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J.D. Salinger

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Prestwick House

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ISBN 978-1-60389-520-0

Item No. 201219

Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Chapter 1

1. The narrator of this story is in a hospital or mental institution. Although he is going to tell the reader about his life, he is not going to write about his parents. He writes, “In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them.” My family was the same way, and I suppose most families are. If they have nothing to hide, why do you suppose families act like that?
2. As the manager of the fencing team, the narrator is responsible for the equipment when the team goes to New York for a match. Because he leaves the fencing equipment on the subway train, forcing the team to miss the competition, the team ostracizes the narrator on the train ride home. Assume you are a member of that team, and write a letter to the narrator telling him how you feel about his irresponsible mistake.
3. Holden knows he is not coming back to Pencey after the Christmas holidays because the school kicked him out for flunking four subjects. He writes, “They gave me frequent warning to start applying myself—especially around midterms, when my parents came up for a conference with Old Thurmer—but I didn’t do it.” Some people, myself included, don’t have much sympathy for people who are capable of doing work, but don’t do it. How do you feel about it?
4. The football game is not interesting to the narrator. He is hanging around because he wants to feel some kind of good-bye. He writes, “I don’t care if it’s a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to *know* I’m leaving it. If you don’t, you feel even worse.” He gets his good-bye memory when he recalls the fun he had throwing the football around with Tichener and Campbell. If you were going to switch English classes tomorrow, write about a good-bye memory you might have of your time in this classroom.

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13. Throughout this story, Holden makes inconsistent statements about himself. For example in this chapter, Holden states that “I’m quite illiterate, but I read a lot.” If you understand his meaning, explain it to a friend who doesn’t understand.

14. Holden does not like Ackley. He criticizes Ackley’s appearance and personal habits. Yet, Holden goes out of his way not to hurt Ackley’s feelings concerning his teeth. Some critics believe Holden feels sorry for Ackley because they are both outcasts. What are your thoughts on this point?

Chapter 4

15. Critics applaud the author, J. D. Salinger, for the way his descriptions of daily life accurately reflect the personalities of the characters. Holden describes his roommate, Stradlater, by describing Stradlater’s razor.
“Stradlater was more of a secret slob. He always *looked* all right, Stradlater, but for instance, you should’ve seen the razor he shaved himself with. It was always rusty as hell and full of lather and hairs and crap. He never cleaned it or anything. He always *looked* good when he was finished fixing himself up, but he was a secret slob anyway, if you knew him the way I did.”
As Holden, write a short paragraph describing an inanimate object belonging to you. Try to copy Salinger’s writing style in your paragraph. Try to make the description you write accurately reflect one of your personality traits.

16. Explain to a friend who doesn’t understand why Holden feels it is “ironical” for Stradlater to want Holden to write the English composition for him (Stradlater).

Chapter 13

41. In the following excerpt from this chapter, Holden discusses his feeling about girls and sex. Holden is clearly confused. If you were Holden's friend, what would you say to him about his views on girls? "The thing is, most of the time when you're coming pretty close to doing it with a girl—a girl that isn't a prostitute or anything, I mean—she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don't. I can't help it. You never know whether they really *want* you to stop, or whether they're just scared as hell, or whether they're just telling you to stop so that if you *do* go through with it, the blame'll be on *you*, not them."
42. Keep in mind that this story was written in the late 1940's. Do you think much has changed in the relationships between young men and young women since then? If so, what has changed?
43. Complete the following dialogue between two students:
- First Student:** Holden is just a coward. He hires the prostitute and then chickens out.
- Second Student:** You sound disappointed. Do you really think he should have lost his virginity in that way?
- You:** One of the themes of this story is Holden's inability to relate. If Holden...

Chapter 14

44. What do you think about the way Holden handles Sunny and old Maurice when they try to chisel him out of five dollars? If anyone ever tried to cheat you, how would you like to be able to handle the situation?

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69. The end of this chapter is controversial. Some readers believe that Mr. Antolini is making a homosexual pass at Holden. Others believe Mr. Antolini is merely expressing his concern for Holden. What's your opinion on this incident?

Chapter 25

70. Holden fantasizes about going out west and working in a gas station. He wants to be a deaf mute so he does not need to have any useless conversations with anyone. Have you ever felt that you didn't want to see or talk with anyone?
71. Because the ugliness of the world has found its way into the museum, Holden is upset by the swear words written on the tomb in the museum. While some people get annoyed over graffiti, others may not be able to relate to Holden's anger. What are your thoughts?
72. As Phoebe rides the carousel in the park, Holden enjoys watching her try for the gold ring. "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them." Some critics believe this passage indicates that Holden has finally come to accept that it is impossible to protect innocent children from the world, and by accepting this, Holden can learn to cope with his life. Given the entire story, do you think that's a legitimate interpretation of the passage, or do you think it's too much of a stretch?