

INSIGHT HUMANITIES™

# The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind

## Rising Grade 7

An Author Study Unit Adapted from Lavinia Group's  
**Insight Humanities™** Curriculum

Lessons 1-20





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## Purpose: Why study memoir and *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*?

In this literature unit, students explore the memoir genre through an in-depth study of William Kamkwamba’s gripping and heartfelt memoir, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. In the text, William recalls his remarkable life story: his childhood in a small village in Malawi; his growing suspicion of magic and love of science; a terrible drought that ravages his community; how that tragedy inspires him to dream of building a windmill; how he fulfills that dream through remarkable ingenuity, creativity, resourcefulness, and drive; and the inspirational aftermath of his tremendous accomplishment.

Students will certainly learn much from reading about William’s remarkable life. But as much as students learn about the importance of science, education, and tenacity, they also learn about the power of the memoir genre. During Shared Memoir and reading, students focus on analyzing the craft and structure that William brings to his life story; how his imagery, dialogue, characterization, and other writer’s moves work to engage the reader, familiarize them with his world, and, ultimately, advance the text’s central ideas and core themes. Students specifically focus on how memoir writers borrow many signature elements from realistic fiction; after all, memoirs are stories. At the same time, students consider how the genre changes when an actual person narrates their own life with the goal of sharing important life lessons with their readers.

By the end of this unit, students will have developed a strong understanding of the memoir genre. They will know why writers pen memoirs, parse the relationship between memoirs and the broader genre of narrative nonfiction, and examine how language works to create meaning throughout a personal narrative. While drawing inspiration from William Kamkwamba’s incredible life story, students undertake a journey of their own: They strengthen their own ability to read, discuss, analyze, and make meaning of the powerful memoir genre.

# Goal: Essential Knowledge and Habits

## Standards-Based Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading

Although memoirs are nonfiction, since they are narrative nonfiction, we will lean on our core practices of reading fiction to better understand our books. Each lesson within this unit is designed to reinforce Insight Humanities' Seven Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading.

### Seven Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading

1. Fiction readers make mind movies to visualize what they're reading.
2. Fiction readers think deeply about how language and structure support the big ideas in the text.
3. Fiction readers develop big ideas and support them with evidence from the text.
4. Fiction readers use context to figure out the meaning of unknown words.
5. Fiction readers think deeply about the characters in their books and how they are developed.
6. Fiction readers develop ideas across books.
7. Fiction readers consider how a story connects to their own lives and experiences or gives them a window into the lives and experiences of people different from themselves.

Each lesson is designed to help your students develop as readers and writers while deepening their understanding of the key ideas in this unit.

## Reinforcing the Core Practices of Strong Fiction Reading Through Independent Reading

**As students read independently, talk with them about their reading and the ideas they are developing. You may find the following questions helpful as you do so:**

- How would you describe the main character? What is your evidence?
- What kind of world do the characters live in? Make a mind movie. What do you see?
- What challenges does the main character face, and how does the character respond? What does this tell you about the kind of person they are?
- What does the main character want above all? Why is this significant?
- What ideas are you developing about the journey the author has created for the main character? What is your evidence?
- How are the main character's relationships with secondary characters developing?
- In what ways has the main character changed? How does it affect their journey?
- What has the main character learned? In what ways has it affected them?
- What have you learned from reading this book? What big message can you take with you into your own life?
- How can you figure out what this word or phrase means (using context)?
- Knowing that it isn't literally a \_\_\_\_\_, what do you think the author means by this word/phrase/expression?
- What are you visualizing in this part?

## Writing Through Shared Memoir

Throughout this unit, students will engage in quick writes to better develop and clarify their ideas about the novel during video-based lessons and virtual discussions. At least once in every lesson, students will have the opportunity to respond to a whole-class discussion question independently through writing before discussing it with their partners and/or the class



# Lesson 1



## Shared Memoir

**Materials:** The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind; “[William and the windmill](#)” (optional)



### Launch

*Friends, I am so excited to begin a new text today. The book we will read together in this unit is The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind, by William Kamkwamba. William is a young man who is famous throughout the world for his perseverance and intelligence. When his country faced a terrible famine, he worked hard to build a windmill for his village in Malawi, a small country in Africa. Most people thought it would be impossible for a young boy to construct a working windmill, but William was successful, using only scraps of material he found in junkyards.*

**Teacher’s Note:** To build further excitement and investment, and students’ background knowledge, you may want to watch “William and the windmill” with your students.

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind is a memoir, a genre in which the author is telling their own life story. As we read this book, we will learn from William about his journey to construct the windmill. At the same time, we will learn about, and discuss, the literary features that make a memoir compelling and effective.*



## Shared Memoir and Discuss

Read The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind by William Kamkwamba.

*We're going to start by reading the prologue. Remember, the prologue is a brief introduction to the text. Whenever I see a prologue, I pay close attention to the ways in which the author prepares me to think about the story to come. I wonder if William will provide key background information for his life story and whether he will preview any big ideas or themes that he hopes his readers will take away.*

**Read to the end of page 3.**

*How does the prologue prepare us to read the rest of William's memoir?*

As partnerships share, highlight key ideas such as:

- The prologue explains his major accomplishment: He constructed a working windmill from scrap pieces.
- The prologue suggests that William is persistent. He mentions how other people in the village made fun of him, which reveals that William had to believe in and stick with his idea, even when others were skeptical.
- The prologue flashes forward to William's big victory, which makes the reader excited to learn about how exactly he got to this point. It creates anticipation for the reader.

*Now, let's move to Chapter One, "When Magic Ruled the World."*

**Read to the break on page 8.**

*What is the significance of William's discussion about magic?*

As partnerships share, highlight key ideas such as:

- William explains an important aspect of his village culture. He wants the reader to understand that in Malawi, many people approach problems and challenges by turning to "invisible magic."

- William sets up an important contrast between magic and science. We know that he eventually builds a windmill, so we are starting to realize that William’s scientific solution (an engineering project) represents a different way of thinking about problems than others in his village, who turned to magic.

**Read to the break on page 15.**

*How do the vignettes (short stories) of the gumball, William’s grandfather, and the Gule Wamkulu develop our understanding of magic in William’s world?*

As partnerships share, highlight key ideas such as:

- The vignettes demonstrate the powerful influence of magic by emphasizing William’s fear of it. He is so afraid of getting in trouble with the gumball trader or evil spirits that he can’t sleep at night.
- At the same time, we see that William gets some mixed messages about the power of magic. His father, in particular, signals to William that magic may not be all that powerful. For example, he laughs after paying the trader for William’s gumballs, and he tells William that his faith can render magic powerless. I wonder if this is one reason why William will eventually entertain a scientific solution to the drought.

**Read to the break on page 23.**



## Whole-Class Discussion

**Final Question:** In this first chapter, we learn a lot about William’s childhood. What are the most important things we learn, and why might they be significant to the text’s deeper meaning?

Give students about a minute to discuss their initial ideas with a partner or small group. Then, give students time to engage in a quick write about this question in their Reader’s Notebooks.

As students complete their quick write, study their writing in real time and choose 1–2 students to kick off the discussion.



**KEY IDEAS**

- We learn about the prominence of magic as a belief system in Malawi, and we get the sense that William’s negotiation of magical vs. scientific solutions may play a large role in his process of building the windmill.
- We learn that William and his childhood friends had hobbies and interests that may have supported his ultimate love of science and engineering, including watching *The Terminator* and assembling and studying trucks.

**BACK-POCKET QUESTIONS**

- How might William’s relationship with magic motivate him to build a windmill later on?
- Why does William include the stories about his two friends? How might they connect to his construction of the windmill?
- Do you notice any patterns in the activities that William and his friends undertake? How might those patterns be significant to the book’s themes?

**Independent Reading**

Students have no additional reading from *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* following this lesson, but they are welcome to reread this portion of the text during their own Independent Reading time in order to deepen their understanding of key ideas that surfaced during the shared reading and discussion.