

# The American Autobiography Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature  
Teacher Manual

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## Four-Level Literature: General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included are flexible options, not a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the classroom teacher. The classroom environment presents the teacher with unique limitations and opportunities. The classroom is a good environment for discussions and Socratic explorations

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of ideas. The dynamic relationships between students and teacher provide moments of intense learning that are amplified by the group interactions. On the other hand, classroom teachers see students for limited amounts of time; teachers may have students of various readiness levels in the same classroom, and they usually have to report grades to an administration according to a system that can affect the classroom dynamic adversely. The activities that generate numerical scores may not be activities that increase student enthusiasm for content. Many of the most important things to teach are also the least scorable. Furthermore, classroom teachers have course content and test content that they are expected to cover, and this may limit the amount of time available for a literature program.

Teachers also work in a social culture that can be unintellectual or even anti-intellectual, and this may afford scant support for a teacher determined to bring rigorous, superb reading experiences to the students. The public understanding of the importance of literary classics, of long works, of works with rigorous vocabulary, and of works from previous generations or centuries is not always what a literature teacher would desire. The

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teacher may be confronted with not only a lack of understanding but even an intractable opposition to these elements, even though these elements are the very heart of an authentic education.

All too often, great reading that includes these characteristics is rejected as “old-fashioned.” People who know literature well do not think that; it is an impediment to a credible program of literature, and it escalates the very weaknesses that our program is designed to strengthen.

Serious literature—including great children’s literature—is not old-fashioned, regardless of when it was written. High genius does not go out of fashion. Furthermore, Western civilization did not begin thirty years ago. It is no advantage to be able to read only entry-level books of the present generation. Great readers of every age read great writers of every age, and the great readers of our present avidly devour the best books of the past.

Books are the time machine of culture. Whenever they were written, it is now that we read them. It is one of the great joys of the educated mind to read back through time, to read back through the centuries, to read great

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books written in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, and before. It is exciting to immerse oneself in the English of Jane Austen or of Daniel Defoe. There is a romance in the history of the English language. It is not better if one cannot read the *Declaration of Independence*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. We do not want our children's minds to be trapped in contemporary English or contemporary beginner's vocabulary.

Imagine that you lived in a spectacular mountain range, surrounded by famous peaks, but did not know it; you had a high fence, and all you had ever seen was the yard around your house.

We also do not want our children to be capable only of reading short works or excerpts. We want their attention spans to be developed and strengthened. Minds grow from struggle. Life is filled with problems that require long and complex thinking. There is a growth of intellect that occurs in following a story or argument for 300 pages that is unknown to everyone who has not experienced it, and almost all famous works are long. To eliminate long works from the educational program is to eliminate the educational program. It is to eliminate

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almost all famous novels. It is to eliminate almost all of the reading that makes one educated. To avoid the long books is to be unread. The current emphasis on short works and excerpts, however well-intentioned, is an educational disaster. Long works are essential.

Short works and excerpts are geared to the instructional minutes available in a one-hour class period. They are not geared to the serious needs of an educated life, and there are abundant ways to incorporate long works into the classroom—ways that have been standard educational practice for centuries.

Finally, we do not want children's reading to focus on works of mere entertainment. Fun is desirable, but there is more to educated reading than fun, and fun is not the most important goal. Greater than fun is meaning. We want children to learn the excitement of thinking, of books that use fiction or nonfiction to disclose important ideas. We do not want children's reading experience to be limited to works of distraction. The educated mind is not a state of oblivion; it is a state of illumination. We want children to know the attraction of serious books with serious ideas that have the chance of being right or wrong. There are novels with memorable characters that

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The American Autobiography Trilogy  
Vocabulary Prestudy

Here are twelve words common to all three books.  
Let us examine them before beginning the trilogy.

**apprehension:** n. anxiety, fear

**ascertain:** v. find out for certain

**conjecture:** n. a guess

**latter:** adj. the second, the later one

**manifest:** adj. obvious; v. to reveal or make obvious

**nigh:** adv. near

**notwithstanding:** prep. in spite of

**precept:** n. a general rule of conduct

**reproof:** n. disapproval, criticism

**singular:** adj. unique, odd

**tedious:** adj. tiresome, boring

**thither:** adv. there

**apprehension:** n. anxiety, fear

“The wealthy inhabitants oppos’d any addition, being against all paper currency, from an apprehension that it would depreciate, as it had done in New England, to the prejudice of all creditors.”

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

“I left Baltimore with a young heart overborne with sadness, and a soul full of apprehension.”

*The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*

“It was a rather cool evening, and some of his neighbors were apprehending a frost.”

*Walden*



*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

A Comment

If Benjamin Franklin were alive, I would tremble to write a word about him. His incisive retort to anything I might say, I would dread to hear. Even now, more than two hundred years after Franklin's death, I slink toward the task of a comment with trepidation, as though stepping into a perceptual minefield. Whatever I say, I would like to get right, but how can anyone draw confident conclusions about such an elusive spirit?

Am I over-cautious about discussing this American icon? On the surface, his book seems straightforward enough: a candid and emotionally reserved account of major episodes in his life. To our disappointment, the autobiography ends before reaching the dramatic story of the Revolution, which we long in vain to hear.

Yes, the *Autobiography* seems straightforward enough, but *seems* is the right word. Behind the seeming candor of the *Autobiography's* surface—right behind it and dimly

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visible, moving with veiled alertness—we sense the wink of genius, the suppressed wink of the cagiest of men, composing a seeming autobiography that he knew would be read not only by his family but by posterity.

The wink of genius. Evil genius? No, but careful, self-conscious writer, yes. For all of his rags-to-hard-work routine, Franklin was no rube, no ingenuous innocent merely transcribing what he could remember of his poor boy's struggle up the ladder of American society. He was no ordinary poor boy, no urchin. From his earliest years, he was a monster reader, and he does not let us forget that. He was clever and alert enough to make his fortune in Philadelphia; to become America's first great diplomat; to conduct experiments in electricity; to develop the Franklin stove, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, fire departments, and public libraries; to organize the Pennsylvania militia; to impress social magnates who could promote his career; to establish the University of Pennsylvania; to become Governor of Pennsylvania; to assist the Revolutionary cause and become a founding father, helping to draft the *Declaration of Independence*; to watch his words; and to take care for how his actions would seem.

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*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

Language Illustration Questions

The following questions concern the language illustrations that appear in this edition of Franklin's *Autobiography*. These questions will promote a thoughtful involvement with what the illustrations reveal about Benjamin Franklin's writing.

1. Which two of the language illustrations in Chapters One through Five are your favorites? Why?
  2. Explain, in your own words, the point of the language illustration in Chapter Ten.
  3. There are three illustrations in Chapter Thirteen. Which of these three is most important? Why?
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## *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

### Quotations for Discussion

The following quotations from Franklin's *Autobiography* are presented for reflection and discussion, which could take the form of essay writing if that is one's preference. The quotations are presented in groups of five chapters at a time, allowing for a solid reading followed by thinking. Students are not asked to comment on every quotation but are given a choice of several, allowing them to choose their favorite quotation or the one that they think is most interesting or meaningful.

These quotations are selected for their richness and potential for interpretation. There is not an answer key because there is not a right answer. These are open-ended Socratic reflections, not convergent questions that require students to find right answers in the book.

We want to foster extended, uninterrupted reading, five chapters at a time, before pausing for reflection. This affords a more authentic reading experience than if

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we required paperwork after each chapter.

The numbers beside the quotations indicate the chapters where the quotations appear. Some chapters have no quotations, no suitable quotation being found in the chapter; others have more than one. It would be good to allow the students to choose one quotation to discuss or to write about in a short, thoughtful essay of one or two typed pages—short because we do not want this to turn into a major assignment that would interrupt the flow of the book.

This assignment should not be heavy or overly time-consuming. The idea is good reflection without anxiety. This is an open-book assignment, and students may wish to go to the chapter to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in their essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for students to select and discuss an interesting quotation not given here, instead of the ones that I provide.

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

Chapters 1-5

2. From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with the *Pilgrim's Progress*, my first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes. I afterward sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton's *Historical Collections*....
  
  2. About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it. With this view I took some of the papers, and, making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, try'd to compleat the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as
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## *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

### Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the students' creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the students to play a part in choosing the creative activities that they will do. If you assign these as written essays, first person is acceptable.

1. Benjamin Franklin returned from England and went on to world fame for his achievements in America. What do you think would have happened had he stayed in England?
  2. In Chapter Nine Franklin describes his plan for achieving moral perfection. He lists thirteen virtues. If you were to remove one of the virtues that he listed and replace it with a more important virtue that he forgot, could you do it?
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## *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

### Academic Writing Practice

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* is an extraordinary American document—one that every student should read during the high school years. It is filled with advanced language and deep insights into American culture. There are many interesting events and ideas that provide opportunities for academic essays. These essays can combine quotations from the *Autobiography* itself and also from additional sources that the students might like to include; the *Autobiography* need not be the only source.

In my own courses I use open-book essay questions exclusively as the assessment for literature. I insist that the essays be written in standard academic English. They must be true essays, with introductions, bodies, and conclusions centered on single ideas. Students must use the standard conventions of formal style: no contractions, no first person. *Essay Voyage* and my

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*Advanced Academic Writing* books provide the guidelines for the essays.

I like to provide four or five study questions in advance, and I give the students several days to prepare for the essays. The actual writing will consist of three of the study questions, with one being mandatory. Each student will choose one of the remaining two to answer. In this method the students must prepare for all study questions, requiring a good deal of thought and preparation. I do not spring surprise questions on the students. I do believe that some student choice is important.

I provide more than five questions here, and you can select those that you wish to give to the students. You also may replace any of these questions with questions you prefer, so long as they are intratextual and not critical in nature.

These are Socratic questions that do not favor one answer over another; the evaluation of the essays will be based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the students make with quotations. This means that students should bring their books to the essay session in order to quote from them.

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1. What indications do you see early in Franklin's life that he might develop into a famous and extraordinarily accomplished person?
  2. What part did reading books play in Benjamin Franklin's life?
  3. Franklin devotes several pages to his interaction with General Braddock prior to Braddock's defeat and death. How would you explain the most important reasons for Braddock's defeat?
  4. Franklin talks at great length about his experiments with poetry and his admiration of poetry. A number of his poems are extant and can be read by anyone today. Why did Franklin not include poetic devices in his *Autobiography*? Many famous prose writers do use them.
  5. Franklin documents many instances of how he went to great lengths to keep up appearances, to make people think of him in a certain way. Were
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