



# Villains vs. Heroes: What's the Difference?

## Helping Kids Become the Good Guys

This lesson plan is designed to support English Language Arts curriculum at the grade 6-12 level. It focuses on a surprisingly difficult question: what exactly makes someone a “villain,” in fiction or in real life? And what makes heroes different?

The lesson will help students:

- **Analyze** what separates protagonists from antagonists in books they have read
- **Think critically** about what really makes someone a hero or a villain—in real life as well as fiction
- **Make good decisions** by understanding how even well-intentioned goals can go wrong

Most importantly, it's part of a broader series of lesson plans that **teach kids how to be heroes**. Each one is based on groundbreaking psychology research<sup>1</sup> and a modern, evidence-based approach to heroism. In addition to these academic goals, we believe that this lesson will help your students be more responsible, more considerate of others, and ultimately seek to improve the lives of those around them.

To get more lesson plans & info on hero training, join our mailing list: [heroicimagination.org](https://heroicimagination.org)

*“Villains ‘take the deal.’ They take the easy way out. Heroes choose the hard way—they are willing to work, make sacrifices, and compromise.”*

*—Dr. Ari Kohen, Heroic Imagination Project*

<sup>1</sup> . For a terrific overview of the research, we recommend the book *What Makes a Hero? The Surprising Science of Selflessness* by Elizabeth Svoboda.



## Introduction for Teachers

All too often we think of villains as simply the “bad guys,” the opposite of heroes. But many villains start off with good intentions, and it’s how they achieve them that’s wrong. That means that a normal person can easily veer into “villain” behavior without realizing it until it’s too late. How can students know the difference and make good choices from the start?

Similarly, some villains even have a few good qualities—things like bravery, endurance, willingness to take action, or dedication to their ideals. These are qualities we might admire or call heroic under other circumstances. If both heroes and villains can have these qualities, then how do we tell the difference? What separates the “bad guys” from the “good guys”?

We propose a simple solution:

**Villains pursue their goals in a way that’s *unfair or harms* people. Heroes *help* people (and they do it the fair way).**

Even if a villain has some good qualities, the “good” in their actions is spoiled if they don’t take into account the harm they do to others.

This understanding of villains will help your students:

- Correctly tell when someone is doing something wrong, even if that person tries to pretend it’s the right thing to do
- See through hype or “spin” and evaluate the real impact of an idea
- Ask themselves how they want to get things done in their own lives, and consider how their choices will affect others

Ultimately, **this lesson will help students build empathy**. Empathy is a key characteristic that all heroes have, and that helps us do good in the world as we live our lives.



## I. Anticipatory: Who are YOUR heroes & villains?

Here's an exercise you can use to get your students' attention:

1. Write the word **HEROES** on one side of the board, and **VILLAINS** on the other.
2. Ask your students to help you make a list—first a list of all the heroes they can think of, then a list of villains.
  - With the villain list, you'll get a variety of classic "bad guys." These are fine, but ask students to name more villains—ideally you want some who are more nuanced.
  - If it helps, you can ask students, "What do these villains *want*?" Students will say "to take over the world" or "to kill (the hero)." Ask them if that's the only kind of villain—can they think of villains who want other things?
3. Once you have both lists, go back to the HEROES side. Ask students what all of these heroes have in common. Based on the responses, you should be able to home in on a single answer: **all of them help people**. Write "Heroes help people" on their side of the board.
4. Finally, turn to the VILLAINS side and ask the students what the villains all have in common.
  - The first answers may be simplistic ("they're all bad," etc.). That's okay.
  - If the answers are too general, point out exceptions on the board. At least one of the villains likely won't fit the generalization. Or, ask them what *else* they all have in common.
  - Some popular villains, like Magneto from X-Men, make great examples you can point out. Magneto wanted to help his fellow mutants, which isn't "bad," but he's still a villain. Why?
5. As the students make more connections, you can tease out a clearer answer: villains pursue their goals in a way that hurts people. Write "Villains hurt people to get what they want" on the board.

### Pop Culture Example: What Makes Magneto Bad?

In the X-Men movies, Magneto sees humans as a threat, and his main goal is really to protect mutants. There's nothing wrong with that goal. But his solution is to attack humankind—*all* humans, not just the ones threatening the mutants.

Magneto doesn't just hurt people to get what he wants. He tries to get what he wants (helping mutants) at the expense of others (innocent people). That's deeply unfair.



Compare that behavior with Dr. Xavier. Dr. Xavier also wants to protect mutants, but he tries to build cooperation and understanding to do so. He isn't willing to hurt innocent people to get what he wants.

In other words: **heroes have empathy not just for their own group, but for people on the other side.**



## II. Teaching: Turning villains into heroes

The basic idea is that any goal can be accomplished two ways: the villain’s way or the hero’s way. If students know the difference, they can go about getting the things they want by using moral or “heroic” means instead of resorting to selfish or “villainous” means.

In other words, nobody is a hero or villain by default. It’s the choices you make that determine what you are.

### Talking Points

- **Nobody is born a villain or a hero.** In stories, heroes are often chosen by prophecy or because they have special powers. But in the real world, the choices you make are what determine whether you’re a hero or a villain.
- **We all want things in life, and there are good ways and bad ways to get them.** You don’t have to hurt people or cheat to get what you want. If you take time to think, you can always find a better way.
- **Doing the heroic thing is harder, but it pays off more in the end.** Cheating or hurting people is often the “easy way” to get something. It takes more work to think of others, put their needs first, and work together. But that extra work means you can *all* get what you want—not just one person.
- **Students have already seen examples of heroic behavior—and unheroic behavior—in literature.** See Section V, “Literary Examples” (page 8), or draw on examples of your own from books/stories you’ve read in class.



### **Modeling Heroic Behavior**

Give your students one or both of these hypothetical examples, and ask them to come up with the non-villain solution to each one:

1. Misha’s parents gave him \$20 to buy holiday gifts for his friends. At the store, he sees a game he wants for himself—and it costs \$12. He figures he could use the gift money to buy it for himself as long as he gets small, cheap gifts for his friends.
  - What’s wrong with Misha’s plan to get the game? What harm does it cause?
  - There’s nothing bad about wanting a game. Is there a way Misha could try to get it without being a villain?
2. Kelly is wearing the brand new jacket her mom bought for her. She slips and falls into a big mud puddle, staining the entire jacket. Kelly knows her mom will be angry—but she also knows she could blame her brother. If she said her brother pushed her, her mom would probably believe it, and Kelly wouldn’t get punished at all.
  - What’s wrong with Kelly’s plan? Is there anything villain-like about it?
  - What’s a better, more heroic way Kelly could deal with the situation?

### **Discussion Questions/Checking Understanding**

Use any or all of these questions to check that your students understand the concept:

- Is it possible for a hero and a villain to both want the same thing? If so, what makes them different?
- Acting like a hero takes more work than acting like a villain. Why is it worth it to do the extra work?
- If there is a “heroic” way to approach every problem, why do some people choose the “villain” way?
- If someone is a villain, can they get better? Can they become a hero?



### III. Guided Practice: Making heroic decisions

Here are two ways you can guide your students in applying what they've learned.

#### 1. Fixing the Villains

Earlier, you made a list of villains on the board. Take 3-5 names from that list, and for each one, ask students two questions:

- What *choice* did they make that made them a villain?  
(If students struggle, ask them what the villain *wanted*. Often, identifying what a villain wanted to achieve makes it easier to see what choices they made to get it—and where they went wrong.)
- What could the villain have done *instead* that would have gotten them what they wanted, without being a villain?

*Example:* What Magneto originally wanted wasn't to kill all humans; it was just to protect mutants. So the choice that made him a villain was the decision to attack humans indiscriminately—even those who weren't threatening mutants at all. Instead, he could have worked to build a safe place for mutants, or he could have worked with Professor X to save mutants in a more peaceful way.

#### 2. Heroes and Villains in Literature

If you haven't already, now is a good time to connect the lesson with books the students have read for class. Choose a book and have a group discussion:

- Which characters acted like heroes, and which characters acted like villains? (There may be more than one in both lists.)
- Does anyone disagree, and think that one of the "heroes" was actually a villain, or vice-versa?
- What actions did those characters take that were heroic/villainous? If the character is a villain, what choice could they have made differently that would have been "good"?

See Section V (page 8) for detailed literary examples from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Lord of the Flies*.



## IV. Independent Practice: Making heroic decisions

Here are three projects you can use to help your students apply what they've learned on their own.

### Group Activity 1

Break the class into small groups, and give them this scenario:

“You have a friend who just got in trouble for something they didn't do. They were in the bathroom when a teacher walked in and found fresh graffiti on the wall. The teacher gave your friend detention even though they're not the one who did the graffiti. Now your friend is really angry—and they told you they want to get back at the teacher. **What could you suggest your friend do to solve the situation instead?**”

Give the groups 10-15 minutes to brainstorm different solutions. They should write down their ideas, then choose 1 favorite idea that they think is the best. Ask each group to present their favorite idea to the rest of the class.

### Group Activity 2

Break the class into small groups, and ask each group to choose one fictional villain from a book they've read or a movie they've seen. (Alternatively, you can ask them to use villains from books they've read in class.) Ask each group to make a short video that covers three things:

- What did that character really *want*?
- As they tried to get what they wanted, what *choice* did they make that made them a “villain”?
- What could they have chosen to do instead, that would let them try to get what they want *without* being a villain?

### Individual Activity

Ask each student to write an essay about a time they did something wrong. In their essay, they should discuss:

1. What harm did it cause?
2. What's another way they could have tried to get the same thing or solve the same problem, that would have been more heroic?

Instead of an essay, you could also have students present this in a video, a presentation to the class, a comic book, or another format.



## V. Literary Examples

Below you'll find helpful talking points to draw on if you're connecting this lesson to *Lord of the Flies* vs. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You can also use them as inspiration to develop similar lessons for other books.

### ***To Kill a Mockingbird***

**Atticus Finch** agrees to represent an innocent man, Tom Robinson. Many people consider Finch one of the heroes of the book. But Finch was only doing his job as a lawyer. Do Atticus Finch's actions count as heroic?

- Unlike most cases a lawyer takes, Atticus Finch risked his own reputation to defend Tom Robinson. He was willing to take a personal risk that many lawyers would not have chosen to do.
- Although Atticus Finch did the unpopular thing, he always did what was fair. In fact, after Bob Ewell died, Atticus was even willing to turn in his own son, Jem, when he thought he was responsible.

**Bob Ewell** probably believed he was doing the right thing. He and his family had been humiliated in court, and one of the town's most respected citizens had called both Bob and Mayella liars. He thought he was treated unfairly, and had a good reason to attack Jem and Scout. But he's often seen as the story's villain. Was what Bob Ewell did wrong, or was it right?

- Even though Bob had been humiliated, it was his own fault — he had brought it on himself by lying about what happened with Mayella.
- Even if Bob did think he was being treated unfairly, the way he went about trying to fix it wasn't fair, either. For example, he attacked two almost defenseless children, Jem and Scout.

***Lord of the Flies***

**Ralph and Jack** both try to become leaders of the boys, and both succeed in different ways. But the two end up taking very different actions once they are leaders. Are either of them heroes? Is either one a villain?

- Ralph makes mistakes as a leader, but he tries to do what's fair. He even takes risks to protect others. For example, he goes to get Piggy's glasses back, even though he knows he is outnumbered.
- Jack consistently puts his own needs ahead of the group. For example, he would rather win fame by killing the "beast" than make sure the smoke signal is lit. And he becomes increasingly violent, mistreating Piggy and eventually even trying to kill Ralph.

**Simon** is killed before the boys are rescued. But he is just as important as Ralph and Jack. Did Simon behave heroically at all?

- Simon obviously prefers being alone, but he worked hard to protect the other boys, especially the littluns. And he made sure that everyone had shelter. He put the needs of the group ahead of his own needs.
- In the end, when Simon saw the dead parachutist, he decided to go and tell the other boys the truth about the beast. Ultimately, this cost him his life. But it was very different than how Jack acted (making up the beast to gain power), or even how Ralph acted (running away when he saw "the beast").