

Books To Read Before College

Reading is the most crucial thing you can do for yourself and your education. Reading books across genre will help you expand your imagination, worldview, empathy, and writing & communication skills.

We have compiled for you a list of every book you should read before you get to college - some are classics that provide foundational understandings of certain periods, some deliver important messages or depict specific historical eras, and all are works that **will be called upon regularly in a college setting, no matter your major.**

The list is sorted by age range, beginning with seventh grade - but every book can and should be read by anyone older than the earliest suggested grade level. Some may be books you have read in school already. If so, great! We have offered similar readings to each book you can check out if you'd like to continue exploring that author, genre, or topic.

Get reading!

***Number the Stars* by Louis Lowry (1989)**

7th grade +

"The whole world had changed. Only the fairy tales remained the same."

Told through the eyes of ten-year-old Annemarie, this book chronicles the journey of Danish Jews during World War II as they are smuggled to safety in Sweden by the Danish Resistance. It offers emotional insight into the plight of the Jewish peoples during the Holocaust, while reminding us of the good that exists in humanity.

Already read it? Check out: *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr

***Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953)**

8th grade +

"See the world. It's more fantastic than any dream made or paid for in factories. Ask for no guarantees, ask for no security."

This novel takes place in a dystopian future, where the censoring of literature and knowledge has escalated to the point that all outlawed books are being burned, and it follows one fireman's efforts to stop the oppression of ideas. It is Bradbury's most famous novel, and is said to capture the anxieties around political repression and violence during the McCarthy era.

Already read it? Check out: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (1949)**

"Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious."

A defining work of dystopian fiction, this book created ideas that are still referenced throughout culture today - from Big Brother to Thought Police. It follows Winston Smith's journey as he fights to rebel against the authoritarian Party that sees, hears, and controls all in the futuristic world of Oceania.

Already read it? Check out: *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *A Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

***The Odyssey* by Homer (~750 B.C.E.)**

7th grade +

"Any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we're doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again."

This is the second oldest existing work of Western literature, with its prequel *The Iliad* being the first. It follows Greek hero Odysseus on his ten-year journey home to Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War, and the legends described in this work are the basis for many books, films, television, plays, and more.

Already read it? Check out: *The Iliad* by Homer, *Beowulf* by Anonymous

***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960)**

8th grade +

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

This novel brings you into the American South during the Jim Crow Era, the period from the late 1800s to 1965 when African Americans faced severe segregation and violence. Atticus Finch, the lawyer who defends a black man falsely accused of a crime, is considered one of the most heroic characters in American literature - his courage in standing up against racism and his compassion for all human beings serves as a lesson to us all.

Already read it? Check out: *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

9th grade +



***Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1949)**

9th grade +

“Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be... when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am.”

This Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning play is considered the defining piece of American theater. It follows Willy Loman, an aging travelling salesman, and his family as they grapple with the changing landscape of the mid-century American economy, family life, and the false promise of the “American Dream.”

Already read it? Check out: *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)**

9th grade +

“I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”

The mysterious, reclusive Jay Gatsby is both the life of the party and its downfall, as his new neighbor Nick Carraway learns through the journeys Gatsby takes him on in pursuit of his long-lost love. A cautionary tale about the excess and decadence of the Roaring Twenties and the drawbacks of the American Dream concept, Fitzgerald’s most famous novel has been referenced, recreated, and adapted in various mediums, including a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

Already read it? Check out: *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner

***Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley (1818)**

10th grade +

“Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.”

One of the most well-known and called upon legends in history, Shelley’s novel - published when she was just twenty years old and considered the world’s first work of science fiction - details Victor Frankenstein’s experiment in creating sentient life and the trials of both he and the creature he creates that follow.

Already read it? Check out: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

***Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (1996)**

“The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.”

In this non-fiction work, Krakauer chronicles the journey and eventual death of a young man, Christopher McCandless, who after college rid himself of all his belongings and retreated to the Alaskan wilderness. Using McCandless’s recovered journal and drawing on the reclusive writings of Jack London and Henry David Thoreau as well as stories of young men who have similarly shunned society, Krakauer draws a picture of the ways in which finding oneself and fitting in can be at odds.

Already read it? Check out: *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed

***A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway**

(1929)

9th grade +

“When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve.”

Set during World War I, Hemingway’s first best seller chronicles the love affair between an American expatriate serving in the Italian Army as an ambulance driver and an Italian nurse. It gives a vivid look into the terrors of the senseless first World War, and introduces readers to Hemingway’s uniquely poetic, stream-of-consciousness style of writing.

Already read it? Check out: *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

***Hamlet* by William Shakespeare (approx. 1599)**

9th grade +

“Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.”

When Hamlet returns home after his father’s death, he finds that his mother has married his uncle and the ghost of his father awaits him, begging his son to avenge his murder. Shakespeare’s canon is comprised of 37 plays, but this story of one bright young man’s descent into madness in pursuit of revenge is among the most famous and most psychologically complex.

Already read it? Check out: *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare

***Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond (1997)**

10th grade +

“Much of human history has consisted of unequal conflicts between the haves and the have-nots.”

This is a non-fiction work that draws upon various academic fields to draw connections and conclusions about power and privilege throughout history.

Diamond looks specifically at the various clashes between Eurasian and North African communities, and highlights the ways that environment, not biological superiority, has caused the disparities in access and advancement.

Already read it? Check out: *A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin

10th grade +



***The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003)**

10th grade +

“I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded; not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night.”

A New York Times bestseller for two years, this novel follows the life of Amir, who was forced to flee to California from his home country of Afghanistan in 1979 after Soviet intervention. The story deals with intense themes including sexual, military, and political violence as Amir learns to deal with grief, guilt, and fear on his journey towards a new life.

Already read it? Check out: *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

***Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987)**

11th grade +

“Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.”

This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel follows a formerly enslaved African American woman and her family as they deal with a haunting in their new home, as well as the complicated aftermaths of slavery including the lasting psychological effects. It has been ranked as the best work of American fiction between 1981 and 2006.

Already read it? Check out: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

***The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. & E.B. White (1918)**

11th grade +

“Never call a stomach a tummy without good reason.”

Despite being now over a century old, this writing reference book is still the defining guide to the principles of writing. It outlines all the rules and how to break them, and its lessons are applicable to all people, professional writers and non-writers alike.

Already read it? Check out: *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King, *How to Write* by Gertrude Stein

***One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (1967)**

11th grade +

“He really had been through death, but he had returned because he could not bear the solitude.”

Originally written in Spanish and among the most famous Latinx books ever published, this novel uses magical realism to tell the story of a Colombian town across seven generations. At its establishment, the town is a utopia; as the influence of the wider world seeps into the town, it breaks down until it is unrecognizable.

Already read it? Check out: *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez, *Don't Stop the Carnival* by Herman Wouk

***On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (1957)**

10th grade +

“Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road.”

An exemplary piece from the Beat Generation - a mid-20th century movement of writing that captured the growing dissatisfaction among young folks towards post-war suburban life - Kerouac's novel is a semi-autobiographical story about the cross-country travels of two young men in search of themselves.

Already read it? Check out: *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac, *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg

***Freakonomics* by Stephen J. Dubner & Steven Levitt (2005)**

11th grade +

“Information is a beacon, a cudgel, an olive branch, a deterrent--all depending on who wields it and how.”

Written by a University of Chicago Professor and a *New York Times* journalist, this non-fiction work blends pop culture and economics to argue that economics is essentially the study of incentives, applying economics to a wide range of subjects as broad as parenting, drug dealing, the Ku Klux Klan, abortion, and even naming children.

Already read it? Check out: *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman

***Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1956)**

11th grade +

“You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you never can go back.”

When David's soon-to-be wife leaves him to spend time in Spain contemplating marriage before their own, David finds himself alone in Paris where he meets and begins an affair with Giovanni, who is soon after arrested and executed. This novel explores the fluidity of sexuality during a time with a sensitivity and empathy that was rare at this point in history.

Already read it? Check out: *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, *Native Son* by Richard Wright

***We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014)**

11th grade +

“The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are.”

In what was originally a TEDx talk and later adapted into this book-length essay, Adichie seeks to give a new, modern definition of “feminism.” She uses anecdotes from her own upbringing in Nigeria, criticizes toxic masculinity, and calls upon society to adapt in order to achieve equality. You may recognize it from the samples used on Beyoncé's “***Flawless.”

Already read it? Check out: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Between the World and Me* by Ta Nehisi-Coates



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