

***The Line Formation* by Pat Flynn Teachers' Notes**

Introduction:

The Line Formation is a novel recommended for study by Year 10-12 students. These teachers' notes are designed to give a greater insight into the themes and symbolism used in the book. A number of activities are also suggested in order to make the teaching of the novel an enjoyable, more meaningful experience. Teachers' Notes to *The Line Formation* or other books by Pat Flynn are available at www.patflynnwriter.com or www.uqp.uq.edu.au

Summary:

The Line Formation tells the story of Ozzie – an 18-year-old country boy who leaves Australia for Texas, USA, as an exchange student. A star Rugby League player, it doesn't take long for Ozzie to shine on the American football field, but with his winning move – The Line Formation – comes an unexpected price. Seduced by the trappings of success, a girl named Angela, and the United States of America herself, Ozzie is called upon to question aspects of his own identity and face up to questions about his future.

Themes:

The Line Formation is primarily a study of American culture and the effects it can have on young Australians. The novel doesn't seek to criticise or defend America but instead examines it, mostly from the perspective of one Australian boy, but also from the points of view of white American, African-American and Native-American characters. Within this, topics such as religious fundamentalism and the American Dream are examined.

Australian identity is also looked at, particularly the differences between the old and young generations.

Other themes include teenage sexuality; the problems facing rural Australia, particularly rural youth; and both the positives and the pitfalls of competitive sport for young people.

Setting:

Hope, a fictionalised town in West Texas, is where most of the action takes place in *The Line Formation*. It is a tough environment to live in, with duststorms, droughts and a harsh, hot sun, similar in many ways to Ozzie's hometown in Western Queensland – Yuranigh. What Hope does have is an established oil industry and a conservative Christian community who unites around their local high school football team, the Hope Shooters.

Suggested Activity: Read page 40 and the top of page 41 and answer the following questions about Hope.

1. What changed Hope forever?
2. Which city is richer, Hope or Denham?
3. Are people generally well-off in Hope?

Have students make a list of the similarities and differences between Australian and American cultures.

Structure:

The book is broken up into four sections: *Pre-Game*, *First Half*, *Second Half*, *Post-Game*. Besides being terms that are used to describe the 'journey' of a football game, these represent Ozzie's journey throughout the book. In Pre-Game and Post-Game, Ozzie is in Australia, while in First Half and Second Half the action takes place in the USA, where the main 'game' occurs. In Post-Game Ozzie reflects on the lessons he learns during his time in America.

Suggested Activity:

Mix up the order and then have students correctly number the major plot points for each part of *The Line Formation*.

Pre-Game:

1. Ozzie plays in a losing Grand Final for Yuranigh
2. Ozzie is considered by the Brisbane Broncos as a future prospect
3. Ozzie says goodbye to his best friend, Johnno, and his girlfriend, Jess
4. Ozzie's Grandfather, Jack, takes him to the airport
5. Ozzie flies to America, meeting a girl on the plane

First Half:

1. Ozzie meets his host family, the Graham's
2. Ozzie tackles Tex and makes the Hope Shooters High School Football team
3. The Shooters win their first game because of The Line Formation
4. Ozzie goes to a party at Tex's place
5. Ozzie almost falls for Unity on the watertower

Second Half:

1. Ozzie goes to church and then Mexico with Angela
2. Sam and Ozzie work together to help the Shooters beat the Armadillos
3. The Shooters lose the coin toss to go to the State Titles
4. Ozzie and Sam go to Justice University on a recruiting trip
5. Pop dies

Post-Game:

1. Unity kisses Ozzie goodbye
2. At Jack's funeral we find out that Jess and Johnno are now together
3. Ozzie is asked to join the Broncos
4. Unity writes to Ozzie and tells him about Jose, Malivai and Angela
5. Ozzie runs out for his first National Rugby League match

About the Author:

Pat Flynn grew up in Jimboomba, Queensland, before moving to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra for 3-years on a tennis scholarship. After playing and coaching on the professional circuit he became a teacher, where his observations of young people – their interests and stories – led to the highly praised *Alex Jackson* series. Flynn now lives on the Sunshine Coast where he writes, surfs, and plays the occasional game of tennis in his spare time. He also runs workshops encouraging young people to read and write.

This is what Pat has to say about the writing of *The Line Formation*:

‘The idea for *The Line Formation* had been kicking around in my mind for over 10 years, ever since I attended the University of Texas at Austin and wondered why their football players hardly ever passed the ball backwards like my Rugby League heroes. I was also fascinated by American culture – the good, the bad and the ugly – and the subtle changes that it had on me as a young Australian. When I finally got a chance to write the book it was a real labour of love. Although it was my sixth book, it was bigger and harder than anything I’d done before, and it took many rewrites before it finally came together. Eventually, with the help of some excellent editors, it became a book I’m proud of.’

Suggested Activity: Have students go to www.patflynnwriter.com go to FAQ and answer the following:

1. Where does Pat Flynn get his ideas?
2. What is his advice for young authors?
3. How many times does Pat’s editor make him rewrite his books?
4. Click on the following links: Pat’s books, Alex Jackson series, Praise For the Alex Jackson Series. Read some of the reviewers’ blurbs and write your own for *The Line Formation*.
5. At the bottom of the same page, read some of the emails about the Alex Jackson series and compare them to the reviewers’ blurbs. How does the style of writing differ?

Symbolism – names and their meaning:

The three main American characters are **Unity**, **Sam** and **Angela**. **USA**. Each represents a different aspect of America society.

Out of the three characters, **Unity** is the nicest, and she embodies the American Dream. She is the America we see on television and in movies, the beautiful cheerleader who loves and is loved by everyone. She is the America we are seduced by, yet she is frustratingly out of reach to most people, both inside and outside the country. Although most boys in the book desire her, she is only intimate with Sam, the successful white American quarterback. At the end she makes herself available to Ozzie, but only if he lives in America, and only because he has proven himself to be a 'winner' in US society.

Interesting fact: Unity's last name is Summer-Andrews. A USA all by herself. It was later on in the project that author Pat Flynn decided to have three characters represent a different 'face' to America.

Sam represents the American Government (Uncle Sam). His major struggle in the book is in coming to terms with having to share the power and the recognition with Ozzie, which shows the difficulty of a superpower having to work with other countries throughout the world. Eventually, the older and wiser Coach Hayes teaches him about the concepts of teamwork and sacrificing for the greater good, the qualities that made America a superpower to begin with. It's only when Sam learns to work with Ozzie that the team is truly successful.

Interesting fact: Sam's last name is Wilson, which is the same as the original 'Uncle Sam'.

Angela is the nastiest of the three characters, she is the America that will lie and cheat with a smile on her face in order to get what she wants. To her parents she is innocent and religious, to her peers she's sweet and bubbly, but underneath there's a moral vacuum that allows her to manipulate others in order to better her own life. On page 209 it alludes to the fact that she's so good at lying, she can even fool a lie detector test.

Interesting fact: Angela's last name is Janus, which means 'two-faced'.

Other Characters:

Ozzie Eaton: Refers to the possibility of Australia being 'eaten' culturally by the United States.

Jack Freeman: Ozzie's Grandfather. People of his generation (born before World War 2) were the last to grow up without television having a major impact on their lives. From a cultural point of view he is a 'free' man, a true Aussie influenced by growing up in rural Australia.

Mayor Green: The mayor of Hope, Texas, who enjoys power and wealth. 'Green' is for his love of money.

Pastor Slipper: The Mayor's best friend and local pastor, whose morals are quite 'slippery'.

Malivai Thomas: Thomas stands for 'Uncle Tom', the name given to African-Americans who act like white people.

Yuranigh: Ozzie's hometown in Australia. Named after Sir Thomas Mitchell's Aboriginal tracker, who 'discovered' much of inland Australia. Mitchell eventually fell out with Yuranigh after their time together.

Interesting fact: Most of the football coaches in the book, such as Coach McCulloch, Coach Wright and Coach Lee, are all named after Confederate Generals from the American Civil War.

Suggested Activity:

Have students answer the following questions:

1. How do Unity, Sam and Angela represent a different face to the United States of America?
2. What do you think the following names could mean?
 - Ozzie Eaton
 - Jack Freeman
 - Mayor Green
 - Pastor Slipper
 - Malivai Thomas (Hint: Look up 'Uncle Tom' in order to help you answer this one)
3. Make up some names of characters that might represent something about Australia or America.

More Symbolism

- On page 9, in the Brisbane Broncos Coach's office, old Cyril 'looked up at a print hanging on the office wall, a mountain rising into thick cloud'. This represents the older generation's concern for the future of Australia, particularly as the younger generation take control. (See bottom of page 11, page 12.)
On page 276 Ozzie is in the same office looking at the same print, and this time the mountain is 'rising into blue sky'.
The book finishes on a positive note, showing that the future of Australia is bright if young Australians, like Ozzie, can contribute to our nation's future in a positive, honest way. (See bottom of page 277, top of page 278.)
- On page 273, Ozzie's best mate, Johnno, apologises for falling in love with Ozzie's girlfriend, Jess. This represents what happened between white and aboriginal Australians, only this time a white person, Ozzie, has his girlfriend 'taken' from him by an Aboriginal, Johnno. However, unlike the white establishment, Johnno apologises to Ozzie for doing this, and it is this apology that allows Ozzie to eventually get over his pain. (See page 286.)
- On page 258, when Ozzie slips on his new Rolex watch given to him by an American university to convince him to play for their 'amateur' team, Ozzie 'suddenly realised he'd lost his old watch, the one Jess had bought him before he left ... He'd lost it without even realising it was gone.'
The warning here is that the same thing can happen with Australian culture. There is a possibility that more dominant cultures can work their way in until Australians forget who they are and where they've come from.

Suggested Activity: Read through the appropriate passages with the students and have them try and work out what they symbolise.

Filling in the Gaps and Silences:

In the process of creating a book, many words and even chapters are cut before the final copy. Below is the original foreword to *The Line Formation*.

Suggested Activity: Have the students read the foreword and answer the questions below. Also, you can lead a discussion as to why they think it was eventually deleted. (Short version: because it 'tells' the themes rather than allowing the rest of the novel to 'show' them; because it could be boring to young readers, especially as the first pages of a novel; because three editors recommended that it be cut!)

Foreword

Western Queensland and West Texas are both hot, dry and red, with sunsets that stretch wide over canvas skies. The ocean is just an idea in these places and often rain is too, though the rare times the sky turns grey and empties tears it may forget to stop, burying tractors in thick mud. They are both farming communities, cattle mostly, because not much will grow in dust. And when people talk they do it slowly – each word like a sentence – because out there, you have all the time in the world.

These places are the heartland. When tourists come to both countries – after they've experienced Uluru and Malibu, Disney World and Dreamworld – they often want to meet some *real* Australians or *real* Americans. They're sick of running into their own countrymen with digital cameras and money belts; they yearn for people who *are* the harshness, the beauty of these nations. Western Queensland and West Texas are the very places these people should go. Instead, travel agents send them to Byron Bay and Miami, perhaps because the travel agents are afraid that if the tourists do meet the *real* Australians or *real* Americans, they may never return.

And there's something else that Western Queensland and West Texas have in common: football. Although both are God fearing places football is the true religion. It bands the little towns together more than God or farming or oil can, and that's not saying it's right or wrong, it's just the way it is in the heartland. Why football? Why not golf or tennis or lawn bowls? Well for one, football's a team game, and when you live in a place that's God-awful hot and dusty and flat as the desert because it *is* the desert, then you sorely need a team of friends to help you survive. Also, football is a sport where men can be men, where physical strength still means something. In the good ol' days men were rewarded if they could chop down trees with an axe, throw cattle to the ground and fight off wild animals. Today, scrawny 'guys' with jewellery sticking out of their ears make and lose fortunes punching, not heads, but keyboards. Football reminds people of a simple time, when the underdog could win with less talent and money but more fighting spirit, when people were loyal to their mates. And football players are nearly always loyal to their mates, right to the very last all-in brawl.

But, of course, people who live 13,423 kilometres apart are bound to be different, and the best example of this is, their footballs are different. In the American game, called American Football or Gridiron, players wear helmets and are shoulder to knee in pads, perhaps because it makes them and the spectators feel more secure. It doesn't bother people to see bodies hurtle towards each other at ridiculous speeds because, hell, they're wearing pads.

Rugby League players have never really bothered wearing pads. Because Australia is so big and isolated, perhaps its people aren't as worried about security as the Americans. Or maybe Australians feel so *insecure* that they know a few pads won't help if the snakes or storms or Asians getcha. Living in Australia has always been a risky venture, so why worry? Why wear a shirt when the sun will just burn a hole right through it?

American Football is a highly specialised game, with two teams in one, an offence and a defence. In the offensive team, five out of the eleven players *never even touch the ball*, and one player, the quarterback, completely runs the show. There's even a specialist downfield kicker called a punter (who presumably doesn't gamble because it's outlawed in Texas), a player who earns *a million dollars* a year in the professional league to kick the ball a few times per game.

Rugby League is much more egalitarian. Sure, the forwards do most of the tough stuff and the backs are flashier, but every player has the chance to score a try, and every player, at some stage or another, has to make a tackle. There are less people in Australia so maybe they're forced to be jacks-of-all-trades, but surely the tradition of scorn felt for uppity Poms – the governors and landowners who thought they were better than everyone else – has something to do with it. Australians would never accept a quarterback in Rugby League. In their own words, everyone should get a fair suck of the sav.

American Football is incredibly technical, with 7 game referees and 50 different ways of being penalised. The 10 coaches carry thick books with thousands of plays – radioed to the quarterback via wireless speakers located inside his helmet. Yet ultimately it is a simple and conservative game – ball control and field position the keys. Games are 60 minutes on the clock but take nearly 4 hours, with the many stoppages a chance for the cheerleaders to cheer, yell leaders to yell, and sponsors to sell products.

In Rugby League, 'Go hard, son' is considered a technical piece of advice. There are lots of bruising runs 'up the guts', yet the game is often free flowing and at times, inspirational. It is less planned than American Football, more based on instinct and feel. When a fullback chimes into the backline at exactly the right moment, probably even he couldn't say why he did it.

The two footballs are similar, but different. Just like the places. But what happens when you take one place and glorify it to the people of the other? Will they still remember who they are, or will they, bit by bit, start changing?

What if an Australian takes up American Football and becomes even better at it than the Americans? What will the Americans do?

What will the Australian do?

Foreword Questions:

1. Name three similarities between West Texas and Western QLD.
2. According to the author, why is football popular in these places? Do you agree or disagree with his argument? Explain.
3. The author gives two different reasons as to why Rugby League players don't wear pads. What are they, and which one do you most agree with? Why?
4. The author argues that while American football is a technical game, it is, at the same time, quite conservative. From your knowledge of American society, give some examples of how it could be construed as both 'technical' and 'conservative'.
5. The third last paragraph sets up the major theme of the novel. What is it?

Suggested Activity: Imaginative Writing

On page 282, Wazza says to Ozzie: 'I just want to say that your Pop would've been proud of you. No, I take that back. He *is* proud of you. I'm sure he'll be looking down tomorrow yelling, "For God's sake, son, pass it!"'

Imagine you are Pop, watching from heaven as Ozzie plays his first game in the National Rugby League. Write 500 words of imaginative fiction on what Pop might be saying to his new 'angel' mates about Ozzie and the journey he took to get where he is.

Possible Start:

That's m' grandkid down there, you know? Young Ozzie.