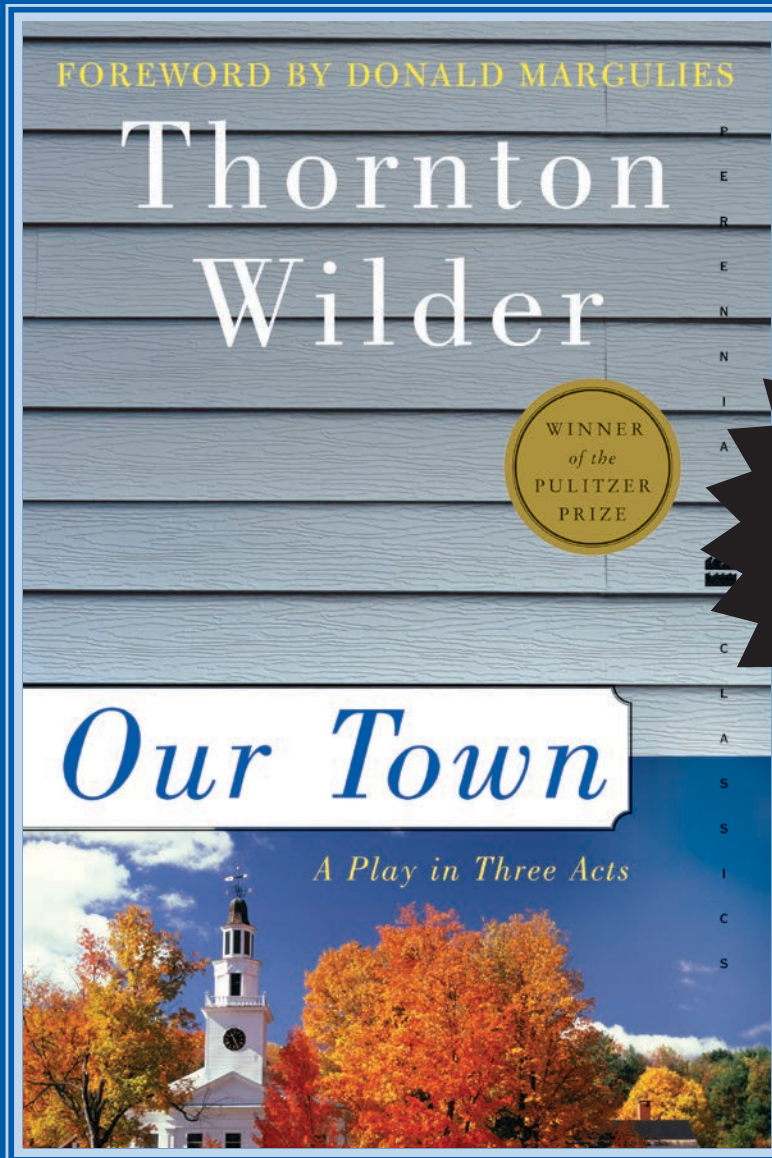


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



**ALIGNED
TO THE
COMMON
CORE**

“You are holding in your hands a great American play. Possibly the great American play.” —Pulitzer Prize-Winning Playwright

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Note to Teachers

Thornton Wilder's classic American play will be an excellent addition to your curriculum. It fits beautifully into courses focusing on American literature or the study of theater. It can also be a cornerstone text in multi-genre thematic units on community, family relationships, or the cycle of life and death. Teachers are encouraged to read Donald Margulies excellent foreword to the play before teaching the unit. Because the play uses minimal scenery and props, it's a good selection to "stage" and read aloud in the classroom.

The questions and activities in this teaching guide were written to support standards-based instruction. *Our Town* meets the standard for **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity** for grades 9-12. Since American Literature is most commonly taught at the 11th grade level, CCSS for 11-12 grade level students were used in this guide. However, the text and guide can easily be adapted for 9-10 grade CCSS.

A complete list of the Common Core State Standards can be found at <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.

About this Guide

This Teacher's Guide is divided into two sections. The first, "**Guided Reading Questions**," will help students with reading comprehension and appreciation. These questions can be used as a guide for annotating the text, journal responses, or discussion. The second section, "**Writing and Research Prompts**," consists of analytical writing and research prompts and is subdivided into genres based on the Common Core writing standards. Teachers will be able to incorporate the argumentation prompts into Socratic seminars or class debates if they wish to focus on Speaking and Listening standards.

Before You Read

As an activating strategy, show students the short documentary about the enduring legacy of Thornton Wilder's play: [*In Our Living and Our Dying: Our Town in the 21st Century*](#). There are several versions of the play available on DVD and online to view before, during, or after students read the play.

Guided Reading Questions

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

ACT ONE

1. Consider the stage directions for Act One. How do you think these directions will impact the audience's experience of the play? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
2. What is the traditional role of a stage manager? Why do you think Wilder uses the character of a stage manager as his narrator? How do the stage manager's actions reflect the role of a stage manager during the production of a play? How do they differ from the traditional understanding of what a stage manager does? What does Wilder's choice of a narrator suggest about the verisimilitude of the play? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
3. What landmarks does the Stage Manager point out? What does his selection of landmarks suggest about the values of the inhabitants of Grover's Corners? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
4. Based on Joe Crowell Jr.'s comments about his schoolteacher's upcoming marriage, what can you infer about the way marriage impacted a woman's career in the early 20th century (8-9)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
5. Explain how Wilder develops the themes of birth and death in Act One. Include specific quotes to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
6. What sort of lives do Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb seem to want for their children? What values do they want their children to develop? Do you think they are good parents? Cite specific textual evidence to explain your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
7. What do Rebecca, George, and Emily appear to want for their own lives? Support your answers with quotes from the text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
8. What does Mrs. Gibbs talk to Mrs. Webb about? What does Mrs. Gibbs want her husband to do? What advice does Mrs. Webb give her? What does this conversation suggest about the roles of husbands and wives in the early 20th century? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
9. Why do you think Wilder has the stage manager interrupt Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Gibbs to introduce Professor Willard's brief history of Grover's Corners? What is the focus of Willard's lecture? How does it relate to the previous scene? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
10. What does the Stage Manager ask Mr. Webb to speak about? Why do you think he invites questions from the audience? In what ways do these audience members serve as dramatic foils? What point do you think Wilder is trying to make? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
11. Examine the first scene between George and Emily (28-31). How does Wilder develop their relationship? Do they seem compatible? Explain your answer, citing specific details from the text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
12. What do you think Emily means when she tells her mother, "you never tell the truth about anything" (31)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
13. What purpose does the Stage Manager say he hopes that the play will serve? What does this suggest about Wilder's purpose in writing *Our Town*? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
14. Describe the relationship between George and his father, Dr. Webb. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
15. What are the choir ladies gossiping about? How does Dr. Webb respond to their gossip? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
16. Summarize the conversation between George and Rebecca at the end of Act One. Why do you think Wilder chooses to end the first act with these lines? How are they thematically significant? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**

ACT TWO

1. How much time passes between the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two? How do the Stage Manager's comments on page 46 suggest the theme of the cycle of life? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
2. What do you think the Stage Manager is suggesting when he tells the audience, "The First Act was called Daily Life. This act is called Love and Marriage. There's another act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about"(48)? How does this foreshadowing impact the audience's reaction to the second act? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
3. What does the Stage Manager say is a "vicious circle" (49)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
4. What do Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs remember about their own wedding day? Why do you think Mrs. Gibbs calls weddings "farces"? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
5. Why does George go to the Webb's house? How do Mr. and Mrs. Webb respond to him? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
6. Summarize the marriage advice that Mr. Webb gives George. Do you think it is good advice? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
7. Why does the Stage Manager say he wants to interrupt the action of the play to insert a flashback? What do you think he means when he says "I don't have to tell you how important that is" about the fact that Emily was just elected Secretary and Treasurer of the Junior Class and George was just elected President. Why would this be important? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
8. What criticism does Emily have of George? How does he respond to her criticism? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
9. What does George ask Emily to do as a favor to him? What does she say in return? Why do you think he decides that he won't go to college? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. What do you think the Stage Manager means when he says, "this is a good wedding" (75)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
11. What do you think the Stage Manager means when he says, "The real hero of this scene isn't on stage at all, and you know who that is"(75)? Who is the real hero of the play? Support your answer with evidence from the text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
12. Consider Mrs. Webb's comments on page 76. What do you think she hopes that Emily's girl friends have told her a thing or two about? Why do you think she means when she speaks in hyperbole and says, "The whole world's wrong, that's what's the matter"? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
13. What purpose does the small chorus of baseball players serve? What does the Stage Manager mean by the comment, "There used to be an awful lot of that kind of thing at weddings in the old days (77)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
14. Why does George have second thoughts about getting married? Why does Emily have second thoughts? Are they worried about the same things? What reassures them? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
15. Examine the use of juxtaposition in the last moments of Act Two. In what way does Mrs. Soames serve as a dramatic foil for the other characters in this final scene? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**

ACT THREE

1. What is the setting of this scene? What stage direction about the way they should speak does Wilder give the actors playing the dead townspeople? What mood is Wilder trying to establish with these directions? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
2. How much time passes between the first act and the third act? According to the Stage Manager, how has Grover's Corners changed during that time? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
3. What type of behavior does the narrator characterize as "layers and layers of nonsense" (87)? Why do you think he considers this "nonsense"? Do you agree with him? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
4. Which characters have died in the past three years? Are you surprised by any of the deaths? Explain your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
5. What does it mean to get "weaned away from the earth" (88)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4
6. Paraphrase the Stage Manager's comments about death. According to him, what happens to people after they die? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
7. Who is Sam Craig? Why is he visiting Grover's Corners? What do his comments about the dead suggest about the platitude "the dead live on in our memory"? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4**
8. Explain how Wilder slowly suggests and then reveals that Emily has died. Why would he choose to reveal her death in this way? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
9. How did Simon Stimson die? What is unusual about his epitaph? What message do you think Stimson was trying to send by selecting it? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
10. What memory causes Mrs. Soames to remark, "My, wasn't life awful—and wonderful" (93)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
11. Why do you think Wilder specifies that Emily should be smiling when she joins the rest of the dead? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
12. What is significant about the amount of money in the legacy that Mrs. Gibbs left George and Emily? How did they spend the money? Contrast their purchase with Mrs. Gibbs' desire for spending the legacy. What does their purchase suggest about their values? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
13. What does Emily mean when she says that living people are "sort of shut up in little boxes" (96)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5**
14. What does Emily decide that she wants to do? Why do the dead warn her not to do it? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
15. What does Emily realize when she relives a day from her life? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
16. How does the Stage Manager respond to Emily's question: "Do human beings ever realize life while they live it" (108)? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1**
17. Why do you think Wilder chose to end his play with comments about the stars? How does the conversation of the dead affect the way you respond to George's entrance and display of grief? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5**
18. What symbolic gesture does the Stage Manager make at the end of the play? What does his gesture suggest? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**

AFTERWORD, OVERVIEW AND READINGS

1. In the Afterword to the play, Tappan Wilder describes some of the most notable elements of the various productions of *Our Town* that he has seen. In your opinion, which one of these details seems like a particularly compelling directorial decision? Why did you choose this detail? How do you think this choice impacted the audience? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3
2. Contrast the initial critical response to the play with the public's reaction to the first productions of *Our Town* in Princeton, Boston, and on Broadway. Why do you think the critics initially responded the way that they did? Why do you think the audience connected with the play the way that they did? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
3. Based on his letters, what parts of *Our Town* were especially difficult for Thornton Wilder to write? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
4. Why was Wilder unhappy with the way the audience responded to the end of his play? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
5. What factors have contributed to *Our Town's* enduring popularity? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1**
6. How does the excerpt from Wilder's best-selling novel, *The Women of Andros*, connect thematically to *Our Town*? (pages 135-137) Cite specific evidence from the text to support your answer. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3
7. Read "Our Town in the Making: Four Drafts"(pages 139-150). What does the evolution of the script for *Our Town* suggest about the themes and issues that were the most important to Wilder? Cite specific textual evidence in your response. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3**
8. In the earliest reproduced draft of the script, "M Marries N", the stage manager introduces the idea of female protagonist as the "heroine" (143). Why do you think Wilder took this term out of subsequent drafts of the play?
9. Read the excerpt from the 1937 draft of *Our Town* (pages 145-146). What do you think Wilder intended as the purpose of the interludes between the acts? What do you think these interludes would have contained? Why do you think Wilder deleted them from subsequent drafts? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
10. Consider the excerpt from the 1937 draft of the play found on pages 146-148 and compare it to the final pages of the play (pages 104-106). What do you think the "Evening Visit" that Mrs. Gibb's mentions is alluding or referring to? Why do you think Wilder decided to revise this section? How does Wilder's revision change the tone of the last scene? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3**
11. Analyze the photograph from the 1938 Broadway production of *Our Town* (158). What thematic elements does the photo suggest? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7**
12. Read Thornton Wilder's interview on pages 150-153 and his "A Preface for *Our Town*" on pages 153-158. What does Wilder say appealed to him about writing for the theater? What was his purpose in writing *Our Town*?
13. Describe the conflict between Harris and Wilder. What aspects of the play did the men disagree about? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3**
14. Examine the list of complaints that Wilder had about revisions that had been made in the production of his play (161-162). Choose one of the specific revisions that Wilder criticizes and examine how the revision would have impacted the reader or viewer's experience of the play. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3**

Writing and Research Prompts

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.4 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.5 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2.9

EXPLANATORY/INFORMATIONAL PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 (a-f) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

1. In Act One, the Stage Manager allows a question from the audience about whether or not there is “any culture or love of beauty in Grover’s Corners (26). Mr. Webb answers her question by referencing four works, Robinson Crusoe, the Bible, Handel’s “Largo,” and Whistler’s “Mother.” Research one of these works and prepare a multimedia presentation that explains the cultural significance of the work you selected. Conclude your presentation with an examination of why this particular work would be significant to the inhabitants of a town like Grover’s Corners. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5
2. Compare the play to one or more stage or film adaptations (suggested adaptations include the 1940 film, the 1977 NBC production, the 1989 Kennedy Center production, and the 2003 Broadway production – all of which are available either online or on DVD). Compose a thoughtful analysis of the production, taking into consideration how the director used theatrical elements (casting, stage movement, set design, lighting, costume, etc) to develop their artistic interpretation of Wilder’s text. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7**
3. Critics often comment that an influence Chinese and Japanese and Classical Greek theater can be seen in Wilder’s artistic style. Research Chinese and Japanese and Classical Greek theater and prepare a multimedia presentation that demonstrates and explains the parallels between Wilder’s play and select world theatre traditions. You may also choose to consider the impact of German Expressionist theater on Wilder’s work. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5**
4. In a collaborative group, stage a production of a scene (or scenes) from Wilder’s play. Thoughtfully consider the choices that you make in terms of staging your scene so that it emphasizes one of the play’s themes. Present your scene for the class. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1.B**
5. In a letter to Sybil Colfax, Wilder noted, “Every act has hymn-singing in it – the choir practice, the wedding, the funeral” (119). Examine the role that hymns play in *Our Town*. Why do you think Wilder structured each act so that it contains a hymn? How do the hymns advance the plot and/or themes of the play? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5
6. In one of the play’s most famous passages Emily asks the Stage Manager whether “any human beings ever realize life while they live it? —every, every minute?” He replies, “The saints and poets, maybe—they do some”(108). Choose either a poet or a saint that you think “realized life while they lived it” and prepare a multimedia presentation to inform your classmates about his/her life and work. Be sure to give specific examples and explain how his/her life or work reflects an awareness of the preciousness of life’s daily moments. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5**
7. In a letter to his family, Thornton Wilder wrote, “The great ghost of Nietzsche. . . . Last night my play got such an influx of new ideas that now it’s the most beautiful play you can imagine”(118). Research the work of Nietzsche and analyze the way *Our Town* may reflect Nietzsche’s influence. Be sure to correctly cite your sources. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8
8. Research the role of costume design in theater and then design costumes for either all characters in a specific scene or a single character throughout the play. Explain the thought process behind your designs. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4
9. In a note to Jed Harris, the director of the first production of *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder outlined his grievances regarding the direction of the play. (172) Watch two to three filmed versions of one scene from *Our Town*. Compare and contrast the choices made by each director. Divide students into groups and ask each group to interpret and perform a specific scene from the play. As a class, discuss each interpretation of the scene by having every group take a turn on a panel where they must

thoughtfully respond to their classmates' comments and criticism. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a-d

10. Analyze *Our Town* in the context of Thornton Wilder's biography. As a starting point, pay particular attention to the primary sources in the afterword of the text. What personal events influenced Wilder? How was his writing process impacted by time he spent traveling or staying in artist colonies, such as the MacDowell colony? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8
11. Compare *Our Town* to another early 20th-century American novel about rural life (suggested authors: Willa Cather, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck). What do the texts have in common? How do they differ? How does each work reflect its historical context? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9.A**
12. Explore the influence of the works of Shakespeare on Thornton Wilder. What do critics mean when they use the term "Shakespearean" to describe a work of drama? In what specific ways could *Our Town* be considered "Shakespearean"? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7**
13. At the beginning of the play, the Stage Manager invites Mr. Webb and Professor Willard to give background information about Grover's Corners. Research the history of your own town and prepare an informational speech about one specific aspect of your town's history (examples: race, industry, education, government, geography, culture, economy).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4**
14. The section "Final Thoughts: 'Value above All Price...'" contains Wilder's handwritten response to his frequently quoted comment that, "The play is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life"(187). How does Wilder's annotation of his own quote enhance your understanding of the play's themes? Explain his final comment that, "Our true life is in the imagination and in the memory"(188). **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**

ARGUMENTATION PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 (a-e) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

1. Wilder was very specific about the set design and staging of his play. How much control should an author have over the way that his or her text is interpreted and/or adapted? Do you believe directors and/or actors have a responsibility to honor an author's wishes, or do they have the right to interpret texts in their own way? Explain your answer.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
2. Over the course of the play, the Stage Manager examines some of the changes that take place in Grover's Corners between the years of 1901-1913. Research this period in American history. Is life in Grover's Corners an accurate reflection of America during the Progressive Era? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8**
3. Although it was first performed in 1938, the action of the play concludes in 1913. Research America during the Great Depression. How does the play speak to the questions, ideas or issues that faced Americans during the Great Depression? Support your answer with specific examples and correctly documented research. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8
4. At the beginning of Act Two, the Stage Manager notes that, "Almost everybody in the world gets married,—you know what I mean? In our town there aren't hardly any exceptions. Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married (48)." Later he notes: "I've married over two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know" (82). How has the role of marriage in American society changed? What do you think accounts for this shift? Do you think people still believe in marriage? Support your answer with specific examples and correctly documented research. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
5. The Stage Manager suggests that one of Wilder's purposes for writing *Our Town* was to document "the real life of the people" for future generations (33). Do you think social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr) is creating a record of "real life" that will accurately inform future generations? Compose a thoughtful argumentation paper that argues for or against the

use of social media as a historical record. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.8**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9

6. Is *Our Town* a work of realism or modernism? Support your answer with correctly cited literary criticism.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7
7. In the Foreword to the text, Margulies criticizes readers that dismiss Wilder's masterpiece as a work of kitsch and place it alongside Frank Capra and Norman Rockwell. Compare the way that *Our Town* portrayals rural American life with the art of Norman Rockwell or the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Do you think Wilder's play is markedly different? Support your answer with specific textual evidence. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
8. Analyze the unconventional character of the Stage Manager. Some critics have suggested that he plays a role similar to that of a Greek chorus; others have suggested that he may be meant to personify Death. Some critics have even suggested that his presence hints at the presence of God. Whatever the interpretation, it's clear that his role is symbolically and metaphorically significant. Compose a thoughtful argument regarding the way you believe his character should be interpreted. How does his presence in the play impact the development of plot and theme? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
9. In Act Two, the Stage Manager states that, "The real hero of this scene isn't on the stage at all, and you know who that is"(75). Who do you think the hero of the play is? Support your answer with logical arguments and textual evidence.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
10. Analyze the way that Wilder deals with gender roles in *Our Town*. In what ways do male and female characters challenge stereotypes? In what ways do they conform to stereotypes? Is the play ultimately progressive or conservative in its portrayal of gender? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
11. In the Foreword to the text, Margulies praises *Our Town* for its "subversive power"(xii). In what specific ways could *Our Town* be viewed as a subversive text? Do you think Wilder intended the play to be subversive? Support your argument with evidence from the text and Wilder's biography. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**
12. In the Afterword, Tappan Wilder writes: "Through much of the last century, *Our Town's* reputation, especially among critical circles was often tarred as a moving, but flimsy, sentimental and patriotic depiction of life in a now lost small-town America—presumably the kind of play you cry at for the wrong reasons." (109-110) Research critical reaction to *Our Town*. (You may start your research at the [The Thornton Wilder Society](#).) Write an editorial response to a review that you particularly disagree with. Support your argument with specific examples from the text and other critical responses.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
13. In the reading "Take Your Pencil," the editor notes that *Our Town* was criticized as being "guilty of the crime of sentimentality" (166). Tappan Wilder explores this criticism in the Afterword to the play. Do you believe sentimentality in art is a crime? Do you think *Our Town* is guilty of sentimentality? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4**
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9
14. Do you agree or disagree that a work of art can provide a realistic understanding of life? How does art help us understand the world we live in or process our experiences? Consider this question in light of the Addendum to the Foreword of the 75th Anniversary Edition. What does Margulies mean when he suggests that "The simple truths about family and community Wilder wrote about seventy-five years ago seemed to articulate the enormity of this contemporary tragedy"(xxii)?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4** **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9**

NARRATIVE PROMPTS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 (a-e) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

1. In the Foreword to the play, Donald Margulies suggests that the reader may have been forced to read *Our Town* “when you were too young to appreciate it.” Think back on a time that you experienced something (a text, film, activity, work of art, relationship, etc.) that you were initially “too young to appreciate.” How did your experience change? What life experiences gave you the context to understand or appreciate the experience? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
2. In Act One, the Stage Manager muses on the significance of the play and states that he is going to place a copy of the play in the cornerstone of the new bank as a message to the future. He explains: “So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. —This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying” (31). Compose a narrative account of what modern life is like as a testimony for future generations. You may choose to write a personal narrative, work of short fiction, or play. Strive to capture a realistic glimpse of everyday life. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
3. At the beginning of Act Three, the Stage Manager talks about death and notes that “everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings” (87-88) What do you believe is eternal? Compose a personal narrative that explores your own beliefs (or questions) about life after physical death. *Note to teachers: If your students have access to technology, this would be an excellent topic for a visual essay.* **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10 CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5**
4. When Emily decides that she wants to relive one day from her life. Mrs. Gibbs advises her, “At least choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough” (100). As a result, Emily has a realization about our inability to comprehend the preciousness of our lives and relationships. Try to make a conscious decision to experience a single day completely aware of how precious life is, and compose a personal narrative reflecting on your experience. Teachers may choose to show the final scenes of the 2013 film *About Time* or Louie Schwartzberg’s Ted Talk “[Nature. Beauty. Gratitude](#)” as an introduction to the assignment. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
5. In Act One, Emily asks her mother to tell her whether or not she is good looking. When her mother answers evasively, Emily responds by saying, “Oh, Mama, you never tell us the truth about anything” (31). If you could ask your parent one question and be guaranteed that they would answer truthfully, what would you ask? Compose a personal narrative that examines your choice of question and what you think your parent’s answer would be. What do you wish they would say? **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
6. Why is the title of Wilder’s play significant? How did you personally connect to the text? Compose a narrative essay that explores your personal reaction to the play. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
7. Although the Stage Manager gives the audience a glimpse of the moment that George and Emily fell in love, there are “missing years” between each act of *Our Town*. Choose a moment from one of the times between acts and write a scene or a monologue that illustrates a moment that you think would be significant. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
8. In Act Two, the Stage Manager asks the audience to think back to the first time they fell in love, “when you were like a person sleepwalking, and you didn’t quite see the street you were in, and didn’t quite hear everything that was said to you” (63). Can you remember the first time that you fell for someone? Compose a poem, short story, reflective essay, or monologue that captures what it felt like to have a crush on someone or to fall in love. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
9. “When asked if Peterborough was *Our Town*, Wilder always shifted the question to a global perspective. . . . ‘Young man,’ he said, ‘Grover’s Corners is your home town in New York and mine in Wisconsin. It’s everyone’s home town. I have received letters from people in Chile, Iran and Iraq who have read or seen the play. Despite sociological differences, they tell me they have readily identified their everyday experiences with those of *Our Town*...’” (152) Re-write a scene from *Our Town* from a different perspective—changing the time, place, and ethnicity of the characters. Be prepared to read your scene to the class and to discuss the choices that you made and how they did and did not affect the scene. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**

10. Before Emily turns away from the living world, she asks to take one last look and recites a list of good-byes to the things and people that she will miss. She concludes with the observation, “Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize”(108). What would be on your list of things that are “too wonderful” to realize? What places, people, or things are you most thankful for? Create a “gratitude list” and compose a poem, monologue, or reflective essay about the specific things you appreciate the most. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.10**
11. In the reading “Take Your Pencil” (pages 166-169), Wilder responds to criticism that his play was “guilty of the crime of sentimentality” by noting, “Eight of ten find that memory has selected from their earlier years the more touching and affectionate aspects of their early life. Death, separation and distance have condoned whatever elements are painful.” Think back on a memory from your past. What aspects of that memory do you choose to focus on? What do you intentionally gloss over, ignore, or edit? Compose a narrative account of this event that presents the event in the way that you want to remember it. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4**

Links of Interest

[The Thornton Wilder Family Official Website](#)

[The Thornton Wilder Society](#). Academic site devoted to Thornton Wilder

[NEA: The Big Read](#). Teaching materials for *Our Town* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*

[The Thornton Wilder Papers, Yale University](#)

Resources based on the [PBS Masterpiece Theater](#) production of *Our Town*.

[OT: Our Town](#). A critically acclaimed documentary film about a production of *Our Town* staged in an urban high school in Compton, California.

Books of Interest

[The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder](#) edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer

[Thornton Wilder: A Life](#) by Penelope Niven

[Thornton Wilder and the Puritan Narrative Tradition](#) by Lincoln Konkle

Works by Thornton Wilder

NOVELS

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

Foreword by Russell Banks

The Cabala and The Woman of Andros: Two Novels

Foreword by Penelope Niven

The Eighth Day

Foreword by John Updike

Heaven's My Destination

Foreword by J. D. McClatchy

The Ides of March

Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Theophilus North

Foreword by Christopher Buckley

PLAYS

Our Town: A Play in Three Acts

Foreword by Donald Margulies

The Skin of Our Teeth

Foreword by Paula Vogel

Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker

Foreword by John Guare

Other Titles of Interest

My Antonia by Willa Cather

O Pioneers! by Willa Cather

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson

Spoon River Anthology – Edgar Lee Masters

About This Guide's Author

Amy Jurskis is the author of numerous teaching guides, including *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot and *American Tapestry* by Rachel Swarns. She holds a B.A. in English from the University of Georgia and a MAT from Agnes Scott College. A former department chair for language arts in a title one public school in Atlanta, she currently serves as a chairperson of curriculum and English teacher at Oxbridge Academy of the Palm Beaches.

For more teaching guides aligned to the CCSS, visit our [CCSS Resource Site](#).