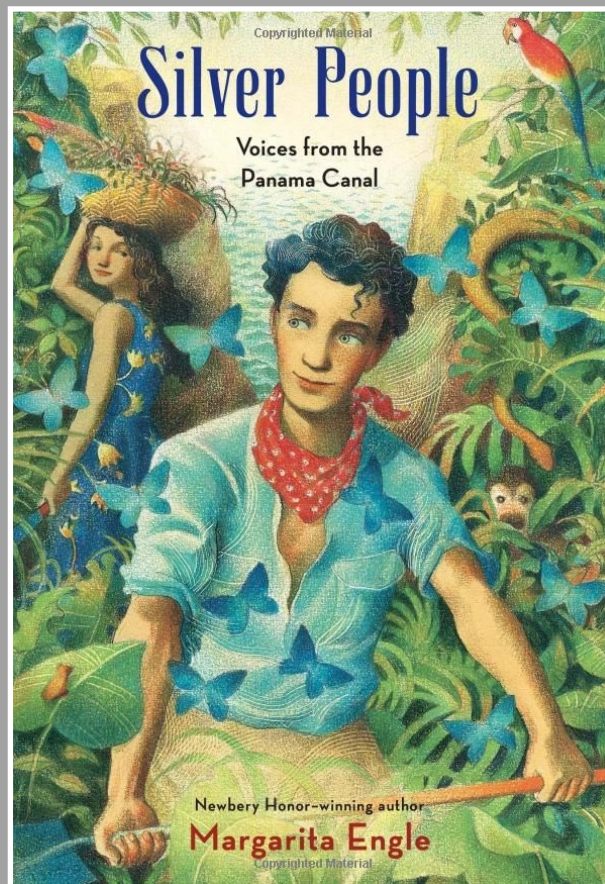


# Stories from the Panama Canal

## Lesson Plan (Gr. 6-8)



A Common Core Standards Lesson Plan to Accompany **2015 Américas Award Winner *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*** by Margarita Engle and ***Voices from Our Americas Panama Canal Oral History Project*** (directed by Dr. Ifeoma Nwankwo).  
Grades 6-8.



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## Stories from the Panama Canal

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**Text:** *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* by Margarita Engle

**Online Resources:** *Voices from Our America* website

<http://www.voicesamerica.org>

**Grades:** 6-8

**Key topics:** Oral storytelling; Panama Canal; Roosevelt; Power; Resistance; poetic prose; point of view; voice; historical fiction

### Overview:

This learning segment uses Margarita Engle's *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* and the oral storytelling project, *Voices from Our America* to give students a more nuanced understanding of the people of the Panama Canal. *Silver People* presents various fictional and historical voices from the Panama Canal in poetic prose while *Voices from Our America* gives students a chance to interact with real voices from the Panama Canal. Ultimately, these resources allow for classroom discussions pertaining to race relations, power struggles, and the differences between race, nationality, and ethnicity. What does it mean to be Spanish, Caribbean, American, Tennessean, Nashvillian, etc.?

Lalitha Vasudevan argues that "it is obviously not enough to highlight the way power operates to sustain inequality. We have to move beyond analysis" (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009). In order to move beyond recognition, we will discuss, read, and create counter narratives. In this unit, students will experiment with how sentence fluency can help create distinct voices. They will also recognize how specific voices can encompass characteristics of communities. As students broaden their understanding of the voices from the Panama Canal through these two counternarratives, they may begin to notice counternarratives and layered stories within their own communities.

As a part of an English Language Arts curriculum this learning segment can also be incorporated into a larger unit on writer's voice. Although, that distinct personality and style involves many different writing skills, refined and purposeful sentence fluency can lead to the development of authentic voice. While sentence fluency enhances writer's voice, authentic voice is made up of several writers' traits including purposeful word choice and organization. Through Engle's intentional poetic prose and the oral storytelling of the online project, you can focus on how sentence variety can be used to create rhythms and overall coherence in writing.

## **Common Core Standards/ Tennessee State Standards Connections:**

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5**

Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6**

Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.7**

Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9**

Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3.B**

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9**

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## **Learning Goals:**

- Students will gain a more nuanced understanding of the people, history, and cultures surrounding the building of the Panama Canal.
- Students will consider the significance of perspective and bias in literature and historical accounts.
- Students will be able to recognize distinct writing voices as they read mentor texts and hear oral accounts of stories.
- Students will recognize distinct elements of culture across various mentor texts.
- Students will strengthen their writer's voice through practice and implementation of sentence fluency in their writing.
- Students will be able to recognize hidden voices within stories and historical accounts.

## Learning Sequence/Activity Ideas

### *Focus: Historical Context*

Time	Instructional Strategies/Learning Tasks	Purpose
8 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do now: Individually (in their writer's notebooks), students will write a list of everything they already know about the Panama Canal. Here are some possible questions to provide students in order to begin their thinking: Who/ what countries were involved? Why was this canal built? How was it built? What were the working conditions like? Where did the workers come from?</li> </ul>	This initial writing prompt will get students thinking about the thoughts they have already formed about the building of the Panama Canal.
20 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In table groups or small groups, students will share their findings and compose a list of common understandings about the Panama Canal. This list can be recorded on poster paper and then posted on a wall. After groups have shared their findings, the class can come up with a single wall chart of the most common and agreed upon things they already know about the Panama Canal. This list can become a permanent wall chart throughout the unit.</li> </ul>	This activity will allow students to discuss their pre-conceived thoughts about the Panama Canal and the people involved with their classmates. The wall chart will serve as a point of reference for students to continue to consider as their initial thoughts become more complex.
40 min	<p>Research and Jigsaw Share</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give each group of four or five students a different topic to research pertaining to the Panama Canal (possible topics: Roosevelt, working conditions, workers, etc.). After assigning these topics, students will be given resources and websites to use to become experts of their topic. It may be useful to create a graphic organizer with questions or topics for students to consider while</li> </ul>	Students will gain a greater understanding of the historical context of the Panama Canal before beginning the

	<p>researching. After gathering information, students can then divide themselves so that there is one member of each group at each table. Students will then share the findings of their group with individuals from other groups. The activity can end with a large group discussion and synthesis.</p> <p>Additional Resources for Historical Background building:  <a href="http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/panama/">http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/panama/</a>  <a href="https://thesilverpeopleheritage.wordpress.com">https://thesilverpeopleheritage.wordpress.com</a></p> <p>Greene, Julie. <i>The Canal Builders</i>. New York: Penguin, 2009.</p> <p>Keller, Ulrich. <i>The Building of the Panama Canal in Historic Photographs</i>. New York: Dover, 1983.</p> <p>Newton, Velma. <i>The Silver Men</i>. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1984.</p> <p>Maps of Panama: <a href="http://ian.macky.net/pat/map/pa/pa.html">ian.macky.net/pat/map/pa/pa.html</a></p> <p>***Some of these resources as well as several more references can be found in the back of Engle’s <i>Silver People</i></p> <p><b>Potential Homework: Read the first section, “The Panama Craze”</b></p>	<p>texts. This particular jigsaw activity allows the students, rather than the teacher to be the experts of the content.</p>
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*Focus: Poetic Prose/ Sentence Fluency*

Time	Instructional Strategies/Learning Tasks	Purpose
8 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students respond to one poem from the first section, “The Panama Craze,” in their writer’s journals.</li> </ul> <p>Students may want to consider these questions as they write.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What are the characteristics of this specific character’s voice that make it unique and recognizable?</li> <li>-What do you notice about the rhythm of the poem?</li> <li>-What do you notice about the sentence fluency?</li> <li>-What makes their voice unique from the voices of other characters? How does Engle distinguish the characters?</li> </ul>	This writing prompt will allow students to begin thinking about voice and how Engle intentionally creates authentic voice for each character
10 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask students to get into pairs with someone who analyzed a different voice from the one they</li> </ul>	This activity will prompt students to

	dids. Discuss how those voices are unique.	compare and contrast the stylistic choices Engle makes in order to create distinct voices in her writing.
15 min	<p>Group Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After talking in pairs, students can complete a “Engle’s Author’s Voice” graphic organizer. Students will fill in the corresponding boxes with unique characteristics of her writing.</li> </ul>	Students will be able to share their opinions as we wrap up our initial analysis of Engle’s voice. They will also get a chance to synthesize the ideas of others.
10 min	<p>Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sandra Cisneros or Jacqueline Woodson can also provide nice examples of mentor texts with interesting sentence fluency.</li> <li>Potential Activity: Read Cisneros’ “My Name”</li> </ul> <p>In groups, highlight sentence length with different colors based on a wall chart.</p>	This activity will allow students to practice recognizing the strength of a large variety of sentences. It will also give them a tool (highlighting chart) when they begin to revise their own writing for sentence variety.
25 min	<p>Group Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you define Cisneros’ voice based on her sentence length variety?</li> </ul> <p>Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will write their own version of “My Name”</li> </ul>	<p>Students will be able to share their opinions as we wrap up our analysis of Cisneros’ voice. They will also get a chance to synthesize the ideas of others.</p> <p>Students will get to practice sentence variety as they write their own version of “My Name.”</p>

*Focus: Voices from Our America/Oral Storytelling*

Time	Instructional Strategies/Learning Tasks	Purpose
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60 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assign students an interview from <i>Voices from Our America</i> website.</li> </ul> <p>These three interviews pair nicely with the content of <i>Silver People</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cecil Haynes</li> <li>-Melva Goodin</li> <li>-Sarah Williams</li> </ul> <p>The <i>Voices from Our America</i> website has great ideas for guiding questions and activities pertaining to these interviews. Here are the lesson plans:  <a href="http://www.voicesamerica.org/content/lesson-plans">http://www.voicesamerica.org/content/lesson-plans</a></p>	Students will hear and interpret real voices from the Panama Canal
10 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Possible Class discussion ideas:</li> </ul> <p>What's the difference between race, nationality, and ethnicity?</p> <p>Compare and contrast your reactions to the voices in the books and the voices you heard in the videos. What were some similarities? Did it make the experience different to see their faces on the screen?</p>	This activity will prompt students to compare and contrast the modes of communication (prose and video).

*Focus: Creating Counter narratives*

Time	Instructional Strategies/Learning Tasks	Purpose
20 min	<p>Looking back at our original list of things we knew about the Panama Canal. What do we know now? Create a new list.</p> <p>Class discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who was left out of original list?</li> <li>Whose voices were left out?</li> <li>Whose voices are often left out of the historical story of the Panama Canal (Refer back to page 249 in <i>Silver People</i>)</li> <li>Whose voices are often left out of American history?</li> <li>Whose voices are left out of the school/community, etc.?</li> </ul>	This activity will allow students to continue thinking about the voices that are often left out of history.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students will have several choices for their final assessment. Some of these choices have been adapted from activities found in other <i>Silver People</i> lessons. These lessons will all be cited for your reference at the end of this learning segment.</li> <li>***Due to the array of choices and creativity</li> </ul>	

	<p>involved in the final assessment, it may be beneficial to have the students collaborate with you in creating a rubric.</p> <p>Options:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Make an exhibit for the silver people as well as a small research paper detailing your findings. (refer to page 249 in the novel)</li> <li>2. Create a book trailer for <i>Silver People</i>.</li> <li>3. Imagine you are one of the historical figures listed in the book. Write your speech about why the Panama Canal is needed.</li> <li>4. Write an environmental campaign speech saying why the Panama Canal project should be stopped.</li> </ol>	
15 min	<p>Final Group Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some counter-narratives or hidden voices that could be illuminated in our own communities?</li> </ul>	Students will synthesize thoughts about the voices they learned about during the learning sequence.

### Additional Activity Ideas

- Literature Circles with assigned roles (Ex: Discussion Director, Historical Context Enricher, Artist, Devil’s Advocate, etc.)
- Incorporate Theatre of the Oppressed
- Small group/ pair discussion
  - How would you feel if you were a silver or gold person working on the Panama Canal?
  - How would you feel if you were an animal or bird or another living creature watching the Panama Canal being built?
  - What is more important—“progress” or deconstruction of the environment?
  - Were these people ever able to prevail and be heard?
- Analyze Political Cartoons from the time period at the beginning or end of each class

### Materials Needed:

Writer’s Notebooks  
 Posters  
 Markers  
 Computers/iPads/access to the Internet  
*Silver People* novel

**Learning Supports:** graphic organizers; wall charts; videos (some are in Spanish); project choices; group work; student-created rubric



**Adaptations:**

This learning sequence can be adapted to fit the curriculum of many different content areas. Although, this lesson lends itself to an English Language Arts or Social Studies classroom, there are also several opportunities to learn about Spanish speaking cultures through the novel as well as some of the *Voices from Our America* videos that are completely in Spanish. In a science classroom, *Silver People* would fit nicely into an ecology unit. A math class might focus on census and polls, thinking about political bias in these modes of communication as well.

**Resources:**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/panama/>  
Panama Canal documentary (*American Experience*)

<https://thesilverpeopleheritage.wordpress.com>

The Silver People Heritage Blog

<http://www.margaritaengle.com>

Margarita Engle website with several lesson plans

[http://www.teachingbooks.net/media/pdf/HMH/SilverPeople\\_EducatorsGuide.pdf](http://www.teachingbooks.net/media/pdf/HMH/SilverPeople_EducatorsGuide.pdf)  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Educator's Guide