



Classroom Activity

Freedom of Artistic Expression: Poetry

Students will use Goffman's Framing Theory to examine "[Somebody Blew Up America](#)" by Amiri Baraka in this activity. Start by passing around copies of Baraka's poem, then share a definition of Framing Theory and an overview of the controversy surrounding Baraka's poem. Divide students into small groups, provide each one with an article from the list below and then have students answer discussion questions. Bring the class back together to summarize their article and read their responses aloud. Finally, share the post-discussion activity options for students to complete in class or outside of class.

Framing Theory

"How something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning" (Davie, 2010)

Controversy

After Baraka published this piece in the wake of 9/11, he was met with both praise and protest. Many accused him of inciting violence through racist and homophobic language; however, others considered the work an important commentary on American culture.

Articles:

- Purdy, M. (2002). "[New Jersey Laureate Refuses to Resign Over Poem.](#)" *New York Times*.
- Ulaby, N. (2014). "[Amiri Baraka's Legacy Both Controversial and Achingly Beautiful.](#)" *WBUR - Boston's NPR News Station*.
- Weiss, P. (2002). "[If Poet Amiri Baraka Becomes Ex-Laureate, Is It Bad for Writers?](#)" *New York Observer*.

Discussion Questions:

- How did the article frame Baraka, the poem, and the controversy surrounding it? How did you conclude this? What words in the article helped guide you towards your answer?
- How do you think this article influenced the public's perception of this controversy? Consider comments on the article (if there are any), source of publication, and those quoted in the piece.
- What do you think should be changed about the article, if anything? How could the article have been written to express either a more neutral or more controversial viewpoint?
- Consider the following quote from the New Jersey Anti-Defamation League. Do you agree? How do you feel about Baraka's poem?
 - "What 9/11 served to underscore is that words of bigotry lead to acts of bigotry which in turn lead to the kind of murder that occurred on 9/11."

Post-Discussion Activities:

- Create a poem in response to Baraka in the same style as “Somebody...” This can be a response in agreement or disagreement. OPTIONAL: Have students swap poems and read them aloud with their interpretation.
- Create a blackout poem using “Somebody...”

References & Resources:

- Baraka, A. (2021, July). [“Somebody Blew Up America.”](#)
- [Blackout Poem Instructions from Harvard University's Faculty of Arts and Sciences](#)
- Davie, G. (2010). [“Framing Theory.”](#) *Mass Communication Theory*.
- Llano, S. [“Disciplining the Poetic: Amiri Baraka’s Somebody Blew Up America and the Limits of Political Poetry.”](#)
- Pearce, J. (2003). [“When Poetry Seems to Matter.”](#) *The New York Times*.