

Lesson plan for discussion of Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* and his talk at the Academic Convocation on Aug. 20, 2004. Submitted by Rick Moreland.

1. Welcome to students, explanation of rationale for this new way of kicking off your college career, congratulations for coming, even more congratulations to those who have read the book. We're going to talk about Eric Schlosser's talk and his book, but first I'd like each of you to introduce yourself briefly, for example your name, where you're from, and your best guess at this point about what you will major in at LSU.

[My main purpose in this introduction is to set a friendly tone and to make students feel welcome and comfortable, but also to combine these social introductions with a more academic, intellectual atmosphere. This is, in fact, my main purpose throughout this session, to demonstrate that the university is a place where people can come from different backgrounds with different ideas and opinions and discuss those differences in a respectful way with reasons and appeals to evidence drawn from a wide variety of academic disciplines (history, epidemiology, sociology, economics, political science, advertising, rhetoric, etc.), and to show how all these disciplines provide knowledge and skills for addressing both private and public issues like those surrounding the fast food industry. I'm getting students to (tentatively) declare their future majors so I can draw students in when the discussion touches on their discipline.]

2. What did you think of Schlosser's talk?

[Here I'm asking for first reactions, again starting from what's most comfortable, but with an eye toward moving from first reactions to reasons and evidence. I'm just trying to get people talking, so I won't challenge any of these reactions, though I'll try to summarize what the range of reactions is.]

3. What do you think his main points were?

[Now I'm asking for a more objective description of what he was saying. I'll write brief versions of two or three points on the board so people can start thinking about how fair they are as descriptions of what Schlosser's arguments and whether they were persuaded by these arguments.]

4. Do you think he backed these arguments up?

[Here I'm focusing attention on the question of how someone makes a persuasive argument. I'll follow this question up with more specific questions about each of the arguments listed on the board, such as the following. Did he just appeal to what people already think? Did he try to explain why people think what they already think? Did he use persuasive evidence that people should change their minds? Did he offer plausible alternatives? Did he address difficulties with those alternatives? I'll ask these kinds of questions.]

5. How would you compare his talk with his book?

[This is mostly just a transition, but I want to call some attention to the difference between a talk, even in an academic setting, and a book, which lays out its reasoning and evidence in more detail and allows readers to scrutinize it as carefully and thoughtfully as they can. At some point, I want to call attention to the footnotes that make up almost a fourth of Schlosser's book and ask students to consider why he and his publishers thought this was important enough to justify the expense, assuming most readers won't even read most of those notes.]

6. What were his main points in the book?

[This sounds like the same question I asked above about the talk, but it gives us a chance to practice what we learned from addressing this same question about the talk. Also, being able to summarize an author's argument (whether it's in a paragraph of a textbook, in a journal article, or in an entire book) is one of the most important skills people in a university need. I expect to get a range of answers to this question, since the book does make several different arguments (that the fast food industry is unsafe for workers, unfair to workers, unprofitable for most franchise owners, unfair to taxpayers in the subsidies given to the industry, unhealthy for consumers, cruel to animals, environmentally destructive, etc.) I'll write these up on the board near where I've written each of the most relevant points of his talk, either underlining those, crossing those out and replacing them with these, or adding these to the existing list.

7. Do you think he backed these points up?

[We'll take each of these points in turn, discussing what kind of evidence he offered, whether that was enough, and what further evidence students think they would need to be persuaded, and perhaps how one might go about finding that evidence. We'll also discuss his tone toward people who might disagree with him, whether he made easy villains, idiots, or heroes of those he discussed, or whether he tried to explain both their reasoning and his.]

8. My summary. Instead of explicitly summarizing the discussion myself, I plan to thank students for coming, say I hope this has been a useful way to get their feet wet in the university and the kind of discussion that goes on in at least many of the classes here, compliment them on how thoughtfully they've evaluated Schlosser's arguments, and invite them to visit me in my office sometime to let me know how things are going.

[this is actually my summary of what my own main purpose has been.]

9. Their summary. I will ask students to write three sentences before they leave: something they noticed in our discussion, something they learned, and something they wondered about.

[Whatever my own purposes might be, students will have all noticed and learned different things from our discussion. For example, some may have noticed that more people read the book than they expected, which might change their impression of their fellow students. Or they may have learned why they should eat fast food either more or less than before. Or they may have decided they should get a different job or become a vegetarian. They may have learned that certain students' scoffing or outrage was less persuasive than someone else's more careful reasoning. They may have learned that the student planning to major in psychology had the kind of reasons they would like to learn more about. They might wonder about what effects this book has had on public policy since it was published. Whatever each student has noticed, learned, or wondered during the discussion, this exercise should help him or her pause to gather and focus those observations, any conclusions they might have made, and any directions for future thinking and discussion.]