

**Teacher Guide**  
**"Telephone Conversation" by Wole Soyinka**

**Suggested Lesson Procedure: ~110 Minutes**

**1. Introduction Lesson (~10 Minutes)**

Begin with the PowerPoint lesson to introduce key background information:  
Wole Soyinka's biography, including his role as a Nigerian writer and activist.  
The history of British colonization of Nigeria, focusing on its lasting effects through the 1960s.  
The social climate of 1960s Britain, particularly regarding racism and housing discrimination.

**2. First Reading of the Poem (~5 Minutes)**

Students read the poem silently to themselves to get a first impression and absorb the tone and structure.

**3. Second Reading of the Poem (~5 Minutes)**

Read the poem aloud as a class or select a student volunteer to read it dramatically. Ask students what stood out to them.

**4. Reading Questions (~20 Minutes)**

Students work in pairs or independently to answer a set of reading comprehension and literary analysis questions.

**5. Whole-Class Review & Discussion (~15 Minutes)**

Go over the questions and answers as a class. Facilitate a discussion.

**6. After Reading Activity: "Apartment for Rent" (~40 Minutes)**

In pairs, students will design what they feel is a fair and respectful rental application as if they are a landlord/landlady. Once finished, pairs swap applications with another group and score them based on fairness, respectfulness, and relevance using the scoresheet provided.

**7. Final Reflection (~15 Minutes)**

Students will complete an individual reflection by thoughtfully responding to a set of questions. Review responses.

Name:  
Telephone Conversation Analysis

Date:

1) Who is the speaker in this poem?

2) Who is the speaker talking to?  
What do you know about the person on the other end of the phone?

3) What is the purpose of the conversation?

4) Explain the meaning of the following lines:

a) Silenced transmission of pressurized good-breeding

b) Stench Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak

c) Her accent was clinical, crushing in its light Impersonality

d) sensing Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap About my ears

5) What is ironic about the speaker using the word "confession" when describing his skin color?



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# TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

*by Wole Soyinka*

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# Wole Soyinka

- Akonwande Oluwole “Wole” Soyinka is a distinguished Nigerian playwright and poet.
- He was born on July 13, 1934, in Abeokuta, Nigeria.
- At the time, Nigeria was a Dominion of the British Empire.
- He is the author of 3 novels, 10 short story collections, 7 poetry collections, 25 plays, and 5 memoirs.
- He attended Government College and University College in Ibadan, Africa. He graduated in 1958 with a degree in English from the University of Leeds, England.
- In 1960, he was awarded a Rockefeller scholarship and returned to Nigeria to study African drama.
- He is the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.



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# Nigeria



- Nigeria was colonized by the United Kingdom in 1884.
- Colonization was driven by the desire for natural resources like palm oil, tin, and later crude oil.
- The British introduced new systems of government, education, and law based on European models. Many Nigerians lost control over their own land and decisions.
- Ethnic and cultural groups were grouped together in ways that caused tension later on.
- Nigeria gained independence from Britain on October 1, 1960.
- Wole Soyinka was arrested in 1967 during the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War) because he tried to promote peace between the warring sides.
- The Nigerian military government, suspicious of any contact with Biafra, accused him of sympathizing with the enemy.
- He was imprisoned for a total of 27 months, from August 1967 to September 1969.
- He was never given a trial nor was he ever formally charged.
- The Nigerian government quietly released him without explanation after numerous colleagues, activists, and human rights organizations campaigned for his freedom.

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# Mid-20th-Century Britain

- In the 1950s and early 1960s, the UK encouraged migration from its colonies, including Nigeria, to move to the UK and help rebuild the economy.
- The British Nationality Act of 1948 made it easier for citizens of the British Empire to move to the UK.
- Despite the fact that Britain actively invited workers from the Commonwealth to address labor shortages, significant and widespread racial discrimination existed in the UK against immigrants.
- Housing discrimination was widespread. Many landlords refused to rent to Black people, often posting signs like "No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs."
- During the 1960s, Africans were frequently harassed or treated with suspicion and disdain in public.
- The UK lacked specific anti-discrimination laws during the early 1960s, which enabled these discriminatory practices to persist.
- The setting of the poem "Telephone Conversation" is in Britain in 1963.



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# Telephone Conversation

## Vocabulary in Context

- Cigarette-holder: A long, slender tube used to hold a cigarette while smoking. Associated with upper-class fashion.
- Button B and Button A: In older UK telephone booths, Button A was pressed to connect your call or stay connected. Button B was to get your money back or end your call.
- Omnibus: In the early 20th century, people said "omnibus" instead of "bus."
- Sepia: Before color photography, photos were often printed in a warm brown tone called sepia, which gave pictures an antique feel.
- Spectroscopic: A spectroscope breaks light into different colors. If someone describes something as "spectroscopic," they may be suggesting it's full of complex shades.
- Peroxide blonde: This phrase was often used to describe someone with bleach-blonde hair.
- Flight of fancy: This is an English idiom that means an idea that is fantastic and imaginative but is not realistic or practical.



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6) When does the speaker's tone shift in the poem, and why does this happen?

7) What does the color red, as in: "Red booth, Red pillar-box, Red double-tiered omnibus" symbolize in the poem?

8) What role does satire play in the poem? How is it used?

9) How does the poem end? What is the effect?

10) What is the author's purpose of the poem?

11) How does the structure of the poem reflect the content?

12) How did the poem make you feel? Why?

13) How does the setting influence the events or message of the poem?

# APARTMENT FOR RENT



**TASK:** You're a landlord/landlady with a flat (apartment) available for rent. You want to create an application form for potential tenants. Your job is to design a form that will help you decide who should get the flat by asking questions you deem important in finding a quality tenant.

Generally, a good tenant is someone who takes care of the property, respects the lease terms, and maintains a positive, responsible relationship with the landlord or management. Qualities you are looking for include: trustworthy, responsible, good communication, punctual, and financially stable.

## Directions

**Part 1. Individually or in pairs, create a fictional rental application.**

Must include at least 3 sections:

- 1) A minimum of 8 **"Basic information"** questions (Example: Name, Birthdate)
- 2) A minimum of 7 **"Personal information"** questions (Example: Job, Lifestyle)
- 3) A minimum of 5 Creative **"Get-to-Know-You"** questions (Example: What's your idea of a perfect day?)

Reminder: Do not answer the questions you create.

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Part 2. Swap applications with another group. Score the group’s application using the chart below.

Reminder: Do not answer the questions on the application.

Category	Give each category a score 1-10 Points. (10 being excellent, and 1 being poor)	Explanation
Creativity		
Completeness		
Relevance to real-world scenarios		
Ethics		
Professionalism		

**Part 3. Reflection. Answer the reflection questions independently.**

1) If you were denied a rental after submitting an application, how would you respond or what steps would you take next?

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2) If you didn't have a job or prior rental history, how might you try to show you're a responsible tenant?

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3) How can hidden bias show up in ordinary paperwork?

4) What additional steps might a landlord/landlady take before agreeing to rent to a potential tenant?

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5) What questions are important to avoid on this type of application? What type of information should be considered irrelevant?

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6) How does this process help protect both the tenant and the landlord/landlady?