

# Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, Summer Reading and Summer Assignments

First of all, welcome to the adventure of AP English!

Your AP journey starts this summer with two summer reading books: *The Blind Assassin*, a novel written by contemporary Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, and *Poetry 180*, an anthology of contemporary poetry edited by American poet Billy Collins.

## *The Blind Assassin*

*The Blind Assassin* is a novel which pulls together several different sources to tell the story of sisters Iris and Laura Chase. The reader knows from the very beginning of the novel that Laura commits suicide, but the reasons for her suicide form the mystery at the heart of the work.

As you read *The Blind Assassin*, you will be required to write five journal entries, as instructed below.

What is a journal? A journal is a type of informal writing in which you spend some time reflecting on your own thoughts and ideas. Much like a personal journal, a journal for our literature class helps you to record (and to retain) the thoughts you have in a given moment and serves as a more immediate, personal way of taking notes about the work. Journals should be typed and about 350 words in length.

Often in class I will give you “free” or unguided journal questions where I will just ask you to write about anything that interests you in our reading, but for these summer journals I will provide prompts to help guide your thinking.

**Remember: journals are not formal essays!** Instead, journals serve as casual reflections about the ideas you think are interesting in the work you’re reading.

Our five journals for *The Blind Assassin* are timed to take place after you’ve read some crucial events in the novel. As you start reading the novel, don’t worry too much about it “making sense” right away. The novel is designed to be put together like a puzzle, so we as readers hear from a variety of narrative voices. The novel is a complex frame story, with the different pieces of the frame commenting on each other. Iris is the speaker for most of the novel, and she is mostly reflecting on her past or commenting on her present life as an elderly woman. Other “speakers” in the novel include newspaper articles, Laura Chase’s novel (also called *The Blind Assassin*), and the science fiction story “he” tells within Laura’s novel.

As you read, pay attention to symbols and make some notes about the symbols you see in the book. Notice whenever Atwood repeats a motif (mentions a key phrase, object, or idea more than once or with variations). Especially look for references to clothing, colors, letters, storytelling, photographs, water, and fire throughout the book.

While the book is complex, it's also an enjoyable read, one with a great deal of suspense and some major surprises in its conclusion.

### *Journal Assignments*

1. Begin *Blind Assassin*. Read from “The bridge” through “The soda.” For your first journal, write about Iris retelling her family history. Why do you think she’s telling us all of this information? What do you think is important about what she says about her family? Specifically, what kind of relationship does Father set up between Iris and Laura in the chapter “The soda”?
2. Read “The café” through “Hand-tinting”. Journal about hand-tinting—what is Laura literally doing to the pictures? What colors does she choose and why? Why does Laura think that Iris is blue because she is “asleep”? What does Laura’s unique view of the world help her to see? What might it prevent her from seeing? In what ways are Laura and Iris foils of each other? Which sister do you identify with more? Why?
3. Read “The cold-cellar” through “Postcards from Europe”. Write about Richard and/or Winifred. Analyze Richard and/or Winifred carefully. What motivates them? What do you know for sure about them? What is Winifred’s role in Richard’s life? Why do you think Richard married Iris? What is the difference between Laura’s “accidental” cruelty and Richard’s cruelty?
4. Read “The eggshell hat” through “Union Station”. Write about the complicated relationship between “he” and “she”. How do you think they really feel about each other? What does their relationship provide that keep them together? What threatens to break up their relationship? You may also want to write briefly about what happens to Laura in this section and how it affects her relationship with Iris.
5. Read “The cubicle” through “The threshold.” Journal about the secrets of the novel and the ways in which these secrets unfold. Where are the clues placed throughout the text to point you toward the unveiling of the mysteries in the book? Reflect, too, about Iris’s ultimate audience. For whom was she writing? Why do you think Iris needed to write this history, her version of the truth?

Use the questions accompanying each journal assignment as starting-off points. Don’t feel obligated to answer all of the questions, but use them to guide your thinking if you need to do so.

Feel free to talk to each other and compare notes as you read—even form a book club if you want! BUT under no circumstances should you reveal the big secrets if you read ahead! Don’t spoil it by getting online either!! Get lost in the story and watch how Atwood pulls all the pieces together!!

## Poetry 180

Poetry 180 is a collection of poems with the specific goal to prompt readers to “turn back” (do a 180) and view poetry in a thoughtful but pleasurable way.

Your job this summer is to read the introduction (p. xv-xxiv) and then read and annotate Poems #1-22 (p. 3-38). You will annotate your poems directly in your book, and you may use pen, pencil, and/or highlighters in all the colors of the rainbow. (Be careful, though, to test your pens and markers first to see if they bleed through to the reverse page. I hate that, and I suspect some of you might, too! ☺)

What is annotating a poem? Simply reading it actively and taking notes, underlining key words, circling something that sticks out to you, looking up a word you don't know and writing its definition on the side, etc.

I've attached a sample of my own annotating to this document to give you an idea of what I mean.

I do want you to write directly in the book. I understand this may be a challenge for some of you because books are lovely objects that we tend to want to keep clean and pristine. No more! Make your book your notebook and make your mark in its pages!

Before you start to annotate, be sure to write your name on the front cover because I will collect each student's book to check your annotations.

### **DEADLINE:**

***Printed, hard copies of all five journal entries plus the copy of your poetry book with its annotations are due on the first day of school before the start of the school day.***

If you cannot be there on the first day of school, leave your assignments for me in the school office or in student services.

Our class time together will not start until Term 3, so make careful notes as you read. Obviously, a quick reading of the book and/or the use of study aids such as Cliff Notes or SparkNotes or any other service similar in intent is not acceptable and beneath your integrity as AP English students at SUA.

If you have questions as you go, I will check email periodically over the summer.

I can't wait to meet you all! We're going to have a great class!

Sample Poetry Annotation

**"Do You Have Any Advice For Those of Us Just Starting Out?"**

Ron Koertge

Give up sitting dutifully at your desk. Leave your house or apartment. Go out into the world.

It's all right to carry a notebook but a cheap one is best, with pages the color of weak tea and on the front a kitten or a space ship.

Avoid any enclosed space where more than three people are wearing turtle-necks. Beware any snow-covered chalet with deer tracks across the muffled tennis courts.

Not surprisingly, libraries are a good place to write. And the perfect place in a library is near an aisle where a child a year or two old is playing as his mother browses the ranks of the dead.

Often he will pull books from the bottom shelf. The title, the author's name, the brooding photo on the flap mean nothing. Red book on black, gray book on brown, he builds a tower. And the higher it gets, the wider he grins.

You who asked for advice, listen: When the tower falls, be like that child. Laugh so loud everybody in the world frowns and says, "Shhhh."

Then start again.

new writer?  
Q + AC end of reading?

soothing

irony?

child: joy fun

attn.

commands

in world

contradiction

nothing too fancy

humor

don't kid yourself

ranks of dead: snows

tower - books as blocks

Babel?  
shoulders of giants?

books mean nothing to kid who can't read - ??

be like the child

then start again

so keep writing

take advice from life  
don't hide - live, then write  
be part of it