

Prestwick House Response Journal™

Sample



Rosencrantz and ildenstern Are Dead

> Click here to learn more about this Response Journal!



Prestwick House

More from Prestwick House

Literature

Literary Touchstone Classics Literature Teaching Units

Grammar and Writing

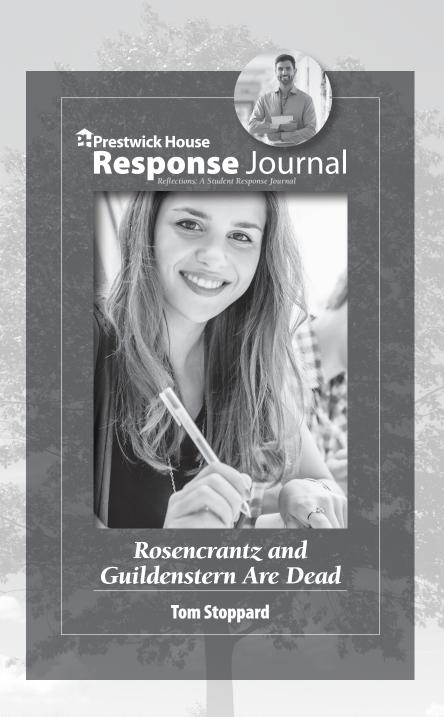
College and Career Readiness: Writing Grammar for Writing

Vocabulary

Vocabulary Power Plus Vocabulary from Latin and Greek Roots

Reading

Reading Informational Texts Reading Literature





Copyright © 2007 by Prestwick House, Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593 • www.prestwickhouse.com

Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

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.

Background/Pre-reading

1. Tom Stoppard began his writing career, at the age of seventeen, as a free-lance journalist and theatre critic. He loved the theatre, but thought he would be better at creating art than he was at critiquing it. He wrote his first play at the age of twenty-three. He did not have a major hit, however, until he reintroduced theatre audiences to the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 1967. It is ironic that a man who loves the theatre should become famous for a play that pokes fun at it. For, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is not so much a story as it is a dialogue, which cleverly skewers the artificial nature of theatre.

Imagine you are a playwright and you have written a scathing play about one of society's cornerstones: family; religion; community; education; politics; or the legal system. Write a character monologue that clearly delineates your opinion.

2. Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead is a black comedy based on a Shakespearean tragedy. In it, Tom Stoppard reveals how the events of Hamlet unfold for two of the play's minor characters. He basically asks himself, "What if the two spies from Hamlet had personalities? What if audiences could see events through the eyes of Ros and Guil?"

What if you could take two of literature's minor characters and turn them into stars? What original text and characters would you choose? Write a brief synopsis of the new work detailing your choices and the reasons behind them.

Act One

6. The play opens on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern betting on a coin toss. Guildenstern loses repeatedly, as Rosencrantz always calls heads. Guildenstern displays his nervousness as he mutters about the laws of probability. These characters obviously feel confused about who they are and what they are doing. In a futile attempt to comprehend what is happening, Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz to tell him the first thing he remembers. Rosencrantz replies that he cannot remember, because "it was so long ago." Thus, Stoppard highlights the fact that much of one's sense of self comes from one's memories.

Free write about your earliest memory. What role does it play in your identity? Separate the memories suggested to you by relatives and friends or family photos from events you clearly remember.

7. While Rosencrantz mulls over mundane matters, perpetually growing fingernails and non-growing toenails, Guildenstern turns out to be a philosopher. Philosophy is the critical study of a basic belief and its foundation, and to philosophize is to expound upon a philosophy or system of belief. Guildenstern philosophizes about the nature of illusion, probability, and reality. He seems, however, to do this to no effect. His musings do not lead to answers for him and his pal Rosencrantz.

Drawing on your own life experience, write an essay in which you philosophize about the nature of education. Can one receive an education only in a classroom? What is the purpose of getting an education? In what way is education necessary for a happy life? What constitutes a good education?

- 34. Although Stoppard never reveals how much they are paid, the king rewards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before they depart on their journey to England. Aboard the ship, the two are questioning each other about how much the other was paid. They agree, without disclosing how much, that they each received the same amount.
 - Imagine your dream reward for a job well done. Write an email to a prospective employer or someone else who has commissioned you to perform a service, politely, but firmly, explaining your salary and benefit requirements.
- 35. Ros and Guil react differently to finding themselves on a dark ship. Ros is at first afraid, but Guil feels relieved that he does not have to decide where to go or what to do. Ros begins to explore the ship and gradually becomes more comfortable in his new surroundings. Ironically, Guil begins to see that they are not free, but trapped.
 - Think back to a time in your life when you moved to a new house, or in some other way found yourself in unfamiliar surroundings. How long did it take you to acclimatize yourself? Write a journal entry detailing the effects of a new environment on you.
- 36. Among other things, Stoppard uses his play to comment on the artificial nature of theatre. He does not want his audience to suspend its disbelief. Rather, he constantly reminds them they are watching a play. His Elizabethan characters spout modernisms and refer to contemporary experiences. The characters sometimes look out at the audience, almost seeming to address it. The audience realizes they are watching a play, which pokes fun at another play, and which employs a play within a play.

Imagine you have just seen a performance of the play. Write an intimate, first-person, review of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. For a positive review, you might begin with something like, "Despite the fact that I never forgot that I was watching a play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* still took me on a most rewarding journey." For a negative review, you could use the following line: *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* failed to transport me beyond the narrow confines of my theatre seat.

43. Guildenstern generally appears smarter and more mature than Rosencrantz; but Rosencrantz generally appears happier than Guil. Do you think it is more important to be happy no matter what, or do you think it is more important to understand what is going on around you at all times?

Based on an incident from your life, write a narrative essay supporting one of these statements: Knowledge is power. Ignorance is bliss. Remember to use plenty of concrete, vivid details to bring the incident to life.

44. Confronted with King Claudius' command to take Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though they feel vaguely threatened by the turn of events, do not act to save themselves. Even when they discover that the letter they are carrying to the King of England now demands their deaths, they behave as if changing the situation is beyond their scope of ability. Their collective apathy proves to be their downfall.

Imagine you are running for political office. Write a stump speech beginning with the following statement: Apathy is the enemy.

45. Is there a missed moment at the beginning, as Guil surmises, when he and Rosencrantz could have said no? In what way did they fail the king? Hamlet? Themselves?

Think back to a time you suffered a setback, or failed at something. Write an explanatory paragraph analyzing the causes for your failure; then write a paragraph identifying the effects of your failure.

46. Given the personalities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, what other endings for the play may have been possible?

Imagine that Ros and Guil know that Hamlet is not dead at the hands of pirates, but that he has returned to Denmark after altering the letter to the king of England. Imagine that they also know that he feels no sympathy for his former friends. What happens to the two after they reach England? Write an alternate ending for the play.