

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

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## Book Information

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

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Bantam Books, 1963

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203 Pages

Book Level: 5.5

Interest Level: UG

One man struggles to maintain his dignity as a man in a Russian concentration camp.

**Topics:** Careers, Carpenter; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, Russia/Soviet Union; Emotions, Hate; People, Communists; Places, Prisons; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

## Main Characters

Alyoshka the Baptist in Shukhov's work gang

Caesar a member of Shukhov's work gang, who is a "mixture of all races," and who often receives packages

Der the building foreman

Fetyukov a "scavenger," whom Shukhov dislikes

Ivan Denisovich Shukhov the protagonist of the book, who has served eight years of his ten-year prison sentence

Kilgas a Latvian bricklayer, who is one of the best workers in Shukhov's work gang

Lieutenant Volkovoy the disciplinary officer, of whom everyone is scared

Nikolay Vdovushkin the "medic" who won't excuse Shukhov from work

Pavlo the assistant boss of Shukhov's work gang

Senka Klevshin a deaf, quiet member of Shukhov's work gang

the Captain a member of Shukhov's work gang, who has only been imprisoned for three months and is still learning the ropes

the Thin Tartar one of the guards, who sends Shukhov to mop the warders' room

Tyurin the boss of Shukhov's work gang

## Vocabulary

**groats** grits; especially coarse cracked wheat; also, the edible parts of oat kernels

**kolkhoz** a collective farm of Soviet Russia

**magara** used to make mush; "nothing but grass that looked like millet"

## Synopsis

This book chronicles one day in the life of Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, an ordinary prisoner in a Soviet work camp. Shukhov becomes a case study of what a prisoner must do in order to survive the camp's sub-human conditions.

The day begins before dawn with reveille. Shukhov is sent to mop the warders' room and must be careful not to get his only pair of boots wet. He goes to breakfast and savors every morsel and mouthful of the thin camp gruel. He isn't feeling well and goes to see the medic, but isn't excused from work because the medic has already excused the two prisoners he is allowed to excuse.

The men are carefully counted and sent out to work. Shukhov's gang is going to continue building a power plant. They spend the morning getting things ready, including figuring out how to get the bricks to the second floor because the hoist is broken, how to keep the water for the mortar from freezing, etc. They work hard and well in the afternoon laying the bricks. Shukhov is so proud of the quality of his bricklaying that he lingers after the rest of the gang has left to make sure that he has done a good job.

When the men return to camp, Shukhov stands in the package line for Caesar, in case Caesar might have received a package. He later helps protect Caesar's package when Caesar hasn't gotten it to the storeroom before night check. In return, Caesar shares some of the food he has received.

The book ends with Shukhov going to sleep feeling very happy because he had gotten an extra bowl of mush at noon, his gang hadn't had to work out in the open, he had done a good job making the wall, he

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had smuggled a piece of steel into the camp, Caesar had shared with him, and he had bought some tobacco.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

How had Shukhov ended up in the camp?

*Shukhov had been caught by the Germans in World War II. He escaped, but told the truth about his capture and escape when he returned to his own lines. Those in command didn't believe him and said he must have been conspiring with the Germans to carry out their instructions. He was sent to the camp as a traitor.*

### Literary Analysis

What is one literary device the author uses to make this book so effective?

*He keeps the tone matter-of-fact, instead of sensationalizing the conditions he is describing. This tone signals to the reader that these conditions are "normal," which is horrifying.*

### Inferential Comprehension

As the author describes Fetyukov, what do we learn about rank in the work camp, and about how Fetyukov and Shukhov are similar and different?

*Fetyukov is at the bottom of the ranks in the work gang. Although all the prisoners, to some degree, are scavengers, Fetyukov will do anything to try to get what he wants. Shukhov still has some self-respect and will not stoop to doing certain things. A prisoner's unofficial status in a gang's hierarchy is extremely important to his chances for survival.*

### Constructing Meaning

What insight into human nature do we gain from this book?

*Even in the worst of circumstances, humans will not just survive, they will make the best of their situation and retain some dignity. However, in a system as brutal as the work camps, the prisoner's "worst enemy" is not the guard, but "the guy next to him." As the narrator puts it, "If they didn't fight each other, it'd be another story..."*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** From descriptions in the book, we can surmise the layout of the prison camp. Have the students do their best to make a map of it, including the barracks, the mess hall, the warders' room, and the hospital.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Have the students do some research on Soviet work camps. Did they really exist? Were the conditions as bad as they are described in this book? Did prisoners ever get to go home? When did the Russians stop using work camps? Solzhenitsyn's massive *The Gulag Archipelago* definitively documents the system's history.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** This book is told in the third person. Have the students tell some portion of it in the first person. If they choose Shukhov, how does having him tell the story directly change the impact of the narration? How does the story change if they choose another one of the prisoners or one of the warders?

**Responding to Literature** Students are likely to respond strongly to the brutal, realistic details in this novel. You may need to allow them an opportunity to share those responses, identifying the aspects of Shukhov's day they found most frightening, gruesome, or inhumane. You may want them to go beyond that discussion and speculate how the system in the novel is more dehumanizing than a prisoner's life in a "normal" American prison might be. Can specific reforms be inferred from the novel to create a "humane"

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prison system?