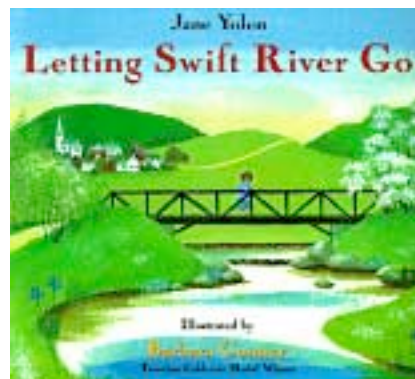


Letting Swift River Go:
A Literature Guide for 4th Grade

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Summary	2
Rationale	3
Initiating Activities	4
Discussing Quabbin	5
Vocabulary	5
Reading the Story	6
Discussion Questions	6
Mini-lesson: Share Your Perspective	7
Mini-lesson: Mapping Swift River Valley	10
Related Activities:	
Before Reading	12
After Reading	14
Works Cited	15
Appendix	16



Summary

Jane Yolen's book, Letting Swift River Go, tells the story of the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir through the eyes of a young girl named Sally Jane. The protagonist narrates the story, which begins when she is a mere six years old. She describes her surroundings – the buildings in her community, the low rolling hills, the plants and trees, and the trout-filled river – with love, respect, and wonder and through her description, shares with the reader her deep reverence for the Swift River Valley. She remembers playing with friends by the river and in her town's cemetery, the privilege of walking part of the way to school by herself, having the seasons dictate the community's chores and celebrations, and catching fireflies with a friend. Everything that she remembers about her childhood is tied to the natural world – her life, like a river, flows through the landscape.

After describing her town, Sally Jane shares her memory of when, “it all began to change (Yolen 1992, 11).” A man came from Boston many times, she says, and talked with the grown-ups at the Grange Hall about trading them money, new homes, and better lives for some of their most abundant resource – the clean, clear, cool water of the Swift River. “Only,” she remembers, “Nobody asked us kids (11).” And after that, everything changed.

The first thing that was done to prepare the valley for the flood was to move bodies from their graves to higher ground. Then, the land was stripped of forests, brush, and bushes. Next, the buildings were removed – some, the smaller and sturdier of the structures – were moved to nearby villages. Others were knocked down, like the stone mill – a landmark on Sally Jane's solitary walk to school. The residents of the four tiny villages moved on to nearby towns, to the city, and to faraway places, never to be seen in the Swift River Valley again. Finally, a hole was dug, a dam was built, and the water came.

It took seven painful years of Sally Jane's life to create the vast expanse of open water that is the Quabbin Reservoir. During the final stages of its construction, her father takes her to see the hole and tells her to always remember what it had been before – and what it meant to her.

The story ends with a memory from when Sally Jane is older and the reservoir has long since been completed. She and her father row out into the middle of the reservoir at night to see the landscape, and he reminds her of her promise not to forget the way that it used to be. They row across

the water, tracing what once were heavily traveled roads through villages, past farms and churches, and to school and the Grange Hall. The moonlight reflecting off of ripples on the water's surface reminds Sally Jane of the fireflies she caught and stored in a jar as a child. She remembers her mother saying, "You have to let them go, Sally Jane (29)." And so she does – she lets go of the sadness, frustration, and longing conveyed through her description of the destructive process of "building" and is, finally, at peace with the water and the changes to her valley, her community, and her life.

Rationale

The reading level of the story, according to Scholastic is a 5.6, and the company lists its interest level as grades 6-9 (Scholastic); however, other sources list it as being appropriate for kindergarten and up (Yolen 1995), as well as only upper elementary (Ashby). Despite the inconsistent reports of the story's grade-appropriateness, I think that it is perfect for use in a fourth grade classroom – especially early in the year.

At that age, they have just begun to, "see the bigger world (Wood, 111)," and are, "struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior at a new level (108)." Fourth grade students are very concerned with issues of fairness, as well, and are developing a new awareness of social issues (Anderson, 6). Students at this age are likely still existing within a developmental stage that limits their true understanding to ideas that they are able to relate to themselves and their own personal needs, but their development of the concept of fairness (stemming from their desire to experience only fairness for themselves) helps lead them to an expanding awareness of the needs of others and the issues affecting the world around them (Kegan, 162-167).

The two major themes addressed within the story, then, are a perfect fit for students at this age. Letting Swift River Go brings up questions of fairness, a few ethical dilemmas, and some social issues, too. The process and after-effects of building the reservoir perfectly illustrate the controversial nature of the decision to build, and allowing students to voice their own opinions on the decision can be an empowering and validating experience. The story can also help students to expand their ability to assess fairness. While students may develop a strong opinion regarding the event after a single reading of the story, deeper analysis can help them learn critical thinking skills that will help them develop

opinions and understand more complex issues in the future .

The experiences shared in the story that allow community to be built amongst Sally Jane and her friends (as well as, it is implied, their parents and the other adults in town) are similar to the ties that fourth graders create amongst each other. The children in the Swift River Valley feel, Sally Jane says, as if they have been left out of the decision to flood the valley, and it isn't fair. Fourth graders can certainly identify with this feeling! Their preoccupation with fairness leads them to bond over shared experiences, activities, and/or similarities, creating a new-found sense of community and a, “Growing group solidarity (Wood, 108).” Students who are so acutely aware of their ties to a particular group or community and who take such interest in assessing fairness will easily understand Sally Jane's frustration.

Finally, the book is especially useful and appropriate for students (of any age!) who live in the communities directly affected by the construction of Quabbin, or in the communities nearby because it creates a place-based learning experience. Place-based education, defined as, “The process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts ... across the curriculum (Sobel 2005, 7),” is a practice that deeply roots students' learning in their immediate surroundings – both in terms of the physical, natural world and in terms of the structure of and relationships within their communities. Using a significant event in local history for a literacy activity makes the book more than just a story – it gives it deeper meaning and context. Often in schools, students are – as author David Sobel states – taught to “not-think' about what goes on inside the school walls and outside in the social and natural communities (Sobel 2008, 2).” However, taking the time to connect classroom activities to the places, spaces, and events that students are familiar with non-academically can help to bring students to higher levels of measured academic achievement (if we must measure) and deeper understanding of and engagement within their communities. A place-based literacy activity can be just the tip of the icy place-based education berg that sinks the ship of a boring, standards-based curriculum.

Initiating Activities

Use of this book is suggested during the beginning of the school year, while students' memories of the time that they spent outside while the weather was warm are still recent and near the surface of

their consciousness. Being able to easily remember their own attachments to the natural world surrounding them will help them to quickly identify with Sally Jane's attachment to her surroundings (potentially very similar to those that the students experience).

Reading Letting Swift River Go early in the year also allows the themes of fairness and justice to be brought into the classroom for further study throughout the rest of the year. By reading the story together as a whole class, each student will become familiar with the themes and the class can develop together a collective understanding of what each word means. Throughout the year, the text can be used as a common reference whenever questions of fairness, justice, or equity arise.

Discussing the Quabbin Reservoir

(For use with students living in the communities near or surrounding Quabbin)

Before reading the book, have a short class discussion to find out what the students know about the reservoir. Ask students to share anything that they think they know about the reservoir, as well as any experience that they have had there. This discussion could include things like:

- Where it is
- What it is/what purpose it serves
- How it was created (specifically, find out whether or not the students know that it was man-made)
- If they have been to Quabbin, and what they did there

Spending 5-10 minutes on this should be enough time for students to build a collective understanding of the context that they will need to understand before reading the story. Additional information about Quabbin doesn't need to be shared with students since they will learn more about it by listening to the story; however, if there is any essential background information missing from the discussion (like the reservoir's location, for example), it's best to share it with the students. This need not be an in-depth conversation, though.

***Note: If reading this book with students outside of western Massachusetts, a similar discussion on what a reservoir is and where on the map they can find this particular reservoir can take the place of*

this activity.

Vocabulary

There are many words in the story that are essential to students' understanding of the plot. Reviewing these words before reading the story helps make for a smoother reading, and helps to remind students that they're prepared for to hear what you're going to read for them. It can also help to make them excited to hear the story – each word offers a tiny taste of what the story may be about and offers hints about the characters and setting. Words to define before reading could include reservoir, trade-off, crossroads, mason jar, eiderdown, Grange Hall, caisson, dam, and dike.

Make these words visible to students by writing them on the chalk board or sharing a pre-written poster including the important vocabulary. See if students can define any of the words accurately, and share with students the definitions of words that they cannot define.

Reading

After discussing vocabulary and some background information on Quabbin, the students will be well prepared to hear the story. A read-aloud for this particular book is best done in a small space where all of the students can see the illustrations, as they help to convey Sally Jane's deep connection to her surroundings and can help students better understand some of the new words that they will encounter. Reading in a classroom reading corner or on a morning meeting rug can provide students with the proximity necessary to absorb the illustrations.

A second reading of the book should follow the first, either with a discussion of some of the ideas extracted from the story in either of the mini-lessons included in this guide, or after working on some Critical Thinking Questions.

Assessment

Informal formative assessment can be carried out throughout a reading or readings of Letting Swift River Go. Critical thinking questions (see following section) can be asked at key points throughout the book in order to gauge student understanding, and breaks can be taken while reading to see if students have questions about the story.

Discussion Questions for Critical Thinking

- What do we know about Sally Jane's community in Swift River? What clues do we have to tell us this?
- Does Sally Jane enjoy the place that she lives in? How can we tell that this is true?
- How is nature described throughout the story? Is it portrayed in a negative or positive way? Can you give examples?
- What sort of connection do you think that Sally Jane has to nature? Why?
- What do you think the fireflies represent in the story? Can you explain what you think Sally Jane learns at the end of the story?
- What are some of the things that Sally Jane enjoys doing in Swift River?
- What do you think she means when Sally Jane says that, "Nobody asked us kids (Yolen, 11)?" How would you feel if you were in her situation?

Assessment

The use of critical thinking questions for class discussion utilizes informal formative assessment, as the students' responses to the questions will provide the instructor with an idea of what each student did or did not understand about the text, and will provide the instructor with a picture of what ideas, topics, etc. need to be explored further. It is informal in that the students are participants in the discussion and will not be explicitly told beforehand that their answers are being analyzed for assessment of their learning; it will be no different than any other class discussion.

Standards Addressed (Varies Depending on Questions Used)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.IT.4.8: Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1b,c: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 4 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- b. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.
- c. Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.2: Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Mini-Lessons

Share Your Own Perspective

In this mini-lesson, students will be asked to write letters-to-the-editor of a local paper, in which they share their opinion on whether or not the building of the Quabbin Reservoir was fair, and will use examples from the text in order to support their argument.

When the Quabbin was built, letters-to-the-editor were an important way in which to share information with the community. The book Letters From Quabbin by Mabel Jones and Amy Spink is a collection of letters-to-the-editor written to the Springfield (MA) Union about the process of creating Quabbin, and the process' effects on the community and the natural world. In a world yet to experience social media, such letters were the only way for Swift River Valley residents to communicate their experiences to the world outside their valley. The activity that the students will do mimics the process that these two women – and surely countless others – went through in order to share their experiences.

- Explain to students what a letter-to-the-editor is: a short piece of writing that expresses the writer's opinion and includes basic details supporting their argument. Be sure to include that most newspapers limit the number of words or characters that writers can use in their letters. Share an easy-to-read sample letter with the students (as a handout, on an overhead projector, or written on a chalkboard) – see appendix for an example. The sample letter should include both positive and negative statements about the topic being addressed. Examine the structure of the letter as a class – introductory statement, examples, conclusion.

Read Aloud: *“This letter is an example of a letter-to-the-editor that one of you might write to the*

Hampshire Daily Gazette.” (Read sample letter out loud) *“This letter includes some very important information, and the author used a few writing tricks that we should pay attention to while we are preparing to write our own letters. What special things do you think the author did in order to squeeze everything that they had to say into this short piece of writing?”*

Students might answer that the author doesn't use many words, that they used some big words, and that they shared some information.

“That's right! The author made sure to do all of those things, and we will, too. There is one other very important thing that they did, though. They included an introduction and a conclusion. Does anyone know what that means?”

A student may say that an introduction is at the beginning and a conclusion is at the end. Beginning 4th graders probably won't be able to say much more than that, though they might understand the idea of it.

“An introduction is something that we say at the beginning, introducing our idea. Just like you say, 'Hello, my name is....,' to introduce yourself to a person, you need to share your topic with a reader when they meet your writing. A conclusion closes your writing and ends the conversation you have with a reader. It's like saying, 'It was great telling you about myself!' when you finish talking to a new person. The conclusion's job is to clearly state the point of your writing.”

- Have students practice weighing each side of the argument. Using a topic that all of the students are familiar with (potentially the same topic that is used in the sample letter), practice making a list of pros and cons together on a large piece of paper or a chalk board.
- Distribute a handout on which students can make their own lists of pros and cons for the creation of Quabbin (see appendix). Make copies of the book available so that students can look back at the story if necessary. Ask for at least 3-4 ideas in each category so that students can demonstrate their awareness of the many different issues regarding the event. Some of the pros and cons are stated explicitly in the book, while others are implied and require that students make inferences in order to unearth them.
- Finally, have students craft their own letters-to-the-editor. Set a limit of 6-8 sentences, and ask that students include 1-2 examples each of the pros and cons that they thought of from the story in their letters. Have students share their letters with partners after they are done writing.

Assessment

Students' learning will be assessed through formal formative assessment. Students' charts and letters will be collected at the end of the assignment and read by the instructor in order to assess both students' understanding of the story and their development of writing skills. The examples given in the chart will provide the instructor with an example of each student's ability to understand text, draw examples, and make inferences. The letters serve as specimens of the students' ability to express and support an opinion, the amount of skill that they possess in writing clear sentences, etc. From the students' work, the instructor will be able to tell what skills students need to work on, and where attention should be focused in the future.

Standards addressed

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1a,b,d: Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

- a. Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which related ideas are grouped to support the writer's purpose.
- b. Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.
- d. Provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Mapping the Swift River Valley

The landmarks in Sally Jane's community – and throughout the entire Swift River Valley – play an important role in the book. In this mini-lesson, students' understanding of the physical spaces that Sally Jane describes and their proximity to the river and, later, the reservoir can be examined by doing a map-making activity. Students will create their own maps of her surroundings, as described in the book. It is likely that each student's map will be different, based on their understanding of and ability

to construct relationships between physical spaces as described within the story.

- Introduce the activity to students with a short discussion about maps. Review what information is shown on maps, what they are used for, and what different types of maps you might find (political, topographical, etc.). Explain that students will be creating maps of the places that Sally Jane describes in the book. Share with them an example of a map of the students' community (see appendix), including places that share similar significance to the places that will be included in the maps that students make.
- Re-read the story to the class so that they can listen for places that they may not have remembered were important during the first reading. Suggest that students write down places that they want to include in their map while you read the story – pause extra between pages so that they have time to write. It isn't as important that students be able to see the illustrations this time, and sitting at tables/desks will mean that they have a surface to write on.
- After reading the story again, hand out plain paper (8.5x11 or similar) for mapping and give students access to basic art materials. Maps needn't be beautifully illustrated, but color can be an important element in conveying relationships and/or importance of places. Remind them to do quick drawings of each place, because it isn't their drawing of the place that matters so much as where they put each place is. Also remind them not to include anything that they don't have a reason to include. Allow 10-15 minutes for students to finish.
- Once they have finished, put students in pairs and have them share their maps. Students should examine each others' drawings, and explain to each other why they put things where they did. Before they share, remind them that their maps may not be the same, and that this doesn't mean that any of them did the “wrong” thing.

Read Aloud: *“I'm so glad that you all got to share your maps! I really enjoyed listening to you explain your thinking to each other. I heard some really great examples of inferences that you made while you listened to the story, and I also heard many of you share details from the story that you remembered. Thank you! I'm wondering, though, if any of you noticed anything different about you and your partner's maps?”*

Students might answer that they noticed that their partner put something on the right side of the river when they put in on the left, or that the school was next to the stone mill on their map but very far away

from it on their partner's map.

“That's all very interesting. We know, though, that there aren't any maps in the book, so we don't actually know where any of these places were really located, or whether or not they were even real! When you and your partner talked about your thinking behind your map, did you notice any similarities? Did you have any of the same ideas, or make any of the same inferences?”

Students will likely answer that they did see similarities, and/or that they made similar inferences to their partners but that maybe one of them missed a small detail of information. Some groups might say that they need to look at the book to see who was “right.”

“Well, the fun thing about this project is that none of us are right or wrong. Just like when we do art projects, making this map was a chance for us to share what we learned and what we were thinking about creatively. Just because we didn't all make the same map doesn't mean that any of us are wrong! Everything that we mapped was there for a reason.”

Assessment

The instructor will conduct informal formative assessment during this activity in multiple ways. While students create and share their maps, the instructor will move throughout the room to see what things each student included and where they mapped them out, thus providing a look at the students' comprehension of the story and their ability to detect significant places. Listening to snippets of students' conversations with each other about their maps will provide some explanation for why students mapped their locations the way that they did. Assessment of both of these things will provide the instructor with a basic idea of where the class is at as a whole in terms of reading comprehension and ability to make inferences about and to understand relationships between physical places (rather than actual characters) as described in a story.

Standards Addressed

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.IT.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.IT.4.5: Describe the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in a text or part of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.IT.4.7: Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

Related Activities

Before Reading

Studying Local History

Learn about your community's history by looking at a text (or portions of a text, especially if a community member (or member of the historical society) who is well-versed in community history to speak to the class. Focus on identifying, together, important moments in the town's history – try to pick events that took place during pivotal moments in national history so as to easily share historical context with students. Assign small groups of students an event to study, and have students spend 10-15 minutes doing a bit of light research (could simple be a Wikipedia search) on the year in which their event took place, so as to gain a better understanding of why it happened. Create a visual (a larger *illustrated* timeline is best) that shared the gathered information. Have each group briefly share what their event was and when it took place. Discuss how each event highlighted might have affected to community, for better or worse. This activity will likely require a vocabulary lesson on the word “context.”

Identifying With Nature

Take a nature walk as a class, and have students identify things in nature that they have a particular interest in, have important memories about, or are otherwise drawn to. Sit in a circle in a comfortable outdoor space after exploring a planned route and have students share the connections that they have (or have just made) to their surroundings – everything from big things like the particular field you walked through to smaller things things as specific as the particular shape of a birch leaf.

Appreciating Natural Resources

Identify as a class any natural resources that play an important role in the community. If possible, identify some that came up in the class study of local history. Try to identify resources used for a variety of reasons – recreation, industry, agriculture, etc. - so as to illustrate how the community is dependent upon its natural resources. Be sure to identify multiple bodies (or other sources) of water, along with forests, farmland, etc.

Understanding the Role of Water

Discuss the importance of water in daily life. Have students share what they need water for, then share with them uses they may not have thought of (flushing toilets, fighting fires, providing electricity, watering gardens and farmland, etc.) that are equally as important and require larger amounts of water than things like brushing teeth, staying hydrated, etc. Then, discuss where the water we use comes from (students should be able to contribute the particular sources of water identified in the discussion of natural resources).

Finding Sources of Necessary Resources

Examine both physical and political maps of Massachusetts. Giving students copies of the maps to share in small groups (2-3 students) is best so that they can examine them up close. Have them look for major rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water, as well as major highways and metropolitan areas. Have them identify as many types of bodies of water as possible. Then, discuss the role that bodies of water near cities play in the daily life of urban communities. Be sure to highlight a city (Boston, in particular) that has no nearby source of clean water and have students share where they think the city may get their water from. If one (or more) student knows about the Quabbin Reservoir, they will likely bring it up, as it is the source of much of Boston's water. If none of them know about Quabbin, talk about what a reservoir is and show them where to find Quabbin on the map. Let students examine the map and ask them to share observations about the reservoir's location, surroundings, size, etc. (This can be replicated using almost any state, or even a map of the entire country.)

After Reading

Mock Town Meeting

Hold a mock town meeting as a class. Study the structure of a town meeting, and talk about its place in rural government. If it's the time of year when town meeting takes place, ask students' families to take them to all or part of the meeting (but don't require it). An alternative to this could be suggesting that students attend some of a school board or planning committee meeting, just to observe the structure and learn about the role that each participant in the meeting plays. The class meeting will be a recreation of a meeting that the residents of the Swift River Valley may have have with the men from Boston while debating whether or not Quabbin should be built. Students will play roles as townspeople, Bostonite lawyers and businessmen, meeting moderator, stenographer, etc. Have students think about their role before the meeting so that they can plan things that they would like to add to the discussion, and develop a meeting agenda as a class. This activity will allow students to study local government and learn about meeting structure and practices. Examine some of Robert's Rules of Order before the meeting. Afterwards, have kids reflect on what it was like to play their role. Have them think about things that they might like to contribute to local government meetings in the future.

Explorations in Artistry

The book is filled with beautiful illustrations, some of the most striking of which are Barbara Cooney's drawings of the nighttime scenes described in the story. Using very few colors – mainly white, light blue, and black – she manages to create entire landscapes. One of her tricks to doing this is to include only tiny sources of light in each picture, like the moon, fireflies, etc. Look at how she draws shapes using only partial outlines of things, focusing on where light reflects off of things. Then, try it as a class! This can be done using white crayons or chalk and dark paper, or, for kids with great motor skills who can handle using sharp tools, try out scratchboard (a medium that uses specially coated paper where a black substance is scratched off to reveal a white background).

Light Absorption Experiment

In the book, Sally Jane mentions that her grandfather's headstone was the best for playing on in the summer because while the others were light colored and cold, his was black and always warm. Ask students why they think that is to gauge how much (if any) they know about the subject, then conduct a

short scientific experiment as a class. Use natural materials of three different colors (light sand, grey rocks, and dark soil could work) to examine how light absorption affects the temperature of a substance. Pick a sunny spot outside and place each item in a container in a spot where it can get lots of sun. Take the temperature of each item when you begin, and then periodically throughout the day. Track the changes in temperature and have the students make graphs expressing the data that they collected. Then, talk about what the data tells you and explore the reasons why. (A warm lamp can be substituted for the sun if it is cloudy out or if there isn't an easily accessible, safe outdoor space to use.)

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Appendix

Sample: Letter-to-the-Editor

(For “Share Your Own Perspective” Mini-Lesson)

To Whom it May Concern:

I am writing because I don't like my school's rule that reading books have to be left inside during recess. I know that if students aren't careful with their books, they might get ruined during recess. If the grass on the field is wet and a book gets left there, it might fall apart. Someone might forget their book outside and it might get stolen. I think, though, that if I can take my book home, I should be able to bring it to recess. Also, reading is important, and it shouldn't be against the rules if I want to practice reading. Recess is supposed to be when we get to have fun, and reading is fun for me, then I should be able to do it.

Yours truly,

A 4th grader at Jackson Street School

Sample: Chart of Pros and Cons

(For “Share Your Own Perspective” Mini-Lesson)

Pros (+)	Cons (-)