

## Dominant Narratives

<p><b>Overview</b></p>	<p>This guide provides a discussion-based lesson plan on dominant narratives. <b>A dominant narrative is an explanation or story that is told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies.</b> It usually achieves dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts. Because dominant narratives are so normalized through their repetition and authority, they have the illusion of being objective and apolitical, when in fact they are neither. This discussion guide will help students recognize dominant narratives, how they are perpetuated, and how and whom they benefit/harm.</p>
<p><b>Goals</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) To help students understand what dominant narratives are and how they function.</li> <li>2) To encourage students to think critically about the dominant narratives they take for granted.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Implementation</b></p>	<p>In almost any topic you explore with your students, there will likely be dominant narratives that they have encountered and may believe uncritically. This discussion-based activity can be implemented or adapted to suit the needs of a class. For example, it could be adjusted to fit the topic of the class (e.g., a course on public health could include this activity to specifically address dominant narratives that impact public health). Or it can be used as is to help students understand dominant narratives more generally. Pair this discussion with <a href="#">The Perfectly Logical Explanation Discussion Guide</a> to encourage an even deeper exploration of dominant narratives and how they function.</p> <p>This guide presents four activities that explore Dominant Narratives, allowing you to choose which format would best fit your class.</p>
<p><b>Challenges</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Students likely have personal stakes in dominant narratives. These narratives are often tied up in values, culture, and identity, so it is normal for students to feel invested in believing them or disbelieving them depending on how the narrative impacts them.</li> <li>2) If it seems like students are resistant to being critical of the dominant narratives, you might make time to model for them how you personally engage with dominant narratives that you have felt/feel invested in.</li> </ol>

## Session Sequence Option A – Historical Example

Give your students an example of a dominant narrative that they can analyze with some personal distance. This option has the advantage of easing your students into thinking critically about dominant narratives before moving to more contemporary narratives in which they will have personal stakes, but it has the disadvantage of not addressing the role students may play in perpetuating or resisting dominant narratives. You should remind students that dominant narratives often sound reasonable and that it isn't important whether they agree or disagree with the narrative.

Lesson Structure	Time <i>(Estimated amount of time for each component)</i>	Activity Content and Instructions
Introduction	5 mins	<p>The instructor introduces the topic of Dominant Narratives with an overview of the lesson and stating learning goals for the class period.</p> <p>Dominant Narratives: Explanations or stories that are told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies, usually achieving dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts.</p>
Small Group Activity	15-20 mins	<p><b>Have students divide into groups</b></p> <p>Give your students an example of a dominant narrative that they can analyze with some personal distance and write it on the board.</p> <p>For example, before the Civil War, a common defense of slavery was: <i>"If slavery is abolished, former slaves wouldn't have the means or ability to take care of themselves. Therefore, slavery is necessary for the wellbeing of slaves."</i></p> <p>In small groups, students will go through the dominant narrative together, answering the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who do you suppose would say this?</li> <li>• Why would they say this?</li> <li>• Who does this narrative benefit? Who does it harm?</li> <li>• What assumptions are being made?</li> <li>• How does it function rhetorically? (You made need to parse this question if they are unfamiliar with rhetoric)</li> <li>• What narrative is it attempting to silence?</li> <li>• Why do you suppose this narrative had power?</li> </ul>

<b>Large Group Review</b>	20 mins	Go through the dominant narrative and questions together. As you go, jot down any properties of dominant narratives they come up with.
<b>Large Group Debrief</b>	10 mins	<p>After reviewing answers together, ask your students to explain what a dominant narrative is in their own words. Jot down its essential properties as your students name them. Some properties include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Serves the people in power</li><li>• Told by the “victor”</li><li>• Ignores other perspectives</li><li>• Taught as “the truth”</li><li>• Most people have heard it (in school, on the news, from parents, etc.)</li></ul> <p>Once you are satisfied that your students understand what a dominant narrative is and how it functions, ask them to come up with additional dominant narratives.</p>

## Session Sequence Option B – Contemporary Example

Pick a contemporary example with which your students will be readily familiar. Picking a contemporary example will likely make the activity more uncomfortable for the students (as they will have personal stakes in the conversation) and may bring out defensiveness if your students are not primed to think critically about social issues. However, contemporary examples do allow students to relate by bringing their personal experiences and immediate insight into the conversation. You should remind students that dominant narratives often sound reasonable and that it isn't important whether they agree or disagree with the narrative.

Lesson Structure	Time <i>(Estimated amount of time for each component)</i>	Activity Content and Instructions
<b>Introduction</b>	5 mins	<p>The instructor introduces the topic of Dominant Narratives with an overview of the lesson and stating learning goals for the class period.</p> <p>Dominant Narratives: Explanations or stories that are told in service of the dominant social group's interests and ideologies, usually achieving dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts.</p>
<b>Small Group Activity</b>	20 mins	<p><b>Have students divide into groups</b></p> <p>Give your students a contemporary example of a dominant narrative with which they will be readily familiar.</p> <p>For example, the American Dream: <i>"America is a meritocracy, and anyone can achieve their ambitions through hard work and perseverance."</i></p> <p>In small groups, students will go through the dominant narrative together, answering the following questions (using as many or as few as you would like):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who do you suppose would say this?</li> <li>• Why would they say this?</li> <li>• Who does this narrative benefit? Who does it harm?</li> <li>• What assumptions are being made?</li> <li>• How does it function rhetorically? (You made need to parse this question if they are unfamiliar with rhetoric)</li> <li>• What narrative is it attempting to silence?</li> <li>• Why do you suppose this narrative had power?</li> <li>• How is this narrative perpetuated?</li> <li>• How is participation in/belief in this narrative enforced?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How were you taught this narrative and by whom?</li> <li>• How has this narrative impacted you? How do you benefit from it? How does it harm you?</li> <li>• How have you participated in/resisted this narrative?</li> </ul>
<b>Large Group Review</b>	20 mins	Go through the dominant narrative and questions together. As you go, jot down any properties of dominant narratives they come up with.
<b>Large Group Debrief</b>	10 mins	<p>After reviewing answers together, ask your students to explain what a dominant narrative is in their own words. Jot down its essential properties as your students name them. Some properties include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves the people in power</li> <li>• Told by the “victor”</li> <li>• Ignores other perspectives</li> <li>• Taught as “the truth”</li> <li>• Most people have heard it (in school, on the news, from parents, etc.)</li> </ul> <p>Once you are satisfied that your students understand what a dominant narrative is and how it functions, ask them to come up with additional dominant narratives.</p>

## Session Sequence Option C – Class Topic

If your class is focusing on a particular topic, ask students what dominant narratives they have heard or read on that topic. You should remind students that dominant narratives often sound reasonable and that it is not important whether they agree or disagree with the narrative.

Lesson Structure	Time <i>(Estimated amount of time for each component)</i>	Activity Content and Instructions
<b>Introduction</b>	5 mins	<p>The instructor introduces the topic of Dominant Narratives with an overview of the lesson and stating learning goals for the class period.</p> <p>Dominant Narratives: Explanations or stories that are told in service of the dominant social group’s interests and ideologies, usually achieving dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts.</p>
<b>Small Group Activity</b>	15-20 mins	<p><b>Have students divide into groups</b></p> <p>Ask your students to brainstorm what dominant narratives they have heard relating to the class topic/content.</p> <p>In their small groups, students will select one of the dominant narratives they came up with together and answer the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who do you suppose would say this?</li> <li>• Why would they say this?</li> <li>• Who does this narrative benefit? Who does it harm?</li> <li>• What assumptions are being made?</li> <li>• How does it function rhetorically? (You made need to parse this question if they are unfamiliar with rhetoric)</li> <li>• What narrative is it attempting to silence?</li> <li>• Why do you suppose this narrative had power?</li> <li>• How is this narrative perpetuated?</li> <li>• How is participation in/belief in this narrative enforced?</li> <li>• How were you taught this narrative and by whom?</li> <li>• How has this narrative impacted you? How do you benefit from it? How does it harm you?</li> <li>• How have you participated in/resisted this narrative?</li> </ul>

<b>Large Group Review</b>	20 mins	Go through the dominant narratives groups came up with and their corresponding answers to the questions together. As you go, jot down any properties of dominant narratives they come up with.
<b>Large Group Debrief</b>	10 mins	<p>After reviewing answers together, ask your students to explain what a dominant narrative is in their own words. Jot down its essential properties as your students name them. Some properties include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Serves the people in power</li><li>• Told by the “victor”</li><li>• Ignores other perspectives</li><li>• Taught as “the truth”</li><li>• Most people have heard it (in school, on the news, from parents, etc.)</li></ul> <p>Once you are satisfied that your students understand what a dominant narrative is and how it functions, ask them to come up with additional dominant narratives.</p>

## Session Sequence Option D – Assigned Topic

This activity is good if you want your students to explore dominant narratives more generally. You will assign a topic to groups and ask them to write dominant narratives they have heard about each topic. You should remind students that dominant narratives often sound reasonable and that it is not important whether they agree or disagree with the narrative.

Lesson Structure	Time <i>(Estimated amount of time for each component)</i>	Activity Content and Instructions
<b>Introduction</b>	5 mins	<p>The instructor introduces the topic of Dominant Narratives with an overview of the lesson and stating learning goals for the class period.</p> <p>Dominant Narratives: Explanations or stories that are told in service of the dominant social group’s interests and ideologies, usually achieving dominance through repetition, the apparent authority of the speaker (often accorded to speakers who represent the dominant social groups), and the silencing of alternative accounts.</p>
<b>Small Group Activity</b>	15-20 mins	<p><b>Have students divide into groups</b></p> <p>Give each group a paper with a topic and have them list and discuss the dominant narratives they have heard about each topic. Some topics you might assign are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immigration</li> <li>• Health Care</li> <li>• Gun Control</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> <li>• Communism</li> <li>• Protesting</li> <li>• Higher Education</li> <li>• Minimum Wage</li> <li>• Prisons</li> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Climate Change</li> </ul> <p>In small groups, students will go through the dominant narrative together, answering the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Who do you suppose would say this?</li> <li>2) Why would they say this?</li> <li>3) Who does this narrative benefit? Who does it harm?</li> <li>4) What assumptions are being made?</li> </ol>

		<p>5) How does it function rhetorically? (You made need to parse this question if they are unfamiliar with rhetoric)</p> <p>6) What narrative is it attempting to silence?</p> <p>7) Why do you suppose this narrative had power?</p>
<b>Large Group Review</b>	20 mins	<p>Pick a couple of the dominant narratives the students came up and spend time on them as a class, asking any/all of the following questions that encourage deeper reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who have you heard repeat this narrative and what was the context?</li> <li>• How is this narrative perpetuated?</li> <li>• How is this participation in/belief in this narrative enforced?</li> <li>• How does this narrative benefit the dominant social group(s)?</li> <li>• How has this narrative impacted you? How do you benefit from it? How does it harm you?</li> <li>• How have you participated in/resisted this narrative?</li> <li>• What alternative or marginalized narratives get drowned out or silenced by these narratives?</li> <li>• Does this narrative inhibit concrete action? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ For example, do narratives around climate change and personal responsibility inhibit regulation that would impact corporations?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Large Group Debrief</b>	10 mins	<p>Ask your students to explain what a dominant narrative is in their own words. Jot down its essential properties as your students name them. Some properties include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves the people in power</li> <li>• Told by the “victor”</li> <li>• Ignores other perspectives</li> <li>• Taught as “the truth”</li> <li>• Most people have heard it (in school, on the news, from parents, etc.)</li> </ul> <p>Once you are satisfied that your students understand what a dominant narrative is and how it functions, as them to come up with additional dominant narratives.</p>