

“Sticks” by George Saunders

Suggested Lesson Procedure

Estimated Total Time: ~115 Minutes

1. Have students read the full story silently and independently. (~5 minutes)
2. Read the story for the second time as a whole class, out loud. (~5 minutes)
3. Move into comprehension by having students answer the reading and analysis questions. This can be done independently or in small groups. (~35 minutes)
4. Review all answers as a class, clarifying misunderstandings and reinforcing key themes and ideas. (~25 minutes)
5. Have students choose from 1 of the 2 “After Reading Options” (or choose one yourself for the entire class to complete). (~45 minutes)

Option 1: Creative Writing

Students rewrite the story from the perspective of the pole. This assignment focuses on point of view, symbolism, and indirect characterization, demonstrating how meaning can be conveyed through observation rather than dialogue.

Option 2: Book Jacket Blurb & Cover Design

Students create a brief, compelling back-cover blurb that summarizes the story in an intriguing way. They will pair it with an original cover design that visually highlights the story’s symbolism through illustration.

Name:

“Sticks” by George Saunders

Date:

1. What role does the pole play in the family’s yearly traditions?

PREVIEW

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2. The father is described as having “only one concession to glee.”
What does this phrase reveal about his personality and emotional life?

PREVIEW

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3. How does the narrator describe the father’s rules and behavior inside the home?

4. Why does the narrator say the family later found “the seeds of meanness blooming also within us”?

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5. How does the father’s treatment of the pole change after the children grow up and leave home?

PREVIEW

6. How does the extended description of the yellow pole and crossed sticks deepen the story’s meaning? (It must be important since “Sticks” is the title of the story.)

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7. What is the significance of the apology notes and pleas for understanding taped to the string? Why are they public?

8. What happens to the pole at the end of the story?

9. What is symbolic about the abrupt ending?

10. What does the story suggest about the long-term effects of emotional repression within families?

11. How does Saunders explore the idea that people often express love in indirect or flawed ways?

12. In what ways does the pole serve as a metaphor for grief, regret, or unspoken emotion?

13. Why is the final image of the pole left on the curb for garbage day so powerful?

14. Do you feel sympathy for the father by the end of the story? Why or why not?

15. What message do you think Saunders is conveying about forgiveness?

PREVIEW

16. What do *you* think a parent's primary role is: to protect, to guide, to love, or to prepare children for hardship? Can all of these goals coexist?

PREVIEW

17. Should children be expected to forgive parents who were emotionally harmful but tried their best?

18. How does the retrospective first-person point of view shape the tone of the story?

PREVIEW

19. Why might Saunders choose a pole—rigid, fixed, immobile—as the central symbol of the story?

PREVIEW

20. Does the story suggest that understanding someone's pain excuses the harm they caused? Why or why not?

Creative Writing Prompt: Writing from an Inanimate Perspective

In *Sticks*, the pole in the family's yard silently witnesses the family's traditions, conflicts, and emotional distance.

Rewrite the story from the perspective of the pole.

Your response should imagine what the pole observes, feels, and understands about the family—especially the father. Although the pole cannot speak or move, it is always present and aware.

As you write, consider:

- What moments does the pole witness year after year?
- How does the pole interpret the father's actions and decorations?
- What does the pole notice about the family's emotions that the people themselves do not express?
- How does the pole understand its role in the family's life?

Requirements:

- Write in first person from the pole's perspective
- Use descriptive language and internal reflection
- Stay true to the tone and themes of the original text
- Length requirement minimum: 500 words or two pages (double-spaced)

Grading Rubric

Point of View	Consistently written in first person from the pole's perspective; voice is clear, original, and believable as an inanimate observer.	10 Points
Understanding of the Text	Demonstrates deep understanding of the story's events, characters, and themes; details are accurate and thoughtfully selected.	10 Points
Use of Symbolism	The pole's role as a symbol is sophisticated and meaningful, revealing insight into emotional distance, control, or suppressed emotion.	10 Points
Language & Style	Writing is vivid and purposeful; strong imagery and reflection enhance tone and meaning.	10 Points
Conventions	Few or no errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation	10 Points

Total: 50 Points

Book Jacket Blurb & Cover Design

Your task is to imagine that this short story is being republished as a standalone book.

You will create two connected components:

Part 1: Cover Illustration

Design an original book cover that visually represents the story.

Your cover should:

- Include a title and author's name (You may change the title of the short story)
- Feature imagery connected to the story
- Use color, placement, and design choices intentionally

Part 2: Book Jacket Blurb

Write a compelling back-cover summary that could persuade a reader to pick up the book.

Your blurb should:

- Briefly describe the central situation and conflict of the story
- Introduce the themes that the author explores
- Avoid major spoilers while still creating intrigue
- Be written in third person and sound professional
- Length requirement minimum: 150 words or 10 sentences

Grading Rubric

Blurb Content	The blurb is engaging, concise, and reveals deep understanding of the story's themes and conflicts without giving away the entire plot.	10 Points
Analytical Thinking	Demonstrates strong insight into tone, conflict, and meaning; word choices reflect thoughtful interpretation.	10 Points
Cover Design & Symbolism	Cover is visually striking and symbolic; design choices clearly connect to the story's meaning.	10 Points
Integration	Writing and artwork complement each other and convey a unified interpretation of the text.	10 Points
Conventions	Writing is polished with minimal errors; presentation is neat and intentional.	10 Points

Total: 50 Points

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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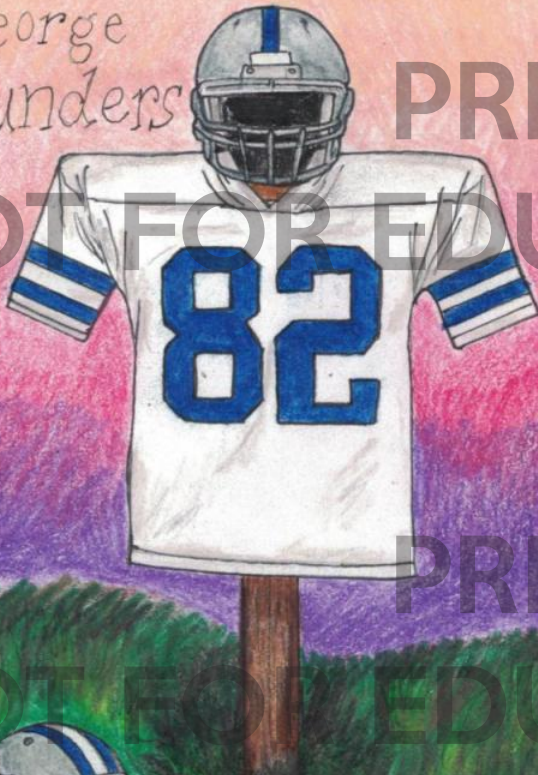
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PREVIEW

The Pole in the Yard

Based on the short story "Sticks"

By George
Saunders



Name: _____

Date: _____

In a quiet neighborhood, one family's life revolves around a pole in the front yard. To outsiders, it's meaningless and strange. To the family, it represents communication and tradition.

The father insists on decorating the pole for every season, holiday or major event, such as the Super Bowl. He treats the display as normal and a form of emotional gesture. This is a contrast to what happens within the family's home. The family is limited to creative or emotional expression and feelings must be suppressed.

As the children grow older, the family dynamics become more complex. The kids become resentful toward their father for the upbringing that lacked joy. The father feels regret and loneliness. This story explores themes of authority, inherited harm, and the lasting impact of emotional restraint.

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