

Love, Life, and Loss

The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed

High School Discussion Guide



In honor of the lives of:

**Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner.
Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford.**

***Love, Life, and Loss
and Seven Last Words of the Unarmed***

High School Discussion Guide

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Discussion Guide Introduction



Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner. Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford.

These African-American men—each killed by police or authority figures—are the subjects of a powerful multi-movement choral work by Atlanta-based composer Joel Thompson titled “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” The piece was recently premiered by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club under the direction of Eugene Rogers, associate director of choirs and professor of conducting at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

The story of this collaboration and a powerful performance of the piece by the Men’s Glee Club, along with their moving rendition of John Legend’s song *Glory*, from the *Selma* motion picture soundtrack, are presented in the Michigan Media documentary film, *Love, Life, and Loss*.

This discussion guide is meant to complement this film and help educators engage with the complex and important issues of race and police violence. The guide includes tips on how to prepare for and address controversial issues in the classroom, discussion protocols and questions to process the film, as well as a supplementary reading with guiding questions to provide important background knowledge. The guide includes plans for both one and two class period lengths.

Guidelines for addressing controversial issues in the classroom

Introduction:

One of our most important roles as educators is to help students learn to think critically about important social issues, including those that have the potential to generate controversy. Our students need support and instruction in order to learn how to participate in constructive dialogue around these issues, even when it might make them uncomfortable.

The killing of unarmed people by police or other authorities, and especially the killing of unarmed Black men, is one such issue that merits exploration. It is a complex issue rooted in the history of racism and violence that is a part of our national story. It is also an issue that generates a great deal of emotion and thus deserves thoughtful examination. Through engagement with the film and the supplementary reading, we believe that students can develop their understandings of the problem and possible solutions as they also consider the role of art and music in working for social justice.

The guidelines below should be read and considered carefully before delving into this issue (or other similar issues) in order to create dialogue that is thoughtful and productive, even if it is also uncomfortable. As Joel Thompson, composer of *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, states in the film, “Now more than ever do we need art to create sincere dialogue between disparate groups.”

Guidelines:

Prepare yourself:

- First know thyself! When preparing to take on an issue in the classroom, you need to consider if this is an issue you care deeply about. Do you have strong views? Will you be able to listen well to students who might not agree with you? Will they feel they can speak up? If you do have strong feelings, how will you work with students who feel differently? Think about these questions ahead of time so that you are not caught off guard if a student says something with which you deeply disagree. At times, these might just be differences of opinion, but students might also hold and voice misguided ideas you feel compelled to challenge. There will be times when you may need to stop and manage offensive speech that might harm other students, whereas other times you may want to push a student’s thinking without shutting them down. Know your own triggers and have a plan so that you are able to stay calm and be a facilitator of learning!
- Prepare yourself academically and cognitively as well. Learn as much as you can about the topic from a range of sources. Explore divergent perspectives and

consider the evidence base for different positions. At the same time, don't feel like you have to be the all-knowing expert! It is acceptable and even helpful to say to your students, "That's a great question... I don't know the answer, but I'm going to write it down and we'll see if we can address it later."

Prepare for and with your students:

- Know your students! What issues set them off? What views are percolating in the classroom? Which students tend to say things without first thinking, and which students are prone to angry reactions? Which students start clowning around when things make them uncomfortable? How can you proactively prepare yourself and them for the topic and the discussion?
- Talk with your students about emotions, and respect emotions when they arise, especially in these kinds of activities. If a student gets upset when talking about these issues, that is very understandable and potentially productive. So let them know it's ok to feel that way, but work with them on how to manage and express the emotion. Acknowledge discomfort and validate it, and find positive ways to help move past it without delegitimizing it. At times, humor may be appropriate to lessen tension, but be careful and never use it to humiliate a student or trivialize their feelings. Asking everyone to pause and take a few deep breaths (inhaling, holding their breath, and then letting it out) can help a great deal!

Prepare your classroom culture:

- Establish a safe classroom climate BEFORE engaging with controversial issues. Students need to build trust with each other and their teacher in order to fully engage with these topics. HOW to do this is beyond the scope of this discussion guide, but seek out help from master teachers or other instructional leaders in your building. Consult high quality online resources such as Teaching Tolerance and tap into the many available (and often free) professional learning materials. Start here if you need ideas: <http://www.tolerance.org/module/critical-practices-anti-bias-education-classroom-culture>
- Establish group and discussion norms at the beginning of the school year, preferably in the first 2-3 weeks. In particular, help students collaboratively develop norms for the following:
 - how to disagree respectfully.
 - how to listen productively.
 - how to deal with interruptions and how not to interrupt.
 - how to ask thoughtful questions.
 - how to participate in discussion, including how to manage equitable talk time.
 - how to choose and use appropriate language in different contexts.

- Students need to talk about what these norms look and sound like in action, and also about non-examples- what it looks and sounds like when these norms are NOT in place. Consider having parents or community members come in and talk about norm setting and respect in their own workplaces. Help students understand that healthy, professional work settings have these kinds of norms and that these ideas go far beyond the classroom.
- Work with students to respect and value multiple perspectives, but help students learn to discern when a “perspective” becomes hurtful or offensive. This is not an easy process, and different people have different standards... but this is why we need to talk about them! In this process, establish clear boundaries for classroom language. We want students to speak their minds, but we do not want them using racist, sexist, homophobic, or other offensive language that will make other students feel unsafe or uncomfortable.
- Teach students to focus on ideas and not on individuals when there is disagreement! Some views can be deeply tied to important identities carried by students, so helping them see that we can question ideas without calling their identity into question is important.

Prepare for interactive learning and dialogue:

- Clarify and make visible the purpose for any discussion, especially when they delve into controversial issues. What do you hope the outcome of the discussion will be? Do students think this topic matters? If not... why should they? Why do you? What’s the point of talking about it?
- Beyond your general classroom norms, establish clear norms for discussions with the input of students. Have them generate ideas, and then help them refine their ideas and develop a list of 5-7 norms that gets classroom consensus. Post these somewhere everyone can see them, and consider having students sign them as well. Share them with parents and administrators. When setting up a discussion, revisit them and modify as needed.
- Have discussion protocols or routines in place, and practice them ahead of time with less sensitive subjects. Classroom “discussions” often aren’t really discussions; many times they involve the teacher asking questions and the same four or five students answering them while everyone else sits back and tunes out. Disrupt this dynamic by starting small! Use the Stop and Jot routine with an interesting prompt to give students time to think and informally jot down some ideas before

asking them to talk about them. Then have students Turn and Talk with one or two other students, sharing what they wrote and responding to each other. Keep these moments short (30 to 60 seconds), and consider using a timer. Then have students form larger groups of four to six and share again, and only then bring the class together. Using this kind of approach gives every student time to talk in safer spaces and also gives them time to develop ideas and “practice” before speaking in front of the whole class.

- Explore interactive group routines like jigsaw groupings, Socratic seminars, fishbowls, and other discussion strategies. Effective discussions require planning if students are not well accustomed to sharing their thinking out loud.
- Explicitly teach students the discourse of dialogue. For example, teach them how to express disagreement by providing sentence stems and having them use them in discussion (e.g. I think that what she says is interesting, but I have a different idea... I'm glad you shared that thought, but I disagree because...)

Prepare for implementation around a specific topic:

- Communicate with administration and families ahead of time if you have concerns about a particular topic. As needed, have support staff either on hand or alerted to an upcoming topic that might trigger students dealing with trauma, anger, etc.
- Attend to necessary knowledge. Is there content or vocabulary that students need BEFORE they engage with this topic? How will you build it if they don't have it?
- Locate the issue in an academic discipline and tie it to real world experts, organizations, or events. Let them know that other people care deeply about this issue and are actively studying it and trying to solve it.
- Locate the issue in your curriculum. How does it connect to other problems you have studied? If it doesn't, why is it worth exploring now?
- Find out what your students already think about the topic. This can help you clarify any misconceptions they might have and also head off potential problems.

During implementation:




- Revisit norms and model civility yourself.

- Once discussion begins, move it along by asking open-ended questions that invite dialogue and connect to things students have learned or sources with which they have engaged.
- As much as possible, help students support their views with evidence, and gently model effective argumentation. Probe student thinking by asking them to support their ideas with examples, statistics, or other evidence. Try using the visible thinking routine, [What makes you say that?](#)
- Keep a running list of “Need to knows,” questions that arise that can guide future research.
- Be an active facilitator, monitoring participation and tone, and keeping the discussion moving. Help students learn how to confront and challenge ideas, not people, and to not take it personally when their own ideas are challenged. For example, you can ask students to support, extend, or challenge each other’s ideas, and model what this might look and sound like.
- Invite students to clarify statements that might set other students off, giving them space to dial back something they may not have thought through.
- Build in moments to reflect and process.
- Summarize what students say and ask them to verify if that is what they meant. Engage them in reflection and processing activities.
- If things are not going well, address the problem! Validate the fact that these kinds of discussions are hard, and then involve students in plotting a way forward. Also have a backup plan if you feel the need to change course. If the conversation gets too heated, it can be wise to pause and come back to it another day, but you need to have something to which students can be redirected.
- Discuss solutions and provide pathways to action! Students are interested in complex, difficult issues, but they often want to go beyond the problem and think about solutions and even take action, and we need to encourage this!
- After the initial discussion, revisit the topic at some point and provide some additional processing and follow up. Get feedback from students on how it went, and take that feedback into account the next time around.

Viewing and Activity Guide

Duration: 1 class period (approximately 55 minutes)

- *Read over this plan before teaching it. If you have less time or are worried about accomplishing all of this in one class period, consider providing the handout the night before as reading homework, or reading it with students in class the day before you show the video.*
- 1) Ask students to Stop and Jot (silently write) for one minute in response to one of the following prompts, which should be displayed on your screen or board:
 - How can music help us learn about and resolve important problems of social justice?
 - Are there any songs you listen to that deal with problems like racism, poverty, or violence? What do you think about these songs?
 - 2) Ask a few students to share what they wrote, and then tell the students they are going to explore the connections between music and social justice by learning about an important problem facing the nation, the killing of unarmed Black men by the police or other authority figures, as they watch and discuss a documentary about a musical piece dealing with this issue.
 - 3) Pass out the attached handout, *Love, Life, and Loss and “Seven Last Words of the Unarmed” Discussion Handout*. Have student volunteers take turns reading this short introduction out loud in order to set the stage for the documentary film.
 - 4) Prepare students to view the short documentary film by asking them to think about the different stories being represented in the film – the stories of the men killed by the police or other authority figures, and also the stories of the people who created and performed the songs. Direct students to jot down ideas during the film using a See –Think –Wonder protocol. They should describe in basic terms what they see, then jot down any ideas that surface in the Think column, as well as any questions in the Wonder column. You might have them use a note taking table such as the one below:

| See  | Think  | Wonder  |
|---|---|--|
| | | |

- 5) Show the film. After the film, give students a minute or two to add any ideas to their notes.
- 6) Next have students Turn and Talk about what they wrote in the Think column for a minute or two.
- 7) Ask students to then quickly form into groups of four by combining their Turn and Talk pair with another pair. Direct their attention to the discussion questions on the back of the initial handout. Ask each group of four to pick one question to talk about for five minutes. Each person in the group should quickly share their thoughts, including additional questions, on the discussion question they chose. They should then talk about what ideas they share in common in the group about the film and song. They should decide on one “big idea” they want to share with the class.
- 8) Close out the activity by having each group share out their big idea. If any time remains, ask students to respond to the ideas shared by other groups by supporting, extending (or adding to), or challenging (respectfully disagreeing) the ideas that were shared.
- 9) Have students write an individual reflection on the film and the song. What does it make them think and feel? This can be done as an exit pass or as homework. This should be informal writing and assessed for thought and effort, not issues like grammar and spelling (so that students are encouraged to think about ideas and can focus on expressing their feelings).

Reading and Discussion – Optional Day 2 Extension

- 1) Begin the second class-period by asking students to reflect on the film again. Have them Stop and Jot about the specific “Last Word” performance that touched them the most. Ask them to reflect in writing about why they were moved by this particular part of the piece.
- 2) Without pressuring anyone, ask students to share what they wrote with the class. If no one wants to share with the large group, have them share with a Turn and Talk partner. Also invite students to share any general thoughts or questions they have in relation to the film and the song. If students have questions about the specific cases of the seven men, ask them to wait as they are going to learn more about the cases soon.
- 3) Pass out the handout, *Love, Life, and Loss – Case Overviews* (found on the website educational resources page). This text provides overview information about each of the seven men whose last words are in the song. The lyrics to *Glory* are also provided as well as an overview of certain police reform recommendations.

- 4) Put students in groups of three to four. Assign each of these groups one or two of the cases to review, making sure that at least one group is reading about each case. Post the following questions on your board or screen and direct the groups to discuss and answer them as they review the case:
 - What happened in this case?
 - Why do you think it happened?
 - What about this case makes it an issue of social justice? In other words, what about this case suggests that things might have turned out differently if all people were treated in a fair, respectful way?
- 5) Next, ask each group to present a summary of their discussion around one case, until each case has been summarized at least once. Then, begin a whole class discussion with the following questions (project or display on board or screen):
 - What do their last words tell us about these seven men?
 - Reading over the descriptions of the killings of these men, what do the incidents all seem to have in common?
 - Given these similarities, how can music and art help us begin to solve the problem?
- 6) Then direct students to read the selected lyrics from the song *Glory*. You can have them do this silently, or you can have volunteers read sections out loud. Ask students to talk about the message of this song and why they think it was included as a companion piece.

Explain to the students, if they don't bring it up, that the song is a call to action against racism and injustice. Share the idea that taking action and making change can take many forms, and that some organizations are working to change the way that police are trained and monitored. Ask students to read the final page of the handout. Again, you can have them read silently or you can have volunteers read each bullet.

Have students quickly Turn and Talk about which of the suggested solutions seem the most important to them, and then have them share their thinking to begin a whole group discussion around solutions.

If students don't participate, feel free to put them back into their small groups to talk about the same questions and then report out to the whole group.

- 7) End the activity by asking students to write a short letter to the editor, or sketch out their own graphic design, calling for a specific policy change, or general social change, they think will help begin to solve this problem.

Extensions:

1) If you want to devote more time to discussion, below are additional questions:

- What stories are told in this piece that get lost in the news coverage of these events, and how are these stories told?
- How can music help people connect emotionally to stories they might otherwise dismiss because of desensitization?
- How can music help speak for those who have been silenced by systemic violence?
- How does the emotional nature of music help us engage with issues that might otherwise make us feel uncomfortable?
- How can music move us to action?
- How can music help us engage with others across lines of difference?
 - How do people with privilege recognize their privilege, hear the voices and stories of others, and work to make change in responsible ways?
 - How do people marginalized by the power structures in a society make their voices heard in a way that cuts through the defenses of the powerful?
- How can we connect the stories of these 7 men to the larger historical narrative of race, racism, and violence in America?

2) If you want students to engage in a research investigation, the following questions can drive their research:

- What do the data show about police violence and race?
- Are Black men actually more at risk from police violence? (the short answer is yes, but many people were misled by an often-cited Harvard study, so this becomes an important question to ask, particularly for White students who might not know.)
- Who else is at high risk for police violence?
(http://inthesetimes.com/features/native_american_police_killings_native_lives_matter.html)
- What are the historic roots of police and authoritarian violence towards people of color? Are there regional differences?
- How does policing actually work in the US? Who makes the rules that police follow and who provides oversight? Who can change the rules?

- What are different explanations for this violence, and how do we best understand this problem through different social sciences?
- What are possible solutions to this problem? Which ones seem to help?
- What is policing like in other nations, and what can we learn from other models?
- What other cases are represented in the work of graphic artist Shirin Barghi, and how are these cases similar to the seven discussed in this lesson?

3) If you want students to respond through the arts, consider:

- Precedent studies in which students analyze and compare several works of art (music, visual arts, etc.) dealing with the same issue, and then produce their own work informed by one that they analyzed.
- Student production of lyrics to a song about a different case
- Student graphic design to educate people about the problem and possible solutions

Love, Life, and Loss and The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed

Discussion Handout:

Read Before Viewing:

Michael Brown. Trayvon Martin. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner. Kenneth Chamberlain. Amadou Diallo. John Crawford. These African-American men—each killed by police or other authority figures— are the subjects of a powerful multi-movement choral work by Atlanta-based composer Joel Thompson titled “Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” The piece was recently premiered by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club under the direction of Eugene Rogers, associate director of choirs and professor of conducting at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. The music was inspired by visual art created by artist Shirin Barghi. Barghi, responding to the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, began to illustrate the last words of Black men killed by the police or other authority figures as a way to raise awareness and spark dialogue.

The story of the musical collaboration around this piece is told in the Michigan Media documentary film, *Love, Life, and Loss*. The film also includes a powerful performance of the piece by the Men’s Glee Club, along with their moving rendition of John Legend’s song *Glory* (from the soundtrack of *Selma*).

An Overview of Police Violence

The music in the film deals with the issue of police violence on a very personal, small scale, but the issue is quite large in scope. The Washington Post began tracking police violence, specifically, shootings, in 2015

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/>).

They tracked more than a dozen details about each killing – including the race of the deceased, the circumstances of the shooting, whether the person was armed, and whether the person was experiencing a mental-health crisis. In 2015, 991 people were shot dead by the police. Of this 991, 949 were male, 772 were carrying a deadly weapon (94 were unarmed), 495 were white, 258 were black and 172 were Hispanic, and 254 showed signs of mental illness. In 2016, 963 people were shot dead by the police. Of this 963, 519 were armed with guns (48 were unarmed), and 631 were not fleeing the scene.

Each of these incidents was unique in the circumstances and contributing factors, yet patterns do stand out in the data. Although African-Americans are approximately 13% of the population of the United States, they accounted for around 26% of all people killed

by the police in 2015. In particular, African-American men, who are only about 6% of the US population, represented 40% of the unarmed men shot and killed by police in 2015.¹ The song *the Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, and the dialogue in the film *Love, Life, and Loss* take us into this issue on a very personal level and asks us to look beyond the numbers and consider the lives and humanity of seven of these men. The performance of *Glory* then asks to come together and take action in the face of these grave injustices.

Small group discussion:

Choose one of the questions below to discuss. Take a moment to think, and then go around your group and give each person no more than 1 minute to share their thoughts. Then, talk about important ideas that everyone brought up. Agree on one “big idea” that you want to share with the class.

- Why is this documentary titled *Love, Life, and Loss*?
- Why do you think the composer chose to use the last words of these men as the foundation of his piece? What is the point of using these specific last words in the song?
- How does the song “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed” seek to reclaim the humanity of the seven men represented in the piece?
- What is the role of music in helping us deal with the pain of injustice? What were the goals of the artists involved in this project? Did they achieve these goals?
- How does this type of music impact its creators, performers, and audiences?
- What is the power of pairing a song like *Glory* with *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*? What message does putting these songs together communicate?
- What did this film and the song make you think about? How did you react to it?

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2015/12/26/a-year-of-reckoning-police-fatally-shoot-nearly-1000/?utm_term=.de493bf46b01