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# Sample

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**Response Journal**

Reflections: A Student Response Journal



*The Handmaid's Tale*  
Margaret Atwood



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**Margaret Atwood**



**Prestwick House**

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## 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.



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*The Handmaid's Tale*

## **Pre-Reading**

1. You've probably heard the phrase "you can't judge a book by its cover." Before beginning *The Handmaid's Tale*, though, or even reading the back, take a good look at its cover. What do you think the book will be about? Using only the front cover for inspiration, write a short paragraph that explains what you think is the subject matter of this book.
2. Flip to the Table of Contents and note the manner in which the chapters are organized. Do you see a pattern? What do you think this pattern might suggest about the story? Write a short paragraph that discusses why you think the author might have arranged the chapters as she did.
3. An epigraph is a short quotation or series of quotations at the beginning of a work of literature that is placed deliberately to suggest its theme. Read the epigraphs prior to the Table of Contents. One is the story of Rachel and Bilhah, from Genesis. The next is a reference to Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal." The third is a Sufi proverb that states simply that "In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones."

Taken all together, what do you suppose these epigraphs will mean in relation to the novel's message? Write a predictive paragraph that develops your theory.

## **Sections I and II: Night and Shopping**

### **Chapters 1-2**

4. Offred refers to other women like herself as "sisters, dipped in blood." Imagine that the ban on reading and writing for women does not exist, and Offred has the opportunity to write a letter to one of her "sisters," telling her what life is like now that she has moved into the Commander's home. Compare her time in the school to her new quarters and responsibilities at the commander's home. Describe her relationships and interactions with other individuals around her, such as the Wife, Rita, and Cora, and other women at the school.

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## *The Handmaid's Tale*

Imagine that Offred is emboldened enough to break free of her passive role and gather other Handmaids together for a rebellion. Write a speech that she might give to the other Handmaids urging them to abandon their habits and dress as individuals. The speech should focus on the effects of the habit on their psyche and the freeing aspects of individualized behavior. Offred should, of course, offer them some alternatives to their current lifestyle, as well.

### **Chapters 5-6**

10. In Chapter 5, Offred and Ofglen become the objects of a trade delegation from Japan's curiosity. The delegation is fascinated by the women, their strange way of dress and even stranger customs. They ask, " 'Are you happy' [Offred] can imagine it, their curiosity: *Are they happy? How can they be happy?*" Offred responds, in the wake of Ofglen's silence, "Yes, we are very happy."

Imagine that you are a member of this visiting delegation and that you are unconvinced by Offred's murmured response. You are appalled by the society as a whole but specifically by its oppression of women. You would like to do something to help, and decide that your first step is to write a letter to the editor of every major newspaper in the global economy. You will state clearly what exactly is going on in the Republic of Gilead and why, in your opinion, it is wrong. You will describe why you believe the situation is of interest to people in other countries and perhaps why they should consider getting involved.

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## *The Handmaid's Tale*

15. As Offred and Ofglen walk past the Wall on their routine outing, they notice three new bodies. One is a priest, still in his cassock. The other two, in Guardian uniforms, have purple placards around their necks, indicating Gender Treachery. The bodies from before, those of the doctors, have been removed from the Wall. The bodies on the Wall instill a kind of horrified blankness in Offred, and a relief if she is able to discern that none of them belong to Luke. They serve as a warning to society, and a reminder of times past.

Write the inscription for a sign that might be hung above the bodies on the Wall. Keep in mind that this inscription would be composed by members of the Gilead of the Regime, and its goal would be to inspire fear and obedience in all who paused to view the bodies and read the sign.

Next, imagine that some bold individual had dared to carve another inscription in the brickwork next to where the bodies are hung. What do you think the goal of this secondary inscription would be? What might it read?

### **Chapters 9-10**

16. In Chapter 9, Offred takes her time exploring her room and discovers the Latin phrase "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*" Although she has no idea what the phrase means, the fact that it is carved into the floor of the closet brings a certain image to her mind, a girl with "freckles...irreverent, resourceful." Later, Offred comes to learn that the Latin expression means, "Never let the bastards grind you down." It is appropriate for the Handmaid that has come before Offred, and for her personality.

List 4 or 5 individuals that you are close to and for each one, come up with an expression that conveys their personality and/or situation that they may be involved in. Explain your choice of each expression in a brief paragraph.

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*The Handmaid's Tale*

What does your name mean to you? What would it mean to be stripped of it as Offred was stripped of hers? Using the letters of your name, write an acrostic poem that explains how your name helps connect you with your identity. If your first name is very short, use your middle name as well.

Here is an example of an acrostic poem that defines Offred:

Of Fred.  
For duty, out of  
fear. She is  
red, watched by  
Eyes everywhere.  
Desperate to love and be loved.

22. The novel is written entirely from Offred's perspective. A couple of times she mentions Nick's inappropriate interest in her—a wink here, a comment there—and the fact that she ignores it because she is fearful that Nick may be an Eye. In Chapter 14, just prior to the Ceremony, Nick again attempts to flirt with Offred by simply touching his foot to hers, and letting the warmth of his skin seep into hers. Offred again brushes him off by moving her foot away.

What is Nick thinking? Rewrite this episode from his point of view instead of Offred's, and let the reader into his head. Is he an Eye? Is he sincerely interested in Offred? If so, what can Nick hope to offer Offred, a Handmaid? How does he feel when Offred rebuffs his advances? What are his goals and plans for the future?

23. In Chapter 15, Offred's mind wanders as the Commander reads the Biblical basis for the Handmaids' purpose. Offred recalls the time Moira feigned appendicitis and tried to bribe an Angel with sex to help her escape. The attempt backfired drastically and Moira was punished by having her feet flayed with steel cables.

Imagine you are Offred, Moira's best friend. Write a letter to your friend. You would like to encourage her, but at the same time caution her. You realize that such a punishment will likely only serve to delay another escape attempt, but not put it off for forever.