About the Common Book

Otterbein’s Common Book Program, one of the University’s signature programs, offers a shared reading experience for all incoming first-year students, faculty, staff, and other members of the Otterbein community. In this year’s common book, *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson writes about the absence of mercy and justice in our criminal justice system. His memoir chronicles the work he does to represent those who have not been fairly represented, giving us compassionate and inspiring portraits of all he encounters.

“It will be a gift within an opportunity for Otterbein’s incoming Class of 2021 to read Bryan Stevenson’s *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, as it was for me. I would go as far as to say it changed my life. I was impacted, conflicted, and changed by Stevenson's journey that explores the tragic injustices within the criminal justice system. In honor of what this University represents, where we stand on this campus right now, and where we are in the world, we must study these cases and experiences Bryan Stevenson has given us.”

~SARAH CARNES, Otterbein University Psychology major, minors in Creative Writing and Criminology & Justice Studies

Want to know more about the author and the book? Go to bryanstevenson.com and ejj.org.
Respond to the prompt below in an essay unified by a clear thesis or claim.

Stevenson works to help those who have been wrongfully incarcerated for various reasons. They may have been imprisoned as children; they may be intellectually disabled; or they may have been convicted and sentenced on the basis of flawed evidence or testimony, discrimination, inadequate legal representation, or prosecutorial misconduct.

Write an essay in which you examine the cases of two or three of the people Stevenson writes about. Analyze what these cases have in common or how they might be significantly different. Your essay should be unified by a strong thesis, or main idea.

Consider these topics in your analysis:
- The charge or charges against the people who are incarcerated
- The evidence and eyewitness testimony
- The conduct of the police, lawyer(s), judge, and jury
- The circumstances of the incarcerations
- Stevenson’s representation of their cases

Be sure to analyze and not summarize, or simply re-tell stories, in your essay. Support your thesis with specific evidence from the book, including at least three but no more than five brief quotations. Cite pages for all quotations, and include a Work Cited entry, which you'll find on page 4, Document Design. Respond as a thoughtful and critical reader, using only the book itself. Consult the Rubric for the Common Book Essay on page 3 for standards, and see the Document Design page for formatting.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effective / Completed</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Needs work/ Incomplete</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The introduction effectively introduces the book and engages the reader.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The thesis clearly presents the main idea of the essay.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The essay is organized and unified. The writer develops ideas logically, making appropriate and effective connections between them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The essay is an analysis, not just a summary, with reasons supporting the thesis clearly presented in topic sentences, and with each reason defended with clear and appropriate evidence from the book.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Supporting paragraphs are illustrated with specific support from the book (summary, paraphrase, and at least 3 direct quotations).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Quotations are carefully chosen and used judiciously, appropriately introduced and punctuated, and correctly cited.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The Work Cited entry is complete and correct.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Sentences are varied in length and structure.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The writing is economical. Word choice is precise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The writer is consistent in tense, number, and person. Mechanics, usage and grammar are standard. The essay has been carefully proofread.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Essays submitted to your professors should be written according to a standard format: font, spacing, margins, headings, page numbering, and documentation style are prescribed. The sample below illustrates these different features of an academic essay written according to MLA documentation style, 8th ed.

Sample First Page

1” Last Name 1
Your Name
Professor ___
FYS 1000
18 August 2017

Your Title

Academic writing follows certain conventions. The font, spacing, margins, and placement of headings and page numbers you select affect the appearance of your essay, which should be consistent from page to page and from paper to paper, and which should be appropriate to the assignment. Established rules dictate these matters of form to help make your essay not only clear and readable but also professional.

Some rules apply to type font, spacing, and indenting. A standard font is the one used here, Garamond, and the font size is usually 12 pt. Margins should be one inch at the top, bottom, left, and right of each page. Essays should be double-spaced. When you begin a new paragraph, tab, or indent the first word five spaces.

A major concern in an analytical essay is how to incorporate and cite quotations in your writing. Carefully selected quotations demonstrate your knowledge of the text. For instance, you might write:

The author explains empathy: “... our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing” (Stevenson 289).

A few words from a quotation may be enough to illustrate your idea. You may want to use a longer quotation occasionally, but try not to overload your essay with quotations. Your ideas and analysis are most important; quotations are evidence in support of those ideas.

Work Cited

How long should the essay be? About 500 – 750 words, or 2 – 3 pages, typed and double-spaced.

What if I don’t take my FYS until spring? Your essay will be collected at First Flight and given to your FYS instructor.

Who reads my essay? Your FYS instructor, who might grade your essay or simply offer comments.

Other questions? Contact Regina Kengla at rkengla@otterbein.edu.
Aggressive Reading

Reading at the college level is much more demanding than reading for high school. As a college student, you can expect more reading, reading that challenges your thinking, reading that broadens your view of the world, reading that transforms you. If you are going to read effectively at the college level, you cannot be passive; you must be a proactive reader and interact with your text. To help you become that successful, aggressive reader, we recommend this strategy:

**Locate:** Choose a time when and a place where you are alert and focused.

**Survey:** Look at chapter titles, and in textbooks, section headings, intros, topic sentences, words in bold type, graphics.

**Question:** Read your text with your assignment, your prompt, or your research question in mind. Answer and respond as you read.

**Now, read:** Armed with a view of the layout of the text and with questions you’re reading to answer, read in chunks of 10 pages. Read 100 pages at a sitting. Your reading will be more efficient.

**Write:** Yes, write as you read—annotate, or take notes in the margins. Use a pen, not a highlighter, and write in the margins: ask questions, circle unfamiliar words, connect with prior knowledge or with other parts of the text, list names, and underline key passages.

Annotations work in the present, to help you engage with the text, and in the future, when you’ll review for a test or collect information for a paper.

**Outline or Summarize:** Outlining as you read helps you situate what you’re reading in a larger context of information. Summarizing after you read a chapter, using your own words, is a good measure of your understanding of the text.

**Journal:** To help you read Stevenson’s book actively and productively, we recommend a reading journal in which you note observations, reflections, and questions as you read, pausing to write every so often. Summarize events, record images, trace patterns, find connections, describe significant persons, and explain relationships. Keeping the journal should help you to interact with the text, enhancing your understanding of the book and your ability to retain information. The journal serves as a record of your reading that can be useful in class discussions, assignments, and program events during the author’s visit. The reading journal can also serve as a reference for the essay that you’ll write and bring to First Flight.

---

*The Common Book Program is made possible by a generous gift from Mary B. Thomas, Class of 1928. Our thanks to Beth and Gary Daugherty for their gift to the Thomas Endowment, and to Alan Goff, Class of 1975, and Coral Harris, for their support of programming for Just Mercy.*