

## *The Handmaid's Tale* in Court

### **Activity Summary**

In this activity, I stage a “trial” for two morally ambiguous characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*: the Commander and Serena Joy.

I break students into five groups—the Commander’s defense team, the Commander’s prosecution team, Serena’s defense team, Serena’s prosecution team, and the Jury. Instructions for each group are on the following pages.

After groups have had time to prepare, the Jury group first details the facts of the case (a summary of the novel up to the point of our reading), and the prosecution and defense teams then deliver “closing arguments” for the jury to rule upon.

The activity allows students to practice gathering textual evidence, compiling that evidence into a cohesive argument, and evaluating/being evaluated upon how convincing that argument is.



## defense team: the commander

### Task:

Argue in defense of the Commander, convincing the jury to find his character morally “innocent” based on what we know at this point in the novel.

### Instructions:

**First**, work together to figure out what you can know and infer about the Commander. What does the novel tell us about him? Each person in the group should make a list, citing page numbers when applicable.

**Second**, how can you use what the novel reveals to frame the Commander in a positive light? What does the novel *not* reveal (where are the gaps in our knowledge about the Commander, which might allow you to speculate or suggest positive possibilities)?

**Third**, based on the notes you’ve gathered as a group, decide what degree of innocence you will argue for. Do you see the Commander as a blameless figure in the novel? A basically decent man? A regular guy who doesn't deserve to be considered a villain for his mistakes? A character whose morality seems iffy, but not iffy enough to convict?

**Fourth**, construct a 2-3 minute “closing argument” in which you present your case. You should offer up to six reasons for declaring the Commander “innocent.” Please back up your claims with relevant passages whenever possible, citing page numbers (exhibit A, exhibit B, etc) on the board so the class can follow along. Everyone in the group should have a brief speaking part in your closing argument.

## defense team: serena joy

### Task:

Argue in defense of Serena Joy, convincing the jury to find her character morally “innocent” based on what we know at this point in the novel.

### Instructions:

**First**, work together to figure out what you can know and infer about Serena. What does the novel tell us about her? Each person in the group should make a list, citing page numbers when applicable.

**Second**, how can you use what the novel reveals to frame Serena Joy in a positive light? What does the novel *not* reveal (where are the gaps in our knowledge about her, which might allow you to speculate or suggest positive possibilities)?

**Third**, based on the notes you’ve gathered as a group, decide what degree of innocence you will argue for. Do you see Serena Joy as a blameless figure in the novel? A basically decent woman? A regular woman who doesn't deserve to be considered a villain for her mistakes? A character whose morality seems iffy, but not iffy enough to convict?

**Fourth**, construct a 2-3 minute “closing argument” in which you present your case. You should offer up to six reasons for declaring Serena Joy “innocent.” Please back up your claims with relevant passages whenever possible, citing page numbers (exhibit A, exhibit B, etc) on the board so the class can follow along. Everyone in the group should have a brief speaking part in your closing argument.

## prosecution team: the commander

### Task:

Your task is to convince the jury that we should find the Commander morally “guilty” based on what we know at this point in the novel.

### Instructions:

**First**, work together to figure out what you can know and infer about the Commander. What does the novel tell us about him? Each person in the group should make a list, citing page numbers when applicable.

**Second**, how can you use what the novel reveals to frame the Commander in a negative light? What does the novel *not* reveal (where are the gaps in our knowledge about the Commander, which might allow you to speculate or suggest sinister possibilities)?

**Third**, based on the notes you’ve gathered as a group, decide what degree of guilt you will argue for. Do you see the Commander as a completely evil figure in the novel, emblematic of all Gilead’s injustices? Is he a character with some decency, but whose flaws and mistakes outweigh his potential? Is he not personally “bad” at all, merely guilty of standing by and failing to respond nobly to his situation?

**Fourth**, construct a 2-3 minute “closing argument” in which you present your case. You should offer up to six reasons for declaring the Commander “guilty.” Please back up your claims with relevant passages whenever possible, citing page numbers on the board so the class can follow along. Everyone in the group should have a brief speaking part in your closing argument.

## prosecution team: serena joy

### Task:

Your task is to convince the jury that we should find Serena Joy morally “guilty” based on what we know at this point in the novel.

### Instructions:

**First**, work together to figure out what you can know and infer about Serena. What does the novel tell us about her? Each person in the group should make a list, citing page numbers when applicable.

**Second**, how can you use what the novel reveals to frame Serena Joy in a positive light? What does the novel *not* reveal (where are the gaps in our knowledge about her, which might allow you to speculate or suggest positive possibilities)?

**Third**, based on the notes you’ve gathered as a group, decide what degree of guilt you will argue for. Do you see Serena Joy as a completely evil figure in the novel, emblematic of all Gilead’s injustices? Is she a character with some decency, but whose flaws and mistakes outweigh her potential? Is she not personally “bad” at all, merely guilty of standing by and failing to respond nobly to this situation?

**Fourth**, construct a 2-3 minute “closing argument” in which you present your case. You should offer up to six reasons for declaring Serena Joy “guilty.” Please back up your claims with relevant passages whenever possible, citing page numbers on the board so the class can follow along. Everyone in the group should have a brief speaking part in your closing argument.

## members of the jury

**Task:** Present all that we've read thus far in an informative, organized manner.

We've covered a large portion of the novel, and many of the events in the book are presented in a non-chronological fashion—so help our class out by creating a “cheat sheet” that tells us how Gilead came into being, what's up with Offred, who the important characters are, what the vital issues at stake are, etc.

As a group, collaborate on a concise, thorough summary of the events and information with which we need to be familiar. You might want to consider using a timeline, diagram, or other form of organization for the information. You'll start off the trial by briefly presenting your summary, and each person in the group should be prepared to contribute.

Then, you will become the jury and vote on which arguments you find more appealing.