

Opening Young Minds

Quick Start Guide: Teaching Literacy Through Media

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Every Child Is Already a Reader.

*A free introduction to the Opening Young Minds framework
for educators, parents, and home learners*

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Part One: The Opening Young Minds Philosophy

There is a child in a classroom right now who has given up on reading.

Not because they cannot think. Not because they are not intelligent. Not because the story is too hard. Because the story is the wrong shape for the way their mind works.

I know this child. I taught this child — for thirteen years, in grades one through five, in elementary schools in California. I saw them every September. And I watched what happened when I stopped trying to force the wrong text on the right learner — and started finding the text that fit.

The Core Conviction

Every child is already a reader. They are reading the films they love, the comics they cannot put down, the song lyrics they have memorized without trying, and the signs and logos of the world they move through every day. The educator's job is not to introduce them to reading. It is to meet them inside the reading they are already doing — and build the bridge from there to the academic literacy their futures require.

Opening Young Minds is built on that conviction. It is an instructional framework that uses movies, television, comics, graphic novels, environmental print, and song lyrics as serious educational texts — not as rewards or distractions, but as the primary vehicle for teaching the literacy and critical thinking skills that academic standards require.

The research is unambiguous: students learn most durably when information arrives through multiple channels simultaneously, when it is embedded in narrative and emotional context, and when it connects to knowledge they already possess. Film, comics, and song lyrics engage all of those conditions simultaneously. Traditional instruction, for many students, engages none of them.

Who This Framework Is For

- Classroom teachers whose students are disengaged from traditional reading instruction
- Parents and home educators looking for practical strategies that meet children where they are
- ELL instructors seeking culturally relevant, visually supported literacy approaches
- Anyone who has ever watched a struggling student light up during a film or absorb a comic cover to cover and wondered: how do I harness that?

A Note From the Author

I was not a good student myself. I arrived in this country without English, found most of what I needed to know outside of classrooms, and spent a career — first in the Army, then in information systems, then in thirteen years of teaching — watching the same pattern repeat: the students the system dismissed were often the most capable, once someone found the right door. This framework is the result of spending thirteen years finding doors. I offer it to you freely, in the hope that it helps you find yours.

Part Two: The Learning Tree

The Learning Tree is the analytical framework at the heart of Opening Young Minds. It works with any text, in any medium — a film, a comic, a song lyric, an advertisement, a television episode, an environmental print sample. Once your students learn it, they carry it everywhere.

Picture a tree. Its branches reach upward into the light, gathering information from the surface of a text. Its roots grow downward into the dark, reaching into the deeper places that surface observation cannot access. The branches gather. The roots evaluate.

The Six Branches: Gathering Information

The six branches are the journalist's questions — the most efficient information-gathering tools in any analytical toolkit.

WHO?	Who is this story about? Who created this text? Who is affected? Who is visible — and who is absent?
WHAT?	What is happening? What is the central event, conflict, or message? What changes from beginning to end?
WHERE?	Where does this take place? What does the setting reveal? Where does this text come from culturally or historically?
WHEN?	When does this occur? When was this text created, and why does that moment matter?
WHY?	Why did this character make this choice? Why did the creator make these specific decisions? Why does this story matter?
HOW?	How is meaning created? How does the creator use the specific tools of their medium to produce the effect you experience?

These six questions produce a thorough analysis of any text. They surface the information. But they do not take you to the depth that genuine critical thinking requires. That is what the roots are for.

Part Three: The Three Roots

The three roots of the Learning Tree go deeper than the branches can reach. They push students from description into evaluation, from evaluation into imagination, and from imagination into personal moral reasoning.

ROOT ONE: COULD — The Root of Possibility

Could the story have ended differently? Could this character have made another choice at this turning point? Could this situation exist in the real world today? Could this happen in your school, your community, your own life? Could works in two directions simultaneously. The first is narrative imagination — students hold the actual text in one hand and a possible text in the other, examining what the difference reveals. The second is real-world transfer — students move the analysis from the page into the world. Could is the most accessible of the three roots. It opens the door for every learner in the room, including the quietest ones.

ROOT TWO: SHOULD — The Root of Judgment

Should this character have made this choice? Should this advertisement be allowed to make this claim? Should this story be taught in school? Should we, as a community, accept what this text is telling us? Should requires students to form a judgment — not just to report what they observed, but to evaluate it against a standard. That standard might be ethical, practical, or personal. The student must name it and defend it. That is the beginning of genuine argument. Should is where analysis becomes opinion, and opinion becomes argument.

ROOT THREE: WOULD — The Root of Personal Connection

Would you have made the same choice as this character? Would this story feel different if you were living it? Would you have the courage this person showed? Would you act as they acted, knowing what it would cost? Would moves the analysis from the text to the student. It makes the learning personal — the moment when a text stops being something a student reads and becomes something a student lives. Would is where the academic and the personal meet, and where the most honest and most memorable classroom conversations begin.

The Sequence That Works

Could opens the door. Should deepens it into judgment. Would holds the student accountable on the other side. Use them in that sequence and you will move every student — even the most reluctant — from observer to thinker to participant.

Part Four: A Complete Lesson Plan

The following lesson was developed for the Opening Young Minds instructional series. It uses the film *Moana* to teach narrative structure — beginning, middle, and end — in a way that is concrete, joyful, and immediately transferable to both reading and writing. It has been used successfully with learners aged six through twelve, including ELL students.

Lesson at a Glance	
Title	Moana and the Magic of Stories
Grade Level	1–5 (ELL adaptable at all levels)
Subject Area	Reading / Language Arts
Objective	Students will identify the beginning, middle, and end of a narrative and explain how each section contributes to the story's overall meaning.
Key Vocabulary	Plot, character, setting, obstacle, resolution, theme
Materials	Film: <i>Moana</i> (selected scenes — see timestamps), Story Map organizer (page 10 of this guide), pencils
Time Required	60–75 minutes (or two 35-minute sessions)
Standards	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.5, RL.3.3, RL.4.3

Step 1 — Opening Hook (5–7 minutes)

Before showing any film, ask students: “Think about your favorite movie or show. What happens at the very beginning? What makes you want to keep watching?”

Allow two or three students to share briefly. Then say: “Today we are going to look inside a story — like opening a treasure chest — and find the hidden shape that every great story has. Once you see it, you will find it in every movie, every book, and every show you ever watch.”

Step 2 — Introduce Vocabulary (5 minutes)

Write the word PLOT on the board. Say: “The plot is everything that happens in a story, in order. Every plot has three parts: a Beginning, a Middle, and an End. Today we are going to find all three inside *Moana*.”

For ELL learners: display a simple three-box diagram labeled Beginning, Middle, End. Point to each box as you introduce each term. Invite students to say each word aloud in English and in their home language.

Step 3 — Scene Viewing: The Beginning (8–10 minutes)

Play the opening sequence of Moana, from the grandmother's legend through the moment young Moana reaches the water's edge (approximately 0:00 – 6:00).

Pause the film and ask:

- Who is this story about? What do we know about her already?
- Where does the story take place?
- What problem is beginning to develop?

After discussion, guide students to complete the Beginning box on their Story Map: character, setting, and problem.

Step 4 — Scene Viewing: The Middle (10–12 minutes)

Play the sequence beginning when adult Moana sets sail through the encounter with Maui and the Kakamora pirates (approximately 28:00 – 48:00).

Pause and ask:

- What obstacles is Moana facing? Can you name at least two?
- Does she give up? What does she do instead?
- How is she changing as a character?

Introduce the word obstacle: 'An obstacle is anything that blocks a character from reaching their goal — like a big rock in the road.' Students complete the Middle box on their Story Map.

Step 5 — Scene Viewing: The End (8–10 minutes)

Play the climactic sequence: Moana returning the heart of Te Fiti (approximately 1:35:00 – 1:42:00).

Pause and ask:

- Was the problem solved? How?
- How has Moana changed from the beginning of the story to the end?
- What big lesson does this story teach us? Try starting with: 'This story shows us that ____.'

Introduce the word theme. Students complete the End box and the Theme line on their Story Map.

Step 6 — Apply the Learning Tree (10–15 minutes)

Now use the Learning Tree to go deeper. Work through the branches together as a class or in small groups:

- **WHO:** Who is this story about? Who is absent from Moana's world that she is trying to find?
- **WHAT:** What is the central conflict? What does Moana want and what stands in her way?
- **WHERE / WHEN:** Where and when does this story take place? Why does the Polynesian cultural setting matter?
- **WHY:** Why does Moana keep going when everything goes wrong? What drives her?

- **HOW:** How does the filmmaker use music, color, and camera to show Moana’s emotions?

Then move to the roots:

- **COULD:** Could this story have ended differently if Moana had turned back? Could a real person face a similar challenge today?
- **SHOULD:** Should Moana have listened to her father and stayed on the island? Should she have confronted Te Ka alone?
- **WOULD:** Would you have turned back when Maui abandoned you? Would you have chosen duty over safety? Would you have chosen compassion over combat?

Step 7 — Your Turn Activity (15–20 minutes)

Students choose their own favorite movie, book, or television show and create a Story Map for it. ELL students are encouraged to write in their home language first, then attempt key words in English. Drawing is accepted as a primary mode for any learner.

Step 8 — Closing (5 minutes)

Ask two or three students to share their Story Maps. Close with: ‘Now that you know the shape of a story, you will see it everywhere — in every movie, every book, every show. You are story detectives now. The Learning Tree is your magnifying glass.’

Assessment Options	
Basic	Completed Story Map with beginning, middle, end, and theme for Moana
Intermediate	Written paragraph: how one obstacle in the middle connects to the resolution at the end
Advanced	Comparative Story Map: Moana and a book they have read, with a reflection on similarities and differences
ELL Adaptation	Bilingual Story Map; drawing accepted; oral response in any language

Reproducible: The Learning Tree Organizer

This organizer may be photocopied for individual classroom or home use. Use it with any film, comic, song, television episode, or environmental print text.

**The Learning Tree**

Text / Media Being Analyzed: _____

THE BRANCHES — Gathering Information		
WHO? <i>Who is this about? Who created it? Who is absent?</i>	WHAT? <i>What happens? What is the central conflict or message?</i>	WHERE? <i>Where does this take place? What does setting reveal?</i>
WHEN? <i>When does this occur? Why does that moment matter?</i>	WHY? <i>Why did the creator make these choices? Why does it matter?</i>	HOW? <i>How is meaning created? What tools does the medium use?</i>
THE ROOTS — Going Deeper (Could • Should • Would)		
COULD <i>Could this story have ended differently? Could this happen today?</i>	SHOULD <i>Should this character have made this choice? Should we accept what this text tells us?</i>	WOULD <i>Would you have made the same choice? Would you have the courage shown here?</i>

Reproducible: Story Map

Use this Story Map with any film, book, graphic novel, or television episode. Works for the Moana lesson above and for any narrative text.

Story Map: Beginning — Middle — End		
BEGINNING <i>Character, setting, and the problem that starts everything.</i>	MIDDLE <i>The obstacles the character faces. What almost stops them?</i>	END <i>How is the problem solved? How has the character changed?</i>
THEME: This story teaches us that _____		

Quick Reference: The Learning Tree Branches and Roots

THE BRANCHES (Gather)	THE ROOTS (Go Deeper)
WHO — Who is this about? WHAT — What happens? WHERE — Where / what setting? WHEN — When / what context? WHY — Why these choices? HOW — How is meaning made?	COULD — Possibility & real-world transfer SHOULD — Judgment & moral evaluation WOULD — Personal connection & empathy

What Comes Next

You have just seen the core of the Opening Young Minds framework. The Learning Tree. The three roots. A complete lesson plan you can use tomorrow. But this is only the beginning.

The Full Opening Young Minds Library

The Complete Opening Young Minds Resources	
Learning Beyond the Classroom	The complete 15-chapter book. Covers movies, television, comics, graphic novels, environmental print, and song lyrics as educational texts. Includes the full Learning Tree framework, 6 complete assessment rubrics, curated media guides, and a standards alignment chart. Available on Amazon in ebook and paperback.
Companion Workbook	The hands-on daily-use companion. All Learning Tree organizers, Story Maps, Character Arc Charts, Episode Journals, Lyric Annotation pages, lesson plan templates, and a full semester integration planner. Available on Amazon in ebook and paperback.
CME Opening Young Minds YouTube Channel	Free video lessons applying the Opening Young Minds framework to specific films, comics, song lyrics, and more. New videos on a regular schedule. Subscribe at @CMEOpeningYoungMinds.
cmeopeningyoungminds.com	The full resource library, updates on new content, and additional downloadable tools. Visit the website for the latest materials.
I Want To — IWT YouTube Channel	A broader learning channel for educators, parents, and students. Subscribe at @IWantTo-IWT-ft8mg.

A Final Word

The child who is mouthing song lyrics is a close reader. The child absorbed in a comic is a literary analyst. The child who can navigate the cereal aisle is a sight-word reader who needs a bridge from that aisle to the classroom. You now have the framework to build that bridge. The Learning Tree is yours. Go use it.



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