AP English Literature and Composition Summer Reading 2014

_Things Fall Apart_
by Chinua Achebe

Buy only this edition. It contains the novel and additional readings, some of which are also assigned.

Reading the novel

“For me there is only one human side. Full stop!”
Chinua Achebe

Before you read the novel, consider why we read novels. American writer Flannery O’Connor once received a letter from a student at Hollins College asking her “just what enlightenment” she intended in her stories. “I suspect she had a paper to write,” O’Connor said. “I wrote her back to forget about the enlightenment and just try to enjoy them.”

For O’Connor, enjoyment and analysis fit cog and wheel. “A story isn’t any good,” she wrote, “unless it...hangs on and expands in the mind. Properly, you analyze to enjoy, but it’s equally true that to analyze with any discrimination, you have to have enjoyed already....”

As you read _Things Fall Apart_, enjoy first. It’s a moving story, and why and how it moves us will be a topic for discussion and analysis. But read the novel at least twice, once for enjoyment and at least once more for deeper pleasure, and for literary pleasure and appreciation.

Before the second reading, enrich your knowledge of Igbo culture by reading these selections in the Norton edition of the novel: _Introduction_, pages ix-xxi; “The Igbo World,” pages 225-235; “Igbo Culture and History,” pages 236-257; “Chi in Igbo Cosmology,” pages 159-169. We’ll read some of the critical essays in August.

Then review how to read a novel. As you read, start with the basics. Define the novel’s Elements of Fiction. Define and follow key themes (Come to class with a list in August.), character development, motifs and imagery. Follow them through the novel. And define and pay attention to the novel’s style. What defines Achebe’s style? How is that style suited to his novel’s intentions? Expect quizzes on this material.

As you read, annotate your book. See How to Mark a Book: sample pages from David Foster Wallace’s teaching copies for his English class at Pomona College. (Don’t miss his “annotations” to McCarthy’s photo. No one, it seems, is above caricature.); one of my teaching copies; another of my teaching copies; and classic books annotated by famous authors. I expect to see your copy of _Things Fall Apart_ annotated, too. Those comments record more than plot points; they mark your conversations with the novel. Good reading is conversational reading.
Once you’ve read the novel, you might listen to this talk by Achebe. Or this talk. Or Explore Achebe’s world and more. (Links contain spoilers.) You might also read this interview with Achebe.

**Writing the essay**

On day one of class—that’s day one—you will present a typed essay of at least 1,000 words and at least five paragraphs, in proper MLA style, though you are to print your essay in landscape mode, using Times New Roman size 11 and 1-inch margins top and bottom and 2.5-inch margins left and right. (Don’t know how to format or print this way? Youtube it.)

I want a gauge of your reading, thinking, and writing skill. So I’m interested in what you think and how you write. They’re no right or wrong answers here. English isn’t calculus or physics. English allows varied responses, even contradictory ones, to the same topic and rewards gutsy, informed exploration. The best advice? Say what you think. Follow your ideas. Invest in them. Care about them. Believe in them. With Horace and Kant, Sapere aude.

Consult no source other than the novel, a dictionary, The Little Brown Handbook, and the provided links. Do no Googling. Googling for knowledge or insights is a coward’s crutch and puts you at risk of dishonor and plagiarism. Remember, the penalty for plagiarism is severe: an F or a 0 on the assignment, depending on the severity of the offense. But the penalty for dishonor is still more severe: your own knowledge of your wrong. Conscience has sharp teeth.

Once you’ve chosen a topic from the list below, work through the text to find all of the best evidence. Study those examples to better understand the topic through the evidence and to test your own argument. Your essay will state a clear thesis; include introductory and closing paragraphs; and make the case for its thesis in developing paragraphs that follow standard structure and make arguments with quotations from the novel and your analysis of them. Cite those quotations in proper MLA style and blend them properly. Make this essay a benchmark of the minimum kind and quality of work expected.

I’m looking for spark in your thinking and in your writing. While the obvious always matters, it doesn’t always matter in obvious ways. Your essay should be lively and engaging in its thought and its style. Writing, no matter the type, is an imaginative and creative enterprise, a way to discover and understand—and therefore to enjoy. Never forget that. Enjoy yourself as you write.

The essay will be a graded major essay, one you will revise for another major grade once we study the novel and review essay-writing basics. It is also subject to my late penalty policy.

How will your essay be evaluated? See the grading rubric. But don’t be ruled by grades. Write a true essay. And things won’t fall apart.
Essay prompts for *Things Fall Apart*

Choose one for your essay

These prompts should point you in interesting directions, leaving you to chart your course, not lead you by the nose, determining your every step. Don’t feel obligated or expected to address each question or to address them in the order in which they’re posed. You’re to craft your own thesis and to make your own argument.

What’s the novel’s view of women and their importance for the novel’s larger themes?

Igbo proverb: “The thought that led a man to truncate his own existence was not conceived in a day.” What are the thoughts that led Okonkwo to his suicide? How were they formed over many days? Do you see his act as a cowardly one or a courageous one? (You choice needn’t be either/or.)

Achebe has said “that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity.” Write an essay that defines and explores that culture and reflects on its importance to the novel’s larger themes.

Define the point of view from which the story is told and the role the narrator plays in the story. Explore the art of Achebe’s choice.

Explain Achebe’s choice to end the novel as he does.

How does Achebe create characters? Define his methods and means and explore their art.

It is said of Okonkwo at one point that “Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation” (76). How should we understand the roles of fate and individual responsibility in the novel?

Okonkwo’s self-understanding is deeply bound up with his need to affirm and protect what he thinks of as his “manliness.” What are the main features of Okonkwo’s view of masculinity, and how does his view relate to that of other important characters in the novel? Do you see problems with Okonkwo’s view?

Achebe’s style seems very simple. Is it really as simple as it seems? Define and explore the artfulness of the novel’s style. How does that style contribute to the novel’s larger meanings?

After Okonkwo’s female killing of the boy, Obierika, the novel’s philosopher, wonders, “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?” The narrator tells us that “although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities” (74). Does the novel answer what Obierika can’t?

Igbo culture believes “there is a fundamental justice in the universe and nothing so terrible can happen to a person for which he is not somehow responsible” (“Chi” in Igbo Cosmology” 163). Explore the justice of Okonkwo’s actions and his responsibility for them. What view of justice emerges?

How does the novel depict and treat the Christian missionaries? Do you see bias or objectivity? What role does the treatment of the missionaries play in the novel’s larger themes?
Recommended Reading

AP reading is nothing more than GOOD reading. While you’re accustomed to reading professor-like for what writers say, in AP Lit. and Comp. you’ll read writer-like for how writers say, for how they use technique to create meaning and make literary art.

Here are a few recommended—that’s recommended, not required—books offering examples of GOOD reading. They’re books best dipped into, not read through.

*Reading Like a Writer* by Francine Prose. Chapters organized by technique, with lots of closely-read examples. Prose takes the right approach and shows you what close reading means. Highly recommended.

*How Fiction Works* by James Wood. In the same vein as Prose but more erudite. Linked series of meditations on fictional practice from an esteemed critic. Highly recommended.

*Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster. A classic look at fiction, according to Forster’s predilections.

*How to Write a Sentence* by Stanley Fish. Not so inspiring as Prose or Wood but solid.

*Slow Reading in a Hurried Age.* Discussion about reading well from a UH professor. Solid.

Other than that, read everything, whatever you like, whenever you can. Here’s a [NYT article](https://www.nytimes.com) asking writers to reflect on books that shaped them. Or see the suggestions on my website.