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REQUIRED BOOKS FOR THIS COURSE

You need unabridged copies of the following books:

Can You Drink the Cup? by Henri Nouwen

A Circle of Quiet by Madeleine L'Engle

Godric by Frederick Buechner

No Graven Image by Elisabeth Elliot

**‘Tis the good reader that
makes the good book.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Introduction

Why This Course?

Being able to read and write well is important. Whether you want to relax with a good book, mull over the themes of a short story, or understand the moral and philosophical implications of the latest medical research, your reading skills will play a role. And whether you’re writing a journal entry, a novel, a letter to your senator, or a report for work, your writing skills will affect your success. The Lightning Literature and Composition guides teach the skills of attentive reading and strong writing by using literature to expose you to techniques you can use in your own work.

Each course in the Lightning Literature series concentrates on literature of a particular period, region, or author. This course focuses on writing by American Christians from the 1600s to the 2000s. Beyond the general benefits of learning about writing from any group of people skilled in the craft, I find these particular writers worth considering as a group because of their common worldview.

For one thing, looking at these writers’ work can help you think more clearly about what you believe and why you believe it: Trying other people’s ideas on for size, figuring out what’s right and wrong about them and why, can help you get a better handle on your own ideas. And it’s important to read the work of people you think you agree with just as critically as the work of those you know you disagree with. As Paul tells the Thessalonians, we should “test everything.”

For another thing, these are people who have spent a lifetime working out what it looks like to live as Christians. The writers in this course wore a variety of hats—writer, parent, spouse, priest, missionary, speaker, teacher, farmer, general store manager. They wrote explicitly about Christianity and they wrote about a wide range of other subjects, and they did it well. Their lives and work can help us consider how to work within our own circumstances and develop our own skills—for our own well-being, the peace and prosperity of the world around us, and the glory of God.

It’s my hope that you’ll find these writers worth holding onto, and that you’ll want to read more of their work, even if you don’t agree with every aspect of their beliefs. For Christians, an immeasurable benefit of spending time with the work of a group of Christian writers lies in the help and encouragement we can receive from others who have run the same race we’re running.

On Reading

As you approach the readings, choose a spot to read where you can be comfortable, and where your surroundings won't be a distraction. Read carefully. Try to read for at least half an hour at a time, so that you can really get into the work. If you run across a word or a concept you don't know, you can make a note of it and look it up when you're done; this may help you not to lose concentration. Or, if it's getting in the way of enjoying what you're reading, you can check a dictionary or encyclopedia to help sort it out. When you read poetry, read it out loud, and take time to listen to the way it sounds.

On Writing

BRAINSTORMING

As you tackle the writing assignments, I'd suggest that you start by brainstorming. Set a timer for twenty minutes and write down everything you can think of about your topic. This isn't a structured process—the most important thing is that you don't stop writing! Once the timer goes off, read through your ideas, looking for those that might fit together.

For example, suppose your topic is “snow,” and during your brainstorming session you wrote down: “snowmen, snow angels, snow forts, building a snow fort in the front yard when I was five, sledding, crashing into snow banks on my toboggan, the dog trying to jump in the sled with us as we came around the corner by the driveway, coming in all cold and wet and drinking hot cocoa with marshmallows in it, my hands were so cold they hurt as they warmed up, running out of dry clothes because I played in the snow so much, each snowflake has a unique structure, snow is cold, snow can be wet or dry, snowball fights with the uncles, ice skating on the pond when it froze over in the winter, snow shoes, skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, downhill skiing, cross country skiing, blizzards.”

On reading back through your list you might choose the topic, “Things to do in the snow,” using “build snowmen, make snow angels, build a snow fort, have a snowball fight, go skiing, go snowshoeing.” You might decide to write a personal essay about your childhood, using “building a snow fort, the dog jumping in the sled, drinking hot cocoa, snowball fights with the uncles.” Or you might opt for a more informative paper about snow itself, using “each snowflake has a unique structure, snow is cold, snow can be wet or dry,” and doing a little research to add to your information. If you don't already have a topic, brainstorm about everything you can think of for twenty minutes—somewhere in the mess there's probably a great idea for a paper.

OUTLINES

You may want to use an outline to help organize your thoughts. Sometimes I find outlines helpful and sometimes I find them a pain in the neck. Even if you don't like creating an outline before you start writing, writing a rough draft and then outlining what's there can help you identify and strengthen the organization of your papers, especially as you start to write longer papers.

Introduction

A basic outline consists of Roman numerals for the main points and capital letters for secondary points, followed by regular numerals and lower case letters for further subsets. Here's an example of the correct format for an outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Defining Affirmative Action
 - A. Preliminary considerations
 - B. Current definition
- III. History of Affirmative Action
 - A. Origin
 - B. Evolution
- IV. Arguments for Affirmative Action
 - A. Redress past wrongs
 - 1. Black Americans
 - a. Slavery
 - b. Jim Crow laws
 - 2. Other minorities
 - 3. Women
 - B. Prevent present wrongs
 - 1. Discrimination in schools
 - a. K-12
 - b. Higher education
 - 2. Discrimination in the workplace
- V. Arguments Against Affirmative Action: Reverse Discrimination
- VI. Alternatives to Affirmative Action: Income-based preference
- VII. Conclusion

This gives you a good idea of how an outline is constructed, though some of yours will be simpler than this, and some will be much more complex.

REVISION

Keep in mind that the biggest part of writing is revision. Nothing I've ever written is finished. Every time I go back and look at it I see things that could be improved. The same thing will be true of your papers. You should do at least three separate reviews of each paper before you turn it in, paying attention to content, organization, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

CITING RESEARCH

Whenever you write a paper for which you do research, even if it's not specifically called "a research paper," you must include a bibliography. This will give acknowledgement to the work of those you've learned from, and let your readers know where they can look for more information. For your research papers, whether or not you use direct quotations from other writers' work, you also need to include in-text citations that give credit for the ideas you're sharing. Different academic disciplines and professions use different approaches to citations, including Associated Press (AP), Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), Modern Language Association (MLA), and others. MLA is most common in English classes. Consult a handbook or style guide for formatting instructions.

Why Are We Doing This?

It may be tempting to turn some or all of this work of reading, brainstorming, organizing, researching, writing, and editing over to someone else to do, whether that's by using one of the websites that explain books for you or sell papers on various topics, or by inputting your information into one of the ever-evolving chatbots that, as of this writing, are coming into widespread use. It would be less work, and if you're worried about a passing grade, it might seem like a safer bet than risking your own work. It might even be *fine*, if your paper was the end product for which we are aiming.¹

But the goal here is not actually to produce more papers on *Moby Dick*, or the poetry of Robert Frost, or whatever it is you're asked to read and write about. The goal is for *you* to learn how to understand and enjoy literature, for *you* to grapple with ideas about the world around you, for *you* to discover what you think and figure out how to say it so that other people can know it too. The goal is for *you* to revel in your humanity! And that goal is seriously hampered by taking the easy route or the safe route to a finished product. So I invite you instead to buckle down, be brave, and do the sometimes-uncomfortable mental work that allows you to create new neural pathways in your brain, make new connections, and literally expand your mind. It's far more important than any paper you'll ever write or any grade you'll ever earn.

¹ In the first place, this assumes your instructor has given permission for such an approach. If you submit such material as if it were your own work, that's cheating! In the second place, you have to have a foundation of knowledge to be able to decide if chatbots, for example, are giving you something worthwhile.

The Fluidity of Language and Pronoun Confusion

Language is alive. It changes as the people who speak it change. English is no exception.

Perhaps the most obvious example of how English is currently changing is pronoun usage. The rules of standard English grammar have dictated that the number of a pronoun and its antecedent must agree—that is, a singular noun requires a singular pronoun, and a plural noun requires a plural pronoun. “The bowl broke. It was a family heirloom.” “The cats are brothers. They were chosen from the same litter.”

This creates complications when speaking or writing about human beings. Singular pronouns for people have been gendered, “he” or “she,” with no useful gender-neutral pronoun such as the Finnish “hän.” We’re expected to behave as though we know the sex of an individual about whom we’re writing, though of course we often don’t. “That driver almost hit me, and I didn’t get a good look at [??] license plate!”

In everyday speech, most people have dealt with the problem by borrowing the plural “they” and causing it to do double duty as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. “That driver almost hit me, and I didn’t get a good look at their license plate!” A quick search shows that some writers have long been using the same approach. The Oxford English Dictionary records ongoing instances of such usage starting in the late 1300s; I’ve seen it go by myself in books published in the 1900s, such as Elizabeth Enright’s delightful novel *The Four Story Mistake*.

As the movement for standardizing English became more powerful (promoted most famously by England’s Samuel Johnson in the 1700s and America’s Noah Webster in the 1800s), the singular gender-neutral “they” was increasingly proscribed by textbooks and style guides as noun-pronoun disagreement. Instead, writers were taught to use what’s called the inclusive or universal masculine pronoun when writing about an unspecified individual. So we see C. S. Lewis writing in *The Four Loves*, “I believe that everyone who is honest with himself will admit that he has felt these temptations.” The masculine pronoun was said to refer to “mankind,” and so to include women as well as men.

For the past several decades this rule has been declining in popular usage, and even coming under attack. The universal masculine pronoun was acceptable because men were considered to be the standard human being in Western thought. Women were excluded from many parts of human life—from voting, from higher education, from owning money or property, from what the 1848 US Woman’s Rights Convention called the “profitable” and “honorable” professions. As women worked for more equal protection under the law, many began to argue that the inclusive masculine pronoun not only continued to shape social understanding of men and women in harmful ways, but that its inaccuracy meant it was not good grammar either. Women, after all, make up more than half of humanity!

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People have responded to this ongoing conversation in a number of ways. Some create work-arounds:

- Masculine and feminine pronouns together. “I believe that everyone who is honest with him- or herself will admit,” etc.
- Alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns. This can be done either on a case by case basis—“Everyone who is honest with himself will admit. . . . And yet anyone who finds herself in this situation will recognize. . . .”—or by using, say, feminine pronouns in the first half of a document and masculine pronouns in the second half.
- Using the second person pronoun rather than the third, or using a plural pronoun. “If you are honest with yourself you will admit, “ or, “If we are honest with ourselves we will admit,” or, “Those who are honest with themselves will admit.”
- Rewriting the sentence to avoid pronouns entirely. “These temptations are common to the human experience.” From a purely practical perspective, this will often actually strengthen a sentence by streamlining it.

Some continue to use the universal masculine pronoun, arguing that alternatives create clunky writing (or even that there are theological grounds for maleness as the standard for humanity). And some choose to use “they” as a singular gender-neutral pronoun.

As of this writing, the use of the singular “they” is becoming increasingly widespread. It’s acknowledged by Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary, and has been approved by the Associated Press, the Chicago Manual of Style, and the Modern Language Association style guides. These guides also note that some individuals prefer “they” and “them” as their personal pronouns rather than “he” and “him” or “she” and “her,” and that it is appropriate to use an individual’s preferred pronouns, just as it would be to call someone by the name with which they introduce themselves.

While you’re in school, the style guide a teacher asks you to rely on for their class will determine to some extent how you use pronouns in your writing, but ultimately you’ll have to make up your own mind as to how you handle the topic. As you decide what to do about pronoun use, think about the ideas your language conveys. Accuracy of thought and communication is important. Respect for the personhood and well-being of others is important. As with many other choices about how you use language, it’s not just an abstract rule of grammar.

How to Use this Student's Guide

INTRODUCTION

The Introduction provides information on why reading and writing are important, basic writing guidelines, and ideas for expanding your language arts study (for example, a family reading/writing night). Refer to this Introduction throughout the year, especially the writing suggestions and instructions.

THE LESSONS

Each lesson is divided into different sections. The following is a description of each section and how to use it.

Introduction

At the beginning of each lesson an introduction gives a brief biography of the author. Sprinkled throughout the guide is also some boxed information related to various topics that arise in the course of the textbook.

The Selection

“The Selection” refers to whatever work (novel, short story, etc.) is being taught for that lesson. This guide covers four major works, four smaller works, and their authors. All shorter works are included in the guide or available online. You must obtain the book-length works. Because comprehension questions are based on chapter breaks, not page numbers, you can probably use any unabridged edition with little or no difficulty, but be aware that page numbers may differ.

While You Read

This is a list of questions or ideas to keep in mind while reading the selection. They will help prepare you for the literary lesson that follows.

Comprehension Questions

Every reading selection includes short answer questions to help assess and solidify basic understanding. Answer the questions for the shorter selections after reading the entire piece. For the books, you can choose to answer the questions periodically as you read or after reading the entire book. Answers are in the Teacher's Guide.

Literary Lessons

With each selection, there is a literary lesson covering one major topic. I teach the literary concept with examples from the selection to increase your understanding of how to read deeply

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and demonstrate how to use these techniques to improve your writing. Each unit has a lesson preview that should be read before the selection. For books, I often refer to specific chapters in the literary lesson. You should review those chapters when they are discussed in the lesson.

Writing Exercises

All the writing exercises either address the selection, the author, the concept covered in the literary lesson, or related topics. For example, the lesson for Henri Nouwen's *Can You Drink the Cup?* is on writing a basic essay. The writing exercises for that lesson either ask you to write a basic essay on a variety of topics or to research something related to Henri Nouwen.

Complete at least one writing exercise for each of the shorter selections (those contained in the guide) and at least two for every book-length work. Choose a variety of paper types (research, opinion papers, analysis, etc.). Each paper should be at least one to two pages and three to five paragraphs long (except in obviously different situations, such as poems or papers where the assignment specifies a different length).

Preview the exercises before you begin the selection. If there are exercises you're drawn towards, keep these at the back of your mind while you read. You can also make notes to help when you are ready to write the paper. This technique is particularly useful for longer works where you may have difficulty finding a certain passage later.

Perspectives

Sprinkled throughout the units are articles touching on topics related to American Christian literature. Read these as they are assigned in the schedule.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Discussion Questions and Project Suggestions

This appendix provides discussion questions and ideas for extension projects related to the selections. These don't replace writing, but can be a great way to more deeply explore an author or work that you especially like.

The discussion questions allow you to further explore the questions of morality, theology, philosophy, etc. that arise naturally from these works. They can make for great dinner conversation. Sometimes only a small part of the work need be read to get the context for the question, so everyone can participate without having to read the whole work. Alternatively, you can summarize the salient points for everyone else. This is an excellent way to reinforce the story in your mind.

The projects are suggestions for additional exploration of the readings and authors. If you enjoy hands-on activities, you may find ways here to have more fun with the reading assignments.

Introduction

Appendix B: Reading List

This is a list of additional books written by the authors covered in the guide. If you need additional challenge in this class, I strongly encourage you to read and write about some of the books on this list.

Appendix C: Schedules

The two schedules in this appendix show how this course can be completed either in a semester or in a full year.

Activities to Enhance Your Study

VOCABULARY NOTEBOOK

During your reading you will encounter words that are new to you. You may wish to keep a vocabulary notebook where you record each word and its appropriate meaning. (Many words have more than one meaning, so just record the meaning that is indicated by the context—i.e., the meaning the author is using at that point.) To further solidify the word in your mind, you can follow your definition with a sentence of your own using the word.

READING JOURNAL

You can also keep a notebook or journal, separate from your vocabulary notebook, where you record what you've read, your thoughts and feelings about what you're reading, and any quotations from your reading that you particularly like. This will encourage you to think more about your reading and you'll have a record of your reactions, which can be fascinating to read months or years later. This can also inspire writing ideas.

BIOGRAPHIES

I encourage you to read good biographies of the authors discussed in these courses. If you find an author you particularly like, you can often understand their writing even more by exploring their life.

FAMILY READING OR WRITING NIGHT

You could start a tradition in your family where once a week everyone shares something they've read or written or both. Everyone should agree on the guidelines. (Does everyone have to write something or could it just be something that was read? Is there a time or page limit? Should there be a theme each week? How much discussion, if any, should there be about each selection? Does the reader need to explain why the selection was important to them? Etc.) Even children who can't read can participate by asking a parent or older sibling to read something that has been read to them, or by dictating a story to be written down and read.

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ORAL SUMMARIES

If your family is agreeable, you could take time over dinner each night to summarize for everyone what you've read that day. This can be helpful for memory and comprehension, and it will be a sure indicator of what you didn't understand or remember (and thus, probably need to review). Also, others may have questions or comments that will make the selection even more interesting.

WRITING GROUP

You may be able to form a writing group with friends. Again, the group will need to agree on guidelines before beginning. (How often will everyone meet? How much writing is to be done between meetings? Are there any restrictions on the type of writing? What sort of comments will be considered unwelcome? Etc.) Once the group decides on rules, meet regularly. Everyone should make enough copies of their writing each time for everyone else. That way it's easy for everyone to make comments on each paper. I strongly recommend that everyone try to make as many positive comments as possible because too many negative comments—or just a few of the wrong type—can hurt both the group and the friendships.