INTRODUCTION TO
Literature and Composition:
The Hero’s Journey
Sample
Introduction to Literature and Composition: The Hero’s Journey

This course explores the question, “What does it mean to be a hero?” It looks at literature featuring ordinary people who find themselves in circumstances that require extraordinary acts, and examines these acts in relation to the archetypal hero’s journey. Lessons provide historical background on the setting and author while offering discussion points students can use to explore literary topics with family and peers. The course includes the use of a main lesson book as a reader’s journal to keep track of key passages, new vocabulary, observations about characters, settings, and literary technique, etc. Students develop a wide range of composition skills throughout the course by exploring techniques and formats such as comparative essays, first person writing, figurative language, summarizing, poetry, persuasive writing, inferential reading and contextual clues, and observational writing.

The following materials are included in this course package:

- Introduction to Literature and Composition: The Hero’s Journey coursebook
- The House of the Scorpion, by Nancy Farmer
- Kidnapped, by Robert Louis Stevenson
- The Diary of a Young Girl, by Anne Frank
- Into the Wild, by Jon Krakauer
- Pygmalion, by George Bernard Shaw
- Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston
- House of Light, by Mary Oliver
- A Pocket Style Manual, by Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers
- Write It Right: A Handbook for Student Writers (Oak Meadow Books)

Two blank journals to be used as main lesson books (one for each semester)
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Into the Wild
Lost in the Wild

Sometimes a small mistake can have very big consequences. Has this ever happened to you? Did you know right away the mistake would be costly, or did the repercussions sneak up on you, slowly becoming apparent as time went by? As Chris McCandless lives out his dream in the wild, a series of mistakes take their toll. Although his short life ended tragically, his spirit of adventure and his drive to find meaning in life became the source of inspiration to many, as evidenced by the flood of mail sparked by Krakauer’s initial report of what happened to Chris.

Lesson Objectives

• Practice descriptive writing
• Craft a 100-word essay
• Research the scientific explanation of McCandless’s death

Digging Deeper

Knakauer began climbing mountains with his father when he was eight years old, and eventually he climbed Mt. Everest. Tragically, four of the five teammates on that trek were killed in a storm. Jon Krakauer wrote about what happened in an article for Outside magazine, for which he won a National Magazine Award. Later he wrote about Mt. Everest in Into Thin Air, which became a New York Times #1 bestseller and Time magazine’s Book of the Year in 1997. The book also was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize. In Into the Wild, Krakauer offers his own personal account of life as a risk-taking young man, searching for meaning, in order to help readers understand what may have motivated Chris McCandless.
Lesson 22

Assignments

Reading

Read chapters 14 through the epilogue (pages 133–203).

Main Lesson Book

Continue to trace Chris’s journey on your map, and make color-coded notes about his choices along the way. Add your own thoughts.

What Do You Think?

Krakauer describes his own quest for meaning as a young man eloquently:

By fixing my sights on one summit after another, I managed to keep my bearing through some thick postadolescent fog. Climbing mattered. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything—the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds—to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real. (Into the Wild 134)

Do you think this is how Chris might have viewed his solo wilderness trek? Read this passage aloud to a friend or parent and discuss your thoughts.

Writing

1. Choose one person, event, or element of Into the Wild for each of the following vocabulary words, and explain each choice in a complete sentence. The notes in your MLB might be helpful with this exercise. The first two words are done for you to give you the idea. Hint: You will need to know the meaning of these words in order to do this exercise (but you don’t have to write the definitions down for your teacher).

existential: I chose existential for Chris because he was always questioning the meaning of existence.

reverie: The word reverie makes me think of the wilds of Alaska, where the vast spaces seem to encourage dreamers.

cirque (142) n: a steep-walled basin formed by a glacier.

coppice (176) n: a grove of small trees or shrubs.

desideratum (137) n: something considered highly desirable.

hector (148) v: speak in an intimidating or harassing manner; bully.

incognito (174) adj: disguised or concealed.

miasma (178) n: a noxious or highly unpleasant smell or atmosphere.
2. Create original descriptions of physical and emotional settings. This book is filled with powerful imagery and moving descriptions of both physical settings and emotions. The author is especially adept at fresh imagery and metaphors. Write five brief, original descriptions of physical places (such as your favorite tree, a lake you’ve visited, your bedroom, your backyard, or the house of your friend, grandparent, or other relative) and five brief descriptions of emotional expressions. You might choose to describe a time you felt angry, overjoyed, frightened, or overwhelmed, or the way you feel when you are with your favorite pet, riding a roller coaster, or all alone in your room. Strive to describe these places and feelings in new and unusually expressive ways. Here are several examples in Krakauer’s signature style:

Physical descriptions:

The icefall was crisscrossed with crevasses and tottering seracs. From afar it brought to mind a bad train wreck, as if scores of ghostly white boxcars had derailed at the lip of the ice cap and tumbled down the slope willy-nilly. (139)

... spindrift avalanches hissed down from the wall above and washed over me like surf....(150)

The summit proper, a slender rock fin sprouting a grotesque meringue of atmospheric ice, stood twenty feet directly above. (153)

Lesson 22

(continued)

*molybdenum* (142)  
n: silver-white metal used in some alloy steels.

*progeny* (147)  
n: offspring; descendants.

*serac* (139)  
n: a block or column of ice on a glacier formed by intersecting crevasses.

*verglas* (153)  
n: thin coating of ice on rock.
Lesson 22

(continued)

Fittingly, the summit was a surreal, malevolent place, an improbably slender wedge of rock and rime no wider than a file cabinet. (153)

Emotional descriptions:

Embarrassed, I halted the blubbering by screaming obscenities until I grew hoarse. (141)

Early on a difficult climb, especially a difficult solo climb, you constantly feel the abyss pulling at your back. To resist takes a tremendous conscious effort; you don’t dare let your guard down for an instant. The siren song of the void puts you on edge.... (142)

...I was speaking to my father with a clenched jaw or not at all. (148)

Pain, excruciating at times, filled his days like a shrill and constant noise. (149)

3. In 100 words, write a well-reasoned argument for or against the following topic: Mountain climbers and others who do extreme sports sometimes feel, as Krakauer did when getting ready to climb Devil’s Thumb, as though facing a particular challenge would “fix all that was wrong with my life” (155). Do you agree or
disagree with this viewpoint? Why? Write your argument, using as many words as you need, and then edit it down to 100 words. See the writing tip for instruction on the 100-word-essay format.

4. Choose one of the following projects to complete. Each of these projects requires you to write one paragraph. When writing a paragraph, make sure to include a comprehensive topic sentence introducing the subject and your stance, and then elaborate on your subject in three to five well-crafted sentences. Wrap up your paragraph with a concluding sentence that ties your ideas together and relates them back to the main topic.

a. From the many quotations that preface each chapter, choose one that carries great meaning for you personally, and explain its relevance. Write one paragraph, and remember to include the quotation and reference the page number where it can be found (this goes at the top of your page and is not counted as part of your paragraph).

b. Does it seem ironic to you that Chris chose to stay in a bus stocked with a bed, stove, and supplies during his great solo adventure into the wild? How might someone who claimed he was “no longer to be poisoned by civilization” (163) have justified this? Explain your thoughts in one paragraph.

c. On page 174, Krakauer explains how a topographical map could have saved Chris. Do you think having a map on a wilderness survival trip would have been “cheating” or common sense preparedness? What difference would a map have made? Write one paragraph stating your view and backing it up with a logical argument or factual references.

d. Do you consider Chris’s lack of supplies and preparedness ignorance or arrogance? Which do you think is worse? Explain your thoughts in a well-reasoned paragraph.

5. Read Krakauer’s follow-up article in the New Yorker (“How Chris McCandless Died”) and write a summary of the new scientific research related to Chris McCandless’s death. The article can be found online. If you do not have access to the article, you can research the neurotoxin ODAP (beta-N-oxalyl-L-alpha-beta diaminopropionic acid) and write a summary of its sources and symptoms in humans.
Lesson 22

(continued)

Writing Tip

Writing a 100-word essay is much harder than it sounds! Contrary to popular belief, writing with as few words as possible can be harder than writing with lots of words at your disposal. See “The 100-word essay” in Write It Right for tips and an example, and refer to “Tighten wordy sentences” (Hacker and Sommers 2–3) for help in streamlining your writing down to the bare essentials.

FOR ENROLLED STUDENTS

Please submit the assignments for lessons 21 and 22 (including the outline and rough draft of your essay for lesson 21) to your teacher as soon as you have completed them. Make sure to email your teacher when your lessons are ready for review.