

The Grammar of Dread: Channeling Joan Didion's Santa Ana Winds

Subject: Advanced Language Arts (Literature, Grammar, Composition, Etymology)

Student Profile: 16-year-old homeschool student

Time Allotment: 75-90 minutes

Materials Needed:

- A printed or digital copy of Joan Didion's essay "Los Angeles Notebook" (from her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*).
 - Whiteboard, large chart paper, or a digital equivalent (like a tablet drawing app).
 - Multiple colors of dry-erase markers or pens.
 - Student's notebook and a pen/pencil.
 - Access to an online etymology resource, such as Etymonline.com.
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Lesson Plan

I. Learning Objectives (5 minutes)

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Analyze how an author's stylistic choices (diction, syntax) create a specific mood.
- Investigate the morphology and etymology of a complex word using Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) to understand its deeper meaning.
- Apply Michael Clay Thompson's four-level sentence analysis to deconstruct a complex sentence by a master stylist.
- Synthesize these analytical skills by composing an original paragraph that mimics the author's style and structure.

II. Introduction: The Mood of the Wind (10 minutes)

1. **Engage with a Question:** Begin with a discussion prompt: "How can weather do more than just make you hot or cold? How can it change a person's mood, their patience, or even how they behave? Think of a 'thunderstorm mood' or a 'lazy, humid day' feeling."
2. **Introduce the Text:** Explain that you're going to read a passage from an essay by Joan Didion, who was a master at describing this very phenomenon. She's writing about a famous, mysterious wind in Southern California called the Santa Ana.
3. **Read Aloud:** Read the first two paragraphs of "Los Angeles Notebook" aloud with expressive intonation.

"There is something uneasy in the Los Angeles air this afternoon, some unnatural stillness, some tension... I have been trying to tell you what it is like to live in Los Angeles during the season of the Santa Ana. It is hard for people who have not lived in Los Angeles to realize how radically the Santa Ana figures in the local imagination..."

4. **Initial Reaction:** Ask the student for their immediate gut reaction. "What feeling does Didion
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create here? What words or phrases jump out at you as being especially powerful?" List these words on the whiteboard (e.g., *uneasy*, *unnatural*, *tension*, *radically*, *menacing*).

III. Deconstructing the Dread: Analysis Activities (40 minutes)

Activity 1: Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) - "Ominous" (15 minutes)

1. **Select the Word:** Focus on the word "ominous" from the third paragraph ("The wind shows us how close to the edge we are."). Ask the student what they think it means.
2. **Investigate the Structure:**
 - Propose a word sum hypothesis: **<omen> + <ous> → <ominous>**.
 - Explain that <ous> is a suffix meaning "full of" or "characterized by." So, "ominous" means "full of omens."
 - **Etymology Deep Dive:** Use Etymonline.com to look up "omen." Discover its Latin origin, *omen*, meaning "foreboding, portent." Discuss how this historical meaning injects a sense of fate and inescapable doom into Didion's description. An omen isn't just a sign; it's a sign of something to come.
3. **Make Connections:** Ask: "How does knowing that 'ominous' is literally 'full of bad signs' make Didion's description of the wind more powerful?"

Activity 2: MCT Four-Level Sentence Analysis (25 minutes)

1. **Select the Sentence:** Choose this iconic, rhythmic sentence from the text: **"The baby frets. The maid sulks. I rekindle a waning argument with the telephone company, then cut my losses and lie down, given over to whatever is in the air."** Write it clearly on the whiteboard.
2. **Analyze Level by Level (using different colors for each level is helpful):**
 - **Level 1 (Parts of Speech):** Together, label each word (The/art, baby/n, frets/v, etc.). Pay special attention to "waning" (participle acting as an adjective) and "given" (participle).
 - **Level 2 (Parts of the Sentence):** Identify the core sentence parts. Bracket the simple subjects and underline verbs. Note the three distinct subject-verb pairs in the first part (baby/frets, maid/sulks, I/rekindle/cut/lie down). Identify the direct objects ("argument," "losses").
 - **Level 3 (Phrases):** Box all the phrases. Identify the prepositional phrase ("with the telephone company," "in the air"). The key here is to identify the participial phrase at the end: "given over to whatever is in the air." Discuss how it modifies the subject, "I."
 - **Level 4 (Clauses):** Identify the independent clauses. Note the staccato rhythm of the first three ("The baby frets." "The maid sulks." "I rekindle..."). Then, analyze the final phrase. How does ending the sentence with a passive participial phrase ("given over...") create a feeling of surrender and powerlessness? The action stops, and the subject is simply acted upon by the "air."
3. **Synthesize the Analysis:** Ask: "How does this sentence's *structure* mirror the *feeling* Didion is describing? How does she use grammar to create that irritable, tense, and ultimately resigned mood?"

IV. Creative Application: Writing the Weather (15 minutes)

1. **The Prompt:** "Your task is to become Didion for a paragraph. Choose a specific weather event (a suffocating summer heatwave, a blinding blizzard, a thick morning fog, a relentless downpour). Write a single, rich paragraph (5-7 sentences) describing not the weather itself, but its psychological *effect* on you and the people around you. Embody the mood."
2. **The Challenge:** "You must consciously use Didion's techniques. Your paragraph should:
 - Use precise, mood-setting vocabulary (like *ominous* or *uneasy*).
 - Vary your sentence structure, perhaps using short, punchy sentences followed by a longer, more complex one.

- End at least one sentence with a participial phrase to create that feeling of passive observation or surrender (e.g., "...staring out the window, trapped by the endless grey.>").

3. **Writing Time:** Give the student quiet time to write.

V. Conclusion and Assessment (5-10 minutes)

1. **Share and Discuss:** Have the student read their paragraph aloud. Offer positive feedback, focusing on how their choices created a specific atmosphere. Ask them to point out the participial phrase they used and explain why they placed it there.
2. **Final Connection:** Conclude by reinforcing the main idea: "Grammar and word origins aren't just rules to memorize; they are the tools great artists use to build worlds and create feelings. By analyzing them, we learn not only how to be better readers, but also how to be much more intentional and powerful writers."

Rubric Evaluation of this Lesson Plan

Merit Category	Evaluation & Rationale
1. Learning Objectives	Excellent. The objectives are specific (analyze, investigate, apply, synthesize), measurable (through discussion, analysis, and the final written piece), and achievable for a 16-year-old student with this background. They directly match the requested curriculum elements (Didion, MCT, SWI) and focus on higher-order thinking (analysis, creation) rather than memorization.
2. Alignment with Standards and Curriculum	Excellent. The lesson is perfectly aligned with the user-specified "curriculum" of MCT Level 4, SWI, and interest in Joan Didion. It explicitly integrates the four-level analysis and word inquiry as core mechanics of the lesson, not as afterthoughts. It follows a logical progression from understanding content to analyzing mechanics to creative application.
3. Instructional Strategies	Excellent. The plan uses a variety of well-articulated methods: Socratic discussion (the hook), direct instruction (demonstrating SWI and sentence analysis), close reading, and project-based learning (the creative writing task). This combination caters to different learning preferences and ensures the student is an active participant throughout.
4. Engagement and Motivation	Excellent. Engagement is high due to several factors: a compelling and sophisticated topic (Didion's prose), a connection to a relatable experience (weather's effect on mood), and a final creative task that gives the student a voice. The "detective work" of SWI and deconstructing a complex sentence like a puzzle adds an interactive, problem-solving element.
5. Differentiation and Inclusivity	Excellent. While designed for a single student (making differentiation inherent), the plan includes built-in flexibility. The instructor can choose a simpler or more complex sentence for analysis based on the student's comfort. The creative prompt offers complete student choice in the weather phenomenon, allowing them to draw from personal experience. The one-on-one format ensures the lesson's pace and depth can be adjusted in real-time.

6. Assessment Methods	Excellent. The lesson employs strong formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment occurs through the ongoing discussion, observation of the student's participation in the analysis, and questions that check for understanding. The summative assessment is the creative paragraph, which directly measures the student's ability to synthesize and apply all the lesson's objectives. The criteria for success are clearly stated in the prompt.
7. Organization and Clarity	Excellent. The plan is logically sequenced with a clear five-part structure: Hook, Analysis Part 1 (Words), Analysis Part 2 (Sentences), Creation, and Closure. The timing is realistic, and the instructions for each activity are specific and easy for any instructor to follow. Transitions between segments are smooth, building from one concept to the next.
8. Creativity and Innovation	Excellent. This lesson is highly creative. Instead of treating grammar, etymology, and literature as separate subjects, it weaves them together into a single, cohesive investigation. Using advanced grammatical analysis and SWI as tools to unlock the "magic" of a famous writer's style is an innovative approach that encourages deep critical thinking and demonstrates the practical purpose of these skills beyond textbook exercises.
9. Materials and Resource Management	Excellent. The required materials are simple, accessible, and highly effective. The list is clear and requires no expensive or specialized equipment beyond what is typical in a homeschool or classroom setting (whiteboard, internet access). The resources directly serve the lesson's goals without being distracting or overly complex.