The edition of the novel that I am using is 165 pages in length, not including the “Afterword” and the “Coda,” which are not part of Fahrenheit 451 itself. Bradbury divides the story into three parts: “The Hearth and the Salamander,” “The Sieve and the Sand,” and “Burning Bright.” The first part of the story ends with Montag beginning his exploration of the books that he has hoarded; he is now moving towards a point-of-no-return in his intellectual journey. “The Sieve and the Sand” continues the narrative where the previous section left off, and ends just before the novel’s climax, with Montag and his fellow firemen stopping in front of his house to burn it. “Burning Bright” takes us from this moment until the end of the novel, when Montag and his fellow book-loving outcasts head back to the city following the war to begin the process of rebuilding a literate society.

Each part of Fahrenheit 451 ranges from forty-two to sixty-eight pages in length. Teachers preparing a unit for this novel need to take into account this organization; unless teaching it to honors, AP, or IB classes, teachers will find that Fahrenheit 451’s sections are too long for high school-age students to read as one homework assignment each. I recommend breaking the novel down to 15-30 page chunks, which would make for much more manageable reading assignments. Although Bradbury divides Fahrenheit 451 into only three sections, each section contains several paragraph breaks where the narration switches forward in time to different action and scenes. Finding a way to make smaller assignments should not be a problem because of these breaks.

**Issues Related to the Study of Literature**

**Theme**

*Technology and alienation* One theme is technology’s influence in alienating individuals from one another. This is apparent at the very outset of the novel, where we see Guy Montag returning home late one night from his work as a book-burning fireman. As he steps into his darkened bedroom, he imagines how the scene might look; he knows that his wife will be sound asleep in her own bed, and “in her ears…the thimble radios tamped tight,” drowning out her very dreams in a sea of sound (12). This theme is accentuated by Montag’s friendship with Clarisse, who “love[s] to watch people” (as opposed to television) and clearly comes from a family where literacy, knowledge, and intimate relationships are valued (8). This curious, observant girl stands in stark contrast to the society in which she lives. Her contact with Montag, however brief, serves as an “hour of rediscovery” that awakens him to the alienation that exists between individuals in his society thanks to their addiction to artificial stimuli.

*Effects of literacy (and illiteracy)* A corollary theme is that the study and enjoyment of literature creates articulate, self-aware individuals and in fact draws people closer together. Whereas Montag is much like the rest of society at novel’s commencement – self-centered,
oblivious to the world around him – he gradually becomes more and more cognizant of the realities of his world and feels greater pain at the emotional distance that separates him and his own wife, Mildred. By the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag has become an empathetic character, crying “My wife, my wife. Poor, Millie, poor, poor, Millie” at the thought of her perishing in the imminent war (156). When the bombing of the city begins, Montag sees clearly in his mind’s eye the death of his wife. It is his exposure to the literary world that causes the former fireman to realize that no man is an island.

**Political correctness** Another theme of *Fahrenheit 451* is that hypersensitivity to political correctness can cause censorship and dilutes our rich literary heritage. Beatty, the fire chief, conveys this message in no uncertain terms during his lecture to Montag, stating that “a book is a loaded gun in the house next door” and should be burned because it causes people to judge one another.

**Setting**

The novel is set in a large, American city sometime in the future. The action also briefly takes place in the countryside following Montag’s flight from the authorities. Setting itself serves a symbolic purpose in *Fahrenheit 451*. It obviously is not important to the author that we know exactly where the novel takes place; what matters is that the city represents the corrupted masses, while the countryside signifies purity, rebirth, and a return to our human roots. Helping students recognize the symbolic function of setting will contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel.

**Point of View**

A third person, semi-omniscient narrator tells the story in past tense. Because the narrator has access to Montag’s thoughts, we see a clear picture of his transformation and the thoughts and feelings that lead him to it.

**Some Important Literary Terms to Understanding *Fahrenheit 451***

**Allusion** The novel is chock-full of allusions! Of course, this could be expected from a novel that is so concerned with books. Beatty’s speeches are particularly notable for their dense allusions: *Little Black Sambo* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (59); “[t]hey are never alone that are accompanied with noble thoughts,” and several other references to the English Renaissance poet Sir Phillip Sidney (105-106); references to and quotes from Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Shakespeare (106-107). The list of allusions in Beatty’s speech could go on for pages, so I recommend reading it over and performing a Google search of any unfamiliar quotations. There are also many, many more literary allusions in Montag’s conversations with the scholars Faber and Granger. One other very important literary allusion is Montag’s recital of the poem “Dover Beach,” by Matthew Arnold. This melancholy piece hauntingly portrays the state of society in *Fahrenheit 451*. It is important that the teacher be familiar with as many of these as possible. Also teach students how to identify literary and Biblical allusions within the text and find out their sources and significance.
**Indirect Characterization** The reader learns about the characters in this novel through their actions and/or thoughts. For example, we learn that Montag’s values are in lock-step with society’s from the novel’s very first sentence: “It was a pleasure to burn” (3). We also learn that he wears “his happiness like a mask,” and thus infer that he is artificial and ignorant like everyone else. Contrast this with the aforementioned moving portrayal of Montag’s sorrow over his wife’s death (see pages 155-156, 158-160). Through indirect characterization, we the readers witness the transformation of Guy Montag, and understand the characters that populate his world.

**Internal/external Conflict** Guy Montag struggles mightily within himself over what is right and how he should act. Helping students to recognize that Montag’s internal struggles are created by and grow out of his country’s issues will ultimately help them to recognize that society’s problems belong to the individual, and the individual’s to society. A few obvious examples of external conflict are Montag’s belligerent poetry recital in front of his wife and the neighbor ladies (97-100); his extended confrontation with Beatty (105-119); and his effort to flee from the Mechanical Hound (119-139). Examples of internal conflict are his troubled thoughts during and after his first meeting with Clarisse (7-11); further mental disturbance following the suicide/martyr of a woman who owns books (36-52); and his thoughts and notions upon reading the books that he had hoarded away and his ensuing disgust with society (71-80).

**Affective Issues Related to Fahrenheit 451**

I think that cell phone-carrying, ipod-obsessed, internet-savvy students will really be able to relate to this novel’s portrayal of the damaging effects of technology saturation on the individual and society. *Fahrenheit 451* can be used to help students become more aware of the technology and media choices that they make each day. I’m not sure if most students will be shedding tears over *Fahrenheit 451*’s descriptions of how books are regarded in the future, but I definitely think that they will be able to engage in serious critical thinking about the alienating effects of things like television and the internet.

**Vocabulary Issues**

The vocabulary and sentence structure in *F4* is relatively easy to understand. The teacher should be aware of words that students may not understand as they come up. Some examples are “minstrel” (4); “proclivities” (33); “objectivity” (36); “sieve” (70); and “cardamom” (144).

The novel makes use of superb adjectives and contains some wonderful passages where a mood or feeling is created. For example:

> He opened the bedroom door.
> It was like coming into the cold marbled room of a mausoleum after the moon has set. Complete darkness, not a hint of the silver world outside…
> The room was cold but nonetheless he felt he could not breathe (11-12).

Passages such as this provide excellent examples that can be used to help students portray a mood through vividly describing a setting.
Background Knowledge

Before reading this book, students would benefit from a discussion on the history of censorship. Many text-world connections can be made by teaching about censorship through the ages, including here in the United States and in Nazi Germany. Also discuss with students issues of censorship today. Encourage students to think critically about why people might desire to ban certain texts; ask them if it is ever okay to ban a book.

While reading, scaffold the students’ understanding of the text by discussing major literary allusions like the ones mentioned earlier. Reading all of “Dover Beach” as a class would be particularly helpful, possibly before they read the excerpt quoted in *Fahrenheit 451*.

Implications for Student Diversity

This novel can potentially prove to be very controversial from a multicultural standpoint. Captain Beatty, during his lecture to Montag about how book burning came about, points to the need to not “step on the toes” of “minorities” as a significant rationale behind the universal book ban (57). Ray Bradbury himself is very forthright in the book’s “Coda” about his belief that “every minority…feels that it has the will, the right, the duty to douse the kerosene, light the fuse” (176-177). *It is vital that we explain to our students that Bradbury’s conception of “minorities” encompasses everyone, not just those who are legally defined as such.* His definition of minority could likely be stated as “anyone who is unique from others in some way.” Because of this premise, *Fahrenheit 451* can be used to spark a lively discussion about the value of diversity in society and the need to be tolerant of one another, even though everyone has a unique view of what is good and how society should be conducted.

Gender Issues

Women play a conflicting role in *Fahrenheit 451*. It is a woman, Clarisse McClellan, who lights the spark that eventually ignites Montag’s awakening. Another woman, who allows herself to be martyred as she burns with her books and her house, further fans the flames of Montag’s questioning.

However, every other woman in the novel can best be described as vapid and brainwashed. Mildred and her neighbor friends are only concerned with watching their TV “families” all day, and are disgusted at Montag’s curiosity about literature. Mildred herself turns Montag in for his illegal activities. Further, none of the self-banished, intellectual Book People are women. A very small, yet crucial percentage of the novel’s important dialogue features women.

Because of the two extreme portrayals of women in the novel, they seem to be portrayed either as muses or drones, little more than outside influences on male actions. It may be wise to discuss this with students, alerting them to the realities of the time period during which *Fahrenheit 451* was written and its conservative values regarding women.

The Central Questions
- What are the consequences of censorship?
- How does technology affect our relationships and interactions with other people?
- Why are individuality and diversity important in society?

**Research Issues and Project Ideas**

- **Censorship** The history of censorship spans millennia, covering every time period and influencing every culture and nation in some way. Assign students to inquire into this history. How have people justified censorship in the past? What have been the results of that censorship? What materials are censored today (books, television programs, internet pages, movies, video games, etc.)?

- **Science fiction** This genre has great potential for authors wanting to explore some of society’s most vexing issues and the directions in which we are headed. Have students write their own futuristic story. It can take place in a space station, on the moon, in their hometown – anywhere. Ask students to ponder the questions, “Where are we going as a society? What sorts of things do you see happening now that, if continued, might lead us down a dangerous path?”

- **Multimedia presentation** How do we celebrate and respect diversity? What sorts of traditions, music, folklore, etc. of different people add to the richness of our society? What would be the results of censoring those cultural traits and our different opinions? Assign students to create a reflective audiovisual presentation concerning these questions, using photographs, paintings, music, and perhaps very minimal text.

- **Participating in democracy** Captain Beatty says that censorship “didn’t come from the Government down,” implying that what the general population of a democracy desires, it receives (58). Ask students to think about an issue that is important to them. Brainstorm together ways that those issues can be resolved and society can be bettered. Point out that here in the United States, we have many ways of making changes in government and in laws: running for office, voting, campaigning for a candidate or other ballot issue, drafting and signing petitions, participating in the proposition/initiative process, writing to congressional representative. Give students a few different options for this assignment:
  1. Write to a national or state congressional representative explaining your concern about the issue you have chosen and how you hope to see it resolved. Be sure to send the letter!
  2. Draft an initiative that would make changes to current policy.
  3. Write a petition regarding your issue and find 25 people to sign it. Send it to the appropriate authorities (school, city, state, etc.).
  4. Write a speech that argues for your stance on the issue, and present it to the class.

**Useful Informational/Functional Texts**
• News articles, editorials, and letters to the editor regarding censorship issues facing our society today.
• Documentary clips about book burning (Nazi Germany).
• Books that have been banned in the United States (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and others).
• Articles about/mentioning studies on how the use of email, text messaging, etc. distances people from one another.

Work Cited