## To Kill a Mockingbird Dialect Activity

**When literature is set in a particular region, authors sometimes try to re-create the language of the region through the characters' dialogue and narrative. This use of regional language is called dialect and helps lend realism and local color to the literature.** Some famous examples of the use of dialect in literature include Mark Twain's *The Adventures* *of Huckleberry Finn*and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

Reading dialect can be challenging, especially if you are not from the region or time period of the literature. But every community has its own kind of dialect. Even when communities share the same language, they may use language differently--for example, using distinct pronunciations or special slang expressions, called idioms.

In addition to differences between regional language, historical eras have also used language in distinctive ways. During the 1930's, for instance, a popular slang expression to convey amazement was "Jeepers!" (like you might say "Wow!" or "Awesome!" today).

To Kill a Mockingbird is both regional and historical in its setting. Through the characters' dialogue and narrative, Harper Lee conveys how some Southerners may have used language during the Depression. She also suggests differences in language use depending on a character's role in the community. To Kill a Mockingbird shows how, even within the same town, a variety of language communities exist.

In this exercise, you will examine passages of To Kill a Mockingbird to reflect on the use of language differences and dialect in literature. Record your responses to the exercise on a separate sheet of paper.

**Instructions:**

1) In Chapter 12 of To Kill a Mockingbird, Scout and Jem attend church with Calpurnia. They notice that she uses language differently at church than she does in their home. Scout describes Calpurnia as "having command of two languages."

Use your text to examine the conversation between Jem, Scout, and Calpurnia at the end of Chapter 12. Respond to the following questions, using quotes from the novel to help explain your responses.

a) How do Scout and Jem describe the way Calpurnia uses language in church?

b) What explanation does Calpurnia give for using language differently at church than in the Finch's home?

c) Do you think Calpurnia's way of speaking at church is right or wrong? Do you think the way she speaks in the Finch's home is right or wrong? Explain your answers.

2) Examine these short passages of characters' speech from To Kill a Mockingbird. Identify techniques such as spelling and punctuation that Harper Lee uses to recreate dialect or regional speech. Respond to the 3 sets of questions, which follow the quotes.

**\* Calpurnia's son Zeebo at church:**

*"Mister Jem, we're mighty glad to have you all here. Don't pay no 'tention to Lula, she's contentious because Reverend Sykes threatened to church her."*

**\* Walter Cunningham passing the Radley Place with Scout and Jem:**

*"Almost died first year I come to school and et them pecans--folks say he pizened 'em and put 'em over on the school side of the fence."*

**\* Aunt Alexandra discussing Scout's choice of friends:**

*"I still say that Jean Louise will not invite Walter Cunningham to this house. If he were her double first cousin once removed he would still not be received in this house unless he comes to see Atticus on business."*

**\* Jem describing his adventures with the Radleys to Atticus:**

*"Mr. Nathan put cement in that tree, Atticus, an' he did it to stop us findin' things-he's crazy, I reckon, like they say, but Atticus, I sweat to God he ain't ever harmed us, he ain't ever hurt us, he coulda cut my throat from ear to ear that night but he tried to mend my pants instead...."*

a) **Choose two of the passages to compare.** Identify the characters speaking, the role each character has in the community, and any special aspects of his/her speech. In what ways are the characters' use of language similar or different? Explain your answers.

b) **Read one passage aloud**. How did your understanding of the character's language use change when you heard it aloud compared to reading it silently? Explain your answers.

c) **Revise Jem's description of his adventures with Boo Radley into "proper" written English, then read the revised passage aloud.** What written changes did you make? How does the revised passage sound when spoken? When you hear the passages read, do you prefer the original or your revised version? Explain your answers.