

The Crucible: Exercises for Understanding Self through Literature

Rationale: Names are a motif in the play, culminating in Proctor's cry, "Because it is my name!" Therefore, having students think about their given names and how they identify themselves may help them understand the character's journey of recovering his integrity—a tragic hero in reverse. This exercise will lead to a full personal narrative or memoir in a later assignment.

Crucible Name Quiz

1. Write your full name.
2. Describe your name—what does it look like on the page? How does it sound when you say it? What impression does each word create?
3. What does each word of your name mean?
4. Are you named after of anyone?
5. Do you have nicknames? What are they?
6. Were other names considered? What were they?
7. Is there a name you'd prefer to have?
8. Name one word you think others associate with your name?
9. Write one word you think of when you hear your own name.
10. Considering all of your responses, reconsider what your name means. (Free write)

Memoir/Personal Essay

Before beginning the play, the class took a name "quiz." Perhaps you have not thought about that assignment since then, as seemingly random in my approaches to meaning as I may appear, but revisit your responses. What do you think now?

Let's play again...a shortened version:

1. Write your full name. (Does it suit you, *feel* like you?)
2. What do the words in your name mean? (Is there any significance between their actual meaning and your personality?)
3. Is there a name you would prefer to have? (Do you have a nickname that is more "you"? What makes it so?)
4. What do you think of when you hear your own name? Others? (How do you see yourself? Is that the way others see you?)
5. What would you like your name to mean? (What reputation or image would you like to craft for yourself?)

With this as your raw material, write an explanation of yourself—a personal essay. A personal essay and a memoir are not the same. The primary difference is that a memoir’s purpose is to inform and enlighten an audience using one’s own experience, often a specific occasion, as the means to do so. A memoir is a type of personal essay, but not all personal essays are memoirs. Those that are not may simply be narratives or expository writing meant to inform an audience about the writer rather than to use the writer’s life to enlighten. Memoirs and other personal essays usually do not begin with a traditional divided thesis but, frequently, has more of an “umbrella” thesis, a more general statement that covers all aspects of the topic. Your writing should clearly examine, explore, evaluate, and reflect upon some aspect of YOU until you come to a general conclusion. Thinking of this assignment as a process of discovery or acceptance may help (or make it insanely difficult), but your writing could begin with a general observation (i.e. mine=horses) that becomes more insightful and reflective as the paper progresses. Although your thoughts should flow naturally, they should not appear to be the first ideas that fell out of your brain onto the page. Craft them into a work as individual as you (yes, I know how lame that sounds, but I sort of mean it.)

These essays are excellent for college applications; below are the prompts from the Common App:

- a. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- b. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
- c. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- d. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- e. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Example Essay: A Journey Made on Horseback by Colleen Hildebrand

At the age of three, I wanted to be a horse when I grew up. I did not know what, exactly, I saw in horses that drew me to them. I did not grow up in the country. No one in my family rode, but one summer we vacationed in Tennessee, and at what was probably a roadside tourist trap, I sat astride an appaloosa, my hands holding the reins tightly. He - or maybe she - paced a steady circle, once, twice, three times around a well-worn track - a living merry-go-round. That horse, the warm smell of leather, my mother’s nervous hand twirling the tip of her own braided black hair—these details weave themselves into one of my first vivid memories. Its details carried me through several horseless years; as I grew, my imagination sustained me. Rather than playing Barbies, house, or school, I played horses in my hushed childhood world.

At the age of five, I began to ask, “Can I have a horse of my own?” And, I heard promises, “Yes, sweetie. We’ll buy you one when you’re ~~eight, ten, eleven,~~ twelve.” That day seemed an eternity away to me, so I took to other means to exercise my growing passion. Pencil and paper, clay, and books kept me busy. Over the years, my need to know led me to read encyclopedias of equine care, and a black beauty and red pony introduced me to my

second great love. I read, wrote, drew, and molded the majesty of horses, and although I certainly refined my artistic skill and readied my mind for my current life, I met with much frustration. No matter how much detail I added or how much I learned, I could not breathe life into clay, perhaps, because my own life had scarcely begun.

Then it happened: at the age of twelve, I was finally born. Proving that horses were no passing phase and contributing an entire \$32.17 to the purchase of my first horse, I rode into a world I had read in countless words and drawn into my heart. Ironically, or maybe expectedly, when my dreams became tangibly wrapped in the wiry mane of the horse I named Patience, I read, wrote, and turned to art a bit less but felt more alive, more aware, more authentic. I felt something wonderful happening within me, weaving itself in and out of my past disappointments and hopes, making sense of all those years I spent in preparation for the reality of horses. They require hard work. And, striking the right balance between horse and rider, I learned, involves more cooperation than control. Horses have minds of their own, and although they will obey out of fear, they delight me far more when their spirits are unbroken, when riders respect them as living, breathing beings, when they are not reduced to machinery. To machinery—my heart breaks, now, for the poor appaloosa of my first memories. I wonder if, in his entire life, he ever knew the freedom of a full gallop. My horses did.

During the wind-in-my-hair moments of my teen years, I did not imagine I would ever exchange the tangles of chestnut mane and braided leather my heart held so tightly for the certainty my mind holds today, but my husband, my children, and yes, even my students make me understand how my youthful dreams have transformed into a common reality. Being a wife, mother, and teacher often invites complaints of ingratitude and weariness more than it champions accomplishment. Yet, when I recall feedings at 5:00 a.m., mucking out stalls in mid-August heat, and braiding manes with blistered hands for the possibility of success in the arena, I realize horses have been the best teachers I've known. From them, I have learned faith and frustration, freedom and routine, risk and responsibility. From them, I have learned to live.

Once I promised myself that at the age of forty, I would revisit those early mornings counting strides or circling for judges, but forty has passed, and still, life dictates that I am not ready to ride again. Perhaps at fifty, there will be time...perhaps, never; but no matter; my time is well spent. Wherever fifty finds me, I know I will find no greener pastures. How odd that the present was once the future. Too quickly, it becomes the past. Time tends to trot by unremarkably until one day we look back at our path and mark the miles in wonder. Sometimes we do not recall the journey or arrival clearly, but I do remember where I've been and how I've gotten here. I was carried by horses.

**Note: this is an abridged revision of a longer essay. For the full text, visit*

https://www.southeastern.edu/acad_research/programs/slwp/publications/assets/writegeist.pdf

Essay Rubric

A	B	C	D	Try harder next time ☺
<p>Grammar/ mechanics: is free from RO, CS, Fragments and agreement, coordination, and parallel structure</p> <p>*Contains few minor spelling, or grammatical errors</p> <p>*Structure: *has a pattern of development and maintains focus</p> <p>*demonstrates fluency of thoughts, coherence through transitions</p> <p>*Content:*contains perceptive explanations, examples, reasons which communicate ideas that foster insight to the human condition** meets 800 word min.</p> <p>* demonstrates depth of thought; explanations, examples and reasons transcend superficial (no bogus significance)</p> <p>*Style: demonstrates rhetorical control through sophisticated diction (although slang may be used where effective), structure (employs literary/rhetorical elements such as figurative language, irony, hyperbole, parallelism antithesis, etc.)</p> <p>*has distinct “voice” appropriate for audience</p> <p>*avoids excessive linking verbs and passive voice</p>	<p>*Grammar/ mechanics: is free from RO, CS, Frag.</p> <p>*Contains few minor spelling, grammatical, coordination, or parallel structure errors</p> <p>*Structure: * Has a clear pattern of development</p> <p>*demonstrates fluency of thoughts, coherence through transitions</p> <p>*Content:*contains adequate explanations, examples, reasons which move from objective meaning to subjective meaning.</p> <p>* attempts depth of thought; explanations, examples and reasons transcend superficial (no bogus significance)** meets 800 word min.</p> <p>*Style: demonstrates rhetorical control through attempted sophisticated diction, structure (employs literary elements such as figurative language, irony, hyperbole, etc.)</p> <p>* attempts distinct “voice” appropriate for audience</p> <p>*attempts to avoid passive voice, linking verbs</p>	<p>Grammar/ mechanics: contains no more than one RO, CS, Frag.</p> <p>*contains various agreement errors</p> <p>*Contains several spelling, coordination, parallel structure, or grammatical errors</p> <p>*Structure: * has clear pattern of development</p> <p>* attempts fluency of thoughts, coherence through transitions</p> <p>*Content:*contains adequate explanations, examples, reasons which move from objective meaning to subjective meaning.</p> <p>*expresses thought; explanations, examples and reasons of a common or impersonal nature** meets 800 word min.</p> <p>*Style: Demonstrates proficiency in communicating through diction, structure appropriate to on-level class</p> <p>*lacks unique “voice” but remains appropriate for audience</p> <p>*contains several instances of passive voice, linking verbs</p>	<p>Grammar/ mechanics: contains no more than three RO, CS, Frag.</p> <p>*contains several agreement, spelling, or other grammatical errors</p> <p>*Structure: *lacks a clear introduction, body, or conclusion</p> <p>* lacks fluency of thoughts, coherence through transitions</p> <p>*Content:* offers sparse or superficial explanations, examples, reasons which fail to move from objective meaning to subjective meaning.</p> <p>*expresses superficial thoughts to fill up the page, reasons of a common or impersonal nature</p> <p>8fails to meet 800 word min.</p> <p>*Style: exemplifies diction, structure inappropriate to assignment</p> <p>*lacks unique “voice” but lacks appropriateness for audience</p> <p>*Style: exemplifies diction, structure inappropriate to gifted class</p> <p>*lacks unique “voice” but attempts appropriateness for audience</p> <p>*contains several instances of passive voice, linking verbs</p>	<p>Grammar/ mechanics: contains numerous RO, CS, Frag.</p> <p>*contains agreement, spelling, or other grammatical errors</p> <p>*Structure: *lacks a clear introduction, body, or conclusion</p> <p>* lacks fluency of thoughts, coherence through transitions</p> <p>*Content:* offers sparse or superficial explanations, examples, reasons which fail to move from objective meaning to subjective meaning.</p> <p>*expresses superficial thoughts to fill up the page, reasons of a common or impersonal nature</p> <p>8fails to meet 800 word min.</p> <p>*Style: exemplifies diction, structure inappropriate to assignment</p> <p>*lacks unique “voice” but lacks appropriateness for audience</p>

Crucible final assignment/reflection for personal growth

Teachers,

I really do not hold the students accountable for what is in the box, ever. If they turn one in, the assignment is complete, even if the box is empty. I return the boxes after some time, usually at the end of the year when they have forgotten about them. Often, I'm pleased to hear that the weighty issue in the box is not as heavy as it once was. I always suggest to them that their maturity in the interim is what has made it lighter.

Taking things out of Context yet Thinking Inside of Boxes

So rather than approach this in the usual teacher-y way, I just want to tell you how the idea came to be. A few years ago--actually, more like a dozen--I had a student who said she really identified with the whole reverse-tragic hero idea--not because she committed adultery, mind you, but because there was something about herself which she disliked, and not until she accepted it, did she feel "alive" (her word—So, it's been long enough; she had cerebral palsy and walked with braces on her legs, but was otherwise no different from anyone else in the class—well, maybe smarter). I love the idea. Look at a few of his lines; can you see Proctor's journey in them?

"I may have looked up" (after he tells Abigail) "I'll cut off my hand before I reach for you again" (Act 1)

"I know I cannot keep it. I say I will I will think on it!" (to Elizabeth, Act 2)

"We are what we always were, only naked now" (to Mary after Elizabeth is taken, Act 2)

"Abigail leads the girls to the woods, Your Honor, and they have danced there naked—" (Act 3)

"I have known her, sir. I have known her" ; "...God help me, I lusted...I set myself entirely in your hands" (Act 3).

"...God dams our kind especially, and we will burn, we will burn together" (to Danforth, Act 3).

"I cannot mount the gibbet like a saint...It is a pretense for me, a vanity that will not blind God..." (to Elizabeth Act 4)

"You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor. Not enough to weave a banner with, but white enough to keep it from such dogs" (to Elizabeth Act 4).

"He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!" (Elizabeth as John hangs, Act 4).

I think John Proctor is a beautifully human character, one in whom I can find meaning that will last beyond the context of American literature. By the end of the play, his "insides and outsides match[ed] up"; he had integrity. So now what?

This: Consider yourself: Is there any personality trait, past action (even an isolated incident), habit, or perception you hold that causes you to feel at odds with yourself? What aspect of yourself or your past do you wish did not exist or do you wish you could control a little better? Where, when, why, and how do you disappoint yourself. In short, what about yourself do you have a hard time accepting?

Believe me, I am certainly not asking you to confide all of this in me. I never need to know that much about any of you. But you need to know—after all you’ll be you your whole life.

Here’s the “assignment” in a more assignment-looking format:

1. Think about all that heavy stuff. I know...think about it anyway, maybe not right now, but soon.
2. Figure out a way to represent it (just for yourself; no one else will ever see unless you want to share it).
You can straight forwardly write, draw a picture, write a poem, borrow an existing song that captures what you feel, find a tangible symbol—once someone used a Hot Wheels car to represent an accident with injury he had caused because he was doing a stupid thing. Another used a Monopoly house—or create any other “reminder” which you’ll recognize.
3. Put that thing (no. 2) in the box.
4. Wrap the box complete with a To:___ and From: ___ gift tag.
5. Let me know when you turn in your box. (Leave the box in the big box.)

Just a quick last word, you so easily can “cheat” this assignment easily or turn it into a joke and still get your all-important points for doing it. I’ll never know. But you will.