolfson (2006) Author's message: Sense of place and belonging
Title: Remember by Joy Harjo (2023) Author's message: Wonder and importance of the natural environment with Native American perspective
Title: Butterflies on Carmen Street by Monica Brown (2007) Author's message: Connections between geographic areas through natural phenomena
Title: A Park Connects Us by Sarah Nelson (2022) Author's message: Wonder of nature, importance of communal natural spaces
Title: Letting Swift River Go by Jane Yolen (1992) Author's message: Outdoor adventure, environmental stewardship

Select Green Literacy Strategies

<p>What reading, writing, and drama strategies will encourage your students to express their thoughts, analyze the issue, and explore solutions?</p> <p>Reading, Writing, and Drama Strategies:</p> <p>Free-write</p> <p>Tableau</p> <p>Compare and Contrast Authors' Messages</p>	<p>How can you support all your students—no matter their reading level or background—to engage deeply with the issue and build their understanding?</p> <p>Immersive Strategies:</p> <p>Wonder Walk</p> <p>Imagination Station</p>
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See page 45 in the book for more information on selecting Green Literacy strategies.

See page 16 in the book for more information on the three cycles of comprehension.

PHASE 3: SHIFT

Develop Green Literacy Ideals

As you work with your students to create their Green Literacy ideals, remember this is something that happens naturally during your teaching. You can plan all the other steps ahead of time, but for this last part, you'll need to pause and observe how your students respond.

Reflection 1

As you plan how to guide your students in creating their Green Literacy ideals, take a moment to think about the lessons you've already taught. How did your students respond during these activities? What really stood out to you? Write down some notes or free-write about what you noticed happening in your classroom.

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Students were intrigued by how the land in our area has changed over time. They asked thoughtful questions about what the landscape might have looked like when their grandparents were young and how those changes affected families and their work.

Discussions about families losing their farms to large companies prompted students to reflect on what it means to lose something tied to your identity. They showed a lot of empathy during these conversations.

Reflection 2

In your free-writing, think about what stood out to you during class discussions about the books. What were some interesting things your students said about using the reading and writing strategies?

What stood out most was how students responded when learning about how Native Americans lived sustainably, in harmony with the landscape. They were fascinated by the idea of using resources like rivers for transportation and forests for food without harming the land for future generations.

We also discussed how many Native American tribes were displaced from their ancestral lands as settlers arrived and reshaped the area for farming and urban development. Students expressed empathy, with several asking questions about what happened to those communities and where they are today.

See page 47 in the book for more information on how to facilitate the Green Literacy ideals discussion..

REFERENCES

Brown, M. (2007). *Butterflies on Carmen Street*. Piñata Books.

Harjo, J. (2023). *Remember*. Random House.

Nelson, S. (2022). *A park connects us*. Owlkids Books.

Wolfson, J. (2006). *Home, and other big, fat lies*. Holt.