



## OVERVIEW

*Feed Your Mind: A Story of August Wilson* by author Jen Bryant and illustrated by Cannaday Chapman details the first half of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson’s life. Growing up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, young Freddy Kittel (who later changed his name to August) lived with his single mother, who ingrained a love of reading in him. That foundation empowered August to keep reading, dreaming, and writing through challenging circumstances until he experienced deserved success. Readers will be inspired by August’s tenacity, his dedication to his community, and his success. Cannaday Chapman’s accompanying illustrations support Bryant’s text, bringing the words to life in ways that will enrich and expand readers’ understandings of the text as they learn about this influential man.

The book suits a range of reading levels, offering multiple points of entry for elementary, middle school, and high learners. Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading informational text for middle school curriculums, *Feed Your Mind* is an appropriate selection for grades six through nine in Language Arts, Social Studies, Drama, or Humanities classes.

Younger grades can access the text and have robust discussions, as can older students. Many of the prompts that are included can be modified for different grade levels. The following prompts provide for a critical analysis of *Feed Your Mind* using the CCSS for Informational Text for grades 6–8. In addition, classroom activities are provided that will enhance analysis of the text.

### Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.5

Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas.

### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.7

Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium’s portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words).

For a complete listing of the Standards, go to [corestandards.org/the-standards](http://corestandards.org/the-standards).

## PRE-READING IDEAS

These pre-reading ideas are intended to help educators create an environment that enables students to engage with the text deeply. Through activating students' prior knowledge, educators prepare young people to understand this complex text on multiple levels.

Teachers might begin by surrounding students with images and artifacts of August Wilson. Many are available online. After assembling a range of images of Wilson, his plays, and of the Hill District, a teacher can then use a protocol like Harvard's Project Zero [See/Think/Wonder](#) as a point of entry into the book. The questions students generate can be used throughout the study of the text to guide exploratory writing and discussion opportunities as well. Similarly, teachers could compile a collection of Wilson's quotes and use the same protocol.

Immerse students in Wilson's music and influences. Bessie Smith was revelatory for Wilson, as described in the text, and could be another introduction for students. Given Wilson's popularity, teachers might be able to show students clips from his plays that are either being revived or are archived online. These efforts will help students understand that Wilson was a living, breathing person who left an enduring legacy.

Teachers can also select Chapman's images as an introduction for students. Using a document camera or overhead projector, project individual images and use some strategies from the [Visual Thinking Strategies \(VTS\)](#) to help students critically view images and prepare for deeper analysis of the text.

Finally, the book is divided into two acts, which can generate a discussion about plays and their organization. A teacher might begin discussions with students about their knowledge and experiences with plays, then bridge their responses to the text. Teachers can select any parts of those acts for individual analysis. The author's note and timeline also provide important supporting information that teachers are encouraged to incorporate.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Act I

#### The Hill District, Pittsburgh and Breaking the Code

What do we learn about Freddy Kittel's family? What is the impact of his mother's encouragement on his love of reading? Ask students to explain how the illustrations support those ideas.

#### Wylie Avenue Branch, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

What can the reader infer about the importance of Freddy receiving his first library card? You may wish to share with your students information about the Wylie Avenue Branch and its importance to the community: [www.carnegielibrary.org/about-carnegie-library-of-pittsburgh-hill-district](http://www.carnegielibrary.org/about-carnegie-library-of-pittsburgh-hill-district)

#### "When It Rains, It Pours" and Relocation

Explain why Mother (Daisy) does not win the new washing machine. What conclusions can we make about the time period, about race, and about Mother's reaction? Have students act out this moment in "When It Rains, It Pours," then analyze how this dramatization helps to understand character motivations, conflicts, and points-of-view.

How would you feel if you were Daisy in these two situations? What conclusions can you draw about her and how she feels about her family when she moves them to Hazelwood?

What is Freddy learning about his mother? What is he learning about himself?

## Detour

Why is this chapter entitled “Detour”?

What is the importance of Freddy finding the works of African American authors?

Read Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Ode to Ethiopia” that is excerpted here and have students examine the poem for meaning, language, and other impressions. Then, consider how those words—and the words of other authors—open up the universe for Freddy.

## Schooled

Brother Dominic tells Freddy, “You could be a writer.” Why is this moment significant for Freddy?

Freddy is the only Black student at Central Catholic High School and is harassed by mobs of white students. Despite his teacher’s encouragement, he ultimately decides to leave school. Use this chapter to help students think about bullying, deciding which groups are bystanders and which groups are upstanders. Ask students to consider the impact of racial harassment, drawing examples from the text and connecting their discussions to how they help frame Freddy’s decision.

## Now What?

After Central Catholic, Freddy spends time in several different schools. In each of these places, what does he learn about himself? What does he learn about the education his peers receive?

Explain the appeal of Sonny Liston during Freddy’s daydreams.

Why is he excited to write the paper about Napoleon? How does he complete the assignment? What can one conclude about Freddy’s level of preparation?

## Prove It!

Describe Freddy’s feelings in this chapter when he is accused by his teacher of not writing an original paper. Have students dramatize this moment, focusing on connecting how Freddy feels to their own responses if they were in that situation and analyzing the image of Freddy in front of a chalkboard.

How does Chapman’s image convey Freddy’s feelings in this situation?

“Prove It” is also the end of Act One. Have students collect their text-based observations of Freddy, noting what they’ve learned about him and his influences as well as themes in the book and questions they may have. Then, they can use those to make inferences and predictions about what they will learn in Act Two.

## Rows and Feed Your Mind

Freddy declares, “I dropped out of school, but I didn’t drop out of life.” What is the importance of this statement? Who are his teachers, and what does he learn?

Analyze the relationship between Chapman’s illustration of Freddy walking through the library and of his mother’s decision to leave school to “work the crop rows with her mother.”

What is the significance of the line from Ellison’s *Invisible Man* “I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself” to Freddy?

What can you interpret about Freddy’s voracious reading and desire to learn about a range of topics?

### What's in a Name?

Create a timeline using examples from the text that depict moments that lead up to Freddy's decision to become August Wilson. What is the connection between selecting his name and the goals he wants to accomplish?

### Poet of the Hill and Art on Centre Avenue

Identify and explain the significance of the various influences on August's ability to be a distinctive documentarian for the Hill. Analyze the importance of his connection to the community and "to how the 'I' becomes 'we,'" and explain the role of the artist in community change. Encourage students to look at the work of local artists in their own communities, especially ones who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOCs) to deepen this discussion and encourage making personal connections.

### Friends Can Be Persistent and Goin' Up North

Consider the friendships between August and Rob Penny, and August and Claude Purdy. How do Rob and Claude support August's transition to playwriting? What inferences can you make about August's capabilities and resilience to try a new genre of writing?

### Voices and Bits and Pieces

While in Minnesota, August writes about the Hill District, listening to the voices of his hometown. When Claude gives August a book about Romare Bearden, August is transfixed. Why does August respond to Bearden's work this way? Explore the connections between Bearden's and Wilson's work with students to deepen their understanding of Bearden's impact.

### A Very Good Recipe and Process

August continues to listen to people and consider how to capture their voices in his writing, this time in a new job as a worker in a Minnesota soup kitchen. What is the importance of Rob Penny answering August's question about how to make his characters talk with "Oh, you don't—you listen to them." How does that statement shift August's understanding of playwriting?

Have students make a list of the characteristics that enable August to keep attempting to figure out challenges, such as moving from writing poems to plays or dealing with the rejection of his first play, *Jitney*. Once students generate that list, they can rank the importance of these traits and defend their positions.

### Arriving and Cycle

How does August honor his mother, his artistic influences, and his Hill community? Why is it fitting for the last words of the book to be "Who's there? What are they saying . . . and why?"

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Freddy Kittel is inspired and influenced by African American writers and artists that are powerful sources for further study, including Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Romare Bearden. Additionally, he daydreams about Sonny Liston and models himself after Dylan Thomas. Have students conduct research on these people, including reading their work, and then present their knowledge in an infographic.

Invite students to read any of the ten plays from the Pittsburgh Cycle. Then have them select scenes to dramatize for their classroom and/or community. They can also conduct and present research about the latter half of Wilson's life.

Older students might read interviews and acceptance speeches, analyzing and comparing for themes, and discuss Wilson's legacy.

Act Two of the book details the creation of *Jitney* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Find hard copies of these plays and clips of the plays online (or being performed). Ask students to analyze and discuss the similarities and differences they notice about the formats. What format do they find most effective? Why? For older students, encourage them to either use the plays as mentor texts to write their own one-act plays in the style of August Wilson or enter the August Wilson National Monologue Competition: [truecolorstheatre.org/august-wilson-monologue-competition](http://truecolorstheatre.org/august-wilson-monologue-competition).

Literacy and the love of reading and knowledge was foundational for Wilson. Have students read other picture books about artists and writers. Some suggestions are included in the supplemental resources section below. Have students create a work of art that synthesizes their understanding of the texts. Possible mediums include collage, plays, and poetry.

## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

### Documentary

*August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand* directed by Sam Pollard

### Books

*Richard Wright and the Library Card* by William Miller and illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

*Carter Reads the Newspaper* by Deborah Hopkinson and illustrated by Don Tate

*Bad Boy: A Memoir* by Walter Dean Myers

*Finding Langston* by Lesa Cline-Ransome

*Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories* by Jan Greenberg

*Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* by Javaka Steptoe

### Links

*See/Think/Wonder, Project Zero*

[www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-wonder-at](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-wonder-at)

*The August Wilson Education Project*

[www.wqed.org/augustwilson/timeline](http://www.wqed.org/augustwilson/timeline)

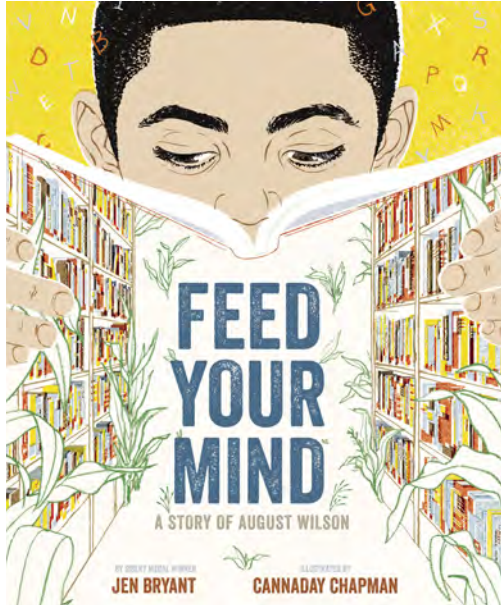
*Visual Thinking Strategies*

[vtshome.org](http://vtshome.org)

# FEED YOUR MIND

## A STORY OF AUGUST WILSON

By Jen Bryant • Illustrated by Cannaday Chapman



ISBN 978-1-4197-3653-7 Ages 6 and up

August Wilson (1945–2005) was a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who had a particular talent for capturing the authentic, everyday voice of Black Americans. As a child, he read off soup cans and cereal boxes, and when his mother brought him to the library, his whole world opened up. After facing intense prejudice at school from both students and some teachers, August dropped out. However, he continued reading and educating himself independently. He felt that if he could read about it, then he could teach himself anything and accomplish anything. Like many of his plays, *Feed Your Mind* is told in two acts, revealing how Wilson grew up to be one of the most influential American playwrights.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jen Bryant** is the author of the Caldecott Honor-winning picture book *River of Words* and many other picture books for children.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Cannaday Chapman** is an illustrator whose work has been featured in the *New York Times* and on the cover of *The New Yorker*. *Feed Your Mind* is his first picture book.

This teaching guide was written by Dr. Kimberly N. Parker. Dr. Parker currently prepares preservice teachers at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, MA. She taught English in a variety of school settings for sixteen years, is active in the National Council of Teachers of English, and is a cofounder of #DisruptTexts. Dr. Parker holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign.

  
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