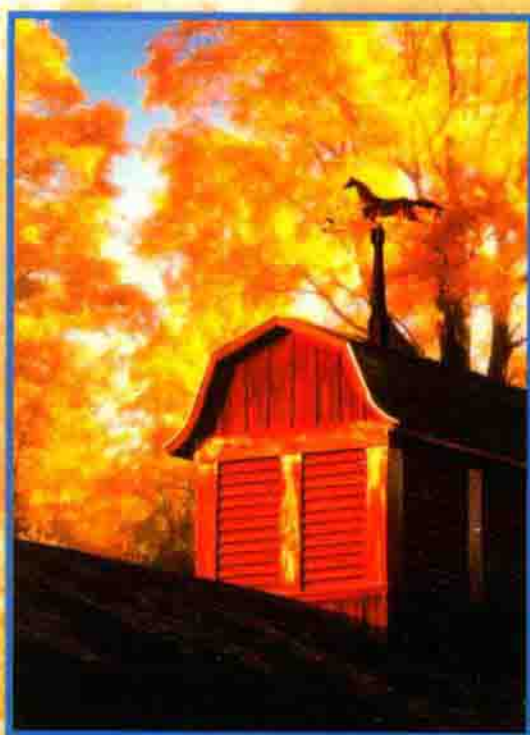


*Signet Classics*

# The Signet Book of American Essays



FEATURING ESSAYS BY

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN • RALPH WALDO EMERSON

W.E.B. DU BOIS • ALBERT EINSTEIN

GLORIA STEINEM • HENRY DAVID THOREAU

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. • MARK TWAIN

ERMA BOMBECK • ABRAHAM LINCOLN

JOHN F. KENNEDY • AND MORE...

EDITED BY M. JERRY WEISS AND HELEN S. WEISS

# THE SIGNET BOOK OF AMERICAN ESSAYS



*Edited by*

M. Jerry Weiss  
and Helen S. Weiss

  
SIGNET CLASSICS



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In this collection . . .

**Benjamin Franklin** stresses the importance of literacy in a piece taken from his autobiography.

**Cotton Mather's** firsthand record of the Salem witch trials exposes the dangers of religious fervor and fanaticism.

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**M. Jerry Weiss** is the distinguished service professor of communications emeritus at New Jersey City University. He is the author or editor of numerous works on literature and education. **Helen S. Weiss** is a freelance author/editor. Together they have edited seven anthologies for young adult readers. They live in Upper Montclair, New Jersey.

For these creative people who have enriched many  
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## Introduction

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In *A Handbook to Literature, Ninth Edition* (Prentice Hall, 2003), by William Harmon and Hugh Holman, the essay is defined as “a moderately brief prose description of a restricted topic.” Of course, beyond that, the varieties are endless. Certain magazine and newspaper articles can be considered essays. There are technical and scholarly essays and personal narrative essays. Essays may make an argument, report facts, or discuss an issue. They vary widely in form, tone, and length.

However, as Harmon and Holman point out, essays can broadly be divided into “formal” and “informal” types. Formal essays are often written to persuade or report, and literary style may be of secondary importance. In contrast, informal essays are written primarily to entertain and tend to have a livelier and more personal style, as well as greater experimentation with form.

For this volume, we have selected a wide range of both formal and informal essays and have arranged them in the categories listed in the contents. This topical arrangement makes it easy to see that certain issues have arisen again and again in our history. If a certain topic strikes you as unimportant, consider that it may have deep significance to other readers just as

it had for writers throughout the history of the United States. That is one purpose of essays, to make us think about our world. They help us to see other perspectives and to form, for better or worse, opinions. That is the power of reading. It is both personal and provocative.

We have drawn our selections from books, magazines, journals, letters, and speeches. We also asked some individuals to write original essays for us because of their positions, experiences, and knowledge of certain areas. We are extremely grateful to all the authors.

Political leaders, presidents and first ladies, teachers and activists, columnists, editors, and others—all of these writers, whether “classical” or “current,” wrestle with issues relevant to us today. Our hope is that their essays provoke thought and discussion—and writing—in communities around this great country.

—M. Jerry Weiss  
and Helen S. Weiss



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# ASPECTS OF LITERACY





## *Benjamin Franklin*

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### *From* THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

(17??)

**F**rom a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books. Pleas'd with the Pilgrim's Progress, my first Collection was of John Bunyan's Works, in separate little Volumes. I afterwards sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton's Historical Collections; they were small Chapmen's Books and cheap, 40 or 50 in all.—My Father's little Library consisted chiefly of Books in polemic Divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted, that at a time when I had such a Thirst for Knowledge, more proper Books had not fallen in my Way, since it was now resolv'd I should not be a Clergyman. Plutarch's Lives there was, in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great Advantage. There was also a Book of Defoe's called an Essay on Projects and another of Dr Mather's call'd Essays to do Good, which perhaps gave me a Turn of Thinking that had an Influence on some of the principal future Events of my Life.

This Bookish Inclination at length determin'd my Father to make me a Printer, tho' he had already one



Son, (James) of that Profession. In 1717 my Brother James return'd from England with a Press & Letters to set up his Business in Boston. I lik'd it much better than that of my Father, but still had a Hankering for the Sea.—To prevent the apprehended Effect of such an Inclination, my Father was impatient to have me bound to my Brother. I stood out some time, but at last was persuaded and signed the Indentures, when I was yet but 12 Years old.—I was to serve as an Apprentice till I was 21 Years of Age, only I was to be allow'd Journeyman's Wages during the last Year. In a little time I made great Proficiency in the Business, and became a useful Hand to my Brother. I now had Access to better Books. An Acquaintance with the Apprentices of Booksellers, enabled me sometimes to borrow a small one, which I was careful to return soon & clean. Often I sat up in my Room reading the greatest Part of the Night, when the Book was borrow'd in the Evening & to be return'd early in the Morning lest it should be miss'd or wanted.—And after some time an ingenious Tradesman\* who had a pretty Collection of Books, & who frequented our Printing House, took Notice of me, invited me to his Library, & very kindly lent me such Books as I chose to read. I now took a Fancy to Poetry, and made some little Pieces. My Brother, thinking it might turn to account encourag'd me, & put me on composing two occasional Ballads. One was called the *Light House Tragedy*, & contain'd an Acc<sup>t</sup> of the drowning of Capt. Worthilake with his Two Daughters; the other was a Sailor Song on the Taking of *Teach* or Blackbeard the Pirate. They were wretched Stuff, in the Grubstreet Ballad Stile, and when they were printed he sent me about the Town to sell them. The first sold

\*Mr. Matthew Adams

wonderfully, the Event being recent, having made a great Noise. This flatter'd my Vanity. But my Father discourag'd me, by ridiculing my Performances, and telling me Verse-makers were generally Beggars; so I escap'd being a Poet, most probably a very bad one. But as Prose Writing has been a great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a principal Means of my Advancement, I shall tell you how in such a Situation I acquir'd what little Ability I have in that Way.

There was another Bookish Lad in the Town, John Collins by Name, with whom I was intimately acquainted. We sometimes disputed, and very fond we were of Argument, & very desirous of confuting one another. Which disputacious Turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad Habit, making People often extreamly disagreeable in Company, by the Contradiction that is necessary to bring it into Practice, & thence, besides souring & spoiling the Conversation, is productive of Disgusts & perhaps Enmities where you may have occasion for Friendship. I had caught it by reading my Father's Books of Dispute about Religion. Persons of good Sense, I have since observ'd, seldom fall into it, except Lawyers, University Men, and Men of all Sorts that have been bred at Edinborough. A Question was once some how or other started between Collins & me, of the Propriety of educating the Female Sex in Learning, & their Abilities for Study. He was of Opinion that it was improper; & that they were naturally unequal to it. I took the contrary Side, perhaps a little for Dispute sake. He was naturally more eloquent, had a ready Plenty of Words, and sometimes as I thought bore me down more by his Fluency than by the Strength of his Reasons. As we parted without settling the Point, & were not to see one another again for some time, I sat down to put my Arguments in Writing, which I copied fair &



sent to him. He answer'd & I reply'd. Three or four Letters of a Side had pass'd, when my Father happen'd to find my Papers, and read them. Without entering into the Discussion, he took occasion to talk to me about the Manner of my Writing, observ'd that tho' I had the Advantage of my Antagonist in correct Spelling & pointing (which I ow'd to the Printing House) I fell far short in elegance of Expression, in Method and in Perspicuity, of which he convinc'd me by several Instances. I saw the Justice of his Remarks, & thence grew more attentive to the *Manner* in Writing, and determin'd to endeavour at Improvement.—

About this time I met with an odd Volume of the Spectator. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the Writing excellent, & wish'd if possible to imitate it. With that View, I took some of the Papers, & making short Hints of the Sentiment in each Sentence, laid them by a few Days, and then without looking at the Book, try'd to compleat the Papers again, by expressing each hinted Sentiment at length & as fully as it had been express'd before, in any suitable Words that should come to hand.

Then I compar'd my Spectator with the Original, discover'd some of my Faults & corrected them. But I found I wanted a Stock of Words or a Readiness in recollecting & using them, which I thought I should have acquir'd before that time, if I had gone on making Verses, since the continual Occasion for Words of the same Import but of different Length, to suit the Measure, or of different Sound for the Rhyme, would have laid me under a constant Necessity of searching for Variety, and also have tended to fix that Variety in my Mind, & make me Master of it. Therefore I took some of the Tales & turn'd them into Verse: