English 11 Summer Reading Assignment
Letter to the Author

To do: Choose one of your summer reading books and write a 2-3 page letter to the author describing your intellectual and emotional responses to the text. Make sure it follows the Oakcrest Style Guidelines for Written Work (see PDF on Atlas, p.4-5). It should be ~3 pages, double-spaced. If you write more, that’s fine, but end it at 4 pages, max.

Mortimer Adler in *How to Read a Book* argues that we shouldn’t try to resist the effect that a work of imaginative literature has on us. What effect did your summer reading book have on you? Did you like or dislike it? Why? Write a personal letter to the author (pretend that the author is still alive) about your encounter with this book, describing your emotional reactions as well as your intellectual response to it.

1. Unlike an analytical essay, which typically employs an objective, third-person voice, this is a personal essay in a first-person voice – your first-person voice. Without being inappropriately casual, the essay should reveal something about you.

2. Decide how to focus your essay. You should NOT answer all the following questions in your essay. Think about what you want your main point to be. Explain why you liked or disliked the book, what emotions you felt during certain scenes or towards certain characters. Inform him/her how the book influenced you or your thoughts and what it taught you about yourself, others, or the world around you. You can ask questions, propose ideas, suggest comments, and so on. Do not give a plot summary. The author knows what the plot is.

3. To get your ideas flowing, read actual letters to authors on ATLAS (website links) for inspiration.

4. AP students, do brief research into the historical and biographical context of the book in order to address historical, cultural, or biographical aspects of the book in your letter.

Some questions to get you thinking:

- Why did you choose the book? Was it recommended by someone? Did your feelings about the recommender influence your expectations or feelings about the book?
- Did you have any previous ideas (correct or incorrect) about the author, book, or time period? Did they affect how your reading?
- What were your initial impressions of the book? Did they change as you read? Why or why not?
- When and where did you read that book? What was your physical environment like? Were you alone? surrounded by family or friends? Did any of these factors affect your reading and how receptive you were to the experience the author was trying to communicate?
- How quickly or slowly did you read the book? Did you read quickly out of pleasure or panic? Did you read slowly because you were bored or because you wanted to savor it?
- What frustrated/bored/excited/surprised you as you read? What didn’t you understand? What questions came to mind? Was the world of the story coherent and believable?
- What direction did you expect the plot to take? Were you right? Did the book’s predictability or unpredictability affect your pleasure in the book?
- Did the book make you think about anything? What and why?
• Did the book itself teach you anything about the world or yourself? Did the experience of reading the book teach you anything about the world or yourself?

• Where did this book fit into your reading? Does it relate to anything you’ve already read? How does it compare?

The following is a letter F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to a fan and aspiring writer. As you write your own letter, think of how you’d like the author to respond. What might he/she say?


Late-1938, eager to gain some feedback on her work, aspiring young author and Radcliffe sophomore Frances Turnbull sent a copy of her latest story to celebrated novelist and friend of the family, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Before long the feedback arrived, in the form of the somewhat harsh but admirably honest reply seen below.

November 9, 1938

Dear Frances:

I've read the story carefully and, Frances, I'm afraid the price for doing professional work is a good deal higher than you are prepared to pay at present. You've got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly, the little experiences that you might tell at dinner. This is especially true when you begin to write, when you have not yet developed the tricks of interesting people on paper, when you have none of the technique which it takes time to learn. When, in short, you have only your emotions to sell.

This is the experience of all writers. It was necessary for Dickens to put into Oliver Twist the child's passionate resentment at being abused and starved that had haunted his whole childhood. Ernest Hemingway's first stories "In Our Time" went right down to the bottom of all that he had ever felt and known. In "This Side of Paradise" I wrote about a love affair that was still bleeding as fresh as the skin wound on a haemophile.

The amateur, seeing how the professional having learned all that he'll ever learn about writing can take a trivial thing such as the most superficial reactions of three uncharacterized girls and make it witty and charming—the amateur thinks he or she can do the same. But the amateur can only realize his ability to transfer his emotions to another person by some such desperate and radical expedient as tearing your first tragic love story out of your heart and putting it on pages for people to see.

That, anyhow, is the price of admission. Whether you are prepared to pay it or, whether it coincides or conflicts with your attitude on what is "nice" is something for you to decide. But literature, even light literature, will accept nothing less from the neophyte. It is one of those professions that wants the "works." You wouldn't be interested in a soldier who was only a little brave.

In the light of this, it doesn't seem worth while to analyze why this story isn't saleable but I am too fond of you to kid you along about it, as one tends to do at my age. If you ever decide to tell your stories, no one would be more interested than,

Your old friend,

F. Scott Fitzgerald

P.S. I might say that the writing is smooth and agreeable and some of the pages very apt and charming. You have talent—which is the equivalent of a soldier having the right physical qualifications for entering West Point.
The next was written by a 16-year old to J.K. Rowling and her reply.  

In September of 2006, following a desperately sad childhood that saw both drug-addicted parents murdered and the care of her younger siblings left in her hands, 16-year-old Sacia Flowers decided to write to J. K. Rowling and thank her for creating Harry Potter, her "best friend" during the most difficult of times. Her letter can be read below, followed by Rowling's lovely, encouraging response.

Sept. 2, 2006

Dear Mrs. Rowling,

I have so much I'd like to say, but I know you are a very busy woman so I'll try to keep it short and not take up too much of your time. Primarily, I would like to say I absolutely LOVE your books and have at least one copy of each on my book shelf, in addition to Harry's school books for Comic Relief and several analytical and biographical ones related to Harry and you. With that, I'll just go right into it. I first heard of the Harry Potter series when I was in fourth grade, but at the time I was not much of a reader. In the beginning of my fifth grade year, I went out on a whim and began Sorcerer's Stone; I was hooked by page three and have not been seen without a book on hand since.

I have never enjoyed a series as much as I have every one of your Harry books. I noticed, as I read each of the six books the first time through, I was the same age as Harry, which was quite coincidental. I have cried at least once reading every one of the six so far (several times during a few) and out right bawled at the end of Half-Blood Prince. Losing Dumbledore, empathizing with Harry and his friends, seeing their heartache, and feeling as though I had lost a grandpa myself was utterly overwhelming. The relationship that evolved and grew between Harry and Dumbledore from the end of book five and throughout book six increased the intensity of this for me.

This emotional reaction, I speculate, may perhaps be a result of the strong connection I feel with Harry. Not only do I wear glasses and have green eyes, thus sharing a bit of his physical appearance (I realize I speak of Harry as if he is a real person, but to me he is very real indeed, as I’m sure he is to you), but I'm also an orphan, both parents having been murdered when I was younger. In addition, I was always picked on before I went to my new school, as Harry was by Dudley and his cronies before he went to Hogwarts. So, I also have a strong emotional understanding with Harry and feel the severity of Harry's loss of Sirius (I bawled here as well); for these reasons Harry holds a special place in my heart and he always will.

Being picked on most of my life, I never had many friends due to my own insecurities and fear of loss, but through the most difficult times in my life, Harry was my best friend when I needed him most and he lent me his world in which to escape my own grief and hurt, and for this I thank you from the deepest part of my heart. To me, it's like Harry and I grew up together. I have grown a lot emotionally over the years and am now sixteen (as is Harry). Thank you so very much for lending me your hero and his world. He is my hero, and you are my heroine.

I do not expect a reply, as I know you are a very busy woman, mother, and wife, but I do hope you have a chance to read this letter (I understand you have a plethora of fan mail and there's only so many hours in the day). I do not wish for you to read this or reply so I can brag about making contact with a celebrity or something ridiculous of that nature; in fact, my family will probably not even know that I wrote to you. Mostly I just really wanted to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to you and Harry. I needed for you to know how important he has been to me.

Thank you, for everything.

Most Sincerely,

Sacia (Say-sha) Flowers
19th September 2006

Dear Sacia (beautiful name, I've never heard it before),

Thank you for your incredible letter; incredible, because you do indeed sound phenomenally like Harry Potter, in your physical resemblance and in your life experience. I cannot tell you how moved I was by what you wrote, nor how sorry I am to hear about your parents. What a terrible loss.

I know what it is like to be picked on, as it happened to me, too, throughout my adolescence. I can only wish that you have the same experience that I did, and become happier and more secure the older you get. Being a teenager can be completely horrible, and many of the most successful people I know felt the same way. I think the problem is that adolescence, though often misrepresented as a time of rebellion and unconventionality, actually requires everybody to conform if they aspire to popularity - or at least to 'rebel' while wearing the 'right' clothes! You're now standing on the threshold of a very different phase in your life, one where you are much more likely to find kindred spirits, and much less likely to be subject to the pressures of your teenage years.

It is an honour to me to know that somebody like you loves Harry as much as you do. Thank you very much for writing to me, I will treasure your letter (which entitles you to boast about this response as much as you like!)

With lots of love

JKRowling

(Jo to you!)

x