

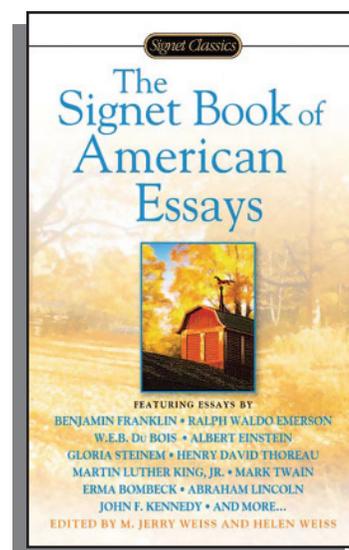


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

THE SIGNET BOOK OF AMERICAN ESSAYS

EDITED BY M. JERRY WEISS AND HELEN WEISS

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QUESTIONS

1. What is "literacy" in this modern age? What suggestions are there for developing a more literate society?
2. Franklin talks about his love of reading. Have the class make a survey throughout the school to determine to what extent students enjoy reading. What kinds of reading materials do they enjoy most? The preferred genres? Have the students discuss these types and what make them so appealing. To what extent are these part of the regular school curricula?
3. Katherine Paterson and Eudora Welty explain why they write and what they write. How does such information help readers with the comprehension and interpretation of literary works? How does knowledge of a writer's background reflect on his/her writing? Have students cite examples.
4. What does a reader learn from the essays by Pickering and Lederer about the power of language, writing, communication of thoughts? How important is writing today in a technological age? Have students keep a journal, recording events in their lives for three or four weeks. Assign them the task of writing a brief essay or memoir based on an event from journal recordings. What is there about the selection process of what is included that helps with understanding what a writer or editor goes through?
5. Emerson and Einstein have interesting statements about the purposes of education and the essential elements of a meaningful education. Have students discuss these "essentials." To what extent is there agreement or disagreement? How do students' educational experiences reflect these goals? If changes are needed, what are they and how can they best be implemented? Are Emerson and Einstein's ideas as significant today as they were when they were written? Have students explain their answers.
6. Much discussion and many writings have been made about gaps in educational programs that show differences in the quality of programs in rural, suburban, urban areas. Have students research such articles and see to what extent they reflect ethnic differences and possible causes for such gaps. In "The Coming of John," what was there about John's efforts that caused concern among the local citizens? Have the students discuss ideas about segregated schools. These might be based by race as well as gender. Laws have been passed to guarantee an equal education. To what extent are these laws effective?
7. After students have read Mather, Heschel and Osherow, discuss the meaning and values of religious freedom. To what extent does religion impact on social, personal and political matters? Cite examples.
8. What is "intellectual freedom?" How important is this in a democratic society? Have students cite examples to support their responses.
9. After students have read essays by Fisher, Morrow, and Krug, encourage a discussion about book banning. What guidelines should be developed before "censoring" artistic works? How effective are rating systems of movies and TV programs? Should a similar system be applied to other media, such as print, art, etc.? Explain. Suggestions have been made that students should have "restricted areas", such as visitations to museums? This means that pictures and sculpture in which there are nudity should be avoided. Ask the students to comment on this idea. What would this do to the study of masterpieces?

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10. Fisher, on page 157, states: “Restraints on our intellectual freedom and other private rights have always been constructed either by those few who seize the mechanisms of government or academia for self serving interest, or by those few without fiat but with self anointed agendas for the rest of us who struggle through life’s travails.” Research examples of such powers and report on these in class. (Ex. Dictatorships, religious groups.)

11. Morrow presents a case for studying the American classic HUCKLEBERRY FINN by Mark Twain. What is there about this novel that might lead to the banning? To what extent is the use of certain words in a text a reasonable rationale for not studying a literary work? Compile a list of reasons why certain literary works might not be studied in schools? Invite a public librarian to class to discuss these issues and the rationale for the celebration of BANNED BOOK WEEK which is sponsored by the American Library Association.

12. Discuss the situation in which a parent does not want his/her child to read a particular book. What might be done in a school situation to alleviate the problem? When do intellectual freedom and individual rights come into conflict?

13. Abigail Adams states on page 197: “And, by the way, in the new code of laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.” How effective was her request at the drawing up of “The Declaration of Independence” and the Constitution? As of today, to what extent has Abigail’s request been honored by laws and civic action? Give specific examples.

14. To what extent do you agree with the patriarchal and racial attitudes depicted in Steinem’s essay? How would courses on women’s studies, Latino studies, African-American studies, multicultural studies bring about changes in societal attitudes and practices? What might

such courses contain and what might the rationales be for the requirements?

15. What do the Cisneros, Clinton and Quindlen writings highlight about the need for women to speak out? With the examples cited in these essays, what issues should be studied in schools and colleges? What steps should be taken to improve the lot of women in modern society the world over? Discuss the “forces” that seem to place women in “lower” positions in societies.

16. How do the essays by Thoreau and King raise issues about individualism in a social order? Have students write responses in which they give argument to the issues presented. When should law and order take precedent over individual rights? Research contemporary cases in which the rights of individuals have been issues.

17. Why is humor important in people’s lives? Plimpton states on page 282: “Surely, of all the arts—excluding music, perhaps—the written word is the most ill-equipped to engender laughter.” Have students discuss this issue. Expose the students not only to the essays by Bombeck and Twain, but also to such writers as James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, Langston Hughes, Art Buchwald, Andy Rooney, Al Franken, David Sedaris, Kurt Vonnegut, among others. What are the different forms of humor (satire, irony, etc.)? What are the purposes of humor? How effective are writers such as Bombeck and Twain in getting their ideas across? Have each student write a humor column for a newspaper.

18. What insights do the writings of the four past Presidents provide about the military and the use of the military? Throughout American history, what are the causes of war? What are the effects? How have wars changed throughout our country’s development? What insights do these essays give readers about the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Darfur, and other places throughout the world? What are the alternatives to such conflicts? How can these best be implemented?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

M. JERRY WEISS is a Distinguished Service Professor of Communications Emeritus, New Jersey City University. He is an author/editor of twenty books and over 100 professional articles, including *Guidance Through Drama*, *Dreams and Visions*, *Reading in the Secondary School*, and the *Signet Book of Short Plays* (with Helen S. Weiss). He has been a recipient of various teaching and education awards,

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