

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

**Summer reading:** *Into the Wild* + your choice of companion text (from a list of three options)

English 11 is a mix of fiction and nonfiction. I’ve decided to assign all nonfiction texts as summer reading, largely because I fell in love with this idea of everyone journaling and reading nature books.

**Summer assignment:** In the spirit of writing about nature as a way to reflect on ourselves, **I’d like you to keep a journal this summer.** Ideally, I’d love for you to write some entries outside or in public, so you can observe your surroundings. Here’s a list of journaling spots I recommend:

- **Baker Wetlands:** My husband and I walk our dogs in all this beauty. So much to observe.
- **La Prima Tazza:** My favorite place to write, especially when I snag a window seat.
- **Wells Overlook Park:** Specifically, the observation tower!
- **Wheatfields and Rudy’s:** If I require lunch as I journal, these are my go-to’s.
- **Home:** If I’m feeling cozy, I make home feel special—sit at a window, go on the porch, etc.

In these journals, reflect on specific scenes and details from the books, but feel free to use the books as a way to reflect on your own life and the world around you, too. **The ratio of details from the books vs. your own life should be about 75% to 25%.** These journal entries should demonstrate that you read these books closely and thought about them deeply. **No online summaries; no AI. You’ll break my heart.** If you keep an actual handwritten journal, I’ll still ask you to type up your entries and turn those in (on Classroom in the fall). I enjoy handwriting unrestricted first drafts of poems in my journal; then I switch over to “editing mode” and type them out. You could view this exercise in a similar way. Plus, that’s what Ross Gay did while writing his “delights”—he handwrote them first! **Spend at least 750 words on each book, for a total of 1500 words.**

**Our anchor text,** your required book:

- **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.

**Companion text options,** listed from most traumatic (and most obviously connected to *Into the Wild*) to most joyful. I’m including content warnings and my thoughts to help you choose:

### 1. **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. **Content warning:** This is an emotionally difficult book to read, containing scenes of abuse. **My thoughts:** This is the least literary option because Carine McCandless isn’t a professional writer, but this is a great choice for anyone interested in Chris’s story and curious to know his reasons for breaking away from his family.

## 2. Cheryl Strayed, *Wild* (2012)—memoir

*Wild* is about a woman who decides to hike the Pacific Crest Trail after a series of losses and destructive decisions. This is an interesting companion text because in many ways Strayed makes more reckless decisions than McCandless, but she lived to write her story; in fact, nature helped her heal from trauma. Also, since so many nature and adventure stories are about men, it's cool to read one centered on a woman. **Content warning:** This book is also emotionally difficult, containing scenes of abuse, drug use, and animal suffering. **My thoughts:** This is a beautifully written literary memoir. Interestingly, Strayed is almost as divisive a “character” (person) as Chris McCandless; she makes choices that many people judge. I admire her for not trying to make herself seem like a hero, for telling the truth about all the reasons that she decided to go on this life-changing hike.

## 3. Ross Gay, *The Book of (More) Delights* (2023)—essays

(Note: I'm assigning the sequel, not the original *Book of Delights* from 2019.)

This is the least obviously connected to *Into the Wild*, but in my mind it makes sense to include it. If there's one thing I admire about Chris McCandless, it's that he was dedicated to living a purposeful, meaningful life, which he achieved in part through self-reflection and an appreciation of nature and the world around him. Ross Gay has that in spades. This is an interesting companion text because Gay didn't do anything drastic to achieve that purposeful life; he just seeks beauty (“delights”) daily. **My thoughts:** I don't think this book is for everyone, but my goodness, it is for me. This is such a poetic book of prose. I felt like a kinder person while reading it, and like it was teaching me how to live a more beautiful and grateful life. If you're more into plot-driven books, this might not be for you, because it meanders. Not much really “happens”—but at the same time, so much happens.

**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*, the companion book you chose, several editorials, and essay excerpts by Transcendentalist writers. This reading will impact multiple assignments/grades.

**Checklist** for what this summer assignment needs in order to get a good grade:

- \_\_\_\_\_ At least 750 words about each book, for a total of 1500+ words (all killer, no filler).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ratio of details from the book to details from your life is about 75% -25%.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Demonstrates you read books closely and thought about them deeply.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Well-organized, well-written, and carefully edited for errors.

I'm so looking forward to teaching you next year. Happy reading!

—Ms. Johnson

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

*Fall:*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (novel)  
 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (novel)  
 Contemporary poetry unit (various)  
 Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (short stories)

*Spring:*

Tommy Orange, *There There* (novel)  
 Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (novel)  
 José Olivarez, *Citizen Illegal* (poetry)  
 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (nonfiction)