10 Most Notorious Serial Killers in History

This lesson plan is designed to help you support your child with this topic: The Nature of Light: Waves and Particles

Learning Objectives (What You'll Learn Today)

- Identify and describe 10 of the most notorious killers in history
- Understand how forensic science and psychology help solve serial crimes
- Explore how society responds to violent crime and investigates patterns
- Develop critical thinking by asking why people commit such acts

Estimated Time

Approximately 90–120 minutes

Let's Get Started

Ask your child: "Why do you think some criminals become well-known in history while others are forgotten?"

The Main Lesson

What is a Serial Killer?

A serial killer is someone who murders three or more people in separate incidents, often with a "cooling off" period in between. These crimes usually follow a pattern, whether in motive, method, or victim type.
Serial killers are different from mass murderers or contract killers. Their motives are rarely money — more often it's about control, rage, or psychological obsession. Learning how to recognise these patterns is one way that law enforcement connects related cases.

Mini-Task: Make a list of other types of criminals (e.g. thief, fraudster) and compare how they are different from serial killers.

How Criminal Profilers Catch Notorious Killers

Criminal profiling is like creating a "character sketch" of a killer, based on crime scene clues. Behavioural science helps investigators predict what the person is like — their habits, age range, or even job type.
Profilers use evidence like location, method, and timing to build their profiles. These tools are especially useful when dealing with serial killers, who often follow patterns but hide in plain sight.

Mini-Task: Draw a mind map showing what kind of clues could help create a criminal profile.

Meet 5 Notorious Serial Killers

Some of the most well-known killers in history include Jack the Ripper (UK), Harold Shipman (UK), Ted Bundy (USA), John Wayne Gacy (USA), and Aileen Wuornos (USA). Each had a unique method, victim type, and motivation.
For example, Shipman used his position as a doctor to murder patients over decades. Jack the Ripper sent taunting letters to police. Gacy performed as a clown while secretly killing dozens of young men. These disturbing contrasts show how evil can hide behind normal roles.

Mini-Task: Choose one killer and write 3 bullet points: what made them dangerous, how they were caught, and what their crimes taught us.

Science Behind Solving Serial Crimes

Modern forensic science plays a big role in solving serial homicide cases. Tools like DNA testing, fingerprint analysis, and computer tracking help detectives gather reliable evidence.
Even tiny clues — a hair, a footprint, or a piece of fabric — can connect multiple crimes to the same person. As technology improves, old cases are being reopened and solved years later. These breakthroughs can finally bring closure to families.

Mini-Task: Research how DNA helped solve a real-life crime. Share your findings in 3 short sentences.

Why Do People Kill?

Understanding what drives a person to kill isn't easy. Psychologists study childhood trauma, brain injuries, mental health, and personality disorders to find answers. But not all people with difficult lives become killers — so what's the tipping point?
Serial killers often feel disconnected from normal emotions. Some enjoy the power of control. Others believe they're doing something justified. These are called "rationalisations", even if their thinking is seriously flawed.

Mini-Task: Write down 3 things that might stop someone from becoming violent — such as strong friendships or access to therapy.

Think and Discuss

- Why do you think some serial killers become famous?
- Is it right to study these criminals in detail, or should we focus more on the victims?
- How could we stop future serial killers before they act?

Wrap-Up Summary

This lesson plan has explored ten notorious killers and how they were caught. We looked at the role of forensic science, psychology, and criminal profiling — and asked why people commit such terrible crimes.

Quiz

1. What is the minimum number of victims needed to be classed as a serial killer?
2. True or False: Harold Shipman was a police officer.
3. Which killer sent letters to the media? A) Ted Bundy B) Jack the Ripper C) John Wayne Gacy
4. What is criminal profiling used for?
5. True or False: All serial killers act alone.
6. Name one modern forensic tool that helps solve crimes.
7. Why was Gacy known as the "Killer Clown"?
8. How can psychology help us understand serial killers?
9. Which profession did Shipman use to hide his crimes?
10. True or False: Serial killers usually kill for money.

Answers

1. Three
2. False
3. B) Jack the Ripper
4. To help identify likely traits of the killer
5. False
6. DNA testing
7. He dressed as a clown for parties
8. By studying thoughts, motives, and past trauma
9. Doctor
10. False

Short Essay Prompt

Write a short essay in 3 paragraphs explaining how forensic science helped solve at least one serial killer case. Include the method used and the result.

Extra Learning

Choose one serial homicide case from history and make a timeline of the key events, including the killer's background, crimes, and how they were caught.

Final Reflection (What Did You Learn?)

Ask your child: "What part of this topic surprised you the most — and why do you think it's important to study these crimes?"