



Don Delillo: *Libra*

AP English Literature

Summer Reading 2020-2021

"This was the year he rode on the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track. He liked to stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People stood on the local platforms staring nowhere, a look they'd been practicing for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past, who they really were."

AP English Literature Summer Reading Assignment 2020-2021

Students enrolled in AP English Literature for the 2020-2021 school year are required to actively read and complete a series of journal entries on the novel *Libra* by Don DeLillo. This assignment will comprise a major portion of the first quarter grade. The journal will comprise two test grades, and a conventional test on the book will also be given the day of journal collection. Furthermore, much of September will be devoted to study and discussion of *Libra*, and it will continually be referenced throughout the year. Your efforts on this assignment will have far-reaching consequences, so please put in your strongest effort.

Below are some specifics about *Libra* and the accompanying journals. A scoring guide for each journal entry is attached.

Libra

Don DeLillo (1936—) was born and raised in an Italian-American neighborhood of the Bronx in New York City, the son of a coal miner and an ex-schoolteacher. After graduating from Fordham University, he worked for five years as a copywriter for an advertising agency, before quitting to pursue writing seriously in 1964. He published his first novel, *Americana* in 1971, and has written seventeen novels to date. His fiction is particularly focused on anxieties of modern life: his darkly humorous narratives explore issues such as terrorism, corporate corruption, artificial intelligence, suburban alienation, and the threats of environmental and nuclear annihilation. His work has generated critical controversy but he generally is regarded as one of America's foremost living writers of literary fiction.

Libra, published in 1988, is a fictional speculation about the events leading up to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The story follows three narrative strands: the life of Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald; the conspirators, a group of disgruntled CIA agents who concoct a plot to bend public sentiment against communism by staging an unsuccessful assassination attempt against the President; and Nicholas Branch, an investigator for the CIA tasked with uncovering as much truth as possible about the assassination. Reading *Libra* involves a deep-dive into mid-20th century American culture and politics, and a sprawling, immersive exploration of the pathologies leading to what DeLillo calls "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century."

You are to complete seven reflective journal entries while reading *Libra*, one on each of the following readings:

Journal Entry 1:	Part I: In the Bronx; 17 April; In New Orleans; 26 April
Journal Entry 2:	Part I: In Atsugi; 20 May; In Fort Worth
Journal Entry 3:	Part I: 19 June; In Moscow; 2 July; In Minsk
Journal Entry 4:	Part II: 15 July; In Fort Worth; 12 August
Journal Entry 5:	Part II: In Dallas; 6 September; In New Orleans
Journal Entry 6:	Part II: 25 September; In Mexico City; 4 October; In Dallas
Journal Entry 7:	Part II: 22 November; In Dallas; 25 November

Tips for reading *Libra*

- Read something about DeLillo's life and work prior to reading. There currently is an interesting film narrated by him on Youtube called "A Don DeLillo Documentary"; although it mostly concerns his next novel, *Libra*, about the assassination of President Kennedy, it will give you some idea of the tone and thematic concerns of his work.
- The novel is a sprawling narrative with many characters, and it's a good idea to keep a list of the characters as they appear with basic info about who they are, especially the different conspirators.
- *Libra* presupposes a general knowledge of American history in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly events that pertain to the Cold War. Before you begin reading, please do a little background research on the following topics: (Wikipedia is fine for this.)
 - The Cold War
 - The CIA
 - The U-2 bomber
 - Edwin Walker
 - Fidel Castro and the 20th century history of Cuba
 - The Bay of Pigs invasion
 - The Cuban Missile Crisis
 - Alpha 66
 - The Warren Commission
 - Lee Harvey Oswald
 - Jack Ruby
 - John F. Kennedy
 - Robert Kennedy
 - The Zapruder film

- Do not read SparkNotes or any other such materials with *Libra*. I want you to have an original reading experience.
- Read with a pen or pencil in hand, making notes in the margins of the text when you are confused, amused, moved, or find some startling significance in a particular passage. Read wide-awake, actively and carefully: this isn't easy beach reading.
- Please remember that this is a work of fiction: DeLillo draws on the historical record, but fills in gaps in the public record with imaginative speculation about what might have happened.

Specifics about the Journal Entries

- The journal entries are to be completed as you read *Libra*, not afterwards. They are meant to help you read the novel actively.
- You may type or handwrite the journal. If you type it, make sure you double-space; if you handwrite it, make sure it is written neatly.
- Label the journal entries accurately, so I know which chapter(s) you are referring to. (For example: the third entry should be labeled "Journal Entry 3: Part II, Chapter 21.")
- The journal will be collected the second week of school and will comprise two test grades. There will be a ten point deduction if handed in late, more if excessively late.
- Each journal entry will be given a separate grade on a 1-100 scale, as specified below. For the full journal grade I will add up the journal entry grades and divide for the final grade.
- Grammar and mechanics matter. I expect words to be spelled correctly, sentences properly punctuated, apostrophes properly used, etc. That goes for every writing assignment in the class, so you might as well get used to it right away.
- The evaluation is in accordance with the Reflective Writing school-wide rubric (last page). Read the next page (which details the "discipline and task specific" requirements on the school-wide) carefully for grading specifics, but above all, please try to make your journal entries interesting, lively and responsive narratives.
- See the "Journal Entry Addendum" supplement about on the last pages of this packet.

AP English
Summer Reading Journal Entry Scoring

A (90-100)

All the requirements of a “B” journal entry (see below) are in evidence, but with a greater degree of effort, analytical insight and writing sophistication. The entry balances generalizations with specific illustrative details with considerable skill, maintains coherence through thoughtful transitions from one point to another, goes beyond mere structural integrity to establish a voice through which the analysis is maintained, and is engaging and enjoyable to read. Furthermore, the entry is unusually insightful and shows an uncommon sensitivity to the language and ideas of the text, especially as language and ideas relate to each other.

B (80-89)

The entry is well-written and constitutes evidence of thoughtful interaction with the text. That evidence is displayed through some or all of the following:

- Characters and events are analyzed and meaningfully compared to other characters and events in the text, different text(s), and/or personal or “real world” experience;
- Structure and/or style is analyzed in relation to meaning, especially regarding the narrative voice and point of view;
- The author’s tone is analyzed and connected to theme, with textual substantiation.

Excerpts from the text are cited and thoughtfully elaborated on, meaningful questions are asked, difficulties with the plot or the writer’s style are grappled with and explored with sensitivity and intelligence. Creative tangents with clear connections to the text may be present.

C (70-79)

The entry aspires to reach all of the requirements of the “B” level entry (see above), but falls short by no more than two of the following: 1) writing about the text superficially, without meaningful exploration of characterization, tone, theme, etc.; 2) not providing enough textual substantiation for your assertions; 3) not clearly connecting the evidence to the assertions in a meaningful way, thus causing confusion; 4) writing about plot at the expense of other literary elements; and 5) writing sloppily or poorly.

F (0-69)

The entry falls short of the requirements of the “B” level entry (see above) by more than two of the deficiencies explained above (see the “C” level entry), or with one or more of those deficiencies with an unusual degree of severity.

In Summary

Just to make it clear what you have to do, here’s the summer reading assignment simplified as far as possible:

- Read *Libra* and complete seven accompanying journal entries as you are reading.

That’s it...enjoy the summer!

Journal Entry Addendum

What constitutes a good journal entry? Simply put, I want the journals to be interesting, lively, well-written discussions that evince engagement with the text. There are various ways to accomplish that. Below is a list of what to do and not to do when writing journal entries.

DO NOT: Summarize the plot as an end in itself.

DO: Provide context for your insights about the readings by providing some plot specifics to clarify what part of the text you're referencing.

DO NOT: Pretend to love the book because you think that's what an English teacher wants to read; or, conversely, complain and blame whatever struggles you're having with the reading on what you imagine to be the author's ineptitude.

DO: Provide an honest and thoughtful reflection of the experience of reading the book; regardless of whether you're finding it a joy or a struggle, read and write with an open mind and the aim of deepening understanding and appreciation.

DO NOT: Get bogged down in endless specifics without connecting those specifics to any larger point, or write in broad generalizations without much in the way of specifics.

DO: Balance broad generalizations with specific illustrative detail.

DO NOT: Go off on tangents about life or your own experiences without a clear connection to the reading.

DO: Write germane tangents about life or yourself that relate clearly to the reading, if you feel it's appropriate and interesting; and make sure to make the connection to the book clear.

DO NOT: Stick quotes from the novel into the entry without regard for grammatical integrity or context.

DO: Weave direct quotes from the reading into your own writing, and make sure you elaborate on the significance of the quotation and properly explain the context.

DO NOT: Write the entry as one long block of text with no paragraphing, or—and this is even worse—randomly indent once in a while to provide the appearance of paragraphing.

DO: Use paragraphing as an organizational tool, to indicate a shift in topic.

DO NOT: Write mechanically, with every sentence the same length.

DO: Vary the sentence structure to help make your writing more readable.

DO NOT: Try to make the entries sound academic by using unnecessarily complex language.

DO: Write clearly, naturally, and with the aim of making authentic, sensible insights about the readings.

DO NOT: Write boring journal entries. I will be reading every word of these, and I don't want to be bored.

DO: Write interesting, lively responses to the readings.

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