Whistleblower
My Journey to Silicon Valley and Fight for Justice at Uber

By Susan Fowler

Guide written by Chris Gilbert

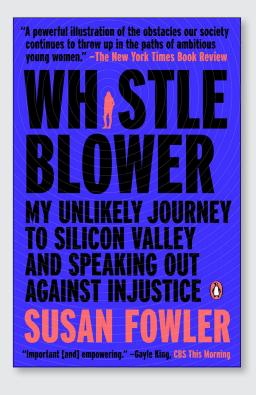**Reading Level: 11th–12th Grade**

INTRODUCTION

In *Whistleblower*, the reader experiences Susan Fowler's powerful story, and learns of her challenging early life, her troubling experiences in the Ivy League, her traumatic experiences at Uber, her courageous publication of a now-famous blog post, and her efforts to manage the related aftermath. Susan's tale is gripping, and it beckons the reader to explore a number of noteworthy themes: the need to become a subject in one's life; the necessity of speaking up and pushing back against sexual harassment and abuse; and the importance of finding the internal strength and courage to enable one to do so. This is a timely, thought-provoking book, and this guide was written to assist teachers and students as they engage with it. Through the questions, activities, and resources featured within, students are encouraged to adopt an analytical view of *Whistleblower*, relevant personal experiences, and related topics. This guide contains five sections: discussion questions, various classroom activities, research opportunities, service learning projects, and other resources for students, teachers, and programs. Each section is applicable to multiple curricular areas, and as such, this document has an interdisciplinary focus. Activities can also be easily modified and scaled, as they were constructed with flexibility in mind. Lastly, students are encouraged throughout to utilize technology and work collaboratively as they complete their First-Year Experience® (FYE); this guide should provoke meaningful analysis and reflection, and it supports the overall purpose of the FYE: to fuse rigorous classroom study with immersive, communal learning experiences.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions can be posed to an entire class, given to small groups, used to initiate online discussions, etc.

1. In what ways do you believe Susan's early life experiences shape her adult identity?

2. In the first part of the book, how does Susan grapple with feelings of being an outsider? How does this insider/outsider dynamic play out in later sections of the text?

3. What is your reaction to the challenges Susan faced during her time at Penn? Put yourself in her shoes. How do you think you would have felt? What would you have done?

4. "Within a few days, I found out that my boss . . . was openly, unabashedly sexist. He commented on my clothing, making fun of me if I ever dressed nicely and telling me I was dumpy if I wore jeans and a T-shirt" (pp. 88-89). What is your reaction to this blatant display of sexism? Have you ever experienced, or witnessed, something similar? If so, how did you feel? How did you react?

5. What were some of the warning signs, or "red flags," that manifested when Susan first began working at Uber? How would you describe the workplace culture that began to take shape during Susan's early days at the company?

6. Throughout her troubling time at Uber, Susan worked hard to locate mental and emotional strength. How did she do so? If you were in a similar situation, how would you find internal strength?

7. Compare and contrast the outward appearance of Uber with its inner reality. How do companies such as Uber use slick marketing to mask toxic, corporate culture?

8. How would you assess the power of blogging and other online forms of activism to create change? Is this something you see yourself engaging in? Why? Why not?

9. Put yourself again in Susan's shoes. If you had experienced and witnessed what she did at Uber, do you think you would have possessed the courage to publish the blog post? Why? Why not? Also, would you be willing to accept the ensuing fallout?

10. Susan speaks repeatedly in the book about the importance of being the subject, as opposed to the object, in one's life. How did she become the former instead of the latter? What steps can you take in your life to become the subject of your own story?

11. In what ways, if any, do you believe Susan changes throughout the book?

12. When do you think someone is obligated to become a whistleblower?

13. If you could ask Susan Fowler a single question about *Whistleblower*, what would you ask and why?

The following are activities applicable to a variety of curricular areas.

1. Paideia Seminar

A Paideia Seminar is a student-centered, Socratic discussion. In it, the teacher serves as facilitator by providing students with open-ended questions, prompting students to respond, and by linking student comments. There are three main question categories: *opening questions*, *core questions*, and *closing questions*. *Opening questions* identify main ideas from the text (What larger points does the book make about sexual harassment?). *Core questions* require students to analyze textual details (What do you consider to be some of the central turning points in Susan's early life? Why?). Finally, *closing questions* personalize textual concepts (What sort of lessons did you take from the book? What makes it such a timely text?). Construct multiple questions like these, and have students gather in a large circle.

Establish group goals for the discussion and have students create individual goals as well. Some group goals could include practicing active listening strategies, disagreeing constructively, and having each participant express at least two thoughts. Individual goals could include referring to specific passages, building on another student's comment, and making consistent eye contact with others. Facilitate the conversation and concentrate on eliciting student responses. When the discussion concludes, have students self-assess and provide feedback on the seminar. Note that many of the discussion questions in this guide can be used during this activity.

For more information, consult https://www.paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/index

2. Student Generated Questions (QAR)

When students are able to generate their own questions, they are typically more invested in the analytical process. Allow them to take ownership of inquiry and explore *Whistleblower* through this activity. QAR refers to Question-Answer Relationships, and this activity works well in terms of encouraging both close analysis and personal connections. The types of questions include:

- **Right there questions:** answers to these questions are found explicitly in the text. (When does Susan first experience sexual harassment?)

- **Think and search questions:** answers lie in the text, but may only be found by examining several different sections and piecing them together.
(How does the theme of being a subject in one's life, as opposed to an object, surface throughout the text?)

- **Author and you:** answers require personal interpretation based on textual evidence.
(How do you think Susan is ultimately changed by her experiences at Uber?)

- **On my own:** answers connect personal experience with themes of the text.
(Have you ever witnessed a form of discrimination or experienced it? How did it affect you?)

Have students work independently or in pairs to generate several questions per category for a specific section of the book. After these questions are generated, instructors have several options:

- Have students trade and answer each other's questions in writing

- Have students pose their questions during small-group discussions

- Have students select one question to expand upon in an extended written response or brief presentation ("Right there" questions do not work well for this).

- Have students answer each other's questions via collaborative documents on Google Docs (http://docs.google.com). *

For more information on this strategy, consult this resource: http://www.readingquest.org/qar.html

All Google resources mentioned in this guide are accessible with a free Google account.

3. Workplace Bullying Role-play

"Almost every other engineer I knew was going through the same issues. My coworkers who were being mistreated were white, black, Hispanic, Asian, male, female, gay, straight--everyone, I realized, was being bullied" (p. 160).

To begin this activity, ask your students to come together in small groups. Next, ask them to brainstorm several problematic scenarios (e.g., bullying or other forms of harassment) that could occur in the workplace; they can base these scenarios on content from *Whistleblower*, or they can create their own from scratch or their own experiences. Have them choose one of their scenarios, select roles to play (for instance, in a group of three, one student could play the supervisor, one could play the worker, and another could play a colleague who observes or intervenes in the bullying), craft dialogue, and then act it out within their group (if students are comfortable doing so, you can have them present their role-play in front of the class). After each group performs their role-play, have them reflect by responding to the following questions orally or through a short writing exercise:

- How did this experience make you feel?

- If you actually encountered such a situation, what steps could you take to address it?

- What overall lessons from this activity did you learn about workplace bullying and/or harassment?

Conclude this activity by debriefing as an entire class.

4. "Silence Breakers" Activity

". . . *Time* magazine included me as one of the 'Silence Breakers' in their Person of the Year issue. It was an incredible honor to be on the cover of *Time*; I'll never forget how humbled I felt sitting for the cover photoshoot, eight months pregnant, next to some of the other incredibly strong women who had bravely spoken up about their mistreatment that year" (p. 244).

Invite students to access the issue of *Time* Susan refers to here: https://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/. Next, have them read the "Silence Breakers" piece in full and then instruct them to select one of the featured individuals to focus on. They should then perform additional online research to learn about their selected individual's experiences so they can effectively compare and contrast them with Susan Fowler's experiences as detailed in *Whistleblower*.

To facilitate this process, instruct students to use a Venn diagram. In one circle, students should note unique aspects of the #MeToo experience depicted in their chosen narrative; in the other circle, they should note unique aspects of Susan Fowler's experience from the book. In the middle section of the Venn diagram, students should record similarities. Have students pair up and share their analysis before transitioning to a whole class conversation. Students could also further explore their noted similarities and differences through extended writing.

5. Company Value Construction

"In one class, we learned the fourteen Uber values, which we were supposed to embody at all times: 'Superpumped,' 'Always Be Hustlin',' 'Let Builders Build,' ' Meritocracy and Toe-Stepping,' 'Principled Confrontation,' . . ." (p. 110).

To begin this activity, first have your students arrange themselves in pairs or groups of three. Next, ask them to review some of the values listed in the passage above and discuss what made them problematic, and how they led to the creation of a toxic work environment at Uber.

Next, ask them to imagine that they are starting a company, and the task confronting them is to construct their own list of values (shoot for at least four-five) for the company. These values should promote equality and result in the creation of a safe, empowering workplace. Have students list their values on chart paper or on an online document, and have them share their values, along with their justifications for them, with the class. End this activity by asking the entire class to find similarities and differences among their values, and ask them to explain how their values will ultimately discourage a toxic work environment from forming.

The following topics are designed to provide students with opportunities for extended inquiry and analysis. In response to these, students could:

- Compose a research paper

- Deliver a presentation

- Design a lesson plan and teach a class

- Record a podcast (https://lifehacker.com/how-to-start-your-own-podcast-1709798447)

- Create a website (http://www.wix.com, http://www.weebly.com, and https://sites.google.com are excellent free resources for this)

- Use Adobe Spark (https://spark.adobe.com/) to create and share a variety of graphics and videos

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES
(CONTINUED)

1. "After my meeting at the Office of the Vice Provost, I did some research on the laws that existed to protect students from this kind of mistreatment and spent hours reading about Title IX" (p. 66). Following Susan's lead, perform research to learn about Title IX. What exactly is it? Where did it come from and why? What specific protections does it offer students? Additionally, research who you can contact for more information on Title IX at your school. For instance, is there a Title IX coordinator or some other individual who handles Title IX related complaints?

2. "I knew where my life was headed. It was obvious. After all, what paths in life were open to a poor, white-trash woman in a rural town without any formal education? I looked around at the other young women in my town. They, too, had grown up in poverty. They, too, had no opportunity to escape, no hope, no future" (p. 23). Perform research to learn about the social, economic, and cultural forces that affect the poor. What are the structural forces that bear down on the poor? What makes escaping from this reality so profoundly difficult? What policies perpetuate poverty?

3. Perform research to learn more about what it means to be a whistleblower. What exactly is a whistleblower? Who are other high-profile whistleblowers you can identify and learn about? How did their experiences compare with Susan Fowler's? Lastly, research the consequences and benefits of "blowing the whistle." What are some successes you can identify? What were the costs of these successes for the individual(s) who blew the whistle?

4. "Forced arbitration clauses are often included in employment agreements that workers must sign as a condition of employment, usually on their very first day of work––not only at tech companies like Uber, but at many companies in the United States" (pp. 97–98). Perform research to learn more about forced arbitration. What is it? Why is it so prevalent? Who primarily benefits from it and who does not? Who are the entities fighting to protect it, and who are those who seek to resist it?

5. Perform research to learn more about the current state of women in the STEM fields. Are there as many women as men currently employed in these fields? If a discrepancy exists, what causes it? What challenges do women presently face in these fields? What are the present rates of discrimination and harassment?

6. Perform research on a company you are interested in working for. What is the company culture like? What are the company's stated values? What is the prevalence of harassment and discrimination in the company? What programs/initiatives does the company embrace to promote equality, encourage diversity, and prevent harassment and discrimination? Who would you go to if you had a related complaint? Research these questions and others to learn more about your company of interest.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Initiate an Online Awareness Campaign

"My blog post was picked up by almost every major media outlet within half an hour, and those first thirty minutes were the calm before the storm. Right after I'd published the blog post, I shared a link to it on Twitter. I watched as it was retweeted and shared by my friends, by their friends, by executives and investors in the tech community, by reporters, by celebrities" (p. 205).

Susan Fowler's blog post was certainly the catalyst for creating change, but her story gained greater exposure and power through social media. Similarly, your students can use social media to broaden awareness of an important issue and move others to act on it.

- To begin, have students assemble in small groups. Next, ask them to identify an issue at the local, state, or regional level they would like to make others aware of.

- The next step is to require students to research the issue and create media related to it. For example, if the issue is environmental, students might record a video and/or take pictures of an affected location for the purpose of documenting it. Students might also consider interviewing those citizens affected by it.

- Lastly, have students utilize social media platforms to initiate an awareness and action campaign. They should disseminate their images, videos, texts, etc. by sharing them widely and using hashtags and other online tools to widely circulate content. Students could also include an action item in the campaign using resources such as https://resist.bot/ or https://www.change.org/start-a-petition/entry.

- For additional, useful tips on social media campaigns, direct students to https://resources.mojomedialabs.com/blog/8-steps-to-creating-a-social-media-campaign-that-gets-results and https://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/yes-social-media-can-be-used-for-positive-change-20180423

2. Support a Non-Profit or Charity related to the #MeToo Movement

To initiate this activity, have students organize themselves into groups and invite them to select one of the charities/non-profits described below (note that these are just suggestions; students can look online to locate others as well. If they do so, encourage students to vet charities/non-profits through the use of https://www.charitynavigator.org and http://www.guidestar.org):

- The National Women's Law Center (https://nwlc.org/) fights for gender justice in society, public policy, and in the courts. They focus on issues of importance to girls and women.

- The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (https://www.nsvrc.org/) works to end sexual violence. They seek to prevent sexual harassment, abuse, and assault.

- The Women's Law Project (https://www.womenslawproject.org/) works across a number of issues that affect women's economic security, legal status, and health.

- Equality Now's (https://www.equalitynow.org/) mission is to "achieve legal and systemic change that addresses violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world."

After students select an organization, ask them to plan and implement several different fundraising activities to support it. To provide students with some fundraising ideas, refer them to the extensive list located here: https://www.causevox.com/fundraising-ideas/.

Whatever students choose to do, encourage them to promote their efforts through social media. After students conclude their fundraising efforts, have them debrief and reflect on what was successful and what could be improved.

3. Become an Expert and Educator

Have students select a topic related to *Whistleblower* to research in small groups. Some suggested topics include:

- Forced arbitration

- The consequences of whistleblowing and the corporate "opposition handbook"

- Workplace discrimination laws

- Challenges facing women working in STEM fields

- Forms of online activism and their outcomes

The purpose of this activity is for students to become experts on their topic so that they may effectively educate other members of the campus community. First, student groups should read and analyze the applicable sections of *Whistleblower* while performing secondary research as well. After students have sufficiently researched their topic, have them answer the following two questions:

1. What is the essential information that others must know about my group's topic?

2. What are controversial elements, if any, of my topic?

Finally, have students present their research to the campus community in such a way that it both informs and invites them to discuss the issue. Groups could:

- Staff an information booth (be sure to obtain permission first) in a visible area and distribute brochures, fliers, or other documents. Free web resources such as https://www.canva.com/ will work for this, or students could use programs such as Microsoft Publisher to create documents.

- Launch an online campaign through social media or a designed website. Encourage students to create captivating presentations through Prezi (http://www.prezi.com), Google Slides (http://www.google.com/slides/about/), or Microsoft Sway (https://sway.com). Students could also blog through a site such as WordPress (http://www.wordpress.com).

- Design and publish infographics. An infographic is a visual representation of information that features short sections of text and multiple charts, graphs, and other visuals. The digital medium offers students a unique way to package and convey knowledge while sharpening their digital literacy skills. Free resources for this include http://piktochart.com, http://easel.ly, and https://spark.adobe.com/.

Regardless of the format students select, their presentations should invite their audience to ask questions and engage in dialogue.

4. Participate in the International Women's Day Campaign

International Women's Day occurs on March 8th, but your students can initiate a related campaign at any time.

To do so, first ask them to navigate to https://www.internationalwomensday.com/HowToPlanIWD, a website that promotes the International Women's Day (IWD) #EachforEqual Campaign. As indicated on this website, the current theme for IWD is listed here and the campaign runs all year.

Ask students to group up and consider initiating one or more of the actions listed on this website. There are numerous ideas here including securing an IWD speaker, supporting women-owned businesses, entering IWD competitions, making IWD-related videos, etc. There are also related materials students can download to support and promote their efforts.

After students initiate their actions, have them come together as a whole class to reflect on the experience and plan their next action.

5. Create a Harassment/Discrimination/Retaliation Resource Guide

Invite your students to create a resource guide for themselves, and other students, who experience harassment, discrimination, and/or retaliation. Ask students to work in pairs or small groups for this activity.

The goal of this activity is to create a guide, in print and/or digital form that features a list of campus resources and associated contact information. These resources should include on-campus organizations/support services, local law enforcement agencies, and other groups that support those who experience harassment, discrimination, and/or retaliation. Students might also consider including basic information regarding student rights (e.g, Title IX) in the resource guide to better inform readers.

Students should aim to create a guide that is accessible, informative, and eye-catching, and they can use any of the online resources featured throughout this guide to do so. For instance, students could use online resources to create a brochure, or students could craft their resource guide as a website or blog post and share it via social media.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PROGRAMS

 The following are resources useful for extending a study of *Whistleblower* and its related subjects:

- https://www.susanjfowler.com/blog/2017/2/19/reflecting-on-one-very-strange-year-at-uber
  Susan's Fowler's blog post.

- https://www.cnbc.com/2017/06/13/eric-holder-uber-report-full-text.html
  The full text of Eric Holder's report on Uber.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRYuRR1DheM
  Susan Fowler speaking at the 2020 First-Year Experience® conference.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llh0dGuYei0
  Susan Fowler's first television interview.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6s5HHoUVEc
  Susan Fowler speaking at Politics and Prose bookstore.

- https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/opinion/metoo-susan-fowler-forced-arbitration.html
  Susan's Fowler's *New York Times* op-ed on forced arbitration.

- https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/technology/uber-workplace-culture.html
  Mike Isaac's piece on Uber's toxic culture.

- https://www.nela.org/
  The National Employment Lawyers Association, an organization that addresses mistreatment within the workplace.

- https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html
  The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights assists victims of sexual harassment, violence, and discrimination in schools.

- https://www.betterbrave.org/home
  Better Brave, an organization that assists victims of sexual harassment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Chris Gilbert is a former high school English teacher and current college instructor who lives in the mountains of North Carolina. He is also an avid writer. His work has appeared in the *The Washington Post*'s education blog, "The Answer Sheet," NCTE's (National Council of Teachers of English) *English Journal*, Kappa Delta Pi's *The Educational Forum*, and *Critical Studies in Education*. He has also written a number of educational guides for Penguin Random House and Patagonia.