

**Lesson Description** This two-day lesson plan frames the reading of Julia Alvarez's novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* by focusing on the theme of "preserving history." While familiarizing students with Alvarez's archived research materials, students will explore questions of representation, memory, accuracy in fiction, and the research process.

As this instructional material was specifically designed for the first two class days of a larger unit on *In the Time of the Butterflies*, its scope is limited to framing activities, discussion questions and supplemental materials supporting the reading of Chapter One and the postscript of the novel. Depending on the needs of the teacher and classroom, these lesson plans can be taught in isolation in lieu of reading the novel in entirety and may be used to scaffold toward a variety of assessments. Some suggestions for types of assessment projects are included, with activity suggestions for each.

**Themes:**

- Preservation of story (memoir, historical fiction)
- Value in archival material (primary and secondary sources)
- Author's credibility and/or accuracy in fiction (the research process; the writing process)
- Cultural representation in biographical and/or research writing

**Paired Project Suggestions:**

- Research essay focusing on historical events or social issues
- Analysis essay focusing on *In the Time of the Butterflies*
- Time Capsule project focusing on preservation of modern culture
- Memoir / Biographical essay
- Historical fiction selection

**Thematically-Connected Topics and Texts**

- Propaganda and persuasive writing
  - *1984* by George Orwell
- Historical dictatorships and political tyranny
  - Trujillo government in the Dominican Republic (1930s-60s)
  - Instances of tyranny and revolution across Latin America
  - *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa
- Memoir / Vignette form
  - *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

**Lesson Objective(s)**

Students will explore the impact of primary source archival material on biography, memoir, and historical fiction writing and consider the effect of lost artifacts on writing historically accurate stories in order to understand how Alvarez' historical fiction novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a preservation of story and history through extensive research blended with creative writing.

**Enduring Understanding(s) & Essential Questions**

**Global/Thematic:**

- Preservation and archival of individuals' artifacts and tangible materials enables members of society to interrogate and verify the perspectives they hold on history and culture.
  - How do we know that the information we use to tell stories or form arguments is accurate? (f)
  - What strategies might a researcher use to generate accurate knowledge about an historical figure, event, or culture? (f)
  - In what ways do we "control" the past from the present? (c)
  - How does our control of the past impact our future? (c)
  - Is history "almost always written by the victors"? In what instances is history *not* written by the winners? (c)
  - Is it possible to achieve absolute equity in the way we preserve and memorialize individuals? Why or why not? (p)

**Reader/Writer Craft:**

- Authors of historical fiction combine verifiable facts and research with realistic creative details in order to produce a narrative that relates a theme pertinent to both the past and the present.
  - What kinds of research did Alvarez conduct prior to writing *In the Time of the Butterflies*? (f)
  - How is her research present throughout the novel? (f)
  - Does the novel reflect accuracy more than fiction, or is it mostly fictional? (c) *This question would be included if the entire novel is covered with historical context lessons included.*
  - How does reliance on first-hand accounts elevate certain voices over others? (c)
  - Does an account have to be first-hand--from a primary source--to be considered "true?" (c)
  - Is it fair or appropriate to memorialize history through a work of fiction, even one infused with a great deal of verifiable fact? (p)

**Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills**

**English II, Adopted 2017**

(4) Comprehension skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student uses metacognitive skills to both develop and deepen comprehension of increasingly complex texts. The student is expected to:

(B) generate questions about text before, [...] reading to deepen understanding and gain information;

(C) make and correct or confirm predictions using text features, characteristics of genre, and structures;

(E) make connections to personal experiences, ideas in other texts, and society;

(H) synthesize information from a variety of text;

(5) Response skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed. The student is expected to:

(A) describe personal connections to a variety of sources [...];

(E) interact with sources in meaningful ways such as note-taking, annotating, freewriting, or illustrating;

(8) Author's purpose and craft: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts. The student analyzes and applies author's craft purposefully in order to develop his or her own products and performances. The student is expected to:

- (A) analyze the author's purpose, audience, and message within a text;
- (B) analyze use of text structure to achieve the author's purpose;

(11) Inquiry and research: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student engages in both short-term and sustained recursive inquiry processes for a variety of purposes. The student is expected to:

- (A) develop questions for formal and informal inquiry;
- (B) critique the research process at each step to implement changes as needs occur and are identified;
- (E) locate relevant sources;
- (G) examine sources for:
  - (i) credibility and bias, including omission; and
  - (ii) faulty reasoning [...];

### Prerequisite Knowledge and Skills

Students will need to be familiar with the vocabulary below. They will further need to know how to access an online database, and depending on the teacher's assignment choice, how to record and cite sources. Students will need a journal or a place to store writing generated during lesson activities.

For certain activities, students should be placed in small groups and/or pairs for discussion.

### Vocabulary

- 1) Archive
- 2) Tyranny
- 3) Dissenter / Dissent
- 4) Plausible / Plausibility
- 5) Censorship

**Time Required** Two consecutive 75- or 90-minute periods.

**Materials** *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez

- "CB, Alvarez Research Materials" document  
*Contact Rachel Meyer at the Hemispheres office via email to request an electronic copy of this PDF. [rachelmeyer@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:rachelmeyer@austin.utexas.edu)*
- "CB, Teacher Notes on Alvarez Research Materials" document
- [Interview with Julia Alvarez](#), National Endowment for the Arts Podcast (2010)
- "[Chasing the Butterflies](#)" by Julia Alvarez
- [Digital Collections](#), The Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin
- Student Handouts Provided (per teacher's desired use):
  - CB, Time Capsule Activity
  - CB, Alvarez Research Materials Analysis
  - CB, 2-5-8 Project Menu and two related documents--
    - CB, Reading Guide ch. 2-4
    - CB, Character Chart
  - CB, Read-Think-Wonder" exit ticket

## Learning Plan

### Day 1: 75-90 minutes

**Engage**  
15 min

#### Journal Catalyst

Students will be given 5-10 minutes to respond to ONE of the following quotations as an entry in their journals or writer's notebooks.

1. "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." (1949: [1984 by George Orwell](#), p. 44)
2. "History is almost always written by the victors and conquerors and gives their viewpoint; or, at any rate, the victors' version is given prominence and holds the field." (1946: [The Discovery of India by Jawaharlal Nehru](#), p. 289)

#### Discussion

When finished, the teacher will ask the following discussion questions, according to their preferred format:

3. What does each quote mean to you?
4. In what ways do we "control" the past from the present?
  - What about textbooks, news, movies, etc.?
5. How does our control of the past impact our future?
6. Why is history "almost always written by the victors"? In what instances is history *not* written by the winners?
  - How can we know about people that weren't literate (able to read or write)? How can we know about people that didn't write a memoir/journal?

**Introduce & Explore**  
30 min  
or 45 min

#### Alvarez' Approach to Historical Fiction

Students will read an essay about Alvarez's approach and relationship to the Mirabal story. Depending on time, there are two options:

- "A Postscript" from *In the Time of the Butterflies* (pgs. 323-324, 2 pages)
- "[Chasing the Butterflies](#)" essay by Julia Alvarez (5 pages)

When finished, the teacher will highlight this passage from "A Postscript":

"So what you will find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals. In addition, though I had researched the facts of the regime, and events pertaining to Trujillo's thirty-one-year despotism, I sometimes took liberties—by changing dates, by reconstructing events, and by collapsing characters or incidents. For I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart."

**Think-Pair-Share**

In their journals or notebooks, students will respond to these questions in a few sentences:

- What is Alvarez' perspective on her own novel? What has she decided to do to preserve the lives of these three sisters?
- What do you think of a novelist taking these real-life individuals and writing a fictional narrative about them?

Students will share their answers in small groups, and then as a class. Finally, the teacher will guide the class in a discussion of the following questions:

- What kinds of research *can* Alvarez conduct to ensure her novel is generally accurate and represents their lives in a way that honors their family?
  - Are there stories from people that knew them? Photographs of them?
  - Did they keep a journal? Birth certificate? Marriage license?
  - What kinds of documents might exist that record their lives?
  - Also, would these documents have lasted through a dictatorship that controls access to documentation and might have destroyed evidence?

**Explain**  
20 min

**Time Capsule Activity**

Teacher Directions:

- Julia Alvarez wanted to go back into the past and write a novel to preserve the stories of the Mirabal sisters. However, because there is limited access to enough information about their lives to make her novel fully accurate, Alvarez has to fill in the gaps using what little information she can collect.
- If someone from the year 2050 decided to write *your* story, what artifacts might they find most valuable? What objects or documents would you want to preserve so that a future biographer could write a novel about your life more accurately?

Students will then consider objects they have at home that might expose who they are for a future generation. With a partner or group, students will discuss the following questions:

1. Name three hobbies, personal interests, personal stories, or people in your life that make you completely unique. What objects or records exist that could show this about you?
2. Name three things that you want a future generation to know about you. What kinds of ideas and pieces of culture define you? (Examples: Movie tickets, a diary, books on a bookshelf, pictures)
3. What two objects represent “highlights” in your life? (Examples: Awards, certificates, school transcripts, plane tickets, family histories)
4. What two objects might demonstrate information about your friends, or what you believe in? (Examples: Church bulletins, club handbooks, materials for an organization, volunteer logs, thank yous and birthday cards, text messages)
5. If I had to select only 5 objects to preserve, what would you choose? Why would you choose those 5 things, instead of something else?

**Extensions:**

- Teacher can use “CB, Time Capsule Activity” handout for students to use to facilitate and record their discussion.
- As homework, students can collect 2-3 items that they would put in a time capsule to preserve aspects of their identity for a future generation. The following day, students can share in groups, or as a class, what objects they choose and why.
- Students can write an informal essay or longer journal entry explaining the five things they choose to preserve for future biographers.

**Important Considerations:**

*Take care to remember that some students may not have, or may lack access to, many personal artifacts (i. e., students who are homeless or in foster care, those who've had to move many times or have recently immigrated to the US). To support such students, a teacher might encourage consideration of objects that serve to represent their childhood, circumstance, or culture as a whole rather than of individual belongings. In a community of learners characterized by challenging or painful circumstances like these, a teacher might focus students' brainstorming and discussion on artifacts of culture in general rather than on students' individual identities and associated objects thereof.*

**Closure**  
10 min

Students will add a few sentences to their entry from the engagement by responding to the following prompt:

- Reflect on the quote you responded to earlier (either “he who controls the past” or “history is written by the victors”) and consider one object that your group discussed during the Time Capsule Activity. How might that one object change the way your story is told?

**Homework Options**

- Read Chapter 1 of *In the Time of the Butterflies* (pages 3 - 10).
- Listen to this 22-minute [Interview with Julia Alvarez](#), from the National Endowment for the Arts Podcast (2010)

**Day 2: 60 or 75 minutes****OPTIONAL:**  
15 min

If not completed for homework, students will read Chapter 1 of *In the Time of the Butterflies* (pages 3 - 10), then complete the Journal Catalyst below.

**Engage**  
15 m.**Journal Prompt**

Students will be given 5-10 minutes to complete the following tasks and respond in writing as an entry in their journals or writer's notebooks.

1. “You must think I'm so outside of things.’ *Tan afuera de la cosa.*” (4)
2. Use Google Translate to determine what “Tan afuera de la cosa” means.
3. How is Julia (the interviewer) portrayed in Chapter 1? What feelings do you think Dedé has toward Julia during their first conversation and encounter?
4. What questions did this chapter bring to mind as you read it?

Students will share/discuss their entries in pairs / small groups.

**Introduce & Explore**  
30 min

The teacher will present materials showcasing Julia Alvarez' research notes during the writing of the novel using images available in the "CB, Alvarez Research Materials" PDF. *Contact Rachel Meyer at the Hemispheres office to request an electronic copy of this PDF.*

\*Contextual notes, discussion points, and citations are included in the "CB, Teacher Notes on Alvarez Research Materials" document.

**Presentation Options:** Showcasing these pieces from the Harry Ransom Center can lend itself to a variety of presentation formats.

- Large prints of each slide can be placed in folders (one set for each small group) so that students can analyze each document for themselves. Students can use the "CB, Alvarez Research Materials Analysis" handout to guide their analysis. They can then share their inferences with the class.
- Large prints of the slides can be displayed throughout the classroom to give students a gallery experience as they view the slides. Display the comments for each item near its printed page and ask students to complete the "CB, Alvarez Research Materials Analysis" handout to guide their analysis. They can then share their inferences with the class following completion of the analysis task.
- A field trip to the Harry Ransom Center (*if possible*) would allow students to encounter this collection firsthand and learn more about the archival process and Alvarez's broader life and works. Each document used is cited in the References section for future use in this case.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Why would an archive like the Harry Ransom Center want to preserve all of Julia Alvarez's notes and research materials? What value do materials like this have today? Do you think they will grow in value?
- Julia Alvarez's novel is ultimately fictional, as she stated in the "Postscript" at the end of the novel. Why would she want to do all this research if she was going to generate details about the characters?
- If Julia Alvarez didn't decide to write their story in this way, would the Mirabal sisters have been forgotten? (They were already minor celebrities on the island, but they were not well-known outside of the D. R.)
- How can research make the novel a more trustworthy source of history? Do you think this novel could fill the place of a factual biography? Why or why not?

**Apply & Elaborate**  
15-20 min

Students can use class time to brainstorm for the project or assessment of the teacher's choice. The teacher may choose to assign one project for the whole class, or allow students to choose a project to work on.

**Differentiation Idea:** Allow students to select any activity they want to work on by using the "CB, 2-5-8 Project Menu" that can be customized to fit any objectives or project. Some project suggestions include:

**Quick Activities:**

- Time Capsule.** Choose 2 objects that you would like to add to a time capsule. For each item compose 2-3 sentences explaining why that artifact should be included in the Time Capsule, and what a future biographer might infer about the student based on that object.
- Literary Analysis.** Complete the “Reading Guide” tasks for Chapter 2 of *In the Time of the Butterflies*.
- Creative Writing.** Write the first 250 words of your own personal memoir memorializing an important moment in your life. Remember to include sensory details.
- Archival Research.** Choose a collection from the [Harry Ransom Center Digital Collections](#), and find 3 artifacts you might want to study further from a single collection. Create a References page and citations for each of those artifacts.

**Medium Assignments:**

- Time Capsule.** Choose 4 objects that you would like to add to a time capsule. For each item compose a 5-6 sentence paragraph explaining why that artifact should be included in the Time Capsule, and what a future biographer might infer about the student based on that object. **Then**, prepare a presentation to share your time capsule with your classmates.
- Literary Analysis.** Complete the “Reading Guide” tasks for Chapter 2, 3, and 4 of *In the Time of the Butterflies*. **Then**, choose one character from Chapter 1, 2, 3, or 4 and begin to fill in the “Character Chart.”
- Creative Writing.** Write the first 350 words of your own historical fiction. Remember to include sensory details, and include details that place the story in a specific time period. Some research may be required, so be sure to cite any sources you use. **Then**, prepare a presentation that includes the historical context for your historical fiction.
- Archival Research.** Choose a collection from the Harry Ransom Center Digital Archives, and find 5 artifacts you want to study from a single collection. Create a References page and citations for each of those artifacts. **Then**, for each artifact, write a 5-6 sentence analysis paragraph using the questions on the “Alvarez Research Materials Analysis” handout. **In addition**, prepare a presentation to inform your peers of your findings.

**Larger Projects:**

- Socratic Seminar.** By opting into this activity, you will be engaging in the center circle for a Seminar. Complete the Socratic Seminar Preparation materials on *In the Time of the Butterflies* to help guide your analysis of the novel and the Seminar discussion.
- Research Essay & Presentation.** Choose a collection from the Harry Ransom Center Digital Archives. Using this collection and at least two other sources, write a 600-word essay (5-paragraph structure) to inform an audience of your peers on the life and history of the author highlighted by your chosen collection. **Then**, prepare a presentation to share your research findings with your classmates.

- ❑ **Persuasive Essay & Presentation.** Write a 850-word essay (5-paragraph structure) to persuade an audience of your peers according to one of the following prompts. **Then**, prepare a presentation to argue your case to your classmates.
  - An archive is designed to preserve and memorialize the work, life, and culture of a particular person for future generations to know and learn about. What one person that you know should be “archived,” and why? What artifacts from their life would be valuable enough to preserve? Why do they deserve to be archived instead of someone else?
  - Archives can be expensive to maintain, are time-consuming to organize, and take up a lot of space. In addition, a researcher using an archive often has to travel to study [physical artifacts, and there can be limited access. Do you think we should keep protecting these large archives of physical artifacts in a world where digital access is becoming widely available? Or, do you think we should scan and photograph all archive contents, and throw out the physical collections to save money and space? Why do you think this?
  - In Alvarez’ novel, large amounts of research contribute to historical accuracy. However, she did not know the Mirabal sisters personally, and created large aspects of her story from imagination. Where is the line between fact and fiction in historical fiction? Is this an appropriate way to preserve history? Why or why not?
  - Curators of an archive or a museum must make the difficult decision of what to put on display, preserve, or purchase for a collection. In doing so, they also decide what materials are not as valuable special as others. This means that curators tell history in a certain way. Do you think this is fair? Do you think there is a better way to decide which artifacts are preserved and which are let go? Or, do you think this system of curator decisions works well for us? Why or why not?
- ❑ **Creative Writing Project**
  - Draft a creative prose piece. Some options might include;
    - ❑ The student’s personal memoir.
    - ❑ A purely fictional account based on the student’s current world (“Historical” fiction).
    - ❑ A factual account of a student’s chosen family member, a close friend, or a historical figure (biography).
  - Ask students to keep in mind the importance of *preservation through story* while they write:
    - ❑ What details can be included that give a sense of history, culture, and personality?
    - ❑ How can students be imaginative through their presentation of historical facts?

**Evaluate & Closure**  
10-15 min

**Read-Think-Wonder Exit Ticket**

Students will complete the “CB, Read-Think-Wonder” exit ticket in response to the following quote **or** in response to the day’s activities:

- “If the past were ever past there would be little use in recalling it; but it lives with us in never-ending variation, as if it were a magic carpet on which we travel through the middle air. The contours of our destination were long ago woven in its fading colours and half-obliterated mazes, and the time to alter or improve them passes quickly while the landscapes of our world race by below. Our future is uncontrollable if we are unable to read our past.” (1961: [Dust in the Lion's Paw by Freya Stark](#), p. 2)
- **Exit Ticket:**
  - Write what they read in the quote (*what does Stark mean?*)
  - Write what they think about the quote (*what does it mean to the student?*)
  - Write what they wonder about the quote (*what questions or loose ends does the quote evoke in the student, or what questions and loose ends do they have regarding the lesson?*)

**References**

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- . Photocopied excerpts from “Century of the Wind” by Eduardo Galeano, containing details of Trujillo’s reign, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Photocopies of political cartoons, titled “Eisenhower y Trujillo”, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Photocopy of map of internment camp from unknown source, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Photocopy of hand-drawn map of jail cells, 1940s-1993. Box 75 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Photocopy of “The Basic Policies of a Regime” by Rafael Trujillo, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 3, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Photocopied map and pocket guide for “Cuidad Trujillo”, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 4, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Materials addressed to Belgica Mirabal (Dede) with calendar dated January 1993, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 5, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Notes on Marriott Hotel notepad, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 5, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . Interlibrary loan request form by Julia Alvarez at Middlebury College, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 5, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

- . Notes concerning the historical horoscopes of characters, 1940s-1993. Box 74 Folder 5, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
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  - . Assorted handwritten notes on white and yellow lined paper, 1940s-1993. Box 75 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
  - . Typed novel outlines and copies with author's notes titled "Here's a tentative structure...", 1940s-1993. Box 75 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
  - . Typed novel outline with extensive handwritten notes and edits, 1940s-1993. Box 75 Folder 1, Julia Alvarez Collection, 1963-2014. Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
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- Stark, Freya. *Dust in the Lion's Paw*. London: John Murray, 1961