POWERFUL MEMOIR FROM AN AMERICAN MASTER
AUGUST WILSON’S
HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED
CURRICULUM GUIDE

CO-CONCEIVED & DIRECTED BY
TODD KREIDLER
FEATURING
EUGENE LEE
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Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 1
- **Grade 7**: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grade 8**: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grades 9-10**: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **Grades 11-12**: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text, including where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 2
- **Grade 7**: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grade 8**: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 9-10**: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **Grades 11-12**: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide and objective summary of the text.

Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details 3
- **Grade 7**: Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).
- **Grade 8**: Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidence in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.
- **Grades 9-10**: Analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the themes.
- **Grades 11-12**: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop related elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 5
- **Grade 7**: Analyze how a drama’s or poem’s form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.
- **Grades 9-10**: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks), create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- **Grades 11-12**: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Reading Literature: Craft and Structure 6
- **Grade 7**: Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.
- **Grade 8**: Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.
- **Grades 11-12**: Analyze a case in which grasping point of view required distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7
- **Grade 7**: Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem with its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).
- **Grade 8**: Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.
- **Grades 9-12**: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).
ACTING

• 1.7 — Create and sustain a believable character throughout a scripted or improvised scene (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.12 — Describe and analyze, in written and oral form, characters’ wants, needs, objectives, and personality characteristics (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.13 — In rehearsal and performance situations, perform as a productive and responsible member of an acting ensemble (i.e., demonstrate personal responsibility and commitment to a collaborative process) (By the end of Grade 8).

• 1.14 — Create complex and believable characters through the integration of physical, vocal, and emotional choices (Grades 9-12).

• 1.15 — Demonstrate an understanding of a dramatic work by developing a character analysis (Grades 9-12).

• 1.17 — Demonstrate increased ability to work effectively alone and collaboratively with a partner or in an ensemble (Grades 9-12).

READING AND WRITING SCRIPTS

• 2.7 — Read plays and stories from a variety of cultures and historical periods and identify the characters, setting, plot, theme, and conflict (By the end of Grade 8).

• 2.8 — Improvise characters, dialogue, and actions that focus on the development and resolution of dramatic conflicts (By the end of Grade 8).

• 2.11 — Read plays from a variety of genres and styles; compare and contrast the structure of plays to the structures of other forms of literature (Grades 9-12).

TECHNICAL THEATRE

• 4.6 — Draw renderings, floor plans, and/or build models of sets for a dramatic work and explain choices in using visual elements (line, shape/form, texture, color, space) and visual principals (unity, variety, harmony, balance, rhythm) (By the end of Grade 8).

• 4.13 — Conduct research to inform the design of sets, costumes, sound, and lighting for a dramatic production (Grades 9-12).

CONNECTIONS

• Strand 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts — Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings (Grades PreK-12).

• Strand 10: Interdisciplinary Connections — Students will apply their knowledge of the arts to the study of English language arts, foreign languages, health, history and social science, mathematics, and science and technology/engineering (Grades PreK-12).

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Attending live theatre is a unique experience with many valuable educational and social benefits. To ensure that all audience members are able to enjoy the performance, please take a few minutes to discuss the following audience etiquette topics with your students before you come to the Huntington Theatre Company.

• How is attending the theatre similar to and different from going to the movies? What behaviors are and are not appropriate when seeing a play? Why?

• Remind students that because the performance is live, the audience’s behavior and reactions will affect the actors’ performances. No two audiences are exactly the same, and therefore no two performances are exactly the same — this is part of what makes theatre so special! Students’ behavior should reflect the level of performance they wish to see.

• Theatre should be an enjoyable experience for the audience. It is absolutely all right to applaud when appropriate and laugh at the funny moments. Talking and calling out during the performance, however, are not allowed. Why might this be? Be sure to mention that not only would the people seated around them be able to hear their conversation, but the actors on stage could hear them, too. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently!

• Any noise or light can be a distraction, so please remind students to make sure their cell phones are turned off (or better yet, left at home or at school!). Texting, photography, and video recording are prohibited. Food, gum, and drinks should not be brought into the theatre.

• Students should sit with their group as seated by the Front of House staff and should not leave their seats once the performance has begun.
August Wilson — Playwright

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr., in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1945. He was the fourth of seven children born to Frederick Kittel, a German immigrant baker, and Daisy Wilson, an African American cleaning woman from North Carolina. Wilson spent his childhood living in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, which was settled by predominantly Black families during the “Great Migration” of former slaves from the rural South to the industrial North during the early 20th century. The Hill District would later become the setting for many of Wilson’s plays.

Wilson encountered racism as the only African American student in his high school and eventually quit school at the age of 15 when a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper. He was mostly self-educated from that point on. He spent significant time at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Library where he independently studied a wide range of subjects from literature and sociology to theology and philosophy. During this time, he also began studying the works of iconic Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes. After serving one year in the United States Army in 1962, Wilson worked odd jobs and refocused himself on writing, producing mostly poetry. After his father’s death in 1965, Wilson changed his name, in part to honor his mother, but also as an act of defining his own identity.

The 10th annual Heinz Awards profile of August Wilson explains that as a writer he “was intent on using his plays to increase self-awareness and self-determination among African Americans,” and in 1968, he and friend Rob Penny founded Black Horizons Theater in the Hill District, a local community theatre aimed at raising social consciousness in the Black community. After he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, Wilson began to flourish as a playwright, and frequently collaborated with St. Paul’s Penumbra Theatre Company. The plays he wrote early in his career in St. Paul included Jitney, which would become the “1970s” installment of his Century Cycle, a series of ten plays that depict the African American experience of each decade in the 20th century. August Wilson was a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for Fences (1987) and The Piano Lesson (1990). His plays have received critical accolades for their depictions of racism, poverty, and the development of African American culture. The Huntington Theatre Company is proud to have been one of Wilson’s artistic homes throughout his career. The Huntington has produced all ten plays in Wilson’s Century Cycle, including early productions of Seven Guitars (1995), Jitney (1998), King Hedley II (2000), Gem of the Ocean (2004), and Radio Golf (2006) before they went on to New York.

Shortly after his death from liver cancer in 2005, the Virginia Theatre on Broadway was renamed the August Wilson Theatre in his honor.

QUESTIONS:

1. The African American population in the Hill District grew significantly during the “Great Migration,” a period during which many African Americans moved from the rural South to the industrial North. Research this important American historical period.
   a. What were the primary industries in Pittsburgh that made it an appealing place to seek work? What other cities were popular destinations for African Americans?
   b. How did the “Great Migration” contribute to the Harlem Renaissance, the explosion of Black culture in the 1930s that would later help inspire August Wilson’s work? What themes and subject matter do Wilson’s plays share with the works of Harlem Renaissance writers like Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes?

2. Few of Wilson’s poems have been published, but two of them, “For Donna” and “The Day Winds Up the Opposite,” are available on augustwilson.net. Read these poems and analyze them for both content and form. What are these poems about? What metaphors does Wilson employ? How does the language evoke time, place, and emotion?

Todd Kreidler — Director & Dramaturg

Todd Kreidler has enjoyed a long career in the theatre and is a self-proclaimed jack-of-all-trades. From box office employee to electrician, he has participated in nearly every aspect of a full-scale theatre production. But one of his major career highlights was his longstanding relationship with the great American playwright August Wilson, working as dramaturg on the final plays of Wilson’s Century Cycle and assisting him in developing the screenplay for Fences (currently in development and slated to star Denzel Washington and Viola Davis). Kreidler also co-conceived Wilson’s one-man show How I Learned What I Learned, which Kreidler has continued to direct with different actors since Wilson’s death in 2005.
In addition to his work with August Wilson, Todd Kreidler also spent three seasons on the staff of the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, where he directed productions of Shakespeare’s plays for their young company program. As a playwright, Kreidler wrote a stage adaptation of the 1967 film, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, which was produced at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, in 2013, and by the Huntington Theatre Company in the fall of 2014. Kreidler’s other recent work includes the musical, *Holler If Ya Hear Me*, inspired by the popular music and lyrics of the late rapper Tupac Shakur, which he co-wrote with another Wilson collaborator, director Kenny Leon. The musical ran briefly on Broadway in the summer of 2014. Kreidler’s next theatrical project is a musical titled *The Heroin Diaries*, based on the music and memoir of Mötley Crüe bassist Nikki Sixx. Kreidler has chosen to pursue these projects in the theatre because he believes the stage gives the audience more “access” to the characters than in film or television and allows him as a writer to carry out a conversation with his audiences.

A Pittsburgh native, Kreidler attended Duquesne University where he studied English and philosophy. He credits Wilson for motivating him to write, which was Kreidler’s true passion, as scary as it was to pursue. Kreidler considers himself privileged to have had such a long career grappling with some of the biggest cultural issues of our times. In this spirit, Kreidler co-founded the August Wilson Monologue Competition with fellow Wilson collaborator, director Kenny Leon, with the aim of introducing a new generation to the playwright’s life and work. The Huntington Theatre Company is the Boston home of the national August Wilson Monologue Competition, now hosted in ten cities around the country.

QUESTIONS:

1. August Wilson was Todd Kreidler’s mentor, a person who is generally well-established in his or her career or field who guides, advises, and encourages someone who is learning or just starting out, known as a protégé. What other mentor-protégé relationships exist in the arts? What qualities do good mentors possess? Is there anyone in your life who you consider a mentor?

2. Research some of August Wilson’s other frequent collaborators, such as directors Lloyd Richards and Marion McClinton. On which theatrical projects did they work with August Wilson? How did their ideas impact Wilson’s work?

3. Visit the websites for the national August Wilson Monologue Competition (*augustwilsonmonologue.com*) and the Boston Regional August Wilson Monologue Competition (*huntingtontheatre.org/education/augustwilson*). In establishing the program, what were Kreidler and Kenny Leon’s hopes for the future? What role does Kreidler play in the program today? What is a “Wilsonian Soldier”?

EUGENE LEE — ACTOR

Eugene Lee’s career in the entertainment industry stretches back more than 30 years, and encompasses acting roles in theatre, film, and television, as well as work as a playwright, college lecturer, and festival curator. Lee was born in 1953 and grew up in the Fort Worth, Texas area where he was one of just a handful of black students in the public schools he attended. In middle school, he performed with the drama club and studied Spanish, in which he would eventually become fluent. In high school, he was outgoing and well-liked, and in 10th grade became the first student of color to be a member of the co-ed cheerleading squad. Lee attended Texas State University where he majored in political science and theatre. With limited performance opportunities available for students of color, Lee co-founded the student theatre group Ebony Players which presented Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* for its inaugural production. The group had the honor of performing at the ranch of former President Lyndon B. Johnson, also a Texas State alumnus. After the performance, Johnson wrote the group a check for $10,000 to help fund their future productions.

After graduating from Texas State in 1974, Lee lived a bicoastal actor’s lifestyle, dividing his time between Los Angeles and New York City, filming commercials and small television and film roles. His theatre career launched in earnest in 1979 when he was hired as a member of the Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Since then, Lee has played a wide range of theatre roles, but the characters and plays of August Wilson’s Century Cycle occupy an important place in his career and he is renowned as a key interpreter of Wilson’s work. Lee has appeared in the Huntington Theatre Company productions of three of Wilson’s plays, playing Eli in *Gem of the Ocean* in 2004, Sterling Johnson in *Radio Golf* in 2006, and Bono in *Fences* in 2009. He has also appeared in productions of *Two Trains Running*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* at other theatres around the country. His other theatre credits include *Home, Sons and Fathers of Sons, Manhattan Made Me*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Soldier’s Play* (produced by the internationally renowned Negro Ensemble Company, of which he was a member). He is the 1990 recipient of the NAACP Theatre Award for Best Supporting Actor. Feature film credits include *Blacklisted, Coach Carter, Static, Fraternity Boys*, and *Menace to Society*. Lee’s television credits include “The Women of Brewster Place,” “The District,” and many
more. He is also a playwright whose works include *East Texas Hot Links*, *Fear Itself*, *Somebody Called: A Tale of Two Preachers*, *Killingsworth*, and the musical *Twist*.

In 2002, Eugene Lee founded the annual Texas State University Black and Latino Playwright’s Conference. The conference aims to showcase the work of Black and Latino playwrights from across the United States, provide an environment in which these writers can collaborate with directors, dramaturgs, and actors to further develop their work, and offer Texas State University theatre majors with the opportunity for hands-on professional work experiences. Lee continues to serve as the conference’s artistic director through his role as artist-in-residence at Texas State University.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Eugene Lee’s acting resume includes roles in many plays by August Wilson. Which other actors and directors have worked on multiple Century Cycle plays? Why does Wilson’s work speak to artists such as Eugene Lee?

2. In addition to his performance at the Huntington Theatre Company, Eugene Lee also appeared in August Wilson’s *How I Learned What I Learned* at Kenny Leon’s True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta in the fall of 2014 and at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre in the spring of 2015.
   a. Beyond Lee’s portrayal of August Wilson, how were these other productions similar to the Huntington’s production of the play? How were they different?
   b. In addition to Eugene Lee, which other actors have performed *How I Learned What I Learned*? What qualities and experiences do these actors share that make them a good fit to portray August Wilson?

3. Lee is a faculty member in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Texas State University, his alma mater. What are the benefits to having a successful graduate as a member of the school’s teaching staff? Would you want to work for a school you attended? Why or why not?
INDIVIDUAL & COMMUNITY IDENTITY

The United States of America is often described as a “melting pot” because it is a place that blends cultural identities from around the world into one unique character. The heritage of many Americans today often includes multiple origins and a wide range of stories behind how they came to this country. Slavery and immigration in search of a better life are major ingredients in the American story and profoundly influence the way Americans across the country view themselves and their communities. In How I Learned What I Learned, Wilson describes this phenomenon in his own neighborhood, the Hill District, noting that when his mother arrived there in 1936, it was “an amalgam of the unwanted — Blacks, Syrians, Jews, Italians, Irish, with each ethnic group seeking to cast off the vestiges of the old country . . . Melting into the pot. Becoming and defining what it means to be an American.” Wilson’s own ancestry reflects this melting pot metaphor, as his father, Frederick Kittel, was a recent German immigrant.

But identifying oneself as an American can be a complicated process for those who struggle to find their place in their communities. In How I Learned What I Learned, August Wilson ponders how racial signifiers, which can be used to unite people with a common culture and experience, can also have linguistic implications that create separations and barriers between groups. “According to the Webster’s Third New International Dictionary,” Wilson observes, Blacks were defined as “outrageously wicked, dishonorable, connected with the devil, menacing, sullen, hostile, unqualified, violators of public regulations and affected by an undesirable condition.” This stood in stark contrast to that dictionary’s descriptions of whites as “outstandingly righteous, free from blemish, moral stain, or impurity. Innocent, not marked by malignant influence. Notably auspicious, fortunate, decent, sterling.” Wilson posits that throughout American history, distinct messages about identity, rooted in these definitions, have been passed down through generations, especially when it comes to the identity of African Americans as the descendants of slaves. “The ideas and attitudes that Americans had toward slaves followed them out of slavery and became entrenched in the nation’s psyche,” he notes. “Ideas that said that Blacks were sub-human, that they were lacking in moral personality, that they were unbaptizeable, that they were lazy, shiftless, watermelon-eating, chicken-stealing, oversexed, loud, menacing appendages to the polite civilized society.”

Wilson goes on to observe the malleable nature of African Americans’ identities, citing a neighbor, Cy Morocco, as an example of a man who adjusted his identity to fit his circumstances. Cy at different times presented himself as a saxophone player (though he did not actually know how to play) and an intellectual seeking discourse (though he did not actually know how to read the magazines he carried around), strongly committing to both identities until the truth was revealed. Wilson sees Cy’s behavior not as dishonest but as simply the result of being “an African lost in America. Cause when you’re African in America,” Wilson explains, “there’s adjustments and things that you have to make” to reflect an American identity. “Cause, your natural impulse is different than the way things are done. But Cy had trouble making that adjustment.”

QUESTIONS:

1. What is “code-switching” and what is its purpose? Why would someone need to code-switch? Are Cy Morocco’s frequent identity adjustments examples of code-switching? Why or why not?

2. Why does Wilson tell the story about the six Japanese American men in the restaurant in St. Paul? What point is he making with his observations about how a white person would interpret the men’s behavior as opposed to how they would interpret the behavior if the men were Black?

3. Is your identity more defined by your view of yourself or others’ view of you? Why?

4. Examine your own heritage. Does your family follow or practice any religious or cultural traditions that are historically practiced by the ethnic group(s) to which you belong? Is it important to you to keep these traditions alive? Why or why not?

RACISM

“I am an accident. This did not turn out right.” These words are emblazoned on the back of the t-shirt worn by the actor playing August Wilson in How I Learned What I Learned. The words on the front? “I am supposed to be white.”

With this statement, Wilson broaches the complicated subject of race and the role it plays in our everyday interactions and expectations of others. He recalls how Fred Rogers, star of the children’s television series “Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood” once told him that he would “always be welcome in this neighborhood.” But Rogers’ sentiments were not echoed by Wilson’s white Hill District neighbors when his family first moved there in the 1950s. “They threw bricks into the window with a note tied around it that said, ‘Stay out niggers,’” he recalls. Wilson goes on to tell the story of how the Catholic Church
in the Hill District lost all of its parishioners except for three little old ladies when the monsignor announced that the congregation would begin accepting black members. Wilson learned an important lesson about the nature of racism from these experiences in his youth. The perpetrators of the racism he encountered in his youth were not torch-bearing monsters in white hoods, they were regular people. “Good, honest Americans concerned about paying their mortgage, concerned about the future of their kids, concerned about consolidating and protecting the position that they had earned in American society over the past 40 years.”

Wilson cites another instance of subtle, insidious racism when he relates a story about attending a fundraiser in Boston. “A man walked up to me,” Wilson explains, “and he shook my hand and he said, ‘Mr. Wilson, you know I don’t see color.’” This was a statement Wilson had heard many times before and “was tired of hearing it. So I said, ‘Did you tell that gentleman over here that?’ And I pointed to a white man . . . ‘Why, since you don’t see color, why of all the people in the room did you walk up to me and say that?’” Wilson objected to the man’s assertion that he does not see color on the grounds that to not see color was to not see a vital facet of Wilson’s identity — that Wilson’s being a Black man was unimportant and irrelevant when, in fact, it was anything but. This dehumanization of others is one of the primary ways that racism develops and continues.

As Wilson continues the narration of How I Learned What I Learned, the Catholic parishioners’ racism of self-preservation and the Boston man’s dehumanizing racism, both mentioned early in the play, give way to a more easily recognizable form. The toy store manager who suspected that Wilson, his new Black employee, was a thief before he even began work. The kitchen supervisor who regarded Wilson with suspicion for his interest in reading. The woman who refused to allow Wilson to cut her lawn and the white lawn-care business owner who acquiesced to her demands in order to get her money. “You see, he’s so busy patting himself on the back for hiring me, a Black man,” Wilson explains, “that he can’t see where the real moral challenge is.”

QUESTIONS:
1. What does August Wilson mean when he says he got the t-shirt “from a man named Clarence Thomas”? What does he mean when he remarks, “I saw this and said, ‘Oh I’ve got to get this for my friend, Justin Timberlake’”?
2. When Wilson’s mother won a new washing machine in a radio contest, the station decided to give her a certificate for a used one instead when they discovered she was Black. Why did she refuse to accept the used washing machine, even though it would have made her work easier?
3. How did Wilson’s experiences with racism inform his playwriting? Which characters from the Century Cycle have stories that are similar to Wilson’s own?
4. Why did the owner of the lawn care business find a different employee to cut the woman’s lawn? What would you have done in that situation? Why?

5. In *How I Learned What I Learned*, Wilson compares the Hill District in the mid-1960s to a third-world country, but also notes that it was a mere four-minute walk from the affluence of downtown Pittsburgh. Research the history of discriminatory housing practices in northern cities in the first half of the 20th century. How did these practices contribute to the formation of the Hill District and economically challenged neighborhoods like it in other cities?

6. What is institutional racism? List some examples of how it affects the lives of people of color in America today.

**LIFE LESSONS**

In *How I Learned What I Learned*, August Wilson shares a variety of stories from his life — things that happened to him, events he witnessed, triumphs and failures by his family and friends. Wilson saw the value in every one of these experiences and believed that there was something to be gained from each of them. Read the following life lessons from *How I Learned What I Learned*, then answer the questions at the end.

- The first thing you discover after leaving your mother’s house is that you gotta pay the rent.
- There’s a way under, around, or through any door.
- Something is not always better than nothing.
- And you look up and you find out that all them years you been living on your mother’s prayers and now you’ve got to live on your own.
- August, you want to be a writer, right? Learn how to do it. Don’t be like Cy. Don’t try to push your spirit out through a horn that you don’t know how to play. Learn how to play the saxophone.
- When you on a search, just possibly you can’t afford to leave any stone unturned. Most of them gonna turn up snails. But you still got to overturn them.
- Limitation of the instrument. There ain’t nothing else I can do with this . . . I done it all. This is limiting me. I got to find another way to express myself.
- You can say the wrong thing to the wrong person at the right time and get away with it. But you cannot say the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time.
- He said, “You going through life carrying a ten-gallon bucket. And if you go through life carrying a ten-gallon bucket, you always going to be disappointed. Cause it ain’t never going to be filled . . . Don’t you go through life carrying no ten-gallon bucket. Get you a little cup and carry that through life. And that way somebody put a little bit in it and you have something” . . . I have got it cut down to about a gallon bucket. But . . . it ain’t never going to get down to that little cup. See, and it ain’t never going to get down to that little cup because I deserve more.
- Take all your truths, all your empirical truths that you have learned in your life and do not try to place them in a hierarchy and decide which one is more important than the other. Because you don’t know. In order to do that you would have to measure one against the other. And any time you start measuring, what’s going to happen? You measure wrong. That’s common sense.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. At the end of *How I Learned What I Learned*, August Wilson says, “You don’t know that you know anything. Until you know, you know it.” What does he mean by this?

2. What is the difference between knowing something and learning it?

3. How do the form (monologue) and structure (episodic stories) of *How I Learned What I Learned* help convey the lessons Wilson learned throughout his life?

4. Wilson learned many of his life lessons from observing the experiences and choices of his friends and family. What lessons have your friends and family taught you?

5. The song, “Ooh La La” by the band The Faces contains the lyrics:

   I wish that I knew what I know now
   When I was younger.

   What is this song about? Is there anything you know now that you wish you could tell your younger self?
1. Describe the setting of *How I Learned What I Learned*.

2. Why did Wilson’s ancestors not have “a problem finding a job” for the first 244 years they were in America? Why did it become difficult for them?

3. Where was Wilson’s mother originally from?

4. Where is the Hill District? Who lived there when Wilson’s mother arrived in 1936?

5. What does Wilson’s t-shirt say?

6. What did Fred Rogers say to Wilson that was so meaningful?

7. Where was Wilson’s mother originally from?

8. Where is the Hill District? Who lived there when Wilson’s mother arrived in 1936?

9. What does Wilson respond to a man who claimed to not “see color”?

10. What kind of opportunities existed for people who lived in the Hill District when Wilson was growing up? How were these opportunities different from what was available to those living in other neighborhoods?

11. How old was Wilson when he dropped out of high school? Where did he go instead of school?

12. Who was Chawley Williams? What advice did he give to the 20-year-old August Wilson?

13. How much was the rent on Wilson’s apartment in 1965?

14. Why did Wilson send his first poem to *Harper’s Magazine* instead of another publication?

15. What lesson did Wilson learn from Barbara Peterson’s experiences trying to get into Carnegie Mellon University?

16. Why did Wilson quit his job in a toy store’s stock room?

17. Who was Pat Zatola? According to Wilson, what was Zatola’s moral failure?

18. What did Wilson’s mother win in a radio contest? When they found out she was Black, what did the radio station try to give her instead?

19. Why did Wilson quit his job as a dishwasher?

20. How long had Wilson been living on his own when he went to jail?

21. Why did Wilson’s landlord put a padlock on his apartment door?

22. Who did Wilson call for advice on what to do about his dispute with his landlord? What advice did Wilson receive?

23. Why couldn’t Wilson return to his apartment when he got out of jail? Who had all of his belongings?

24. Who was Snooki?

25. Why was Wilson surprised when the bartender took out a double-barreled shotgun?

26. Who was Billy? Why was he upset?

27. Why did Wilson decide that he should stop spending time with Snooki?

28. What drug was Chawley Williams addicted to?

29. What did Cy Morocco give to Williams?

30. Why was Cy Morocco’s saxophone concert unsuccessful?

31. Who was John Coltrane?

32. What is the difference between how the people listening to Coltrane inside the bar feel about the music and how the people outside the bar feel about the music?

33. Why did Art Tatum bang his head on the piano? According to Wilson, what does this incident have to do with being an artist?

34. What secret about himself did Cy Morocco not want anyone to know? How did he hide this secret?

35. What decent thing did the police do for Cy Morocco?

36. According to Wilson, why do white people not accept the way that Black people do things?

37. Why did Philmore attack a man with his knife?

38. What did the witnesses in the bar tell the police when they arrived?

39. According to Chawley, why should Wilson always deny knowing where someone else is?

40. Why did the actor, Joe, threaten to kill Chawley and his family?

41. What was Jeanine carrying in her purse the next time Wilson saw her? What did she do with it?

42. What role was Wilson assigned in the 7th grade Christmas pageant? Why was he disappointed in this role?

43. What did Wilson do when he encountered Catherine Moran in the cloakroom?

44. Where did Wilson move in 1978?

45. Why does Wilson try to never stand behind a Black person in line at the bank?

46. Describe the differences between Wilson’s experiences at the bank with two different tellers two weeks apart.

47. How does Wilson know that he knows something?
THE HILL DISTRICT & THE CENTURY CYCLE

The Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh is not merely the setting for nine of the ten plays in August Wilson’s Century Cycle — it was August Wilson’s home where he lived until he was 33 years old. As Wilson describes in How I Learned What I Learned, the neighborhood’s culture had a profound influence on the direction his artistic expression would take. Originally a predominantly Jewish community established in the late 19th century, it became a popular destination for African Americans moving north during the Great Migration of the early 20th century. While the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s marked an explosion of black culture, including art, music, writing, and social philosophy in New York City, the Hill District was Pittsburgh’s Harlem in the 1940s and 50s. The neighborhood was the center of Pittsburgh’s jazz scene and its performance venues featured notable artists such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Eckstein, and Lena Horne.

Meanwhile, the increase in Black residents and the availability of trolleys prompted an exodus of white Hill District residents to the suburbs. During August Wilson’s formative years in the 1960s, the Hill District was about 95% African American. The neighborhood went into a sharp economic decline during this decade following the city’s decision to demolish much of the Lower Hill in order to build the Civic Arena, resulting in the displacement of 8,000 residents and 400 businesses. Riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. exacerbated the Hill District’s economic conditions.

August Wilson saw both the economic and social challenges faced by residents of the Hill District as well as the beauties of its community and celebrated culture. From 1979 to 2005, August Wilson drew on the Hill’s music and poetry, its crime and poverty, its characters and history to chronicle the 20th century African American experience in a series of plays collectively known as the Century Cycle. The Century Cycle’s characters, plots, and dialogue grew both from Wilson’s imagination and bits of conversations he heard in the Hill District, its highly musical language informed by the blues of Bessie Smith, the passion of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the poetry of Amiri Baraka and Jorge Luis Borges. Each of the plays depicts the challenges of the decade in which it is set, and while they do not tell a single ongoing story, they are closely linked by both setting (Pittsburgh’s Hill District for nine of the ten plays) and characters who are either descendants of those appearing in earlier plays or who recur in multiple plays at various ages. For example, Aunt Ester, the spiritual matriarch introduced in Gem of the Ocean, is also referenced in the seventh play, Two Trains Running, and dies during the events of the ninth play, King Hedley II. Additionally, the Century Cycle’s final installment, Radio Golf, revolves around plans to demolish 1839 Wylie Avenue, the house in which Gem of the Ocean takes place.

AUGUST WILSON’S CENTURY CYCLE

1904..........................Gem of the Ocean (written in 2003)
1911..........................Joe Turner's Come and Gone (written in 1984)
1927..........................Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (written in 1982)
1936..........................The Piano Lesson (written in 1986)
1948..........................Seven Guitars (written in 1995)
1957..........................Fences (written in 1983)
1969..........................Two Trains Running (written in 1990)
1977..........................Jitney (written in 1979)
1985..........................King Hedley II (written in 2001)
1997..........................Radio Golf (written in 2005)
QUESTIONS:

1. How does August Wilson describe the Hill District in *How I Learned What I Learned*? How did the community transform during Wilson’s life?

2. Research the Hill District today. What are the racial and economic demographics of its residents? What challenges do people who live there face? What are its popular cultural and social events? How did the Hill District change and stay the same during the time August Wilson was writing the Century Cycle? Since Wilson died in 2005?

3. All of the plays in the Century Cycle except for one are set in the Hill District, the neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where August Wilson grew up.
   a. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is set in Chicago, Illinois. Research the culture of Chicago in 1927, the year in which the play takes place. Compare and contrast 1920s Chicago with Pittsburgh in the same decade. Why did Wilson choose Chicago as that play’s setting?
   b. How does the story, “Wrong Thing, Wrong Time” from *How I Learned What I Learned* connect to the play, *King Hedley II*? Which other Hill District stories that Wilson recounts in *How I Learned What I Learned* share clear connections with Century Cycle plays?
   c. Which other writers of drama and fiction set many of their works in the same city or region? Why do they choose to do so?

3. The Huntington Theatre Company has produced all ten of the Century Cycle plays, several of which were early productions during which Wilson was still revising his writing. Research Wilson’s work at the Huntington. Which plays did the theatre produce while Wilson was still alive? How did Wilson feel about Boston? Which other regional theatres around the country were Wilson’s artistic homes?

SOLO PERFORMANCE

August Wilson originally wrote *How I Learned What I Learned* with the intention of performing it himself. In a Pittsburgh Public Theatre blog post in the spring of 2015, director Todd Kreidler remembered how Wilson first described the project:

> We start out the show, I’ll come out like it’s a lecture. A table, chair, pitcher of water, a couple ferns, a retractable projection screen . . . Then we’ll hit them with something like . . . yeah, this is where we could setup our Monkey Fighting Dog Video Hoax. Or I’ll come out carrying a bucket of ping pong balls, start throwing them out into the audience . . . once . . . two . . . three . . . get everybody counting, clapping along till we hit 41 then reveal what that’s really about. We got to keep flipping it on the audience — subvert expectations.

Wilson did appear onstage in the play’s initial performances at Seattle Repertory Theatre and at venues in Aspen, Colorado, and Chicago, Illinois, his only experiences as an actor. Despite his decades of crafting complex characters that helped launch the careers of some of the American theatre’s best actors, Wilson confessed in a 2003 interview with *The Seattle Times* that performing was never something he wanted to do. “I don’t like getting up onstage,” he admitted. “I don’t like people staring at me.” To prepare for his stage debut, Wilson sought advice from veteran solo performers such as Whoopi Goldberg, whose self-titled show won her the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Solo Performance in 1985. Goldberg’s suggestion to Wilson? “She said not to look at the audience,” Wilson recalled in *The Seattle Times* interview. “She said if you don’t do that you’ll be alright.”

Similar to Wilson with his early performances of *How I Learned What I Learned*, Goldberg both wrote and performed her solo show. Solo performers often possess artistic talents and skills in both acting and playwriting, and it is common for their theatrical work to present a distinctly personal point of view. The text of a solo work may take on the overall structure of a lengthy monologue, but they are frequently composed of many shorter speeches that, when pieced together, require a performer to switch between playing themselves and portraying a number of other characters. They also break the “fourth wall,” the imaginary wall that separates the world of the play from the world of the audience. Unlike actors in traditional drama, who ignore the audience and perform the story as if only the world of the play exists, solo performers often speak directly to the people watching them. They invite the audience to be in the present moment with them as they tell their stories and confess their emotions in first
person. Many scholars and critics of performance art claim that the best solo performances also transmit universal truths to the audience; by playing themselves and sharing distinctly personal experiences, solo performers help the audience discover or learn something new about themselves.

One of the best-known theatrical solo performance artists of the 1980s and 1990s was Spalding Gray. Gray was a member of the Performance Group, an experimental theatre company founded in 1967 that was reinvented as the Wooster Group in 1980. Both iterations consisted of an acting ensemble that created original works and performed in spaces designed specifically for each production, and helped launch the careers of renowned stage and screen actors such as Willem Dafoe and Elizabeth LeCompte. Gray was an active member of the company, but left in 1980 to focus on his monologue work. His scripts were always autobiographical, a self-described form of “creative narcissism,” and explored topics ranging from his Rhode Island upbringing, to his travels to Southeast Asia, to his mother’s suicide. His approach to solo performance was one of minimalism; his primary emphasis was on the actor as a storyteller. Perhaps his best-known work, Swimming to Cambodia, simply featured Gray sitting at a table with a microphone, a notebook, and a glass of water. The set also included two pulldown maps, one of Southeast Asia and one specifically of Cambodia, which Gray referred to throughout his performance. Gray was an active member of the company, but left in 1980 to focus on his monologue work. His scripts were always autobiographical, a self-described form of “creative narcissism,” and explored topics ranging from his Rhode Island upbringing, to his travels to Southeast Asia, to his mother’s suicide. His approach to solo performance was one of minimalism; his primary emphasis was on the actor as a storyteller. Perhaps his best-known work, Swimming to Cambodia, simply featured Gray sitting at a table with a microphone, a notebook, and a glass of water. The set also included two pulldown maps, one of Southeast Asia and one specifically of Cambodia, which Gray referred to throughout his performance. Swimming to Cambodia won Gray an Obie Award in 1985 and was released as a film in 1987, raising Gray’s profile beyond the avant-garde theatre circuit. Gray became the face of his genre. August Wilson even briefly toyed with the idea of using I Am Not Spalding Gray as the title of his own autobiographical solo play.

But not all solo performers write their own scripts. Some make their mark on the genre as interpreters of others’ words. Actress Lily Tomlin memorably performed material written by her partner Jane Wagner and as August Wilson is no longer alive, others are now tasked with sharing How I Learned What I Learned in his place. After Wilson’s death in 2005, director and dramaturg Todd Kreidler continued working on the show with actors who had been among Wilson’s frequent collaborators. Eugene Lee will portray Wilson in the Huntington Theatre Company’s production, having also done so at Kenny Leon’s True Colors Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Pittsburgh Public Theatre. In his performance, Lee strives to capture the essence of the man he knew rather than taking “the Daniel Day-Lewis approach” to playing a real person, director Todd Kreidler told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in the spring of 2015. “He’s not trying to mimic August’s mannerisms or speech or smoke a cigarette like him. But he is trying to conjure August’s presence through his stories. So it’s an evening of storytelling that is arranged theatrically.”

**QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the setting of How I Learned What I Learned? How do the choices made by the scenic, lighting, and sound designers help convey the setting to the audience?

2. When an actor in a solo performance must portray other characters, how do they make it clear to the audience that they have become someone new?

3. What is the difference between theatrical solo-performance and stand-up comedy? Are there any performers whose careers include work in both genres?

4. a. Research the life and work of Spalding Gray. Compare and contrast the minimalist approach Gray took in his solo performances with the style and imagery of August Wilson’s How I Learned What I Learned. Why would Wilson have initially thought to title his show I Am Not Spalding Gray?

b. Research the life and work of other solo performance artists such as Anna Deavere Smith, John Leguizamo, Mike Daisey, Lisa Kron, and others. Do these artists write their own scripts? Do they play themselves, other characters, or both? What topics do their works explore?

c. Research the radio program The Moth Radio Hour and compare and contrast it with theatrical solo performance.

**ETYMOLOGY — THE POWER OF NAMES**

Etymology is the study of the sources and development of words and language, and is often a major influence when a writer chooses names for his or her characters. What does the name mean? What does it translate to in other languages? Where did it originate? Does the name call to mind a particular person or
event? Is the name significant in the context of the story? What impression does this name give of the person it belongs to? These questions are among the many that writers consider when crafting their characters.

In the May/June 2003 issue of *American Theatre* magazine, August Wilson is quoted as saying that “anything you can name you can control and define; that’s what the power of naming is.” Historically, naming traditions have been particularly significant in African American communities because slaves brought to the United States were often stripped of their original names and forced to adopt their masters’ surnames. After abolition, it became common for former slaves to choose new names for themselves and their children. Many chose names with biblical or historical origins, or names that represented a person’s newfound freedom. August Wilson’s own name has its roots in this tradition. Wilson was originally named Frederick August Kittel, Jr., after his white father, but after his father’s death Wilson chose to honor his mother and the African American culture to which he felt deeply connected by adopting his mother’s maiden name and refashioning himself as “August Wilson.”

Wilson was not the first resident of Pittsburgh’s Hill District to carve out a new identity for himself. In *How I Learned What I Learned*, Wilson says that when his mother settled in the Hill District in 1937, the neighborhood:

> was an amalgam of the unwanted — Blacks, Syrians, Jews, Italians, Irish, with each ethnic group seeking to cast off the vestiges of the old country, changing names, changing manners and given a myriad of unlimited opportunities, changing economic circumstance and moving out, up, in, bludgeoning the malleable parts of themselves. Melting into the pot. Becoming and defining what it means to be an American.

According to a Smithsonian Institution article from January 2015, many immigrant families who landed in the Hill District and elsewhere during the first half of the 20th century “chose . . . to alter their surname” from its original ethnic spelling to something they thought sounded more American. “In other cases, immigrants used nicknames given to them by their new neighbors or friends when filling out applications for naturalization” (Smithsonian.com). As Wilson describes in *How I Learned What I Learned*, European immigrants and African Americans alike arrived in Pittsburgh “searching for jobs and opportunity to live with dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.” Doing so with new names represented a complete fresh start that they hoped to pass down to future generations.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. a. The original full title of August Wilson’s solo play was *How What I Learned Has Led Me to the Places I Wanted to Go, Sometimes Unwillingly, It Is the Crucible in Which Many a Work of Art Has Been Fired*. He also considered naming it, *I Am Not Spalding Gray* (see previous article, “Solo Performance,” for more details). Why did Wilson revise the name of his play? Which title do you think fits the play best? Why?

b. Read one of August Wilson’s Century Cycle plays. How does the play’s title connect to its plot, setting, and/or characters? Do you think the title is appropriate for the story? If you had to give the play a different title, what would it be? Why?

2. Read one of August Wilson’s Century Cycle plays and research the meanings of its characters’ names. Why did Wilson choose these particular names for these characters? What do the characters’ names tell you about the characters’ personalities and place in their world?

3. Many people who immigrated to the United States during the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries passed through New York’s Ellis Island. For decades, a myth has persisted that “immigrants, fresh off the boat from their native countries and crossing through Ellis Island, had their names changed by xenophobic immigration officers in order to sound more American” (Smithsonian.com). Research the documentation procedures employed at Ellis Island. How did this myth come about? Why has it persisted for so many years?

4. a. What is a stage name? Research performers who have stage names, such as actors Jamie Foxx, Ben Kingsley, and Mindy Kaling; rappers Common, Ludacris, and Nicki Minaj; and singers Fergie, Lady Gaga, and Pink. Did any of these performers legally change their names or are these simply the names they are known by professionally? How did they choose their stage names? What do you think it would be like to go by two different names — one used by your family and close friends and one used by everyone you meet in public?

b. In 1964, boxer Cassius Clay changed his name from Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. to Muhammad Ali. In 2011, NBA player Ron Artest legally changed his name from Ronald William Artest, Jr. to Metta World Peace. Why did these men choose to change their names? What are the meanings behind these specific names?

5. Research the origins of your own name both historically and within your own family. Why did your parents choose this name for you? Do you share a name with anyone else in your family? Are there any historical, religious, or literary figures with who you share a name? From what language is your name derived?

**COLTRANE & A LOVE SUPREME**

“In 1966,” August Wilson explains in *How I Learned What I Learned*, “John Coltrane was widely considered the most creative and innovative figure on the jazz saxophone. His contributions to the musical art form, jazz, are without peer and unparalleled. But it didn’t mean nothing to me. Because, jazz didn’t mean anything to me, because it didn’t have any words. And I was a poet, and music without words didn’t mean nothing to me.” But Wilson’s perspective on jazz changed one night when he saw a hundred people standing outside of the Crawford Grill on the corner of Wylie Avenue and Kirkpatrick Street in the Hill District. Wilson
initially assumed the assembled crowd was the result of something terrible happening in the neighborhood, but he quickly realized that they had gathered to listen to Coltrane, who was performing at the restaurant. Crawford Grill patrons paid a steep cover charge to sit inside where the drinks were expensive. The people outside, however, could not “afford to go inside to hear John Coltrane. But the music [was] coming out over the heads of the patrons of the bar.”

As Wilson watched and listened, he came to an important realization: Coltrane was not playing for the patrons in the bar — he was playing specifically for the people outside on the corner. It became clear to Wilson that for the crowd, this music was the thing that “enabled them to survive the most outrageous insults. Brought to America in chains. Defined as property. Bought and sold and traded . . . Suffered hundreds of years of degradation and indignity on top of indignity . . . It remains one of the most remarkable moments of my life.” Wilson was incredibly moved and inspired by the sight of a crowd of 200 black people “stunned into silence by the power of art and the soaring music of John Coltrane and his exploration of man’s connection to the divinity. And the power of possibility of human life.”

John Coltrane was born in North Carolina in 1926. Coltrane’s early years were marked by tragedy, as several family members, including his father, all died within a few months of each other. Coltrane was raised by his mother and a cousin who moved the family to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1943. Coltrane’s mother bought him an alto saxophone, which he learned to play along with clarinet and alto horn. After high school, he enlisted in the United States Navy and it was during his just over one year of service, he made some of his first recordings. Coltrane was stationed at the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii, where he played in the base’s swing band called the Melody Masters.

After being discharged from the Navy in 1946, Coltrane returned to Philadelphia and switched to playing tenor saxophone soon after. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Coltrane played the saxophone as a backing band member for other artists’ recordings and nightclub performances, including Duke Ellington’s orchestra. He joined a quintet lead by trumpeter Miles Davis in 1955 and became known for using a chord approach called “sheets of sound,” a technique for playing multiple notes at the same time. His time with the group, however, was short-lived. Coltrane began abusing alcohol and drugs, primarily heroin, and his unreliable behavior caused Davis to fire him in 1957, though they would reunite briefly when Davis had a difficult time replacing him. Coltrane then spent a brief time working with pianist and composer Thelonious Monk before beginning his career as a solo artist.

In the early 1960s, he assembled a quartet that included a bass player, a drummer, and a pianist. Coltrane’s work with this ensemble during this time was prolific, including 45 studio albums. His earlier compositions are characterized by the ferocity and speed with which Coltrane played the notes, while his later works are noted for their experimental lack of a steady beat and improvisational nature. It is said that a near-overdose in 1957 awakened Coltrane’s spiritual search, which would later be a major inspiration behind his landmark album, A Love Supreme. Coltrane recorded A Love Supreme in December of 1964 and released it in 1965, describing it as a musical devotion to God. In the album’s liner notes, Coltrane writes: “I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.” Coltrane was raised in a Christian household but became interested in religions from Africa and India, and sought to use his music to express universal truths.

Coltrane passed away from liver cancer, complicated by his drug use, in 1967, but is remembered as one of the great musical innovators of the 20th century.

QUESTIONS:
1. Why was Coltrane’s music so compelling to the people standing outside of the Crawford Grill?
2. August Wilson listened to Coltrane perform at the Crawford Grill in 1966. Research Coltrane’s career at this time. What venues did he perform in? How was his most recent music received by critics and audiences?
3. Coltrane would have performed many songs at the Crawford Grill but Wilson only mentions two specific songs: “Psalm” and “Blue Train.” Research and listen to these selections. Why did Wilson single out these songs? What emotions do they evoke? Compare and contrast them with each other and with the other songs on A Love Supreme.
4. How does instrumental music like Coltrane’s tell a story without words?
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POETRY

How I Learned What I Learned is an autobiographical solo play, but long before he became a playwright, August Wilson was a poet.

Try writing your own autobiographical “I Am” Poem using the worksheet below. Fill in the blanks to create a personal poetic statement. It could rhyme, but it does not have to. Volunteers perform their poems for the class.

I Am (student name here):

I am

I wonder

I hear

I see

I want

I am

I pretend

I feel

I touch

I worry

I cry

I am

I understand

I say

I dream

I try

I hope

I am
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

MONOLOGUE PERFORMANCE
Choose a monologue from a play in the Century Cycle to analyze and perform (memorized if time allows). Read the play the monologue comes from and then analyze the text to determine the following:

- Who is the character talking to? What is the relationship between them?
- **Objective:** What the character wants in the monologue. Use first-person “I want…” phrasing when discussing your character’s objective.
- **Obstacles:** What is standing in the way of achieving my objective?
- **Beats:** Divide the monologue into these smaller units of thought or subject matter.
- **Tactics:** What strategies am I using to achieve my objective? This is always a verb and there is a new one in each beat.
- **Stakes:** What is at risk? What is the best thing that could happen if I achieve my objective? What is the worst thing that could happen if I fail?

HOMETOWN INSPIRATION
August Wilson’s Century Cycle is also known as the Pittsburgh Cycle because 9 of its 10 plays are set in Pittsburgh’s Hill District neighborhood. As he describes in *How I Learned What I Learned*, Wilson’s early years living in the Hill District were major influences on his artistic point of view.

Consider your own hometown and neighborhood and answer the following questions:

- What makes the place where you live unique?
- How does your neighborhood fit into the historical and cultural heritage of your community?
- Are there any recurring events or traditions in your community?
- Who are the characters who reside in your city, town, or neighborhood?
- What are the conflicts and challenges of the area’s past, present, and future?
- What is the best thing about your community? The worst?
- Is there anything, good or bad, that your neighborhood is known for?
- What is the most important thing people should know about the place you call home?
- What is something people might not know or expect unless they lived there?

Choose an event, real or imagined, that depicts something you feel is believe is a unique, important, or an otherwise defining aspect of your community. Create a short piece of dramatic writing about this event and cast members of the class to perform it as time allows. Guidelines:

- Use minimal exposition. Focus on the action and jump right into what is happening.
- Choose a protagonist. Whose story is this? How does this person change from the beginning to the end of the story?
- Define objectives for your characters. What do they want?
- Include a climactic moment — when the protagonist must make a choice and there is no going back.
- Add specific details that support the story. What characteristics of the setting are vital to the characters are and the way they behave?
ESSAY

Choose one of the quotes from the “Life Lessons” article in the Themes for Writing and Discussion section and write an essay that discusses the following.

• How did Wilson learn this lesson?
• Did he apply the lesson in his life? If so, how?
• Are there characters in one or more Century Cycle plays who have learned this lesson? Are there any who have not?
• Why do you think Wilson chose to include this lesson in How I Learned What I Learned?
• What are some situations in which having learned this lesson would be valuable? How is the lesson meaningful in your own life?

Be sure to cite evidence from the text of How I Learned What I Learned and/or plays from the Century Cycle to support your analysis.

THEATRE HISTORY — AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

“I believe in the American Theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition. I believe in its power to heal. To hold the mirror as it were up to nature. To the truths we uncover, to the truths we wrestle from uncertain some sometimes unyielding realities. All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully.”

— August Wilson, The Ground On Which I Stand

Option A: In the 1990s, August Wilson and theatre director Robert Brustein engaged in an ongoing debate about the role of race in the American theatre. Research and report on this debate and compare and contrast each man’s stance on the following:

• The purpose of dramatic art
• Nontraditional casting (gender and racial)
• Culture, values, and power
• The relationship between art and politics
• Language

Option B: August Wilson is known as one of the preeminent writers of the African American experience. Actor John Douglas Thompson, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, and director Kenny Leon are just a few of the African American artists who are considered important voices in the theatre today. Research African American theatre in the United States and choose an artist or organization committed to the development of artists of color. Research and report on the artist or organization’s work and achievements. How do they embody August Wilson’s statement that “all of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully”?

If researching an individual artist, include information on:

• How did the artist become involved in theatre?
• Does he or she have any formal theatrical training?
• What are the artist's best-known projects? Has he or she won any awards?
• Does he or she have an artistic philosophy? If so, what is it?
• What does the artist hope to achieve in the future?

If researching an organization, include information on:

• When and why was the organization founded?
• Who were its founders? What did they hope to accomplish by starting the organization?
• What are some of the organization’s most successful projects or endeavors?
• Who is in leadership of the organization today?
• What is the organization’s current mission statement? What is the current leadership’s vision for the organization’s future?
2015-2016 STUDENT MATINEES

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC SEPT. 24
A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES NOV. 20
MILK LIKE SUGAR FEB. 11 & 26
AUGUST WILSON’S HOW I LEARNED WHAT I LEARNED MAR. 11 & 31
I WAS MOST ALIVE WITH YOU JUNE 10

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