

## Summer Reading for AP English Language & Composition 2026-27

**COMMUNITY BOOK.** You must read the following community book. The community book is one which is read by every member of the class. Parents are also invited to read the community book. During the first week of school, your English teachers will review, conduct, or oversee projects, presentations, and group seminars – all to generate a sharing of ideas as a community.

| Author                  | Title                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| <b>Colson Whitehead</b> | <b><i>The Underground Railroad.</i></b> A vital book that forces us to reckon with the brutalities of slavery. This is a work of postmodern “historical fiction,” as Whitehead reimagines the Underground Railroad as an actual system of trains and tracks running beneath 19 <sup>th</sup> -century America. We follow the interconnected lives of several runaway slaves who trudge a phantasmagoric yet oddly real version of America during the time of slavery. This adventurous and highly readable novel will surely spark lively conversations among students. |

In addition to the Community Book, you must read one nonfiction book, one fiction book, and one book of essays from the lists which follow. So, you will read a total of **four** books. You are certainly welcome to read more, of course. You'll be asked to write papers about some aspect of each of the books you read, so you should take some notes and complete the assignments attached to your welcome email. Also, before randomly selecting a book, take some time to research it. You should also strongly consider emailing me for recommendations ([lnorment@maclay.org](mailto:lnorment@maclay.org)).

### ESSAYS

| Author            | Title                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
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| James Baldwin     | <b><i>Notes of a Native Son.</i></b> These ten essays were originally published during the 1940s and 1950s, but they remain relevant today. Baldwin was one of America's best writers, and here he focuses on the American and African-American experience.                                                                         |
| Brian Blanchfield | <b><i>Proxies: Essays Near Knowing (A Reckoning).</i></b> Brief texts that de-familiarize the familiar, that queer experience in nuanced and beautiful ways. Each essay is “on” a different idea, person, place, or thing. A stunning collection that emphasizes all the ways we see the world.                                     |
| Ta-Nehisi Coates  | <b><i>Between the World and Me.</i></b> This work of nonfiction, by celebrated <i>Atlantic Monthly</i> columnist Coates, is written as a long letter to his son and explores race in contemporary America. Lyrical, brutal, and more than relevant                                                                                  |
| Joan Didion       | <b><i>Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays.</i></b> A work that gives profound insight into California in the 1960s, Didion's personal experiences, and the many places she has traveled. This collection often unmask the bright, guilty places of California (and its sunshine myths) and reveals its noir underbelly.             |
| Joan Didion       | <b><i>The White Album.</i></b> Named after the landmark album by the Beatles, this collection also focuses 1960s. An excellent portrait of this tumultuous decade and its aftermath, these essays also explore the emergence of American popular culture. Just take a look at the cover. One of the coolest books you'll ever read. |

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| Ross Gay              | <b><i>The Book of Delights.</i></b> Poet Ross Gay's catalogue of small and large joys. For one year, Gay carefully paid attention to his surroundings, and each day, he wrote a brief essay celebrating one thing he noticed that day that brought him joy or delight. Eloquent and celebratory and a good reminder that we can find joy almost anywhere – a tomato plant, a pigeon, a good cup of tea, a friend's hug. Deeply inspiring and uplifting. |
| Ander Monson          | <b><i>Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir.</i></b> A very contemporary collection of clever essays. Most focus on our collective obsession with "I." Monson's book is also linked to a very cool website that allows the reader to view pictures, films, and text that further illuminate the essays. One of the best, most intriguing, and fascinating collection of essays I've read in a long, long time.                                                  |
| Aimee Nezhukumatathil | <b><i>World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments.</i></b> This stunning collection of short, lyrical essays will renew your wonder in the world, as Nezhukumatathil explores identity, nature, and the magical moments that infuse all our lives. My mom loved this book, too. Very accessible and vital.                                                                                                          |
| David Sedaris         | <b><i>Me Talk Pretty One Day.</i></b> Hilarious essays on a wide range of topics: family, art, the American South, and language, to name a few. Easy to read, but interesting and side-splittingly funny.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| David Foster Wallace  | <b><i>Consider the Lobster and Other Essays.</i></b> David Foster Wallace ranks as one of the best writers of his generation (and, arguably, of the entire American canon). This collection has some tremendous essays on a wide range of topics: a lobster festival in Maine, the English language, the aftermath of 9/11, political campaigns, and just about everything in between. Very, very funny and brilliant.                                  |
| E.B. White            | <b><i>Essays of E.B. White.</i></b> Virtually perfectly crafted prose by one of the all-time champions of the form. Required reading for any thoughtful student of the art of the essay.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

## NONFICTION.

| Author            | Title                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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| Jennifer Ackerman | <b><i>The Genius of Birds.</i></b> A compelling look at the way we define "intelligence," ultimately arguing that birds may be some of the smartest creatures on our planet. An excellent read for those interested in natural history, science, and neuroscience. Ackerman grounds her argument in scientific studies of various species and contributes greatly to the genre of nature writing. And, your teacher <i>really</i> loves birds, so . . . |
| Stephen Amidon    | <b><i>Something Like the Gods: A Cultural History of the Athlete from Achilles to LeBron.</i></b> A cogent, well-written argument that seeks to explain the prominence of the athlete in our collective imaginations, this book will change the way you look at athletes. Very readable and very entertaining.                                                                                                                                          |

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| Peter Amers Carlin   | <b><i>Tonight in Jungleland: The Making of Born to Run.</i></b> This lively, insightful book tells the creation story of one of the greatest albums of all time – Bruce Springsteen’s <i>Born to Run</i> . Through numerous interviews with the Boss and other members of the E Street Band, Carlin explores the agony and ecstasy of creation while weaving together many compelling stories about the musicians and producers who helped create this all-time rock album. An excellent choice for artists, musicians, or anyone who has ever tried to make anything great.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Nicholas Carr        | <b><i>Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart.</i></b> Published in 2025, this book thoroughly explores this history of communication technology in America and makes a powerful case for reconsidering whether our phones actually help us stay connected – or push us farther apart. Carr’s writing is easy to read and understand, but he’ll expose you to many other writers and thinkers and ideas that will deepen your understanding of our culture and yourself.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Liana Fick           | <b><i>Passing for Human: A Graphic Memoir.</i></b> This funny and profound memoir (told in comic book style) recounts Fick’s search for her “shadow” – her weird, artistic, authentic self. A mix of anecdotes and existential musings, this book explores our universal need for self-understanding and self-acceptance (and the drawings are very, very cool, too!). A great choice for aspiring artists or creatives.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| William Finnegan     | <b><i>Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life.</i></b> An exciting, compelling, and beautiful work of autobiography. Proof of the animating force of passion in writing and proof of the sublime power of the ocean, time, and memory. 2016 Pulitzer Prize winner, too.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| David Gesner         | <b><i>My Green Manifesto: Down the Charles River in Search of a New Environmentalism.</i></b> This book weaves an impassioned argument for a new kind of environmental movement that focuses on local, passionate involvement with a very well-written personal narrative about the author’s trip down the Charles River. A perfect example of using personal experience to bolster an argument, this book will help you understand the use of this mode of exposition in your own writing – a vital skill for the AP and for all good writing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Hua Hsu              | <b><i>Stay True: A Memoir.</i></b> In simple and straightforward prose, Hsu explores music, memory, family, and friendship, in this very compelling and easy-to-read memoir published in 2023. Or, as <i>Pitchfork</i> describes the book: This is a “coming-of-age memoir that brings music, memory, identity, and grief into a mid-1990s tableau of indie-pop mixtapes, late-night record stores, and xeroxed zines. The son of Taiwanese immigrants, Hsu enters UC Berkeley as a malcontent who hates parties, embraces a straight-edge lifestyle to better sharpen his judgments, and finds Pearl Jam ‘appalling.’ He forges an improbably deep friendship with Ken, his opposite in almost every way: a well-adjusted frat brother who wears Abercrombie and listens to Dave Matthews, whose Japanese-American family has been in the U.S. for generations.” |
| Maxine Hong Kingston | <b><i>The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts.</i></b> A lyrical, experimental, moving, and thought-provoking memoir about Chinese American woman and her identity, personal history, and views of America and her ancestry. A challenging and rewarding read. Very, very well-written.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Jonathan Kozol       | <b><i>Savage Inequalities.</i></b> This book is a searing exposé of the extremes of wealth and poverty in America’s public-school system and the blighting effect the system has on poor children. This will get you ready for one of our first units in Lang – the aims of education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

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| J. Drew Lanham                                | <b><i>The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature.</i></b> My mom gave me this book as a present after she heard Lanham on NPR, and I was immediately taken with the easy-to-read and poetic style, the careful descriptions of the natural world (once you get to know me, you'll know I love birds, and Lanham writes eloquently about many species), and the frank discussions of race relations in rural South Carolina (Disclosure: I'm from rural South Carolina, too). Published 2017.                                                                                                                                 |
| Anne Morrow Lindbergh                         | <b><i>Gift from the Sea.</i></b> Lindbergh wrote much of this book while on a solo vacation on Captiva Island, Florida. Though very brief, this work explores what it means to be human in an ever-changing and often challenging world. Each chapter is named for a shell Lindbergh found on the beach, and she uses these as metaphors to ponder our shifting identities as we move through life. A great choice for anyone who has ever stood beside an ocean and considered the depth of the world and the self.                                                                                                                                 |
| John McPhee                                   | <b><i>The Control of Nature.</i></b> This is a bestselling account of places in the world where people have been engaged in all-out battles with nature, such as in Louisiana against the Mississippi River and in Iceland against a lava flow.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Trish O'Kane                                  | <b><i>Birding to Change the World: A Memoir.</i></b> This compelling and easy to read memoir documents one woman's journey from investigative journalist and professor to bird researcher and community organizer. Reading this book reminds us of the amazing world that's right outside our windows and provides a map for how to pursue our passions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Jenny Odell                                   | <b><i>How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy.</i></b> Artist and Stanford professor Jenny Odell makes a compelling, well-written, lively, and impassioned plea for us to ground ourselves – in our present tense lives and in our environment. If you've ever wondered why TikTok is so addictive or ever found yourself wishing for a way to engage with technology more thoughtfully, this book is for you. Literally changed my life when I read it.                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Richard Rodriguez                             | <b><i>Brown: The Last Discovery of America.</i></b> Using the color brown as a metaphor throughout, Rodriguez's book seeks to deconstruct, re-arrange, and reconsider our notions about "race" and "identity" in America. A classic of cultural criticism.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Bakari Sellers                                | <b><i>My Vanishing Country: A Memoir.</i></b> Sellers is one of the youngest people ever elected to state-wide office, and in this memoir, he discusses the challenges facing the rural South while recounting his role in politics and his family's role in the Civil Rights movement. Highly readable and enlightening.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Rebecca Skloot                                | <b><i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.</i></b> This imaginative and informative work traces the history and development of HeLa cells -- human cells that can survive in a laboratory. A lively mix of medical history, family history, and investigative journalism. A must read for anyone who wants to pursue a career in the medical field.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale AND Epictetus | <b><i>Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior</i> AND <i>The Enchiridion.</i></b> For this choice, you'll read two very brief books by two very different – yet connected – writers. Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam and spent seven and a half years as a prisoner of war. How did he survive torture and solitary confinement? By remembering the words and ideas of the ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus. These books provide timeless lessons on courage and self-control. If you're looking for a way to shape your life into something noble and authentic, these books are for you. |

**FICTION.**

| Author           | Title                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| Elif Batuman     | <b><i>The Idiot</i></b> . A Turkish-American student discovers life at Harvard, email, the beauty of language, and (a kind of) love. This compelling novel, told in the unique and likable voice of its first-person narrator, will give you insight into college life in the 1990s (and today) while dazzling you with its prose. I have literally loaned this book out to numerous people because it is so very, very cool. Published in 2017.                                                                                                  |
| Don DeLillo      | <b><i>White Noise</i></b> . Biting satire about our postmodern condition (obsession with copies, irony, and the disintegration of the family) delivered by a narrator who is a professor of Hitler studies makes this a darkly comic novel. DeLillo is one of America's preeminent prose stylists, and this is one of the best books I've ever read.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Dave Eggers      | <b><i>A Hologram for the King</i></b> . A modern day parable written in at once beautiful yet spare style that evokes Hemingway and lyrical minimalism, this novel traces the trials and tribulations of an American businessman (who is very much mired in a mid-life crisis) who has traveled to Saudi Arabia to meet with the king about a new business venture. This book manages to be philosophically rich and profound without being dense. A vital book that examines the question of America's (and each American's) place in the world. |
| Ernest Hemingway | <b><i>In Our Time</i></b> . Hemingway's first commercially published book, this features short stories along with interspersed prose-poem chapters. Many of the stories are set during or after World War I. A quick, entertaining read that is a good introduction to the "Hemingway style."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Tyehimba Jess    | <b><i>Olio</i></b> . Though "technically" a book of poetry, Jess's prismatic text (an "olio" is a miscellaneous collection of things) traces the lives, losses, and obsessions of numerous nineteenth and twentieth century African-American performers, some famous and some obscure. Provides a beautifully diverse portrait of African-American art and struggle. An excellent companion piece to our community book, <i>The Underground Railroad</i> .                                                                                        |
| Ken Kesey        | <b><i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i></b> . One of the most significant counter-culture novels of the 1960s, this book tells a classic – yet hilarious – story of rebellion at a psych ward. Some truly unforgettable characters, particularly the tyrannical Nurse Ratched. Funny and thoughtful.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Catherine Lacey  | <b><i>The Answers</i></b> . A young woman with a mysterious illness needs money to fund her treatments, so she takes a job as an "emotional girlfriend" – part of an experiment with a millionaire to test the limits of love, attraction, and dedication. Keen insight on our emotional lives and the often inexplicable bonds of relationships. Super hip and very cool. Published 2017.                                                                                                                                                        |
| Ben Lerner       | <b><i>Leaving the Atocha Station</i></b> . A poet traveling on a scholarship spends time down and out in Madrid. A very lyrical meditation on art, truth, violence, love, and poetry, this is a short novel that asks some very big questions. One of the deepest books I've read in recent memory. It will stick with you.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Ben Lerner       | <b><i>10:04</i></b> . A writer ponders the hazy line between reality and fiction. We see our narrator use his life in his fiction, write an epic poem, and wonder about the meaning of an art "in the present tense." A beautifully written and intellectually stimulating novel that provokes a great many interesting questions. For my money, the best novel published in 2014.                                                                                                                                                                |

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| Ben Lerner       | <b><i>The Topeka School.</i></b> An inventive, captivating, and deeply thoughtful exploration of masculinity and friendship and family. The main character is a senior in high school and a champion debater, but dark forces swirl around the periphery of his life, and he must reckon with family and friendship and, ultimately, what being a man means in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century. Ben Lerner is one of the preeminent novelists of our time, and this work presents his vision in lyrical, compelling prose. Required reading for anyone pondering the way masculinity shapes our perception of the world.                         |
| Matthew McIntosh | <b><i>themystery.doc.</i></b> Don't let the massive size (1660+ pages) of this novel fool you: I read it in three sittings, for this bizarre, challenging, and beautiful book contains numerous photographic images, transcriptions of online help-desk conversations, minimalist poems, and much, much more. Some of the story focuses on a young writer dealing with amnesia and the haunting memories of his father's death. Some reckons with collective tragedy. Some explores what it means to be human. All will blow you away. Unlike any book you'll ever read. Published in 2017.                                                   |
| Herman Melville  | <b><i>Billy Budd or Benito Cereno.</i></b> Two of Melville's classic sea stories. <i>Billy Budd</i> tells the moving (and long-lasting) tale of a young man's mutiny and the legend it inspires. <i>Benito Cereno</i> focuses on a mysterious marooned slave ship. Both are well-wrought stories, rich in symbolism and allegory.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Gloria Naylor    | <b><i>Mama Day.</i></b> This novel explores the intricacies of an isolated yet modern African-American family on the fictional Willow Island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Multiple perspectives and a plain prose style have helped make this a classic. Gullah culture, voodoo, the oral tradition, and well-drawn characters. Deceptively simple.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Sylvia Plath     | <b><i>The Bell Jar.</i></b> An autobiographical novel chronicling a young woman's descent into mental illness as she fights to maintain her sense of self in a world determined to make her conform. Deeply sad, but beautiful (and hopeful), too.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Philip Roth      | <b><i>Goodbye, Columbus.</i></b> This collection of short stories by one of America's most respected authors chronicles the Jewish experience in 1950s America. The title novella, in particular, has a memorable main character suffering from post-college ennui. Funny and entertaining reading.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Colson Whitehead | <b><i>Nickel Boys.</i></b> Set in and around Tallahassee during the Civil Rights Era and based on the horrific events at a fictionalized version of the Dozier School, this novel explores systemic racism and the undying human will to persevere. At times, the reality Whitehead depicts is brutal, but the story will hold your attention, and this is a quick (though haunting) read.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Callan Wink      | <b><i>Bear-Tooth.</i></b> If you like hunting and fishing and the great outdoors, this book is for you. A thrilling page-turner, set in the present-day Montana wilderness, along the borders of Yellowstone, this novel tells the story of two brothers who try to live off the land. But financial difficulties force them into some dangerous – and exciting – situations with a kilt-wearing (fake?) Scottish poacher in search of elk antlers. <i>Bear-Tooth</i> will take you into the wilderness on bear hunts, down whitewater rivers in a raft, and all throughout the territory of Yellowstone, with federal agents in hot pursuit. |