

# The American Autobiography Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature  
Parent 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 homeschool parent to use in conjunction with *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Clearly, this trilogy is advanced

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and academic—suitable for older students rather than younger children.

The homeschool environment is different in many dimensions from the traditional school environment, and the recommendations take full advantage of the unique flexibility and purity of concentration that occurs in the homeschool setting. In writing a manual for homeschool use, however, I am mindful that the homeschool environment itself exists in many variations. Some children are homeschooled individually, others in small groups or classes. There are homeschool parents who want a grade-free, creative environment and others who want to establish a classical academic rigor that they may feel is lacking in the school system.

My strategy in this manual, therefore, is to provide paths for all of the above. I may refer to the *child*, or I may refer to the *class*, thinking of a small homeschool class. Every activity in this manual can be conducted as an ungraded, creative activity, or it can be graded by a parent who wants the child to learn how to navigate a grading system. I do not provide any system for grading.

It is important that the approach to literature be literary, focused on the texts, and simple. I do not want

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a noisy panorama of activities, worksheets, and other busywork to be the program. The program is the books. I want our approach to be deft and quiet, rather than loud. I want us to behave with literary grace. I want our activities to cuddle up to the books. We will do some creative and academic work in conjunction with the books, with our hearts turned at all times toward the books.

Accordingly, we can think about the program strategy in terms of four simple levels. The four levels are preparing, reading, creative thinking, and writing.

### **1. Preparing**

Prior to reading the book, we might use an encyclopedia or the internet to look up the author and learn about the author's life and the place of the book in cultural history. This content, however, is secondary to the content of the book itself; it would not be important if the book were not important. An alternative is to do this research after reading the book, when the child may be even more curious about the details.

We might also prestudy the vocabulary by studying the words common to all books in the trilogy and then

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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. The child is not asked to comment on every quotation but is given a choice of several, allowing him or her to choose a favorite quotation or the one that 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 the child 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 child 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 the child may wish to go to the chapter to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in his or her essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for the child 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 child's creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the child to play a part in choosing the creative activities that he or she 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 child 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 child 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 child. 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 is based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the child makes with quotations. This means that the child should bring his or her book to the essay session in order to quote from it.

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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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