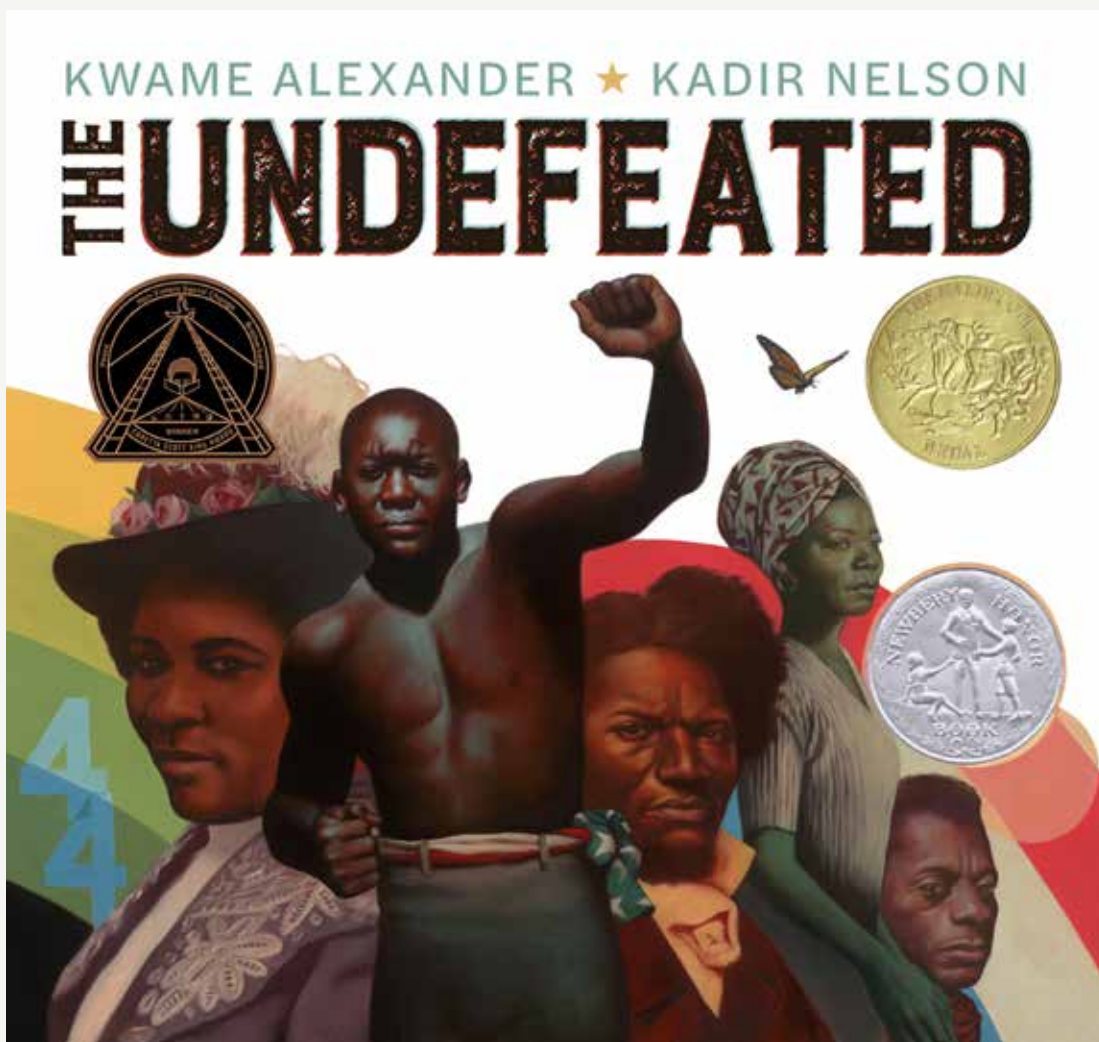


# Curriculum Ideas

for using *The Undeclared* in K-12 educational settings



Note to educators:

*The Undefeated*, written by Kwame Alexander and illustrated by Kadir Nelson, is a remarkable book that has won the Caldecott Medal, the Newbery Honor award, and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award.

The book is a unique educational resource that highlights the experiences and achievements of Black Americans, pairs powerful words with vivid images, and gives students opportunities to engage with poetry and informational reading within the same text.

In the following pages you'll find ideas for incorporating *The Undefeated* into your classroom curriculum. Many suggestions are aligned with the Common Core's College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards in English Language Arts (CCSS), the Michigan K-12 Social Studies Process and Skills Standards (SSPSS), or the Michigan Merit Curriculum in Visual Arts (ART.VA). These connections are indicated through hyperlinks.

We hope these ideas will spark your thinking about ways to incorporate *The Undefeated* into your classroom. And we hope that your students will engage with the book in ways that are transformative and ongoing.

The CCFW Team

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*This project was made possible by a generous grant from Michigan Humanities,  
an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

We're grateful to Deborah Pryor-Bayard, Kristin Otte-Groom, Kendra McNeil, and Alyssa Johansen for sharing their time and expertise with us and offering constructive feedback about the curriculum in its early stages.

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## SELF-DISCOVERY

### ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- The book highlights Black Americans' diverse skills and talents. What are some of your unique talents?
- The book celebrates Black Americans' accomplishments and achievements. What are some of your achievements that you are most proud of?
- The book ends with a picture of children and the words "This is for you." Why do you think the author ends the book this way?

### MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- The remarkable people featured in the book are described with words such as "unforgettable," "unflappable," "unafraid," "unlimited," "unstoppable," "undiscovered," "unbelievable," "unbending," "underdogs," "uncertain," and "undefeated." Which of these words could be used to describe you, and why? (It's fine to choose more than one word.)
- The author concludes the poem with the words, "This is for you. And you. And you." Who is the "you" he is talking about? How does this show that the author believes in the worth and potential of young people? Do you feel included in that group? Why/why not? Explain your thoughts.
- The afterword concludes with a quote from Maya Angelou about resilience; she says it's important to be able to rise back up whenever we get "knocked down flat in front of the whole world." What's a time in your life when you "got knocked down flat" but got back up and kept going? What things, people, beliefs, or ideas gave you the strength to rise up?

### HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- A note in the front flap of the book says that the text celebrates "the grit, passion, and perseverance of our greatest artists, athletes, and activists" while also paying tribute to "the strength and bravery of everyday people caught in the web of history." To you, which aspect of the book is more inspiring, and why? Are you more motivated by examples of greatness, or by examples of ordinary individuals?
- The book shows that there are numerous ways to make a difference in the world: painting, writing, singing, playing an instrument, preaching, public speaking, serving in the military, serving in government, playing sports, participating in social justice movements, and many more. What are your talents and interests? How can you use them to enrich your community (and beyond)?
- The afterword concludes with a quote from Maya Angelou: "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose." Do you agree with Angelou's claim that defeat can play an important role in showing us what we're made of? Why/why not?

### ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- The book features people that the author finds inspiring. Create a drawing of yourself surrounded by people who inspire you. (They can be people from the past and/or present.) [ART.VA.II](#)
- Identify three artistic details in the book that you feel are important, but that others might miss if they didn't look carefully. Explain why those details are worth noticing.
- Find an illustration where you think the artist uses color in a memorable way. ("Color" in this case means anything that's not blank space.) Explain why this use of color stands out to you.
- Find an illustration where you think the artist uses blank space (white space) in a memorable way. Explain why this use of blank space stands out to you.

### MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- Create an original piece of artwork, photography, or video that captures the essence of the last line in the book's afterword: "Keep rising." [ART.VA.II](#)
- Focus on one of your favorite pages in the book. Study the words and images separately. Then evaluate how the words and images produce a richer and more complex message when taken together. Based on your evaluation, explain why the artwork is an essential part of this book. What would be lost if the art weren't there? [CCSS.R.7](#)
- Focus on one of the book's montage illustrations, where images of different people are overlaid (e.g., the people on the cover, the artists and authors, the athletes, the musicians). What techniques does the artist use to make each individual stand out, while at the same time making the images fit together into a coherent whole? [ART.VA.III](#)
- One page in the book isn't accompanied by artwork ("And the ones who didn't"). Why do you think the artist left this page blank? Talk about this question in a discussion group. Then listen to the artist and author talk about it in a video interview, <https://theundefeated.com/videos/the-undefeated-highlights-the-heroes-of-african-american-history/>, from 19:40-21:50. Follow up with a discussion of how your group's insights compare to the artist's and author's remarks. [CCSS.SL.1](#)

### HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- Design and illustrate a short graphic novel that tells the story of a person, historical event, or movement from the book. Focus on parts of the story that you feel are essential for readers to know. [ART.VA.II](#)
- Choose an illustration from the book that stands out to you. Analyze what makes the illustration powerful, focusing on key elements of art (for example, use of color, space, texture, arrangement of figures, etc.). Then share your insights through a video recording that allows an audience to view specific features of the artwork and hear your commentary at the same time. [ART.VA.III](#)

# SOCIAL STUDIES

## ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- Would you say this is a book about the past, the present, the future, or a combination of those things? Support your ideas with specific examples from the text.
- Choose one person from the book and identify a significant date in their career. Write the person's name, along with a brief explanation of what happened on that date, on a timeline that your whole class shares. Once all your classmates have done this, study the timeline to discern the historical scope of the book and chronological relationships between people featured in the book. [SSPSS.P1](#)
- The final illustration in the book shows children smiling; some viewers have suggested that the children have tears in their eyes, too. With your classmates, discuss whether these could be tears of sadness, happiness, fear, hope, or a combination of emotions. Connect your ideas to the historical issues and themes highlighted in the book.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- Learn more about the Transatlantic Slave Trade by studying written texts, maps, and documentaries. Write a reflective essay discussing what you learned and how this affects your understanding of history. [SSPSS.P2](#)
- Learn more about Black soldiers during the Civil War by studying written texts, photographs, and documentaries. Create a learning resource (such as a short video or slideshow) that teachers in your school could use when they teach about the Civil War. [SSPSS.P2](#)
- Learn more about the Jim Crow era (referenced in the endnote about Jack Johnson) by studying written texts, oral histories, and documentaries. Pay special attention to resources that describe Jim Crow laws in your own city and/or state. Share your findings with your peers by hosting a question and answer session about your research. [SSPSS.P2](#)
- Learn more about the Civil Rights Movement by studying written texts, oral histories, and documentaries. Discuss with your peers which issues from the Civil Rights Movement are still relevant today. [SSPSS.P2](#)

## HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- Reflect on current events that are similar to historical issues featured in the book. If you were to create your own version of *The Undefeated* for this current moment, who/what would you include, and why?
- Research past or present issues related to social justice in your city/county/state. Then evaluate your discoveries: which things are unique to your local setting? Which things connect to broader national issues depicted in the book? How does your research help you understand more about your community? [SSPSS.P1](#), [P2](#)
- At the conclusion of the endnotes, the author explains, "During their time, many of the historical figures identified in this book were identified as either colored or Negro. I chose to use the more contemporary terms black and African Americans." Why do you think the author made this choice? How and why has vocabulary for talking about race changed over time? Which terms do you think are most appropriate today, and why? [SSPSS.P3](#)

# LANGUAGE

## ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- Identify three words in the book that you don't fully understand. Which other words, phrases, or sentences in the written text give you clues about the unfamiliar words' meaning? [CCSS.L.4](#)
- Identify three words in the book that you don't fully understand. Look up the words in a dictionary, and then write the definitions on sticky notes. Put the sticky notes in the book where the words appear, so that you'll have a definition nearby each time you read. [CCSS.L.4](#)
- Identify places in the book where the artwork helped you understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word or phrase. Explain how and why the art helped with comprehension.
- Identify a word from the book that is new to you. Once you learn the word's definition, write the word on a sheet of paper, and then create an accompanying drawing or sketch that will help you remember the word's meaning.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- The author uses the prefix "un" to describe most of the people in the book. Why do you think the author made this choice? How does the repeated use of this prefix make the author's message powerful? (If you're not sure, try this mental exercise: replace several of the "un" words with synonyms—for example, change "undefeated" to "victorious," or change "unforgettable" to "mem-orable"—and assess how this impacts the text.)
- Reflect on the word choice in the line, "This is for the unbelievable." What are different possible meanings for the word "unbelievable"? What do you think the word means in this context? [CCSS.L.5](#)
- Reflect on the word choice in the line, "This is for the unspeakable." What are different possible meanings for the word "unspeakable"? What do you think the word means in this context? [CCSS.L.5](#)
- The author frequently uses figurative language (e.g., "shine their light for the world to see"). What's an example of figurative language in the book that you find compelling? [CCSS.L.5](#)

## HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- Reflect on the figurative language in the line, "The dreamers and doers who swim across The Big Sea of our imagination and show us the majestic shores of the promised land." What do you think this figure of speech means? [CCSS.L.5](#)
- Reflect on the figurative language in the line, "The ones who scored with chains on one hand and faith in the other." What are different possible meanings for the word "scored"? What do you think the word means in this context? What is the relationship between the words "chains" and "faith" in this line? Do you interpret them as contrasting, complementary, or something else? [CCSS.L.5](#)

# READING

## ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- What are the book's main ideas? (This question is more challenging than it seems at first glance, since the book is written as a poem, and poets usually communicate ideas indirectly rather than stating them outright.) Which specific parts of the text helped you develop your answer? [CCSS.R.1](#)
- Try two different approaches to reading the book: 1) read the words silently, and 2) read the words and listen to the audio version at the same time. Which approach helps you understand the book best? Which approach helps you enjoy the book best? Why?
- Where in the book do you see/hear examples of repetition (repeated words, repeated sentence structures, etc.)? Why do you think the author does this?
- Why do you think some words and phrases in the book are printed in a larger font than others? (For example, "This is for the unforgettable.") How does this affect the book's message?

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- What are the main ideas expressed in the poem? Which details in the text communicate those ideas most effectively? [CCSS.R.2](#)
- What are the main ideas expressed in the afterword? Which details in the text communicate those ideas most effectively? [CCSS.R.2](#)
- What is the main focus of the book's endnotes? What kinds of details are included in the notes, and why? What differences do you notice between the notes about specific people, and the notes about historical events? [CCSS.R.2](#)
- Where in the poem do you notice instances of alliteration and internal rhyme? (To identify these things, you may find it helpful to read the poem aloud, or listen to a recording of the author reading the text at [www.hmhbbooks.com/freedownloads](http://www.hmhbbooks.com/freedownloads), access code UNDEFEATED.) What do these literary devices add to the poem? [CCSS.R.4](#)

## HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- The poem has a fascinating backstory: it evolved from a personal project to a video project to a picture book. You can learn more about this backstory in the book's afterword, and also in a video interview with Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson, <https://theundefeated.com/videos/the-undefeated-highlights-the-heroes-of-african-american-history/>, especially 4:30-9:44 and 26:37-29:50). Look at these sources; then talk with your classmates how each version of the poem was uniquely shaped by its context, purpose, and intended audience. [CCSS.R.6](#)

## WRITING

### ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- How would you describe this book to someone who hasn't seen it or read it? Write a description that would give that person a clear idea of what the book is about and what makes it unique.

[CCSS.W.2](#)

- Choose a page in the book that you find memorable or interesting; then write an explanation of why that page stands out to you. In your explanation, give at least three detailed reasons, to help others understand your choice. [CCSS.W.2](#)

### MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- Imagine you could go back in time and spend a day with one of the people pictured in the book. Write a diary entry describing that day. Feel free to be creative in terms of imaginary dialogue, details, and events. [CCSS.W.3](#)

- If you could add one more person to the book, who would it be, and why? Write a persuasive paragraph about why that person would merit inclusion in the book. [CCSS.W.1](#)

- After doing further research about a person in the book, write a poem that reflects who they are as a person and gives tribute to their achievements in life. (The poem doesn't need to follow any particular rules for rhyme and meter; it can be free verse, like the poetry in *The Undefeated*.)

- Compose a paragraph-long recommendation for the book. Write your recommendation on an index card or half sheet of paper. Then have your teacher post the recommendation near the place where the book is shelved/displayed in your classroom or school library, so other students can use your comments as a basis for deciding whether to read the book. [CCSS.W.4](#)

### HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- Write a book review of *The Undefeated* for an audience of your choice (children, teens, parents, teachers, librarians, book clubs, etc.). Keep in mind that book reviews typically include a balance of summary and evaluation, so don't simply summarize the book; you should also communicate informed, thoughtful opinions. If possible, publish and/or share your finished review with members of your intended audience. [CCSS.W.4](#)

- Interview your school librarian to learn more about the book from a literacy professional's perspective. Ask them to explain what makes this book unique, compared to similar books they've seen throughout their career. With their permission, write up the interview as a short article for your school newspaper or school district newsletter.

- Find three book reviews of *The Undefeated* from sources like *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Library Journal*, or major newspapers. Read the reviews; then write an essay comparing and contrasting the reviewers' perspectives on the book. What do the reviews have in common? What makes each review distinct? Focus on nuances; for example, all three writers may praise the book, but they may give different reasons for such praise. Be sure to explore and analyze those differences.



# RESEARCH

## ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- Identify a person, event, or issue in the book that you'd like to know more about. Have a parent, teacher, or librarian help you find information in print or online. After reading the information, make a poster that would serve as a good introduction for someone who has never studied your research topic and wants to know more about it.

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- Focus on one of the athletes featured in the book, and view film footage of their sports performances. Choose one film clip that you feel represents their ability well. Share the film clip with your classmates; then lead a group discussion about why the author chose to include this person in the book.
- Focus on one of the musicians featured in the book, and listen to recordings of their music. Choose one song that you feel represents their style well. Share the song with your classmates, and explain a connection you made between the song and a main idea from the book.
- Focus on one of the authors featured in the book, and read examples of their writing. Choose one short piece of writing that you feel represents their style well. Share the writing with your classmates; ask them to comment on what's distinctive about the author's style, voice, word choice, and/or subject matter.
- Focus on one of the artists featured in the book, and look at reproductions of their artwork. Choose one piece of art that you feel represents their style well. Share the artwork with your classmates, and explain why this piece is characteristic of the artist's work.
- The number 44 appears in the cover illustration. Do research to determine the significance of that number; how/why does it fit with the book's content and themes?
- *The Undefeated* has won multiple awards, including the Caldecott Medal, the Newbery Honor award, and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award. Do research to find out what these awards are, and how they differ from one another.

## HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- The five people depicted on the book's cover from left to right are Madam C. J. Walker (entrepreneur), Jack Johnson (boxer), Frederick Douglass (abolitionist), Maya Angelou (author), and James Baldwin (author). The book's endnotes provide background information about Jack Johnson, but to learn about the other four people, you'll need to do some detective work. Do research to find out what they accomplished during their lifetimes.
- The poem's italicized lines allude to phrases that were originally written or spoken by prominent Black Americans. Research the italicized lines to track down their original sources. Then explain how the allusions relate to and/or enrich the book's overall message. (Note: on the page "This is for the unbelievable," one allusion is capitalized rather than italicized.) [CCSS.W.7](#)

## Not sure where to start?

### Try this CURRICULUM SAMPLER

#### ELEMENTARY (grades K-4)

- The book features people that the author finds inspiring. Create a drawing of yourself surrounded by people who inspire you. (They can be people from the past and/or present.)
- Identify three artistic details in the book that you feel are important, but that others might miss if they didn't look carefully. Explain why those details are worth noticing.
- Identify places in the book where the artwork helped you understand the meaning of a word or phrase. Explain how and why the art helped with comprehension.

#### MIDDLE SCHOOL (grades 5-8)

- Create an original piece of artwork, photography, or video that captures the essence of the last line in the book's afterword: "Keep rising." [ART.VA.II](#)
- Focus on one of your favorite pages in the book. Study the words and images separately. Then evaluate how the words and images produce a richer and more complex message when taken together. Based on your evaluation, explain why the artwork is an essential part of this book. What would be lost if the art weren't there? [CCSS.R.7](#)
- Imagine you could go back in time and spend a day with one of the people pictured in the book. Write a diary entry describing that day. Feel free to be creative in terms of imaginary dialogue, details, and events. [CCSS.W.3](#)
- If you could add one more person to the book, who would it be, and why? Write a persuasive paragraph about why that person would merit inclusion in the book. [CCSS.W.1](#)

#### HIGH SCHOOL (grades 9-12)

- Design and illustrate a short graphic novel that tells the story of a person, historical event, or move-ment from the book. Focus on parts of the story that you feel are essential for readers to know. [ART.VA.II](#)
- Reflect on current events that are similar to historical issues featured in the book. If you were to create your own version of *The Undefeated* for this current moment, who/what would you include, and why?
- The afterword concludes with a quote from Maya Angelou: "We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose." Do you agree with Angelou's claim that defeat can play an important role in showing us what we're made of? Why/why not?

# Curriculum in Action

We'd love to see the ways your students are engaging with *The Undefeated*!

If you'd like to celebrate your students' work with a wider audience, please share it with us. You can connect with us through email ([ccfw@calvin.edu](mailto:ccfw@calvin.edu)) or share work from your classroom on social media.



@CCFWgr

We welcome all examples of student interaction with the book, including:

- Photographs
- Short videos
- Written work
- Artwork

In addition to celebrating your students' work in-house and on our various platforms, we'll forward some examples to Michigan Humanities and to the creators of *The Undefeated*, Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson.

If materials include students' faces or other identifying information, please ensure you have written permission from a parent or guardian before sending them to us. If we receive materials from you, we will assume we are permitted to share them publicly unless you've noted otherwise.