

Decision Education Foundation English Curriculum

Fences

by August Wilson

Unit Snapshot

<i>Designed For</i>	High School Students
<i>Essential Questions</i>	What is a good decision? How does the past affect present decisions? How do the decisions and actions of characters reveal their personalities? How do decisions, actions, and consequences vary depending on the different perspectives of the people involved?
<i>Content and Skill Focus</i>	Decision Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• information, frames, values, and alternatives• balancing head and heart• decisions shape character• decisions influence the future English Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• illustrations in writing and speaking• character analysis and plot development• metaphor in literature
<i>Expected Outcomes</i>	Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none">• analyze characters' choices using information, alternatives, and values• use a tree to represent a decision• discuss plot, metaphor and character
<i>Kinds of Assessment</i>	Performance Tasks : Broadway Audition Exercise and Troy on Trial Reading Log: Important Decisions in the Play Quizzes on plot and decision vocabulary Debate: Troy's Parenting Small Group Investigation of Metaphors Two Essays Exploring Decision Elements
<i>Time Required</i>	Eleven class periods
<i>Comments</i>	The topics and conflicts Wilson chooses to explore in <i>Fences</i> are ones that appeal to the teenage mind: love and desire; injustice; baseball and football; domineering parent; friendship—to name a few.

(Version 7)

Overview

General Description: Through a close reading of August Wilson’s play, *Fences*, students will explore the basis for a good decision: finding **creative alternatives**, defining **clear values**, and applying **useful information**—three foundational links in the six parts of the decision-making process. The unit is designed for students in grades 9-12, and teachers can use it as a stand-alone unit or as part of a larger drama unit.

Duration: While the unit is designed for eleven class periods, teachers will need to add time to complete written and group assignments. The class period designations describe chronology, not the exact amount of time. The duration can be adjusted by adapting the learning and assessment activities that will be most useful for the class, and a feasible range of time frames is ten to twenty class periods. To assess how well students can apply their understanding, teachers can choose between two Performance Tasks or use both.

Context: Set in 1957, ten years after Jackie Robinson played in his first major-league baseball game, *Fences* is the half-way point in August Wilson’s ten-play cycle about African American life in each decade of the Twentieth Century. The play is about Troy Maxon, a fifty-seven-year-old garbage man who lives with his family in the Hill District of Pittsburg. Topics Wilson chooses to explore in *Fences* are ones that appeal to the teenage mind: love and desire; injustice; baseball and football; domineering parent; friendship—to name a few.

Hedy Weiss, critic for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, states that

[i]n many ways Fences is the black equivalent of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman -- the tragic tale of a deeply flawed father and his turbulent relationship with both himself and his son. Troy's enduring anger and fear—his inheritance from a crueller and more discriminatory world than the one his son has grown into— make him unable to support his son's dreams. And his bitter experience (and some envy, too), drives him to treat Cory with a Lear-like ferocity and to crush his dream of a college athletic scholarship. Yet Cory only snaps when his father's sexual dalliance with a younger woman is revealed, and he must defend his devastated mother. (The Chicago Sun-Times, January 23, 2006)

Although their own experience may or may not reach the same extremes, high school students will find Wilson’s portrayal of Cory’s struggles realistic and engaging: most teenagers will be able to identify with Cory at some level.

Decisions in the Play: While Cory and Rose, his mother, make important decisions, most of the drama revolves around the main character, Troy: the action and suspense unfold primarily from the decisions Troy makes. However, students can also benefit from studying the quality of Cory and Rose’s decisions. One of the final exercises, *Pulling it All Together* focuses on Cory’s decision to disobey his father.

Through seamless expository passages in the dialogue (students should notice this technique), we learn about Troy’s past and about the decisions that continue to have an effect on characters. For example, Troy’s failed career in baseball and experience of segregation has a direct influence on

his view of Cory's football prospects. Even though Troy views his father as the "devil himself," Troy follows his father's example of avoiding "the walking blues" and providing for his eleven children. Although Troy's care is flawed and emotionally limited, he attempts to stick with both Rose and Alberta, his mistress, and he takes responsibility for all of his children: Lyons (we notice Troy tells Lyons to keep the money he loaned him), Cory (Troy tries from his limited perspective to teach Cory to be successful in the world), and Raynell (Troy convinces Rose to become the mother of his illegitimate daughter).

Troy's most successful decision is to marry Rose, and during the present time of the play, his decision making deteriorates. Limited perspective on *alternatives* and *information* and conflicting *values* keep him from making the best choices in his relationships with Alberta, Cory, and Gabe. For example, commenting on Gabe's hospitalization, Rose tells Troy that he has contradicted his own values:

I said send him to the hospital...you said let him be free...now you done went down there and signed him to the hospital for half his money. You went back on yourself, Troy. You gonna have to answer for that. (2.2)

The root cause of Troy's poor decisions is a complex mixture of unfulfilled dreams, contradictory values, and limited perspective (his inability to distinguish the differences between his past and the present). However, by considering decision fitness and applying elements of a good decision, we can help students begin to make sense of the complexity, identify contradictions, and learn skills to employ in their own decision-making.

Fences Unit Contents

1. Learning Plan

- **First Class: Role Play and Introduction** (page 5)
- **Second Class: Biography and Background** (page 7)
- **Third Class: The First Act** (page 8)
 - Teacher Resource 1—List of Important Decisions in *Fences* (page 9)
- **Fourth Class: The First Act and Decision Elements** (page 10)
 - Teacher Resource 2—A Look at the Quality of Troy’s Decision (page 11)
 - Handout 1—Alternatives, Values, and Information (page 12)
 - Handout 2—Decision Tools and Exercises (page 13)
- **Fifth Class: Writing Workshop** (page 15)
- **Sixth Class: Act 2, Scenes 1 through 3** (page 16)
- **Seventh Class: The Ending** (page 17)
- **Eighth Class: Frame—Troy’s Decision To Kick Cory Out of the House** (page 18)
 - Handout 3—How a Small Frame Limits a Decision (page 19)
 - Teacher Resource 3. Sample Responses to Handout 3 (page 20)
- **Ninth Class: Decision Trees** (page 21)
 - Handout 4—Tree Diagram Representing Troy’s Decision to Commit Gabe (page 22)
 - Handout 5—Values Table (page 23)
- **Tenth Class: Cory’s Decision** (page 24)
 - Handout 6—Cory’s Dilemma: Pulling it All Together (page 25)
- **Eleventh Class: The Debate** (page 26)

2. Assessment Evidence

- Performance Tasks: Broadway Audition (page 27)
- Performance Task: Troy on Trial (page 28)
- Reading Log, Quizzes, Essay Topics (page 29)
- Journal Entries, Small Group Investigation, Debate (page 30)

3. Resources on the Web (page 31)

1. Learning Plan

First Class: Role Play and Introduction

Materials

Student prepared to participate in role play
Essential Questions
Performance Task
Essay Topics
Journal Entry 1

Procedures

- Begin with a discussion of the question, *How much control do you have over your life?*
- Arrange the following role play with a student before class:
The student arrives late to class and interrupts you—*immediately after you have settled the class and asked the opening question above*. When you ask her for an explanation, she responds, “Mr. ____ stopped me in the hall and asked how the game went yesterday.” Lose your temper and tell the student you want to meet with her after school. The tardy student responds loudly: “But that’s unfair—I had no choice—Mr. ____ made me late.” Come clean with the class, and ask them to describe what they just witnessed (if time allows have them respond briefly in writing and share responses before turning to discussion).
- Once students have discussed the situation, draw their attention back to your opening question, by asking the late student if she had control in this situation. The following questions can be used to direct the conversation to a range of topics that will appear in this unit:
 - In what ways do your parents control you? school? peers? teammates? teachers? your past?
 - Did you choose to come to school today? Did you choose this class? Have you chosen to pay attention and participate in the discussion?
 - What are some decisions you have made (or have seen others make) that have changed your (their) life, for good or ill? (If they prefer students can give examples from history, movies, popular culture.)
 - What do our decisions reveal about us?

Emphasize the idea that even though we are all limited in various ways (environment, circumstances, family, school, health, to name a few examples), decisions give us some control within those limitations—power to influence our futures.

- Introduce students to the *Essential Questions* and inform them that the class will explore those questions through both a close reading of August Wilson’s play, *Fences*, and an examination of the foundation blocks of a good decision: creative alternatives, useful information, and values. Emphasize that the goal is to examine how characters handle

decisions, then to apply ideas about good decision-making to our own lives. Introduce the **Performance Tasks** and **Essay Topics** to help students understand more specifically where they are headed in this unit of study. **Procedural Note:** Depending on the time available, teachers can choose one or both of the *Performance Tasks*, but this decision should be made before the unit introduction so that students know what is expected of them.

- **Closure.** Point out the significance of beginning a drama unit with a role play. Ask students to consider the similarities and differences between what they saw at the beginning of class and a full-fledged dramatic production. (2)

Next Steps

Assign **Journal Entry 1**. Before beginning the play, students complete the journal topic below: an exploration of August Wilson’s life and the context of the *Fences*. Provide students with online information sources (see **Web Resources**).

Journal Assignment: Research details about August Wilson’s life and the background and context for Fences (check at least two sources). Imagine that he has come to speak to your class. Write a brief biography (in your own words) that you might use to introduce the playwright to your class. Include details that you learned about Fences.

Second Class: Biography and Background

Materials

Reading Log Instructions

Procedures

- Review journal entries on Wilson's life and the context of *Fences*. Suggested method:
 1. Ask a volunteer to read an entry.
 2. Discuss the important information.
 3. Ask for a second another volunteer to read, one who has different information.
 4. Continue until you have elicited main point you want to emphasize about Wilson's life and the play.
- Explain the **Reading Log** instructions which are listed in **Assessment**.
- Students begin reading 1.1-1.2 (and reading logs).

Next Steps

Homework: Students complete reading assignment (1.1-1.2).

Third Class: The First Act

Materials

Student Reading Logs

Teacher Resource 1—List of Important Decisions in *Fences*

Procedures

- Discuss 1.1-1.2.
 1. Review major plot events and ask if there are any questions. (**Note:** To assess student understanding, after each reading assignment and before discussion, teachers can conduct brief oral or written quizzes on basic plot and character details.)
 2. Discuss reading logs. As students name decisions from these scenes, list them on the board.
- Students begin reading 1.3-1.4 and continue reading logs. Remind them to pay particular attention to new characters who enter the scenes.

Next Steps

Homework: Students complete reading assignment (1.3-1.4).

Teacher Resource 1. LIST OF IMPORTANT DECISIONS IN *FENCES*

(Note: *Teacher Resources* 1 and 2 are intended as background for the teacher. It is best to have students discover this information as they read, write, and discuss.)

Troy decisions are....

- to leave his father/home as a young teenager
- to get married as a teenager (steal, stabbing, jail)
- to marry Rose 15 years later
- to seek better job—become a garbage truck driver
- to have an affair with Alberta
- to end Cory's football career by speaking to the coach
- to continue to see Alberta after confessing to Rose
- to commit Gabe to the hospital
- to kick Cory out of the house

Cory decisions are...

- to play football and postpone working at the store
- to hit his father when Troy is hurting Rose
- to challenge Troy with a baseball bat
- to go to Troy's funeral

Rose's decisions are...

- to marry Troy
- to reject Troy
- to raise Raynell

Fourth Class: The First Act and Decision Elements

Materials

Teacher Resource 2—A Look at the Quality of Troy’s Decision
Handout 1—Alternatives, Values, and Information
Handout 2—Decision Tools and Exercises
Extra blank copy of Handout 2-a (first page)

Procedures

- Discuss 1.3-1.4.
 1. Review major plot events and ask if there are any questions.
 2. Discuss reading logs. As students name decision from these scenes, list them on the board.
- Use **Handout 1** (give students copies and project) to explore how *useful information*, *clear values*, and *creative alternatives* enable good decision making. Guidelines:
 1. Focus on the action of asking. Emphasize the *questions* associated with analyzing values, alternatives and information.
 2. Note how all three links affect each other: for example, my values and information will help determine my alternatives. Hence, a chain, not a linear representation. Our flexibility and willingness to move back and forth from one link to another as we analyze a problem will determine the quality of our decisions.
- Give students copies of **Handout 2-a** (first page). They can complete this exercise individually, in groups, or during class discussion. Smaller group discussion recommended.
- Assign **Essay 1: Using Alternatives, Information, and Values to Understand a Complex Problem** (see **Assessment** for directions). This topic provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the role of values, creative alternatives, and useful information both in Troy’s situation and one of their own.

Next Steps

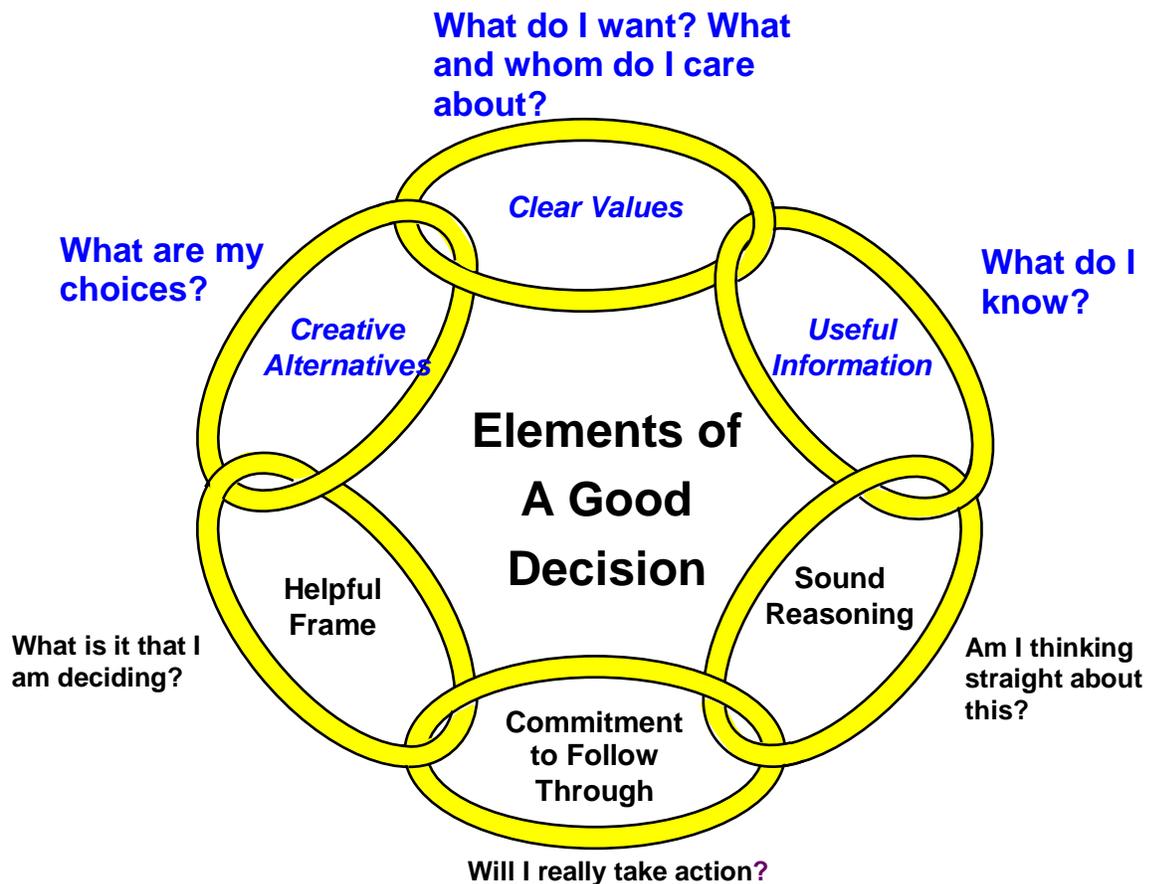
Homework: Students complete **Handout 2-b:Pre-Writing Exercises for Essay 1** (second page).

Teacher Resource 2. A Look at the Quality of Troy's Decisions

X=Elements evident in Troy's decisions → ↓	Decision Declared	Useful Frame	Alternatives Considered	Information Gathered	Clear Values	Comments
escape to the city	x				x	Gains indirect value of leaving father; not free & safe. Troy's decision (at age 14) is mostly from the "heart" and for survival. Only considers one alternative and gathers no information about survival in the city. Age and lack of information result in a limited frame for his decision.
first marriage (steal/stab/jail)						Though the details are few, Troy's comments suggest that he neither declared a decision nor considered alternatives or values . "I was young and anxious to be a man" (1.4). Seems to be "going with the flow" and following only his "heart." As an adult he criticizes this earlier choice and its consequences.
marry Rose	x	x	x	x	x	Declares his desire to marry Rose. Information : shares details of his past with Rose. Values : Wants to have family, stability, Rose.
seek new job	x	x	x	x	x	Alternatives : Given social limits and circumstances of the times, Troy does a good job considering alternatives and frame . Information : Aware of responsibilities and consequences. Clear values : gain respect; provide for family; challenge limits. Reveals Troy's courage and sense of responsibility. Loss of friendship is a sad, unpredictable outcome.
initial affair with Alberta						While we do not know the details of Troy's process here, his confession to Rose in 2.4 is enlightening. Troy admits that he put little effort into making this decision: "I can't explain it none. It just sort of grows on you 'til it gets out of hand." No decision declared or alternatives considered.
continue with Alberta	x		x			While we admire Troy's honesty, we are saddened by Rose's new situation and the loss of their lively connection with each other. This decision warrants some discussion and debate about Troy's conflicting values —long-standing connection and love for Rose vs. laughter and pleasure with Alberta (see end of 2.1 and beginning of 2.4).
end Cory's football career	x				x	Alternatives : Troy's dictatorial role keeps him from considering options. Information : Troy's frame is limited by his past and biases; he can't see times have changed. While he has clearly defined values , Troy fails to see the intersection of his and Corey's values in a world that is different from when he was Cory's age. Troy's genuine concern to be responsible is thwarted by his narrow frame , biases, and pride.
sign Gabe into hospital	x					Troy is clearly conflicted by this decision (contradicted an earlier value). We might assume that with the addition to the family (Raynell), Troy needs money and sacrifices Gabe's freedom for his child's well-being. Cory's comment about Gabe causes Troy and Cory's final battle & separation.
kick Cory out						Troy's frame is limited, and he does not consider creative alternatives or useful information . When Cory refuses to give him respect (the only value he considers here), Troy's only solution is to send the boy away. Past experience (w/ own father & jail) limits his perspective (frame), and he reverts to a former pattern of violent separation. He claims to value respect and pride, but his hypocrisy makes this stance seem hollow.

Handout 1. ALTERNATIVES, VALUES, AND INFORMATION

Asking the right questions about ALTERNATIVES, VALUES, and INFORMATION leads to good decisions.



Handout 2. DECISION TOOLS AND EXERCISES

a. Troy's Alternatives at Age 14

- **Identify the range of choices possible** for Troy's decision to leave home at age 14: brainstorm considering "mild to wild" alternatives and what others might do.
- Once you have made your list, use the table below to **identify possible outcomes, pros and cons** of a few of the best alternatives.

Alternative	Likely Outcome	Drawback	Benefit

A decision is only as good as the best alternative considered.

b. Pre-writing Exercise For Essay 1

Alternatives

- Use a blank copy of the chart in **Handout 1** (first page) to analyze the personal situation you choose to describe in your essay.
- Use the following questions to analyze your list of *alternatives* for that decision:
 - What did I overlook?
 - What if I had framed the decision differently?
 - Were there any alternatives that I ignored because I was afraid of them?
 - What would (Person X whom I admire) have done in this situation?
 - Did I consider at least one “wild” alternative in the situation I faced?
 - Could I see myself potentially doing each of the alternatives I considered?

Useful Information

Before making a decision, find out the basic facts, possibilities, and probabilities (likely outcomes).

Troy decides at age 14 to run away to the city.

- **What information does he consider before he decides?**
- **If you were Troy, what useful information would you want before you decided to escape to the city?**

Fifth Class: Writing Workshop

Materials

Student responses to **Handout 2**

Teacher Resource 2—A Look at the Quality of Troy’s Decision

Procedures

- Review and discuss student response to the essay pre-writing exercises (**Handout 2**). Remind students of the essay format and deadline.
- Writing Workshop. Give students time in class to continue working on the essay assignment. Circulate and discuss questions that arise.

Next Steps

Homework: Read 2.1-2.3. Continue **Reading Log**.

Sixth Class: Act 2, Scenes 1 through 3

Materials

Journal Entry 2

Procedures

- Discuss 2.1-2.3.
 1. Review major plot events and ask if there are any questions or assess student understanding with a brief oral or written quiz on plot details.
 2. Discuss reading logs. As students name decision from these scenes, list them on the board.
- Assign **Journal Entry 2**: *Is Cory's experience as a teenager in any way similar to yours? How much control does he—and do you—have over your future?*

This exercise provides an opportunity to reflect on what students have learned so far by focusing on Cory and exploring connections between his situation and their own.

- Ask a few volunteers to share their journal Responses. Discuss.

Next Steps

Homework: Students finish reading the play (2.4-2.5) and complete [Reading Logs](#).

Seventh Class: The Ending

Materials

Reading Logs
August Wilson Quotation
Directions for Small Group Investigation

Procedures

- Assess student understanding with a written or oral quiz on the conclusion to the play.
- Collect and discuss responses and **Reading Logs**. Make sure that students understand the final situation of each character.
- Once the class has had the chance to discuss the ending, give them copies (or project) of the following comment from August Wilson. He provides insight about the final disposition of his characters, and the quotation suggests interesting topics for class discussion at this point in the unit:

At the end of *Fences* every person, with the exception of Raynell, is institutionalized. Rose is in church. Lyons is in a penitentiary; Gabriel's in a mental hospital and Cory's in the marines. The only free person is the girl, Troy's daughter, the hope of the future. That was conscious on my part because in '57 that's what I saw. (Quoted in Davis Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* [New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988] 301.)

- Discuss the following **Small Group Investigation**. Explain that students will begin individually researching their topics (either in class or for homework). Guidelines:
 1. Assign small groups one of the following: baseball; the fence (and gates of heaven); the song about Blue.
 2. Individually, students find as many references to their topic as they can and put page references in order from first to last.
 3. When the groups convene (next class), they discuss each reference and decide if the character uses more than a *literal* meaning of the figure in each example. Write notes next to the page references.
 4. Each group picks one of their best references and ideas to share with the class.

Note: Students use their **Reading Logs** to complete this task. The exercise provides an opportunity to review and sharpen their knowledge of the details of the play with classmates while they investigate Wilson's use of metaphor in the play.

Next Steps

Homework: Work on figurative language exercise of **Essay 1**.

Eighth Class: Frame—Troy’s Decision To Kick Cory Out of the House

Materials

Handout 3—How a Small Frame Limits a Decision
Teacher Resource 3. Sample Responses to Handout 3
Performance Tasks

Procedures

- Complete Steps 3 and 4 of the **Small Group Investigation**. Allow groups to share their findings and discuss the definition of metaphor.
Definition: Metaphor: A figure of speech in which an implicit comparison is made between two things essentially unlike. It may take the one of four forms: (1) that in which the literal term and figurative term are *both named*; (2) ...the literal term is *named* and the figurative term is *implied* (3)...literal term is *implied* and the figurative is *named*; (4) ...*both* the literal and figurative terms are *implied*.--from *Perrine’s Literature*, 8th Edition, Art and Johnson, ed., page 1714)
- Use **Handout 3** to introduce the concept of *narrow framing*. This exercise provides preparation for the debate. Students complete individually or in groups. Discuss results.
- Introduce and assign roles for the **Performance Tasks**. Teachers should choose the task that will best suit their students’ interests and needs.

Next Steps

Homework: Students complete **Essay 1**.

Handout 3. How a Small Frame Limits a Decision

What is a FRAME?

The frame defines the problem to be solved.

Frames clarify the *purpose, perspective, and scope* of a decision.

Take a close look at the end of 2.4. As you reread this scene which ends with Troy’s decision to kick Cory out of the house, examine the characters’ comments on the following topics during this heated interchange. In the spaces provided below identify their different perspectives of each topic.

Troy’s Frame	←Topic→	Cory’s Frame
	<i>the house</i>	
	<i>being a man</i>	
	<i>Rose</i>	
	<i>Gabe</i>	
	<i>the bat</i>	

Questions for Discussion

- 1. In what ways does Troy’s past experience narrow his perspective in this situation?*
- 2. Is Cory’s perspective also too limited? Explain?*
- 3. Does Troy recognize that his frame is too narrow? Does anyone ever? Examples?*

Teacher Resource 3. Sample Responses to Handout 3

Take a close look at the end of 2.4. As you reread this scene which ends with Troy’s decision to kick Cory out of the house, examine the characters’ comments on the following topics during this heated interchange. In the spaces provided below identify their different perspectives of each topic.

Troy’s Frame	←Topic→	Cory’s Frame
<p>“This is my house. Bought and paid for. In full. Took me fifteen years.” Sees house as result of years of hard work—something he has earned and for which he deserves respect.</p>	<p><i>the house</i></p>	<p>“I live here too!” Sees house as his place as well because he is a member of the family.</p>
<p>“You a man. Now, let’s see you act like one...You go on and be a man and get your own house... this is mine.” With his own experience as his reference, Troy believes Cory must work hard without help (education, football) to be a man.</p>	<p><i>being a man</i></p>	<p>“You ain’t never gave me nothing! You ain’t never done nothing but hold me back.” Cory rejects Troy’s view because Cory only understands (from experience) the fear Troy instilled in both him and his mother. Thinks they are in competition.</p>
<p>“You leave your mama out of this. She ain’t got nothing to do with this.” Can’t see that Rose will be devastated if Cory leaves. Sees this conflict as ONLY between father and son—just like his own experience.</p>	<p><i>Rose</i></p>	<p>“I don’t know how she can stand you...after what you did to her.” Sees and understands only Troy’s infidelity. Does not see or remember any of the happier & healthier times of the relationship</p>
<p>“Get your black ass out of my yard.” Troy’s response to the mention of Gabe. Troy can’t stand the notion that he took advantage of his brother and/or that he had help “earning” the house.</p>	<p><i>Gabe</i></p>	<p>“It ain’t your yard. You took Uncle Gabe’s money he got from the army to buy this house and then you put him out.” While the facts may be true, Cory fails to see the full complexity of the issue. Troy does in fact love his brother and he feels responsible to provide for the entire family.</p>
<p>“Put my bat down!” Troy knows all too well from his own past where Cory’s act of physical defiance will lead. Cory’s action brings out Troy’s violent side that is mixed with competition and baseball: “You gonna have to kill me.” See comments to “Death” at end.</p>	<p><i>the bat</i></p>	<p>After grabbing the bat Cory says, “I ain’t going nowhere! Come on...put me out! I ain’t scared of you.” Sees father as a weak, drunken failure. Troy proves physically stronger but loses Cory in the process of defeating him.</p>

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways does Troy’s past experience limit his perspective in this situation?
2. Is Cory’s perspective also too narrow? Explain?
3. Does Troy recognize that his frame is too narrow? Does anyone ever? Examples?

Ninth Class: Decision Trees

Materials

Handout 1—Alternatives, Values, and Information

Handout 2—Decision Tools and Exercises

Handout 4—Tree Diagram Representing Troy’s Decision to Commit Gabe

Handout 5—Values Table

Procedures

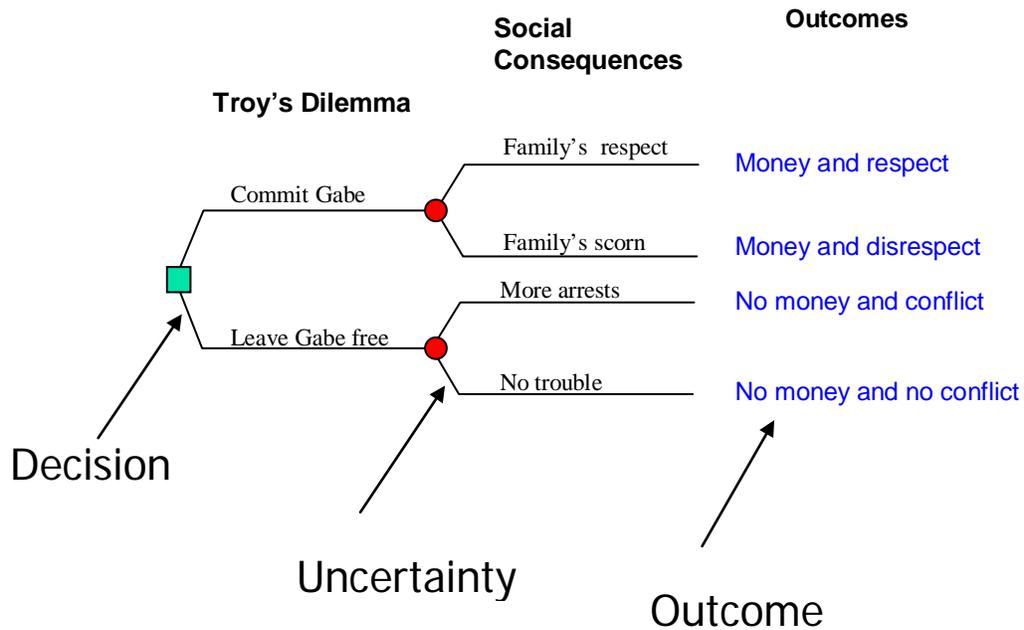
- Collect Essay 1.
- Use Handouts 1 and 2 to review the following decision concepts: *creative alternatives* and *useful information*.
- Use **Handout 4** to review or introduce decision trees.
- Class discussion topic: What are the various meanings of *Fences* in the play? Why do you think Wilson chose the word for the title of the play?
- Give students copies of **Handout 5**. Discuss the directions.

Next Steps

Homework: Complete **Handout 5**.

Handout 4. Tree Diagram Representing Troy's Decision To Commit Gabe

- Trees help organize decisions, uncertainties, and outcomes.
- **SQUARES** represent a decision point.
- **CIRCLES** represent uncertainties.



Decision trees help us clarify decisions, uncertainties, and outcomes.

Handout 5. Values Table

**Definition: Values are what I want or care about in a given situation.
Values help us to...**

- identify what decisions to declare;
- identify what alternatives to consider;
 - Some values are non-negotiable
 - Some values are flexible
- make tradeoffs between choices
 - You may be able to get anything you want, but usually not *everything* you want;
- build motivation to follow through.

Use the following table to explore which of Cory’s alternatives is most likely to achieve most of his values. Fill in the empty blocks.

		Values		
		Play football	College scholarship	Father’s respect
Choices	Work at A&P only	No chance (0)	No chance (0)	Yes (100%)
	Football practice only			
	Football practice and work			

Tenth Class: Cory's Decision

Materials

Handout 6—Cory's Dilemma: Pulling it All Together

Procedures

- Review student responses to **Handout 5**, and discuss Cory's alternatives and values.
- **Before giving students Handout 6**, ask them the questions on the handout about *alternatives, values, and, information*. Record responses on the board.
- Ask students to create (individually or in groups) a decision tree that represents Cory's decision. They can refer to the previous tree example and should make lists of alternatives, uncertainties, and outcomes.
- Once students have had a chance to create an initial version, create the tree on the board with input from the group. Then give students **Handout 6** and discuss.
- Initial steps for the **Debate: *Like his father before him, Troy fails his son.***
 1. Write the statement above on the board.
 2. Post the numbers 1-10 around the room and ask student to line up according to how they would rate Troy as a father: 1= poor; 10 = excellent.
 3. Low numbers prepare the argument that Troy does not fail his son and high numbers that he does.

Next Steps

Homework: Students gather evidence for their positions in the debate in preparation for group meeting during the next class.

Handout 6. Cory's Dilemma: Pulling it All Together

Situation: While Cory's decision to ignore his father's direction by remaining on the high school football team and postponing work at the A&P ends badly, it is a choice worth analyzing with the class. Ask students to imagine that they do not know the outcome and to take on the problem as if they were Cory. Ask them to apply the basis for a good decision by answering the following questions (individually or in groups). Once students have complete responses, ask them to create a decision tree to express Cory's problem (see example at the end of this page).

ALTERNATIVES: What are Cory's choices?

- Work at A&P and no football (obey father)
- Football and no work (disobey father)
- Football and postpone work at A&P (disobey father)

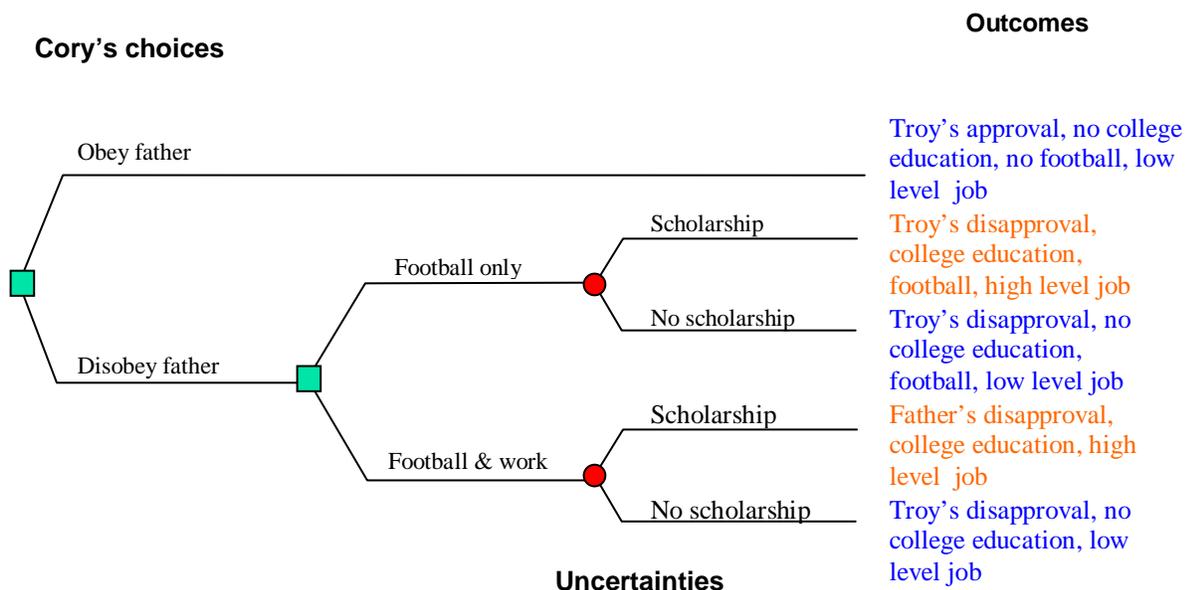
Note: Point out to students that Cory's third alternative is a creative idea that seeks to combine his and his father's values—and Cory takes the initiative to explore this option with the owner of the store. Are there other alternatives?

VALUES: What does Cory want?

- Play football
- Attend college (first one in his family)
- Please his father

INFORMATION: What does Cory know?

- Father wants him to work to be able to support himself in the world; sees no value in education
- Football could lead to college scholarship and ultimately a much better job than Troy imagines
- Owner of the A&P will let him keep the job without starting right away
- Cory loves to play football



Eleventh Class: The Debate

Materials

Essay 2—Values
Performance Tasks

Procedures

The Debate: Give students half of the period to prepare their argument, and hold the debate during the second half of the period.

Next Steps

- Assign **Essay 2: Values** (optional). This assignment is intended to help students apply what they have learned about decision making in the novel to their own lives. As part of this assignment, students should turn in a tree diagram that represents one of the decisions discussed in the essay.

Directions: Choose one of the important decisions a character makes in *Fences* and discuss

- a) what this decision reveals about the character, and
- b) how the particular decision affects others beyond the one who makes the choice. Pay particular attention to defining as best you can the values the character uses in making the decision.

In light of what you discover this decision in *Fences*, conclude your discussion with a discussion of the effects on others (good and or bad) of an important decision you have made (**Note:** If you have trouble thinking of a personal decision, choose one you witnessed made by a friend or family member). Make sure you discuss the values that governed the process.

- Conclude this unit of study with one or both of the **Performance Tasks**. As soon as they have finished reading the play, students can begin (outside of class) their preparation for this task.

2. Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1) Broadway Audition:

Goal: You want to be chosen for a leading role in a Broadway production of *Fences*.

Role: You are an aspiring professional actor.

Audience: The director and a small committee he has chosen.

Situation: The director wants you to demonstrate the depth of your understanding of the character you wish to play.

Product:

1) Give a 3-5 minute oral evaluation of an important decision the character makes (or has made), and comment on the success of that decision. Use what you have learned about useful information, clear values and creative alternatives as your criteria for judgment.

2) Recite one of your character's speeches, a passage that supports your findings, and explain the reasons for your selection.

Standards for Success: Accurate detail from the play; convincing argument supported by the three parts of the basis for a good decision; engaging recitation and explanation of the passage.

Notes and Procedures

1. The teacher should play the role of the director and a group of adults in the community (other teachers, staff, parents) can serve as committee members.

2. Time will be an issue. Ideally, auditions can be completed during larger class blocks, if available. If not, another suggestion is to devote the first and last class periods of the week to auditions until they are completed (assuming committee members can attend). If students are clear about their time limits, it should be possible to complete 5-7 auditions in one 45 minute period.

2) Troy on Trial: A Question of Alternatives, Information, and Values

Imagine that instead of leaving home after their fight with the baseball bat (end of 2.4), Cory goes to the police. The police arrest Troy and charge him with child abuse. Your classroom becomes the courtroom.

The Defense Team: Four or five students will defend Troy's actions. Their goal is to get him acquitted of the charge by presenting convincing evidence from the play that Troy's decisions have been in Cory's best interests. One student in this group will play the part of **Troy** in court.

The Prosecution Team: Four or five students will prosecute Troy. Using evidence of his actions in the play, they will attempt to have Troy convicted of the crime. One student in this group will play the part of **Cory** in court.

Judge and Jury: The teacher will preside as judge over the proceedings, and six-twelve students will serve as the jury. Along with its verdict, the jury must explain to the court the reasoning behind the decision.

Notes and Procedures

1. Showing the class excerpts from the television series *Law and Order* will give students a model for the classroom court scene.
2. Since one goal of this exercise is for students to gather useful information and demonstrate a detailed understanding of the characters, they should use evidence from the entire play—including Troy's past (before Cory was born) as well as Cory's return after Troy's death.
3. Both the prosecution and defense may call expert witnesses to the stand. For example, they can prepare a member of their team to be a forensic or psychiatric expert to explain Troy's actions.
4. In its verdict, the jury should explain their final judgment about what is and is not useful information that was presented in the trial.
5. It should be clear to all three groups that
 - a) every decision ends in action,
 - b) actions of characters will serve as evidence in the trial, and
 - c) the defense and prosecution's ability to use and explain alternatives, information, and values in the decisions used as evidence will determine their success in the trial.

2. Assessment (continued)

Reading Log: While completing each reading assignment, students should keep a log of 1) important decisions characters make (or describe from their past) and 2) all references to *fences*, *baseball*, and *music* in the play. Each entry should include a page reference and a brief phrase or sentence description. Students will use this information in class discussion and during the “Small Group Investigation.”

Quizzes: To assess and clarify student understanding, give brief oral or written quizzes on

- 1) character and plot details (after each reading assignment),
- 2) the questions we ask to define alternatives, information, and values (see **Handout 1**), and
- 3) the definitions of *metaphor*.

Essay 1: Using Alternatives, Information, and Values to Understand a Complex Problem

“And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it.” (1.4)

Troy makes this statement as he tells Lyons and Bono the story of his leaving home at age 14. In your best writing, explore the meaning and application of Troy’s statement. Use the following topics to guide your discussion:

- a. What exactly does Troy mean by “the world suddenly got big”?
- b. Have you ever had a similar experience of feeling the world “get big”?
- c. Describe that experience. How did you “cut it down”?
- d. How could a look at values, information, and alternatives help Troy manage this seemingly overwhelming situation? How do values, information, and alternatives apply to the personal situation you described?

Essay 2: Values

Choose one of the important decisions (see list—*Learning Resources*, a) a character makes in *Fences*, and discuss a) what this decision reveals about the character, and b) how the particular decision affects others beyond the one who makes the choice. Define as best you can the values the character uses in making the decision.

In light of what you discovered about the effect of a decision in *Fences*, conclude with a discussion of the effects on others (good and or bad) of an important decision you have made (If you have trouble thinking of a personal decision, choose one you witnessed made by a friend or family member). Make sure you discuss the values that governed the process.

At the end of your essay, draw a tree diagram of one of the decisions you discuss.

2. Assessment (continued)

Journal entries:

1) Research details about August Wilson’s life and the background and context for *Fences* (check at least two sources). Imagine that he has come to speak to your class. Write a brief biography (in your own words) that you might use to introduce the playwright to your class. Include details that you learned about *Fences*.

2) Is Cory’s experience as a teenager in any way similar to yours? How much control does he—and do you—have over your future?

3) Use the information from the group investigation and class discussion to clarify the various meanings of “fences” in the play.

Small Group Investigation:

Assign small groups one of the following: baseball; the fence (and gates of heaven); the song about Blue. Ask each group to 1) find as many references to their topic as they can and put page references in order from first to last; 2) discuss each reference and decide if the character uses more than a *literal* meaning of the figure in each example; 3) report back during a full class discussion of each topic.

Debate: *Like his father before him, Troy fails his son.* Once students have finished reading the play, ask them if they agree or disagree with this statement. If the class is close to evenly divided on the issue, split them into two groups to prepare a debate on the topic. Each group must argue at least three points with supporting evidence from the play.

Use the debate to introduce a discussion about the need to be aware of how our past experience, school environment, family, and social group can limit our perspective (*frame*) when considering *alternatives*, *useful information*, and *values* in the decision-making process.

3. Resources on the Web

- **Biographical Information on the Web:**
 - Dartmouth College: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~awilson/bio.html>
 - Answers.com—Includes information from Britannica, American Heritage, Columbia University Press, Houghton Mifflin, and Wikipedia: <http://www.answers.com/topic/august-wilson>
 - Web English Teacher, Timeline and other links: <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/awilson.html>
 - Thomson Gale—Detailed information on life and writing career: http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/wilson_a.htm
 - Theater Database—Timeline of Wilson’s life: http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th_century

- **More Information and Links:**
 - Pictures and Study Guide from the University of Chicago Court Theater (includes abridged obituary): <http://www.courttheatre.org/home/plays/0506/fences/>
 - MSN Encarta—Picture and audio file of Wilson reading a passage from *Fences*: <http://encarta.msn.com/>
 - CNN.com—Article on Wilson by James Earl Jones: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000314,00.html>
 - Enotes—Information on first production of *Fences*: <http://www.enotes.com/fences/>