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, and for faculty, staff, and other members of the Otterbein community. *The Underground Railroad*, this year’s Common Book, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction, among many other accolades. The historical Underground Railroad was a metaphor for the loose network of people, routes, and safe houses used by slaves escaping to the free states in the North or to Canada. In his novel, Whitehead reimagines the metaphor of the Underground Railroad as a system of actual tracks and locomotives, built by African Americans, supervised by agents and run by conductors, all in an elaborate subterranean railway system.
Respond to the prompt below in an essay unified by a clear thesis or claim.

*The Underground Railroad* presents an unflinching look at the horrors of slavery. But as a work of fiction, the novel does not have to stay true to what actually happened; the author is able to change or even create new events and people to tell the story he imagines or create the effect he wants. In your essay, analyze how Colson Whitehead’s fictional account of the Underground Railroad relates to the real history. How does the novel deepen, clarify, or disrupt what you have learned about the atrocity of humans trafficked to this country and treated as property? What possibilities are introduced when artists take as their subject real people and events?

In your response, consider the railroad that Whitehead presents as a real construction; in addition, refer to two or three specific episodes in the novel that affected you in the ways that they dramatized history. Your essay should be unified by a strong thesis, or main idea. Be sure to analyze and not summarize, or simply re-tell the story, 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, no other sources. Consult the Rubric for the Common Book Essay on page 3 for standards, and see the Document Design, page 4, for formatting.

*Acknowledgments: Thanks to Dr. Jonathan DeCoster, History and Political Science, for his invaluable assistance.*
**An effective essay demonstrates the following characteristics:**

1. The introduction effectively introduces the book and engages the reader.
2. The thesis clearly presents the main idea of the essay.
3. 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.
4. The essay is organized and unified. The writer develops ideas logically, making appropriate and effective connections between them.
5. Supporting paragraphs are illustrated with specific support from the book (summary, paraphrase, and at least 3 direct quotations).
6. Quotations are carefully chosen and used judiciously, appropriately introduced and punctuated, and correctly cited.
7. The Work Cited entry is complete and correct.
8. Sentences are varied in length and structure.
9. The writing is economical. Word choice is precise.
10. The writer is consistent in tense, number, and person. Mechanics, usage and grammar are standard. The essay has been carefully proofread.

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*Time Life Pictures/National Archives/Getty Images*

*Freedom on the Move Project (1832 Ad); Southwestern Christian Advocate (New Orleans, LA) (1883 Ad)*

*Aminah Robinson, Columbus Museum of Art*
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

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 academic essay is correct incorporation and citation of quotations. Carefully selected quotations demonstrate your knowledge of the text. For instance, you might write:

Ridgeway, the slave catcher, explains to Cora, “... I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed” (Whitehead 226).

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

Important Dates, Fall 2018

First Flight, Aug. 15-19
Classes Begin, Monday, Aug. 20
Campus Author Visit, Oct. 23 - 24
  • Common Book Convocation,
    Tues., Oct. 23, 3 PM, Cowan Hall
  • Common Book signing and Reception,
    4:15 PM, Fisher Gallery, Roush Hall
Check for information about other programming.

What’s Due and When

Your essay will be the first writing that you submit to your ePortfolio, an electronic archive of your academic work as an Otterbein student. Bring your essay in two forms to First Flight: a printed copy and an electronic version saved to a USB flash drive. The printed copies of your assignments will be collected and discussed during your FYS course meetings on Thursday, August 16 and Friday, August 17, 2018.

Your FYS Peer Mentor will introduce you to ePortfolios and show you how to upload your essay to your ePortfolio from your flash drive.

FAQs

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, use your writing to begin discussion of the book, or simply offer comments.
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. Try to 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 Whitehead’s book actively and productively, you might keep 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.

Hanby House, Main St., waymarking.com

Stoner House, State St., waymarking.com

Sharp Home, Africa Rd., commons.wikimedia.org

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