

## Our Bibles

by **Bob Blaisdell**

Illustration by **Rosalind Helfand**

Curriculum developed by **Rosalind Helfand**

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## OVERVIEW

### Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 14+ * Grades 9+
Genre/s	* Personal essay * Memoir
Length	1,656 words
Content Advisories	* Some cursing
One Sentence Summary	A language teacher is determined to read his most beloved book, <i>Anna Karenina</i> , the book that inspires him to reflect and think most deeply, in its original Russian despite the enormity of the challenge.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<b>Topics</b> * Bibles * Translation * Books and reading * Reading on public transportation * Teachers / learning * Russian literature and language * Study of language * Observing the activities of those around us
Topics & Key Themes Overview	<b>Themes</b> * What is lost in translation * The power of the original * When obsession is good * The power of the written word * Advantages of non-electronic reading and communication vs. electronic * The personal quest * Seeking deeper levels of understanding and reflection

Lesson Planning	
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	* The life and works of Leo Tolstoy. * Late 1800s Russia. * History of the internet including: <i>The Digital Revolution</i> ; <i>The Internet Revolution</i> ; <i>Rise of Social Media</i> ; <i>Rise of the E- book</i> .
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	* Books: <i>Anna Karenina</i> by Leo Tolstoy; <i>A Calendar of Wisdom</i> by Leo Tolstoy; <i>Sons and Lovers</i> by D.H. Lawrence * Poems: “There is No Frigate Like a Book” by Emily Dickinson; “reading” by Joanne Burns * Articles: “Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading, and Daydreaming” by Neil Gaiman (from the Guardian); “Why the Smart Reading Device of the Future May Be...Paper” by Brandon Keim (from Wired); “Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning Scanning and Skimming, Researchers Say” by Michael Rosenwald (article on deep reading from the Washington Post)
Author and Artists Information	<p><b>Bob Blaisdell</b> is an author, editor, and adapter of books who teaches in Brooklyn, NY.</p> <p><b>Rosalind Helfand</b> was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a photographer.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

## Author Biography

**Bob Blaisdell** is a published adapter, author, editor, and an illustrator of children’s books and young adult books. He teaches English in Brooklyn at Kingsborough Community College. He is a reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Christian Science Monitor* and the editor of more than three dozen anthologies for Dover Publications.

## Artist Biography

**Rosalind Helfand** was the Managing Editor of Literature for Life (renamed Locavore Lit LA) and is a professional photographer.

## SYNOPSIS

Bob Blaisdell is an author and language teacher who's obsessed with Leo Tolstoy's book *Anna Karenina*. It is the book that inspires him to reflect and think most deeply. He reads it again and again and marks his favorite passages. It is his "bible." In this essay, Blaisdell muses on the nature of deep reading, obsession, and bibles. He reveals that his greatest goal is to read *Anna Karenina* in its original Russian, a goal that, because he is a non-native Russian-speaker, may never end but instead offer new rewards in each iteration.

## CURRICULUM

### Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

#### Topic and Main Ideas

What does it mean to go on a personal quest? As a class, brainstorm examples of personal quests in history, film, and literature.

Then, reflect in your journal about a time you went on a personal quest, small or large. Share some of your answers with your class.

#### Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following quote from "Our Bibles":

If I could go to a museum and see a Cézanne, why would I look at its reproduction in a book?

After looking up some photos of Cézanne's paintings to review, reflect in your journals on a time you experienced something original in person, such as a song or artwork or famous sight. How was that experience different than seeing a photo or other reproduction? Was it more valuable? More special? Why or why not?

After reflecting, conduct a classroom discussion about the merits of seeing art in person versus as a reproduction.

## Universal Themes

In what ways do people seek a deeper understanding of life? Why do they seek this understanding?

## Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
advocate	bible	Mineola
literal	puzzlement	Socrates
literary	grueling	George Eliot
literary	poring	Sophocles
intimacy	gist	Henry George
sympathetic	exactitude	Dostoyevsky
idle	midst	Cézanne
reciting	primers	St. Petersburg
moral	divine (verb)	Anthony Trollope
unsophisticated	austerity	D. H. Lawrence
deriving	austere	William Carlos William
developmental		Jane Austen
psychological		Jorge Luis Borges
interactions		
perfective		
participles		
tedious		

## Vocabulary Activity Options

1. What does the title “Our Bibles” mean? Look up the difference between “Bibles” and “bibles.” What is a bible with a lowercase “b”? In what ways is it both similar to and different from a religious Bible? Finally, is there a book or story that you come back, that you consider to be your bible? In

what ways? After discussing each of these questions in your journal, break into pairs and share your answers with your partner.

2. Make a list of each of the writers and artists mentioned in “Our Bibles.” Look each of them up and write a few lines about what they created and about their lives — you can focus on whatever aspects of their lives you find the most interesting. After creating your list, share one of them with your class and which details about their life you chose to write about.
3. The author twice uses terms that might be considered condescending to some people: “common-folk” in the sixth paragraph and “unsophisticated readers” in the ninth paragraph. Locate these terms and re-read the paragraphs in which they appear. In the context of the paragraphs and the story, what do these terms each mean? Do you find them condescending, honest, or a little bit of both? If they’re condescending, who to?

After writing about your thoughts concerning the use of these terms, discuss your thoughts in class.

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Electronic books or paper books? Which are better? Defend your choice.
2. How many students speak another language besides English (raise your hands)? Have you read a story in English before that was originally written in another language? How was it different in English? Was anything lost in the translation? Discuss.
3. Have you ever been extremely obsessed with completing a task or challenge you’ve set for yourself? Write about your obsession in your journal for 5-minutes and then share answers with the class. Discuss whether there’s such a thing as a healthy obsession.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

1. What does the author love about his bible, Anna Karenina, and its author? What powerful lessons has the book taught him?
2. Why does the author choose to read Anna Karenina in its original Russian despite how difficult the task is? What rewards does he expect from completing his mission?
3. How does the author differentiate between “books of life” and “idle books”? After explaining his perspective, discuss whether you agree with him. Can an “idle book” be a “book of life”?
4. What is the significance of the author learning that he doesn’t know enough to be his own teacher? Have you had a similar realization?
5. What does the author value? Include examples from the text to support your answer.
6. What does the way in which the reader is holding the book in the story’s illustration say about their relationship with the book they’re reading? Do you imagine the book is important to them? Why or why not? Using your imagination, describe how the author of “Our Bibles” might hold his

favorite book—what body language would indicate to an observer that he cares deeply about the book?

## Writing Exercise Options

### **Narrative**

Think about an experience that deeply touched your life in a positive way or taught you a valuable life lesson and has stuck with you. Write a short memoir where you relate this experience as a detailed story.

### **Descriptive**

Think about an obsession you've had. Write a short story about your obsession experience and what became of it in descriptive detail that will make your readers image your experience clearly.

### **Analysis**

Research the profession of translating books into other languages. Attempt to find a job announcement for a book translator. What are the requirements of a translator? What are the ins and outs of the profession? Knowing this, discuss in a short essay in greater depth the difficulty level of the task the author of “Our Bibles” has set for himself. Compare what he is doing to achieve his goal with the career demands for professional translators.

## Complementary Reading Text Option

Read the article from *The Guardian*, “Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading, and Daydreaming” by Neil Gaiman.

### **Writing Exercise**

Do you think the author of “Our Bibles” would agree with Neil Gaiman? Why or why not? Do you agree with Neil Gaiman? Write a short essay that discusses the answers to these questions and explores your own thoughts on the value of daydreaming.

## Activity Options

### **Classroom Activity One**

In “Our Bibles,” the author talks about interpreting people’s expressions. Try this out in class. Break into pairs and have each member of the pair work out expressions for the following five emotions:

- Happy
- Sad
- Angry
- Curious
- Absorbed

Make sure your partner doesn’t see your practice emotions. Then, come back together as a pair and take turns sharing your expressions. See how many emotions your partner can correctly interpret.

### **Classroom Activity Two**

Think about the fiction books that you’ve read. Identify a fiction book that made you think more deeply about your life or taught you an important lesson.

After identifying a book, create an artwork such as a painting, drawing, or collage that represents the book and the lesson it taught you. Include a placard with the book that identifies its title and author and a summary of the lesson it taught. These will be displayed in the classroom.

### **Classroom Activity Three**

With the help of a guest teacher, learn the basics of writing and reading the Cyrillic alphabet. Use the letters to write and read some simple Russian words.

### **Home Activity**

Read a book for fun. Don’t read it because it was assigned—just read whatever book you want, even a comic book! Feel free to read something you’ve read before and really liked.

After reading your book, come prepared to class to give a short presentation where you talk about the following:

- What book you chose and what you like about it.
- Something you learned from your book or that really speaks to you about it.

### **Guest Speaker**

Option One: Invite the author and / or illustrator of “Our Bibles” to guest speak.

Option Two: Invite a Russian literature professor who is a native Russian speaker to speak with the class about examples of phrases in Russian books that do not translate well to English. Ask the professor to also speak about Tolstoy’s history and influence on culture.

Option Three: Invite a book publisher to speak with the class about the market for print versus electronic books from a publisher’s point of view.

Option Four: Invite a professional book translator to visit your class and discuss the ins and outs of their job with the students.

### **Field Trip**

Take a short class journey on a train or a subway or a bus (this can even be for a single hour). Ask everyone to bring a book or story that has in some important way touched their lives on the journey. As they journey, ask students to keep any receipts, tickets, or pieces of paper they come across and place them in their book. Designate at least 15-30 minutes of that journey to reading from their selected works. If a student gets motion sickness easily, have them pair up with another student who will very quietly read to them from their story.

Writing Exercise:

How did reading (or listening) to your story change the experience of your journey? What did you add to your book and how will these keepsakes help you to remember your journey and what you read? Explore these questions in a five minute journaling exercise.

## **TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT**

### **Writing Exercise**

List three of your favorite books and in one word or one phrase, explain why that book is in your top three list. Pick one book and write two paragraphs explaining why this book is your “bible,” as the narrator of “Our Bibles” uses the term.

## **COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE**

### **Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

## Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

## Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

## Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.