

COMPOSITION:

An Autobiography Assignment



*"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life,
or whether that station will be held by anybody else,
these pages must show."*

— *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens



WRITING PORTFOLIO: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

You will write some assignments in class; others will be homework; you will turn some in for comment, and share others in peer groups. You will be required 20 of the following assignments, 10 will be my choice, 10 will be your choice.

You will use Google Docs to write all of your assignments. If you do not have a Google account you will receive help setting one up.

You should revise *ALL* assignments. All assignments must go through some form of the writing workshop and show evidence of revision. Most assignments will be approximately a page long.

- **A COVER--** Your cover should include your selected title, your name, and an illustration appropriate to your book. For illustrations, consider a word pattern, graphic design, collage, original drawings, photographs, magazine pictures, quotations, etc. Use rubber cement or a glue stick to mount items, and be sure that your cover design hides price tags and brand names.
- **A TITLE PAGE--** Select a word or phrase particularly meaningful for you to serve as your title. Browse through a thesaurus, listen to music you love, think of special people and places and interests, and then submit several possible titles. “A Book about Me” or “My Autobiography” are poor titles because they are vague and impersonal. Illustrate the title page with the title, name, hour, and date due.
- **A TABLE OF CONTENTS--** List the assignment number and title of all assignments in your autobiography. Title each contents page.
- **AN INTRODUCTION--** Explain the significance of your title, making clear why it is relevant to your life in particular. Also include a brief description of this writing project and its purposes -- in your own words.

Every assignment should be:

- a thoughtful response to the assigned topic
- revised as necessary
- neatly and legibly written or typed
- in order according to this assignment booklet
- in black ink
- titled on the top line
- numbered by assignment (not page) in the upper right corner
- corrected using proofreading symbols or correction fluid

DONENESS counts! But your writing should also demonstrate appropriate word usage, sentence structure, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

***THE FOLLOWING ASSIGNMENTS ARE REQUIRED: 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 20, 27, 38, 40, 43**

WRITING PORTFOLIO: *Specific Assignments*

*1. **Prologue (or Introduction):** Explain the significance of your title, making clear why it is relevant to your life in particular. Introduce yourself gracefully to your reader and capture our attention. Include a brief description of this writing project and its purposes — in your own words.

2. **What's in a Name?:** Names are an integral part of who we are. They shape our sense of who we are. Explore your feelings about “the unity between [your]self and [your] name.” Are these the names you would have chosen for yourself? Surname, middle name, Christian name? Is there a story behind your naming? Someone famous, a family member, weird initials? Does your name have symbolic meaning? Is it ethnic or historic or literary? Did your parents consider other names? In short, how do you live with your name?

*3. **Personal Alphabet:** Browse through a dictionary, looking for adjectives to describe yourself. Know the meaning of the words you select and be able to explain how each word you've chosen fits you. Choose at least **ONE** adjective for each letter of the alphabet. Be sure you choose the adjective form of words. For example, “excite” is a verb and “excitable” is an adjective. “Exciting” is a participle so it can be used as an adjective...**BUT** “excitable” and “exciting” mean very different things.

4. **Likes / Dislikes List:** Make **TWO** columns, one titled “Likes,” the other “Dislikes,” and list from **TEN** to **FIFTEEN** specific items in each column. Avoid naming specific classmates and teachers by generalizing. For example, “that mean teacher who's making me write an autobiography,” not my name!

5. **Sensory Experiences:** The five senses allow us to perceive whatever is tangible, or concrete. A sensory experience is something we can taste, touch, smell, see, or hear. For example, ice-cold water-melon, hot dogs sizzling over a charcoal fire, mosquito bites, fireworks, and the music of the ice-cream wagon are sensory experiences I associate with a Fourth of July picnic. Describe a specific time and place which recalls rich sensory experiences for you. Include at least **TWO** details that appeal to each of the **FIVE** senses.

*6. **Metaphorical Definitions:** This kind of definition helps make abstract words easier to understand by giving a specific concrete example. A famous metaphorical definition is “Happiness is a warm puppy.” For you, happiness may be something very different — a raise in your allowance, a banana split, a room of your own. Write metaphorical definitions of **TEN** different abstract nouns. Your concrete example must be something specific that you can sense — taste, touch, smell, see, or hear. Your definitions should follow the format below:

METAPHORICAL DEFINITION = ABSTRACT NOUN + IS + CONCRETE EXAMPLE

7. **Color Your World:** In color, and about color, this assignment honors every crayon ever nibbled by any kid. Although you don't have to use crayons, use the color(s) themselves as part of your writing. You could write a poem about the things you associate with a specific color, such as all the blues there are! Or explain the colors you associate with different emotions. Or make lists of best colors to wear or drive in or... You have freedom with content here, since color is the key ingredient. Maybe a myth about "How Pink Was Born"?

8. **Room Sweet Room:** We are territorial animals, instinctively seeking a place we can call our own. The rooms we live in and how we decorate them are as revealing as our clothing. Examine your own room and all the things that make it uniquely yours. Describe the room, not just by listing the things in it, but by conveying the feelings you have for the room and the items in it.

*9. **Personal Metaphors:** Make a list of metaphorical comparisons. Think, "If I were an animal, what kind of animal would I be?" For each item, write the general LABEL and then your specific comparison. Be realistic, be somewhat honest, and be able to explain your choices. Don't say you are a rose, if you're really a daisy. Do at least 10 of the following or come up with your own.

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|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Animal | 11. Musical Instrument |
| 2. Car | 12. Geometric Shape |
| 3. Article of Clothing | 13. Piece of Furniture |
| 4. Day of the Week | 14. Song |
| 5. Food | 15. Season of the Year |
| 6. Color | 16. Television Character |
| 7. Movie | 17. Cartoon or Comic Character |
| 8. Fragrance | 18. Appliance or Machinery |
| 9. Type of Building | 19. Natural Phenomenon |
| 10. Plant | 20. Word |

10. **Extended Metaphors:** Go back to your list of personal metaphors. Choose FIVE that you can extend by explaining the comparison in detail. Write a paragraph for each personal metaphor by giving four or five specific points of comparison. If you are like an alley cat, discuss four characteristics of an alley cat and explain the ways in which you have the same characteristics.

11. **Symbolic Recipe:** Write a symbolic recipe for yourself. This means your ingredients are not blood, muscle, bone, and a hank of hair, but abstract qualities and personality traits (like patience, friendliness, humor). What is really necessary to create you. Follow standard recipe format: a list of ingredients and exact measurements, followed by a paragraph of instructions, advice about the proper sequence of the steps, and any tips or warnings.

*12. **The Ultimate All-Purpose Excuse:** Just in case you are tardy some day, write an elaborate, exaggerated, fantastic excuse for yourself. Be as creative as you can. In about 150 WORDS, convince your heartless English teacher that your excuse is a valid reason for being tardy.

13. **Telling Tales:** Think back to memories you associate with family storytelling. You know, the ones you hear over and over every holiday. Maybe these tales are the legends that have given your family courage in hardship? Maybe they are religious stories or goofy songs or true family history? Maybe they all seem to be about what a bad kid you were? Embarrassing, hilarious, unbelievable? Retell a story you remember as part of your family’s heritage OR make up one you wish had been told (and may tell in your own family circles later).

14. **Unfinished Sentences:** Complete each of the following sentences by expanding them into short paragraphs. As always, be specific.

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|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. I usually worry about... | 6. I feel frustrated when... |
| 2. I feel angry when... | 7. I feel depressed when... |
| 3. I’m moody when... | 8. I am comfortable when... |
| 4. I’m happiest when... | 9. I feel nervous when... |
| 5. I feel confident when... | 10. I feel sentimental when... |

15. **Personal Symbol:** Write about an object that has special symbolic meaning for you. It might be a gift from someone you love, an award of which you are proud, a souvenir from a place you miss, a childhood toy you still treasure, a family photograph, whatever. Describe the object, appealing to the senses as appropriate and giving specific details. Also explain what it symbolizes for you.

16. **A Mysterious Place:** Describe in a FULL page some place that seemed mysterious, exotic, or fearful to you. Concentrate on creating the same impression on your reader by a careful selection of sensory details which recreate the setting. Help us recognize what was special about this place. Or make up a fantasy place that has these qualities...just describe it well enough for us to believe in it too.

17. **Synecdics:** Synecdics makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It is the basis of all metaphor and involves the process of creative problem-solving. Each of the following sets of questions ask for choices between unrelated answers — answers which can be logically related somehow — and yet, there is no single correct answer. **BUT** correct answers would rephrase the question as part of the answer.

Think carefully about the choices offered, make a choice, and then explain your reasons for choosing as you have. It is your explanation which proves your answer “right” or “wrong.”

Answer at least TEN.

1. Which is wiser? a pen or a pencil?
2. Which is easier to forgive? a street or a sidewalk?
3. Which is smarter? a clock or a calendar?
4. Which is easier to teach? a question or an answer?
5. Which is like a contest? a cloud or a sunset?
6. Which is more fearful? new or old?
7. Which is like a promise? mathematics or science?
8. Which is more difficult? a dream or a nightmare?
9. Which is braver? an hour or a year?
10. Which has more pride? an entrance or an exit?
11. Which is easier to close? a road or a map?
12. Which is like a legend? a mirror or glass?

13. Which is more suspenseful? rain or snow?
14. Which has less charm? a signature or an autograph?
15. Which is more trustworthy? history or literature?
16. Which is more useful? a friend or an enemy?
17. Which is sadder? seek or find?
18. Which costs more? a home or a house?
19. Which is happier? music or art?
20. Which is like a valentine? the truth or a lie?

18. **A Day in the Life:** Write about a part of your life as if it were a passage from a novel. Refer to yourself in the **THIRD PERSON** — not “I woke up” but rather “she woke up.” Exaggerate, elaborate, and make it up if you wish — there’s truth to be found in fiction, too.

19. **These Words Belong to Me:** Make a list of words which have special power and magic. Think of common words with uncommon meanings, or even strange new words which allow you to think a new kind of thought. For example, do you know what “serendipity” means? Find out why it’s so wonderful. What’s ironic about a “scar”? List and define at least **TEN** words. For each word, explain why this particular word belongs to you. Or perhaps give me a hint hidden in a question?

*20. **In Other Words:** Try expressing yourself through someone else’s words. Select at least ten “Quotable Quotes” which express your philosophy of life. Choose quotations which represent your thought on several aspects of life – not only love, but also faith, success, integrity, character, friendship, etc. List the **TEN** you have selected, including **ATTRIBUTION** (who said it).

21. **Flashback:** If you could relive one day or experience in your life, what would it be? You might choose to relive this time because it was so wonderful you want to experience it again, or you might choose a day you want to change in some way. Identify the day or experience, tell why it was so important to you, and explain what reliving it would accomplish.

22. **Remembrance of Things Present:** In twenty years you will have forgotten most of the things that fill your life now. What are the things about who you are now, what you enjoy and value, what you do with your time, and so on that you want to remember twenty years from now? Imagine what will be important to your memory of yourself later on. Write these things down.

23. **As Time Goes Bye-Bye: *Carpe diem*** (or, Seize the day!). Before time passes you by, what things do you want to do? What one thing do you most want to do by the time you are thirty-five? Why? What have you already said good-bye to – people, places, ideas, stages in your life, hopes, dreams, sorrows? Reflect on those good-byes and/or grand plans. Make a list with short explanations, or concentrate on explaining one specific goal or farewell in depth.

24. **My Own List of Lists:** Now in its third edition, *The Book of Lists* lists facts from history, literature, science, entertainment, etc. For your list of lists, I have selected more personal topics. Write the general **LABEL** for each category and **UNDERLINE** it. Then list from **SIX** to **TEN** specific items under each category.

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| 1. People who have influenced me... | 6. Things that worry me... |
| 2. Places that make me happy... | 7. Things I would like to know how to do... |
| 3. Places I would like to go... | 8. Things that have moved me... |
| 4. Things in people which I like... | 9. Ideas that intrigue me... |
| 5. Things in people which I dislike... | 10. My personal favorites... |

25. **Metamorphosis:** Make a list of objects, places, ideas that could stand for your younger self, symbols for the way you used to be. Then make a contrasting list that could stand for your current self, symbols that represent the way you are now. Sort of an “I used to be...but now I am...” kind of chart. Use these contrasting **LISTS** to write a **FREE VERSE POEM** on your transformation.

26. **Picture This:** Find an acceptable visual **IMAGE** that you can actually include in your portfolio — a photo of friends, a copy of a well-known painting, magazine clipping, original artwork, etc. Paste it on the page with **IDENTIFICATION** (caption, title and artist, bibliography, etc.) Then write a **RESPONSE**, clearing stating your opinion of the work and supported by details from the work. Sound familiar?

*27. **Look Who I Look Up To:** Think of three people of established reputation whom you admire. You may need to do some formal research on these people, so don't choose your Aunt Helen unless she's in the encyclopedia. You must be specific. If you admire Martin Luther King, Jr., saying he fought for civil rights isn't enough. Exactly what did he do? Devote one solid paragraph to each person, telling what each person has done to deserve your admiration.

28. **Remembering the Child:** Imagine yourself a sweet little toddler. How did others see you when you were very little? Interview someone who knew you as a small child -- one of your parents or grandparents, an older sibling, or an aunt or uncle, for example. Write about their favorite memory of you. Some possibilities are when you learned how to walk or ride a bike, a memorable sports game or musical event, a visit to grandparents, a special birthday, a fulfilling and relaxing evening at home, or anything else that stands out.

29. **One Medium Suitcase:** Imagine that you are leaving home forever, and you can only take what will fit in one medium-sized suitcase with you. Specifically, what will you take with you and why? Explain.

30. **The Perfect Present:** Since I am the perfect teacher, I have the ability to select the perfect present for each of you. It's something you've always wanted, something you've secretly yearned for. It's not a black Trans-Am or designer jeans because there's a catch -- the gift is intangible, or abstract. This means that you cannot perceive it with the five senses. For example, you might want patience, self-confidence, intuition. Tell me what the gift is, why it's the perfect gift, why you need it, and how it will affect your life.

31. **Memorable Event:** Include a ticket stub, program, or some other tangible evidence to represent an event you experienced this year that in some way was memorable. Describe the event, with whom you attended, what was special about it, if you would do it again, etc. For example, you might describe a concert of your favorite group, a special movie you anticipated, a family reunion, or a birthday party. Don't forget the evidence!

32. **Are You Hungry?:** In great detail, using lots of description, tell us about your favorite meal. Where is it served? When? Who cooks it? What dishes does it include? What's your favorite part of your favorite meal? This can be a home-cooked meal or a fancy dinner out or even your usual fast food...whatever makes you lick your lips.

33. **Where I'm From:** Using George Ella Lyon's poem as your inspiration, compile a list of specifics that reveal your roots. Specificity is the key – exact things, places, traditions, sayings...Let where and what and who you are from reveal how you have become who you are now.

34. **Deck of 52:** The enormously popular *52 Deck* series offers whimsically illustrated adventures and activities -- 52 Alternatives to TV, 52 Cheap Dates, 52 Relaxing Rituals, 52 Things to Do in a Museum, 52 Great Books, 52 Romantic Films, 52 Adventures in Chicago (or LA or our town), etc. Create your own concept for a deck and come up with a working list of what will be on each card. You may collaborate with up to three more people on this, maybe even dividing the deck into four suits like playing cards.

35. **The Examined Life:** Divide a sheet of paper in half. On one side, list the best things about yourself. On the other side, list your greatest faults. Your good side must be at least as long as your bad side! Note that, like everyone else in the world, you have a combination of traits.

36. **Annual Report:** Write a kind of annual report on the state of yourself. Compared to what you were a year ago, what are you now? What do you hope to be a year from now? What do you expect to be? Do you expect to make "progress"? If so, how has your last year proven your ability to progress? Are you better off than you were a year ago? Or worse off?

37. **Ekphrasis:** Select (and include) a painting or photograph which inspires you, and ...be inspired! Write a poem, a story, an essay, or even create a parody. Include the original artwork and fully attribute it.

*38. **Lessons I Learned After It Was Too Late:** It seems that we always learn the most important lessons the hard way, usually when it's too late, when we've already made our big mistakes. Look back over your life and write approximately a **PAGE** on the lessons you learned after it was too late.

39. **The Door:** Imagine you are sitting in your English class and it is almost time for the bell to ring. You are to write two paragraphs by completing the sentences below. Let your imagination loose, expanding and extrapolating from the imaginative to the unbelievable. Think of dozens and dozens of details for each topic.

1. When I walk out that door, I want . . .
2. When I walk out that door, I don't want . . .

*40. **Advice to the Young:** Based upon your experience, what practical information about life, living, and growing up could you give to a younger person? You may write this to a generalized "young person," to the child you hope to have some day, to a specific young person you know, or even to your younger self.

41. **Who Am I?:** Everyone is a combination of many selves. You play a variety of roles, such as student, brother or sister, friend, basketball player, music lover, worker, reader, and the like. Make a list of five nouns that you would use to identify yourself. What does the list suggest about your view of yourself as a person? Explain each role, citing your experiences as illustrations.

42. **Futures -- Fantasy and Fact:** This is a three-part assignment. In the first paragraph, pretend that you can see yourself 10 years from now. Describe your future as it could be if all your wishes came true. This description is "romantic." In the second paragraph, describe what your life will be like 10 years from now if you continue just as you are now. No miracles or magic allowed. This view is "realistic." For most people, the "romantic" and "realistic" descriptions are very different. In the third paragraph, analyze the discrepancy. Discuss the specific differences between your two descriptions and how you feel about these differences. Finally, explain the steps you can take to find a sensible compromise between the romantic and the realistic.

*43. **Epilogue:** Imagine that a complete stranger just picked up this portfolio. The stranger reads it from page one to page thirty-nine. How would this stranger conceive of the author? What kind of person appears to have filled these pages? Write a **CHARACTER SKETCH** of the person captured in these pages from an outsider's point of view. Refer to **SPECIFIC PIECES** of writing to support the stranger's impression of the author (you, of course).

Title of Writing Portfolio

Name _____ Period _____ Score _____

Checklist and Grading Rubric

DONENESS

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| _____ 1. <u>Prologue</u> | _____ 23. As Time Goes Bye-Bye |
| _____ 2. What's in a Name? | _____ 24. My Own List of Lists |
| _____ 3. <u>Personal Alphabet</u> | _____ 25. Metamorphosis |
| _____ 4. Likes/Dislikes List | _____ 26. Picture This |
| _____ 5. Sensory Experiences | _____ 27. <u>Look Who I Look Up To</u> |
| _____ 6. <u>Metaphorical Definitions</u> | _____ 28. Remembering the Child |
| _____ 7. Color Your World | _____ 29. One Medium Suitcase |
| _____ 8. Room Sweet Room | _____ 30. The Perfect Present |
| _____ 9. <u>Personal Metaphors</u> | _____ 31. Memorable Event |
| _____ 10. Extended Metaphors | _____ 32. Are You Hungry? |
| _____ 11. Symbolic Recipe | _____ 33. Where I'm From |
| _____ 12. <u>Ultimate All-Purpose Excuse</u> | _____ 34. Deck of 52 |
| _____ 13. Telling Tales | _____ 35. The Examined Life |
| _____ 14. Unfinished Sentences | _____ 36. Annual Report |
| _____ 15. Personal Symbol | _____ 37. Ekphrasis |
| _____ 16. A Mysterious Place | _____ 38. <u>Lessons I Learned Too Late</u> |
| _____ 17. Synectics | _____ 39. The Door |
| _____ 18. A Day in the Life. | _____ 40. <u>Advice to the Young</u> |
| _____ 19. These Words Belong to Me | _____ 41. Who Am I? |
| _____ 20. <u>In Other Words</u> | _____ 42. Futures – Fantasy and Fact |
| _____ 21. Flashback | _____ 43. <u>Epilogue</u> |
| _____ 22. Remembrance of Things Present | |

NEATNESS

- _____ Cover Design
_____ Title Page
_____ Each Assignment Numbered
_____ Each Assignment Titled
_____ Assignments in Order
_____ Legible Handwriting or Typed

CORRECTNESS

- _____ Follows Directions
_____ Adequate Length
_____ Grammar Acceptable
_____ Punctuation Acceptable
_____ Spelling Acceptable
_____ Corrections Made Neatly