

A Student's Guide to Place Out Of Time

by
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Who are you and what gives you the right to tell me about this?

Hi, I'm Jonah, and as you've probably guessed, I'm here to tell you about an online simulation game called Place Out Of Time (POOT for short). This is run by the University of Michigan, but I have nothing to do with U of M. So who am I? I'm a relatively normal student. During the last two years, I was lucky enough to participate in POOT twice.

At this point I'd like to thank Jeff Stanzler and Michael Fahy, two of the people in charge of this program. They've been in touch with my friend and I, and they must really think we know something, because they've asked for our help with stuff a couple times. One of the things they asked me most recently is to write this guide.

Just, really quick, a little about me, so you have some perspective: I'm 14, an entering freshman at Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, OH. I participated in POOT twice, and enjoyed it. I also play the keyboard, do volunteer work, and have a life and friends. I'll probably refer to myself as a POOT nerd at some point, because that's the name a friend and I came up with for ourselves a couple years back, but I don't consider myself a nerd, and I don't think anyone else does (or should) either.

Before I start explaining anything, a warning. You're about to read some stuff that I wrote, and some stuff that I didn't write. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that everything you're about to read was written by someone smarter than you. When you get into POOT and become used to it, you'll be just as capable of writing these things as the people who wrote them. You probably already are, and just may not realize it.

That said, let's move on to the interesting stuff.

So what is POOT anyway?

I'm going to frame it this way: Basically, POOT is a game.

It's not a video game, or one of those games on the Internet (I'm not sure what they're called) where you walk around and chat with people. There are a lot of differences between that and POOT, but the most important one is that in those games, the conversations mostly consists of misspelled words in lowercase in a way were u kinda rite 2 ppl liek this. (I'm assuming that. I have yet to meet someone who doesn't.)

So what is POOT? Well, like those games, you have a character you play. If you're like me, that character is something kind of different from your own personality, and that's true for POOT as well. In fact, in POOT the first rule is that you play, or write in the voice of, a historical character (or in some cases, fictional—I'll get to that in a second). And you really have to *play* them. That is, you have to say what they would say, the way they would say it. The catch is that other people will be playing people that your character probably never met in their life, so you have to basically make up how their interactions would go.

You following me so far?

So, for example, in the most recent simulation as of writing this, I played Atticus Finch, from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee. (You've probably read it, and if you haven't, then you should have. It's a classic novel, and I really recommend it.) Look at the difference between this...

Yeah we all know people can be racist. What we really need to do is just try not to be racist and get over the fact that people are different. Then i think that alot of the problem will be solved.

...and this:

Racism and discrimination have been around seemingly forever, especially in our time, and sadly, too often people participate in it unintentionally. I am glad that there were and are people in the world who realize that this is WRONG and has to stop.

Okay, not even paying attention to the grammar for a moment, the second one sounds a lot more like what Atticus would say. The first one (which is the only example in this guide that wasn't actually posted on POOT) sounds a lot more like a typical teenager's opinion.¹ It's true that the first sentence offers an opinion on what to do about it, but for one thing, that isn't a great strategy, and for another, Atticus would probably have a more logical, less general, and better-worded strategy, if this were a good place to put an opinion. (This was more of sort of a compliment from Atticus.) Even though you won't find the second example in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I think it sounds a lot more like what Atticus would have said if he were to introduce himself to Gandhi. As a matter of fact, that's part of a letter I wrote as Atticus to the student writing as Gandhi.

It gets a little crazier. When the 120 or so "characters" gather together in the virtual Alhambra (located at <http://poot.soe.umich.edu>), they're there to sit in on a trial, and hear testimony from the plaintiff and the defendant, one of whom (usually the plaintiff) is completely fictional. When it comes to the trial, I had two completely different experiences over the two years, so I'll refer to them throughout this guide. (I have a summary of both a few pages in—it's inside of a box so it's easier to find.) The trial is complicated, so I'll explain most of that later on.

For now, though, think of the person you'll be playing (if you know who that is) and imagine him or her in the situation of participating in POOT. How would, for example, George Washington feel about being in this place to watch a trial? The Buddha? Hitler? During the last simulation, I "saw" all these people through other students' writing on POOT. The #1 thing to do when you get on POOT is to research, and get into character as quickly as you can.

¹ Please note that I am a teenager. I wouldn't say it like that if I could think of a politer way to say it.

Who reads what I write?

Only participants of POOT can read what you wrote. As you may have noticed, it's password-protected, and only people with a valid account can get in.

Participants are split into three categories (though it doesn't say this on the website): there are students, mentors, and teachers. Mentors are simply college students at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor or Flint who are taking a class, usually as part of their education to become teachers. And all of their assignments revolve around the stuff you write. So even if this doesn't matter to you, you're helping to teach college students. And they really do count on you to do your work so that they can get something meaningful out of their class. I know; I sat in on one of these classes.

So why should I participate in this thing anyway?

I could give you a bunch of reasons up front, but I'd rather you read what it is first. If you absolutely have to know right now, skip ahead to a section toward the end called "Wait—what? How can this possibly be so helpful?" and read that, then come back here.

Can you give me any tips on getting into character?

That's what I'm here for!

So when you get onto POOT, the first thing to do is find your name on the guest list—

Guest list?

You know what, I should probably give you a little tour of the website. Whether or not you can look at it right now, this should be useful.

(Note: All of this is very subject-to-change information—there are talks of redesigning the website. It shouldn't be too different from this, though, and if it is, just skip this section.)

The main page of POOT (after you log in) is called the **Foyer**. On this page you'll see at the top an unread message count for your email, and the most recent news post under that. Way down at the bottom is a list labeled "most recent blog posts" that will show you every blog post ever written for the duration of that simulation. In the column on the left is a list of any polls that may be currently open, and the ten most recent speeches, which are public posts that you can make right on the main page.

A little down the hall (next on the right) is the **Great Hall**. Here is where you can talk publicly with Alhambra guests about things that may or may not be related to the trial, depending on how many weeks in you are. (The whole thing lasts about 3-4 months.)

The third door on the right is the **Courtroom**. In here you can read presentations of evidence, view the status of the trial, and discuss things more closely related to the trial. You'll see more and more of this room as time goes on.

Next up is your **Mailbox**. If you've ever used email before—and I bet you have—you'll pick up on this quickly. Two things make it different from regular email (aside from that it only works inside POOT): to mark a message as read you actually have to click on "mark as read" at the bottom, and that to send an email to someone, you either have to find their name on the guest list, or add them to your "colleagues list" for quick access.

Speaking of the **Guest List**, that's the next page. Again, pretty self-explanatory. People are listed alphabetically by the first letter of their first name or title. For example, the K section might show you Kaiser Wilhelm, followed by King Leonidas. (Ever heard of him? I hadn't either.) It takes a little getting used to. Click somebody's name to see their page, or click your own name to edit your page or post to your blog.

Skip **Resources**. There's nothing to see in these except a notice saying that the page can't be found. That's been the situation for a while. I don't know, they may put something up there eventually.

In the **Green Room**, please excuse all this dust. In my experience it was used rarely and only by a few people, but the idea is that you can discuss things out of character, as yourself. It's a tool that's useful but underused.

Sounds good! Now tell me about getting into character.

Well, given the nature of this project, you can see why it's important to get into character and stay there. Thankfully, there is a little device built into POOT to help you with this. One of the first things you must do the first time you log into POOT is write a "résumé", or bio, for your character, in your character's voice. These are the important bits:

- **Put as much factual information in as you can.** There are plenty of ways of doing this. You could tell it straight out (see example 1), hide the facts in the character's normal way of speaking (see example 2), or show it (by this I mean don't say "I'm known for having a bad temper", but write in an irritable tone instead). I would stick with the latter two, using the first only when necessary.
- **Speak the way your character speaks.** The Holden Caulfield example below is a good example of this. If your character has any famous quotes, use them (as Atticus Finch, I referenced his statement about walking around in other people's shoes a lot).
- **Not too long, not too short.** Francisco Franco wrote a 12-paragraph (and I mean actual, long, complicated paragraphs) bio that, if I copied and pasted it here in this font and size, would go a good 3 or 4 pages. I don't think anyone read the whole thing, to be honest. On the other hand, Barack Obama's original résumé (before, I guess, his teacher made him change it) was: "I am Barack Obama. You are not." This isn't Wikipedia, and it isn't Twitter either. 4 or 5 paragraphs should be about right.

- **Use your own words.** This should be obvious, but this isn't an assignment where you can get away with copying and pasting the Wikipedia article (and really, you should never do that).

If you want to, there's a tool to include a picture of your character. Make sure to check your facts and use books when you can (remember, anyone can put anything on the Internet, but only really smart people get published).

Both the examples below were written by people who participated in the Winter '08/ Spring '09 simulation. (The first one is more of a non-example, a trap people fall into, of writing a report-style article, just in first person. This makes absolutely no sense and doesn't read well. The second example is really good, in my opinion—if you've ever read *The Catcher in the Rye* you'll get it right away. If you haven't, well, this is one of those books you need to read—not because it's an assignment, but because it's a good book.)

Example 1 (beginning of Stonewall Jackson résumé):

Hello there. I am Thomas Jonathan Jackson, also known as Stonewall Jackson. I was born on January 21, 1842, in Clarksville, VA. My parents died when I was a child, so I had to go to an orphanage. It was very hard growing up there. Growing up, I wasn't the best student, but later on, I learned many things and became a great student.

Example 2 (beginning of Holden Caulfield résumé):

If you honestly expect me to write you some long as hell autobiography, you are sadly mistaken. Sure, I could tell you about my parents, two real nice folks who really want the best for me, sending me to all these fancy schools filled with phonies and hot-shots. I could tell you about my brother, DB whom lives in Hollywood, or my sister, Phoebe, sweet kid she is, lives back home with my parents, she's a real nice girl. I could even tell you about my brother Allie, poor sucker died, and I miss him pretty bad. But none of that has anything to do with me, it's nothing to do with my story.

Now, after you write the résumé, you may be tempted to just be done with it and not do anything the rest of the semester unless you have to. But listen: you're in school already. You have to be there. I'm willing to bet you'd rather be somewhere else right now. But why not make the most of it, as long as you're here? Get everything you can out of POOT while you have this unique opportunity.

Okay, I get that you want me to participate. But nothing's going on at the beginning! What do I do?

Depending on when you first log in, you may have to wait a couple weeks before POOT really gets off the ground. Until then, respond to the first topic, and email someone in the guest list.

Actually, the best way to do something that will quickly become interesting is to say something really controversial. If you're lucky, someone else on POOT will disagree and get into an argument with you.

I realize that that sounded pretty vague, and that maybe I'm not doing such a great job of explaining this. So I'm going to actually show the best example I have of the statement above.

Example 3: Finch vs. Franco (Flores v. the US Navy)²

The second topic was something to the effect of "Have you ever made other people angry?" and Atticus Finch was quick to respond. (In these examples, anywhere you see ... it means that something unrelated, distracting, or redundant has been left out in this guide.

Finch: *Yes, certainly! Shortly before I left for the present-day alhambra, I lawed for Tom Robinson, a negro, the defendant in a rape case in which he was innocent. I will say that the majority of Maycomb, infected with their usual disease of racism, seemed to think I was breaking some [social] code, and many hated me for it. ... However, whatever social code I may have been breaking pales in comparison to the importance of making sure the truth was heard, even though, sadly, the jury's own racism prevented the men sitting in on it from believing him.*

Francisco Franco wrote a response to this the Monday after. (Above was posted on a Thursday.)

Franco: *Ah, truthtellers. There are none so righteous as those self-appointed truthtellers, and often there are none with as inflated an opinion of themselves as those who tell the "truth." Of course, truth is subjective, and it is often the self-appointed guardians of truth who jeopardize what would otherwise be a quite harmonious social order.*

Lest there be any doubt, Mr. Finch, I am speaking to you.... I respect the personal risk that you took, Mr. Finch, but I worry that there may have been consequences to the social order that we do not know about, given that all we have is (you must allow) a quite reverential book about you, and your "heroism." Perhaps you are indeed a hero, sir, but when you impugn the honor of many of your fellow citizens (tossing around words

² On page 9 there's a summary of both of the trials I'm referring to in this guide. I'm sorry, it's the first place where it seemed kind of natural to put it in.

like racism, ...), I am left to wonder if this is truly a story of justice served, or if it ultimately is one of ego served.

I had to think for a while about how to respond to that. I realized that if I wrote a big long thing publicly, I would only be proving his point, so I decided to email him about this instead. After that, a few people emailed me asking if I had read his post, so I decided to go public.

Finch: *... The social order about which you seem not to have read was warped with prejudice before the trial. Following the trial and Bob Ewell's attack, my defense of Tom Robinson can't have had a bad effect on the people. I do not deny the honor of my fellow citizens, as you claim I do, but I do deny that the trial was held in a completely unbiased environment.*

(By the way, Mr. Franco, I don't think that in this situation you are very qualified to talk about ruining social order. You yourself happen to be The social order you helped to create was one of the most evil of our time; Maycomb pales in comparison.)

You claim that "it is often the self-appointed guardians of truth who jeopardize what would otherwise be a quite harmonious social order". I am a state-appointed lawyer who, if I did not tell the truth, would not deserve the respect that I seem to have. Whether I have earned it or not is up to each person to decide on their own.

I assure you, sir, that taking and defending the case I mentioned earlier had nothing to do with my ego or desire for social reform, but everything to do with what is MORALLY RIGHT. I have no desire or need to do anything hurtful to any person or social order, but when it is a question of morality, what is right comes before what is socially acceptable.

As for your question about the book: To Kill a Mockingbird is written from the viewpoint of my daughter; of course it will be "reverential". Toward the end of this book you can see that my choice to defend Mr. Robinson affected very few people negatively; Bob Ewell was one of them. ...

(Following this, Franco and I had a discussion/argument going on for the rest of the semester. I'll never know who played him, but I wish I did so I could thank them.)

But I read To Kill a Mockingbird, and I don't think Atticus would have said that.

There's no right or wrong answer to the questions that go up on POOT. It's really up to you to decide exactly what your character would say, based on their past actions. Especially if

there's only limited information about your person (like with Atticus), finding a concrete answer can be really hard. So, in my opinion, that's what Atticus would say. What you think might be different.

***A little background on the (fictional) trials referenced in this guide:**

- **Eissa v. The State of Israel:** Suleiman Eissa and his family were refugees from Darfur who escaped through Egypt and have been detained in Israel, which does not want to accept them as citizens. (The court ruled that they should be allowed in.)
- **Flores v. The US Navy:** Christina Flores is a member of the Navy who already did two tours of duty. Since then she had a son and is a single mother, and does not want to go back for her third. (The court ruled that she should be allowed to return home.)

Right, so write your résumé and start an argument. How else can you get involved? Another great tool that can get a lot of attention is the button halfway down the Foyer page labeled "Make a speech". Example 4 shows part of one of the better speeches from the Winter/Spring '08 simulation.

Example 4: Israel as an Example (Eissa v. The State of Israel)

A friend of mine who played Elie Wiesel two years ago got a huge response when he made a speech about Israel. It's a little long so I put the most important part below:

This Darfuri family we will debate and judge upon has had a troubling life thus far, and it is our duty to give them respect, whether the government is involved or not. I feel, however, that they are the government's responsibility. A turn off for politicians is that they have to provide food, shelter, education, etc. They also believe this will give the other refugees the satisfaction that it is okay to come to Israel for safety. But we need to think of these people as just that, people. Not about what they require or how they might effect the will of others, but as people in need, no, a FAMILY in need. The reason I have [emphasized] family here is because they cannot be separated, or else their hopes and dreams for the near future will be abolished. The Torah and most LAWS [connote] fairness, equality, and a better life! For Israel needs to set an example, because yes, they cannot take in all of them or stop the violence. But this is a chance for Israel to shine as a nation, to be recognized as a peaceful, fair, and loving country.

(The only changes I made were corrections to spelling.) He got a bunch of responses and a bit of publicity in the Great Hall:

I was chatting with a young Israeli soldier who drove the Chief Magistrate up to Masada today, and who happened to hear Mr. Elie

Wiesel's speech in which he movingly spoke of Israel's special responsibility. She told me that though she greatly respects Mr. Wiesel, she was frankly getting tired of Israel being held up as an example.

"We will know that we have truly arrived as a nation," she told me, "when we are held to the same standards of justice as all other nations--not higher ones. If we are held to a higher standard, it means that someone is waiting for us to prove that we truly belong."

So, what do you think?? Should Israel be held to a higher standard? Does she have a special responsibility??

That was the liveliest discussion in POOT for the rest of the semester.

How can you possibly expect me to stay in character all the time? I have a life, you know.

No, you can be yourself most of the time. But one of the important things to learn is how to quickly slip in and out of your character's shoes, so to speak.

You probably have an email, MySpace, Facebook, or other kind of account on some other social network, discussion forum, etc. I keep ".Mac" (an email service) and "Facebook" in my Bookmarks in Firefox, and right next to them I have "POOT" (which links, by the way, to <http://poot.soe.umich.edu>). During the summer I move this somewhere else, but when POOT starts I make sure it's a part of my routine. Check it at least twice a week and hopefully more, if only to scan your email and the recent posts.

What are some good sources for getting my information?

Try your library before anything else. I like the library because it forces you to take notes—in your own words. There's no chance of plagiarism this way. And if there's a copier, use it only as a last resort.

If you insist on the Internet, though, here are some good places:

- Google. I'm not kidding. Before you do anything else, Google your person's name.
- There are a few places in the Wikimedia foundation you can try:
 - Wikipedia, but only the external links at the bottom. Don't use the actual article, because like it or not, there's a pretty good chance that parts of it are wrong. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)
 - Wikiquote. This is a much better source for our purposes. It contains a repository of quotations from the person that are almost always real. (<http://en.wikiquote.org>)
 - Wikisource. This is a collection of documents about different people. My searches for "Albert Einstein", "George Washington", and a few others turned up good results. This may or may not be helpful. (<http://en.wikisource.org>)

- Google again, but now look for a biography. There are plenty of these. You may want to add “-site:amazon.com” exactly as written to your search to avoid search results from Amazon.
- World Book Encyclopedia or a similar service provided by your school or something. If you ever participated in a city spelling bee, that means you won the school/local one and may have gotten a one-year subscription to Encyclopedia Britannica online. (That’s the standard prize for local spelling bees, at least for the 2008-2009 school year.) You may still be able to use that. My middle school also had an account with something called InfOhio, which is more useful at some times than others. Another school I went to had an account with World Book that everyone could use. Ask your teacher, there may be something like that. (<http://www.worldbookonline.com>)
- If you know your character won a Nobel prize, there are excellent biographies of Nobel prize recipients at <http://nobelprizes.org>.

And of course, that’s just the beginning. As good as the Internet is for watching funny videos and such, it’s even better for finding more information than you’ll ever need, even for a thing like POOT.

So you mentioned a trial, how does that work?

The trial begins a little less than a month in, with an announcement in the Foyer. About 1 out of 10 participants will be selected as a justice to rule on the trial for a total of 12-15 justices. Each justice must post a legal philosophy, which is simply a statement on the perspective from which you are looking at the trial, and it’s a good idea to go public and post a lot. Anyone who agrees with them can give them a “vote of confidence”, and once a justice has five, they see a new button in the courtroom that they can click on to rule on the case. When approximately 2/3 of the justices have voted one way, that is the resolution to the trial and POOT is over.

The way I see it, guests who aren’t justices have just as much of a responsibility as guests who are justices. You have to realize this when the trial starts, because you may find yourself tempted to stop just because you’re not a justice. But if you remember what you learned in a Social Studies class some time ago, the people of the US only vote for what their *representative in the electoral college* should vote for, not the actual outcomes of the vote. The guest/justice system in POOT works in a similar way, only your vote has more of an impact.

Then toward the end, after the justices have read every bit of information*, they will make a final vote on the outcome, and when a real majority votes one way, the trial is over.

By this time, classes at U of M will probably be over (they were in my experience), and so, to be honest, it won’t really matter too much how often you check it. But I recommend sticking around until whenever school ends for you, talking in the green room if it’s open,

* And really, if you become a justice, please take this seriously. Actually read every bit of information and vote thoughtfully.

and so on. It doesn't do anything for your grade, I know, but there's more to education than grades, and this is one of those things that can be very helpful to you the more you do it.

Wait—what? How can this possibly be so helpful?

A friend and I (the friend who played Elie Wiesel) put together a short video about POOT a little over a year ago—we were asked to by the professors at Michigan—and he made a little list about the things that POOT causes you to think about/the jobs it prepares you for. Here is the quote from the video:

“Even though we felt the simulation was actually fun, what makes it so worthwhile is the... lessons it brings to the table. It involves research, critical thinking, individual history, anthropology, persuasive writing, the usage of the Internet, and even more.”

That's the best, shortest summary of POOT there is.

But here's a real-life example of where this comes in handy: I'm a freshman this year at my local high school. My first assignment in English/History classes (which, sadly, are not involved in POOT) involves working with a partner to write an interview for some historical figure from the Enlightenment age. I and a fellow POOT nerd—excuse me, POOT *enthusiast* are writing an interview where one of us will be Galileo. POOT gave us both the researching skills and creative resources to be able to pull this together, I hope, really well. (A similar summer reading assignment required me to write five journal entries in the voice of Merlyn, from *The Once and Future King*—another great book that you need to read.)

In short, you get extra advantages other people won't get. And better yet, you get them without spending hours and hours studying. It doesn't take studying to be able to quickly write paragraphs and paragraphs of organized persuasive writing on the fly. It takes practice. And POOT is the perfect place to get that practice.

I have one last question.

If your school is participating in the simulation (which I assume it is if you're reading this), then if you have any questions, ask your teacher. If you have a question that your teacher can't answer but someone at Michigan can, the email address to write to is info@ics.soe.umich.edu. This will put you in touch with Jeff Stanzler, who is more or less in charge of the simulation, but just one of the many amazing people who make this possible. Similarly, if you have any questions that absolutely must go to me (and I can't imagine what kind of question would be like that) feel free to email me at the address on the cover. (No, pootguide@me.com is not my real email address. But anything sent to it will be automatically forwarded to me. Call me paranoid.)

So I hope you enjoy POOT. Just remember: Participate, treat it as a project rather than an assignment, participate, do a lot of writing and pre-writing, participate, and have fun with it!

A Few Final Words

You can't possibly have done this all by yourself.

That is very true. Well, actually, I wrote this myself, but there are a bunch of people who made this possible. Professors Jeff Stanzler, Michael Fahy, and Jeff Kupperman run most of what goes on with POOT, as well as have a couple of classes at Michigan who participate as mentors, and without those three, POOT would not be the educational, entertaining simulation it is today. I'd like to also thank Dr. Miriam Raider-Roth at the University of Cincinnati for feedback and support with this guide. I'd like to thank Zach (Elie Wiesel), as well as everyone else whose work I used in this guide. But especially, I'd like to thank you, the student who has just finished reading this long guide, for making my work worthwhile by actually reading it, and for helping yourself by participating in POOT.

Your guide was great, but I'd like to actually see POOT before it starts.

Well, the only way to do that is look at past POOTs. Go to <http://games.soe.umich.edu/pootw07/> and put in the username 'jeanine' without the quotes, and the password 'fire', without the quotes. This is an old account that someone used a few years ago and then put the username and password on the Internet. It's an old site, but it looks pretty much the same as my most recent POOT.

Okay, seriously, I have to end this guide now. I'd imagine you're getting a little tired of reading all this, especially because the font size just got smaller. All this information is a lot to take in. But I hope you found it useful and that you'll remember it when you start POOT sometime soon.