

English 11—“How to Tell a True American Story”

Overview of the class:

English 11 is a mix of fiction and nonfiction. A pet peeve of mine is when people refer to fiction as “fake.” When we get to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*—whose story “How to Tell a True War Story” inspired our class theme—we’ll encounter his definitions of “story-truth” and “happening-truth.” Every story we’ll read in English 11, whether it’s technically “true” or not, will reveal something deeply honest about what it means to be a person. And since English 11 is widely considered an American lit class, we’ll also be discussing what is true about being “American.”

We’ll focus much more on fiction (“story-truth”) during the school year, which is why our summer reading (and viewing!) unit will be nonfiction—all centered around one “true” American story.

Summer reading/viewing:

I’m listing these two books and one film in chronological order. You are welcome to read/view these in any order you wish. Do keep in mind that the order you choose could have a major impact on how you view Chris McCandless’s story. That will be something worth writing about in your assignment.

Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (1996)—journalistic biography

Into the Wild is the story of Chris McCandless, who went to live alone in the Alaskan wilderness in 1992. After four months, he was found dead. He was 24 years old. Journalist Jon Krakauer researches his life and death. This is a fascinating and divisive story—some people consider McCandless inspirational, and some consider him reckless. I hope this book will kick off a year of fascinating conversations where we respect and learn from each other’s differing opinions.

***Into the Wild* (2007)—film**

Is it strange to include summer viewing along with the reading? I think the movie is absolutely gorgeous, and it was how I learned about and became interested in Chris’s story. The acting is terrific, the scenery is breathtaking, and the music is incredible (Eddie Vedder from Pearl Jam did a whole original soundtrack for it). I think watching the movie is a crucial part of experiencing this story. **NOTE:** This film is rated R. The main reason is nudity—not sex, just nudity. It’s a movie about people living in the wild, and a lot of times that translates to a freer sort of life philosophy than what we’re used to in our more traditional society. I think this movie is totally appropriate for high school juniors, but if your parents would rather you not watch this, please come talk to me.

Carine McCandless, *The Wild Truth* (2014)—memoir

The Wild Truth is by Chris McCandless’s sister, Carine, who had asked the author of *Into the Wild* to leave out some personal details. Years later, distraught over misconceptions people had about her brother, she wrote her own story. Krakauer wrote the book’s foreword. **CW:** This is an emotionally difficult book to read, containing scenes of abuse. Please talk to me if this concerns you. Last year I gave students a choice for their second book, but every single student who chose this insisted I make everyone read this. They said it made *Into the Wild* much richer and more interesting. Also, it is the best possible fit for the class theme, and it was the most helpful option on the first in-class essay.

Summer assignment: (*Obviously NO plagiarism, AI, or online summaries.*)

This assignment will contain four parts. Each part should be 400-500 words, **for a total of 1600-2000 words**. You'll type this on Google docs and wait to turn it in on Classroom in the fall.

Parts 1-3:

Please write 400-500 words about each book and the film. Your focus in each text should be on determining what you believe is the “true” character of Chris McCandless, a.k.a. Alexander Supertramp. (By the way, you can use whichever name feels most right to you, and I'll talk about why I tend to use Chris even though I am very supportive of calling people by their chosen names.) You must take a position, but it doesn't have to be an extreme one—you don't have to call him a hero or a jerk. The truth is often somewhere in between. However, it should be clear how you feel about him, and why. Also, it will be especially interesting for you to reflect on whether your opinion of who Chris/Alex was changes with each new account of him, or if you keep seeing him the same way. Use evidence to support your opinion, though it's up to you if you actually quote the books and film or if you just cite specific scenes. Either way, please include page numbers for the books.

Again, you are welcome to experience them in whatever order most appeals to you. I could see going in chronological order (the way they're listed on the previous page) so that each text builds on the previous one. Or I could see watching the movie first to heighten your interest as you read the books; that's what I did, and I do think it made me much more invested in this story.

This is not a formal essay, so you are welcome to organize this in whatever way makes sense to you. You can write one or multiple paragraphs for each text, or you can write bullet points for each part.

Part 4:

After you have written about these three different accounts of Chris McCandless's life, I want you to write 400-500 words about yourself. What is your “true” character? I am especially interested in what different accounts of who you are might exist. For example, do you think you are the same person alone as you are around other people? What do you think most defines who a person is?

Importance of doing this reading:

The first essay you'll write in English 11 will be a timed in-class synthesis essay over *Into the Wild* (both the book and the film), *The Wild Truth*, several editorials, and essay excerpts by Transcendentalist writers. This reading and viewing will impact multiple assignments/grades.

I'm so looking forward to teaching you again! —Ms. Johnson

P.S. In case you're interested, here are the other works we're reading in English 11:

Fall:

Tommy Orange, *There There* (novel)
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (novel)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (novel)
Contemporary poetry unit (various)

Spring:

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (stories)
Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (novel)
Ada Limón, *The Hurting Kind* (poetry)
Ross Gay, *The Book of (More) Delights* (essays)

Summer Reading Assignment	Content / Word Count, Parts 1-3	Content / Word Count, Part 4	Accuracy / Depth of Thought	Structure / Conventions
Above Average A+ <u>25</u> A <u>22.5</u> B <u>20</u>	The first three parts are <u>each</u> 400-500 words. The focus is on your opinion of who Chris is and how it changes with each text, NOT giving a summary of each text. Content is all killer, no filler.	The fourth part is 400-500 words. The focus is on giving a deep, thoughtful, layered examination of what defines you as a person. No wasted words, no superficial responses.	Demonstrates you read both books and watched the movie closely and thought about them all deeply. The details you mention about both books and the film are accurate and specific.	Well-organized, well-written, and carefully edited for errors. While not a formal assignment, this is structured in a way that makes sense and enhances content.
Average C <u>17.5</u>	The first three parts are <u>each</u> 400-500 words. The focus is mostly on your opinion of who Chris is and how it changes with each text, though this might include a little summary and/or filler.	The fourth part is 400-500 words. The focus is on examining what defines you as a person, though I would love for the response to go deeper or contain more layers.	Demonstrates you (probably) read both books and watched the film. The details you mention about one or both books and/or the movie is mostly accurate but more general than I'd like.	Written in a way that's compelling, even if it could use more careful editing. Structure does not detract from content.
Below Average D <u>15</u> F <u>0-12.5</u>	Does not meet requirements for some reason—may fall short, contain filler, give more summary or filler than I'd like, etc.	Does not meet requirements for some reason—may fall short, contain filler, not go nearly as deep as I'd like, etc.	Though you may have read one or both books and/or watched the movie, your writing does not demonstrate that obviously enough.	Difficult to read for one or more reasons—could be issues having to do with structure, conventions, fluency, etc.

Score: _____ /100