

AMERICAN
PASSAGES
A LITERARY SURVEY

Instructor's Guide



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OREGON
PUBLIC
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 **Annenberg/CPB**

Personal and Creative Responses

You have undoubtedly noticed that each student has different ways of learning. You have probably also noticed that students play different roles in classroom discussion: some are facilitators, some are instigators, and some are listeners. You may also have noticed that some of your students tend to learn using visual cues while others prefer memorization. Some students may find it easier to understand things using logic while others prefer symbolism and metaphors. Perhaps you have students who could express themselves better if they were encouraged to be creative. If so, this section of the *Instructor's* and *Study Guides* will be useful. In it you will find suggestions for creative writing, journal exercises, and hands-on activities that allow your students to demonstrate what they know in a variety of different formats.

Problem-Based Learning Projects

Problem-based learning (PBL) works from the assumption that a good way to help students think across disciplinary boundaries is to give them hands-on experience as researchers. The PBL sections of the *Instructor's Guide* can help you encourage students to connect their readings and in-class explorations to personal experiences, public events, and life beyond the classroom. PBL features group participation. Sharing ideas and working on complex problems in small groups or pairs may help your students make more headway than they would on their own.

PBL takes time. A single problem may be the primary class activity for several weeks or even for the entire term. When the question at hand is broad and multifaceted, working it out can take many hours of prowling through archives and other resources and quite a bit of intensive discussion with others. PBL also requires perseverance and confidence, from both the student and the teacher. If you are interested in integrating PBL into your exploration of American writers and cultural history, be sure to consult a thorough guide to PBL. Following are a few suggestions to get you started.

First, PBL is not an add-on activity; it is a special way of organizing a classroom, a special form of student-centered learning. Instructors who try PBL must decide whether to try the strategy in a “pure” or a “hybrid” form, depending on the course content and the skill levels and interests of students. In its “pure” form, PBL consists of assigning a problem to a class, having students discuss it to decide what they might need to know in order to make headway with the problem, allowing students to divide the tasks among themselves, and coaching them as they go through the problem-solving process. This process takes the place of the traditional syllabus of assigned readings and paper topics. Here are some examples of PBL assignments that could work with ambitious students in a survey course:

- Choose a literary work that appeals to you—a poem, a short story, a play—from a historical period at least thirty years in the past. How would you present this work to a large contemporary American audience? Would you present it as a “timeless” work requiring no special knowledge of the year in which it was written? Or would you present it as a work very much *in* and *of* that year? Construct your answer by learning about that year. What was hap-

pening in public life? In the arts? In technology and politics and other literary circles? After you have created a summary of that year, evaluate the importance of what you have found with regard to understanding and appreciating the author and work you have selected.

- Nearly every film is the product of many acts of selection, even educational films about literary history. Choose an *American Passages* video that caught your attention, and describe the strategy of the video as an introduction to an American historical period or literary movement. If you were rewriting or re-editing that film, what new or different material would you include? What would you decide to eliminate to make space for the new material and why? Propose and explain these changes; you will need to explore the Online Archive and to decide what is important, as well as what isn't, in telling the story of a bygone time.
- What dramatic changes have taken place in the way that Americans have imagined and represented the North American wilderness? Where do you see shifts in style, mood, expectations, hopes, and fears? This is not a question limited to literary works; you will need to consider painting, photography, map-making, and other media through which Americans represent the natural world.

Depending upon the sophistication and motivation of the students, some problems may take several weeks. Notice that you have not assigned any readings to any student in particular: this means letting go of the idea that everyone is doing the same work. You may also have to change how you assess your students. Some practitioners of PBL suggest that you rely upon graded group work and self-assessment (see below); others suggest that you use a combination of graded group work and graded individual work. In either case, self-assessment is an important way to help students take responsibility for their learning.

Self-Assessment: Please rate yourself and your group members using the following chart:

| | 1 (low) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (high) |
|--|---------|---|---|---|----------|
| My commitment to this project was | | | | | |
| My analysis of the materials was | | | | | |
| Did I help my group members see connections? | | | | | |
| My writing for the project was | | | | | |
| Group Member #1 _____'s commitment to this project was | | | | | |
| Group Member #1 _____'s analysis of the materials was | | | | | |
| Did Group Member #1 _____ help you see connections? | | | | | |

Group Member #1 _____'s
writing for the project was

Group Member #2 _____'s
commitment to this project was

In a “pure” PBL classroom, the entire course would consist of three or four PBL problems such as the ones given above or those in the PBL section of the *Instructor's* and *Study Guides*. In a “hybrid” PBL classroom, PBL problems might be framed by assigned readings that provide some context for the problem or that introduce students to basic concepts. Another hybrid possibility is to assign specific novels and to have students solve problems about the novels.

Glossary (and Other Reference Sources)

As you and your students read the *Guides*, you will find words in **bold** such as **sentimentality**, **Creole**, and **Puritan**. These terms are defined in the Glossary at the end of each unit.

You may find that not every unfamiliar term is in the Glossary or that people and places you don't know are alluded to in the overviews and Contexts. For that reason, it's worth pointing your students toward some other general resources: two excellent starting places are *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, ed. George Perkins, Barbara Perkins, and Phillip Leininger (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), and James Hart's *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, with revisions and additions by Phillip W. Leininger, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1995). These books provide biographical information on American authors, plot summaries of major works, and explanations of key references. Your students can find explanations of cultural references and identifications of historical figures and events at <www.britannica.com> or <www.encyclopedia.com>. If they are stumped by an extended metaphor or symbol, send them to *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols: Symbols from Art, Archaeology, Mythology, Literature, and Religion*, trans. Boris Matthews (Wilmette: Chiron Publications, 1993). If they encounter a word used in an unfamiliar way, they can determine what that word meant for people who lived before the twentieth century by looking in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Similarly, they can discover the cultural significance of key concepts (such as the “sublime” or Prohibition) in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Most of these resources can be found in the reference room of a typical college or university library.

Selected Bibliography and Further Resources

The Selected Bibliography at the end of each unit lists the works that the writers of the *American Passages* guides found most useful when composing the unit materials. Further Resources is a list of other interesting materials, such as museum exhibits (virtual and actual), video recordings, sound recordings,