For the start of the 2016-17 school year, students entering U.S. History and CL-AP U.S. History are required to read selections from *The Story of America: Essays on Origins* by Jill Lepore. *(Students enrolled in CL AP U.S. History are also required to read Chapters 1 and 2 of Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty!*)*

When you return from summer vacation, you will be assessed on your reading of the book. This assessment will offer you the opportunity to demonstrate that you engaged with the book intellectually. The assessment will require you to consider the following question:

*How has American identity been defined and challenged throughout American history? Consider identity in reference to class, culture, economics, ethnicity, gender, geography, ideas, politics, race, religion, and values.*

To prepare, read the *Introduction and 10 of the 20 essays included in Lepore’s book (choose 7 essays from Ch. 1-14, and 3 essays from Ch. 15-20).*

Consider the guidelines and good practices below to help you grapple with Lepore’s works and to prepare to write about them for the summer reading assessment. These guidelines are adapted from the “Loomis Chaffee Study Skills Manual.”

For this assignment, you should follow a three-step process:

I. Preview the readings.
II. Read actively and critically.
III. Reflect on what you’ve read.

These three practices will help you to locate and understand essential information conveyed by Lepore. That information includes her key themes, essential questions, method of presentation, use of evidence, and reasons for writing the book. Thus, a grasp of the “big picture” is more important than getting hung-up on the many details of a book. Of course you will need to tap into specific evidence from the book in order to answer the question above about identity, but knowing every detail is not necessary.

I. Preview the reading.

The step should give you a vision of what the reading will be about and how the author, in this case Jill Lepore, has chosen to organize her essays. Previewing involves looking at the framework of the book: essential questions, structure, and evidence. Looking at the title, the Table of Contents, introduction, and endnotes will give important clues that will help you develop a critical reading of the book. While previewing may seem to be not getting you anywhere, it is crucial in order to gain an understanding of the “big picture.” You should not move on to the body of the work until after a thorough preview.

The key to effective previewing is to look for “announcements” by the author of key points. Start by looking at the Table of Contents to determine how the book is organized. Does it seem to be
organized chronologically, or by theme? What are the themes? Next, look at the endnotes to

determine the type(s) of evidence that Lepore uses. You should then read the introduction. Most
authors establish their key arguments, general outline, and sometimes essential questions in the
introduction. Oftentimes, the thesis will not be explicit. Students will have to reflect on the sum of
their previewing to discern what the author’s central point or motives are. Finally, you should
decide the 10 essays on which you will focus: choose 7 essays from 1-14, and 3 essays from 15-20.

1. “Here He Lyes” - Four centuries on, the battles over John Smith and Jamestown still rage.
Some scoffed at Smith’s outlandish accounts, but was there truth in his tall tales?

2. “A Pilgrim Passed I” - Of Pilgrims, Puritans, and professors

thinking of Franklin as twee, quaint, and preachy. What Poor Richard cost Benjamin Franklin

4. “The Age of Paine” - Was Thomas Paine too much of a freethinker for the country he helped
free?

5. “We the Parchment” – The Constitution and its worshippers: Benjamin Franklin was sure that
the document had its faults, and just as sure that the framers were fallible.

6. “I.O.U.” – How we used to treat debtors: In the early republic, traders could declare bankruptcy
while other debtors were jailed.

7. “A Nue Merrykin Dikshunary” – Webster and the original dictionary wars: Webster’s allies and
foes alike mocked his plans for a dictionary.

8. “His Highness” – George Washington scales new heights: Every biographer of George
Washington has remarked on his inscrutability; every generation has tried to figure him out.

9. “Man of the People” – Writing campaign lives: John Eaton’s “Life of Jackson” established the
genre of the campaign biography; almost every one published since varies only in detail.

10. “Pickwick in America” – Summer vacation with “Great Expectations”: Dickens’s readers are so
devoted that people have been going to Dickens camp, at Santa Cruz, every summer for
decades.

11. “The Humbug” - Edgar Allen Poe and the economy of horror: Always in debt, Poe both sought
and sneered at the popular audience of his day.

12. “President Tom’s Cabin” - Jefferson, Hemmings and a disclaimed lineage: For Annette Gordon-
Reed, the real scandal wasn’t what Jefferson did; it was what historians did, in scanting the
evidence for it.


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2 Jill Lepore, “Plymouth Rocked,” The New Yorker, April 24, 2006
7 Jill Lepore, “Noah’s Mark,” The New Yorker, November 6, 2006
8 Jill Lepore, “His Highness,” The New Yorker, September 27, 2010
11 Jill Lepore, “The Humbug,” The New Yorker, April 27, 2009
13 Jill Lepore, “Westward Ho!” The New Yorker, October 9, 2006
15. “Rock, Paper, Scissors” - How we used to vote: The founders didn’t anticipate that voting would be done in secret.15
16. “Objection” - Clarence Darrow’s unfinished work: “Most jury trials are contests between the rich and poor,” Darrow wrote.16
17. “Chan the Man” – On the trail of the honorable detective: Charlie Chan, based on a real detective with the Honolulu Police, became best known through Warner Oland’s portrayal.17
18. “The Uprooted” – Chronicling the Great Migration: Children at an Easter Sunday matinée in Chicago, 1941. Blacks who left the South hoped to escape from violence and humiliation.18
19. “Rap Sheet” – Why is American history so murderous?: Homicide may have a political dimension.19
20. “To Wit” – The History of the presidential inaugural address: Rarely brief, sometimes brilliant, but often boring.20

Once you begin reading the essays, you should use this process at the start of each essay as well.

II. Read actively and critically.

Reading actively requires you to engage with a source with a pen or pencil in hand. Like all Loomis Chaffee History and Social Science students, you are expected to underline as you read, but discriminate in the way you do so! All too frequently students underline 60‐70% of the material. This is an indication that the reader has not previewed, not understood a paragraph’s topic sentence, and thus is unaware of what is really important. 10‐15% of the material is an approximate amount that should be underlined.

Some guidelines for underlining:

➢ Only underline once you have finished the paragraph or section; only then do you have an idea of what is important.
➢ When underlining, mark only those parts that are related to the main point of the section, paragraph, and book. DO NOT mark everything new.
➢ Make margin notes to indicate key arguments, questions, themes, evidence.
  ○ You might develop a set of abbreviations to make annotating and underlining more efficient. Starring key ideas or summary statements, writing “ev” for evidence, and “Q” for essential questions or your own questions, are a few examples of symbols/abbreviations that you might use.
➢ Be alert for the author’s organization. Frequently an author will write: “There were three ways that illustrate,” etc. “The first...The second...And finally...” In the margin you might write “3 ways” or “Reasons for the change...” and then the numerals 1, 2, and 3.

III. Reflection.

17 Jill Lepore, “Chan, the Man,” The New Yorker, August 9, 2010
18 Jill Lepore, “The Uprooted,” The New Yorker, September 6, 2010
19 Jill Lepore, “Rap Sheet,” The New Yorker, November 9, 2009
20 No prior publication
In many ways reflection is the most important part of reading. The expectation is that by taking the time and devoting some thought to the material AFTER having completed a section, a chapter, or the entirety of a work, the learner can gain a new and more meaningful level of understanding. It is one thing to read the words, learn the new information and concepts, and be exposed to new ideas.

But information per se is not particularly useful unless one THINKS about it and begins to understand how it “fits” into the “big picture.”

Reflection is a time for wondering, for imaginative, creative and insightful thought. Reflection gives you the opportunity to stop and think for a moment and respond to the questions: “O.K., now that I have learned some new information and ideas, so what? Who cares? Why is it important? What does it mean?” You should also consider how various ideas, themes, and subjects within the collection of essays connect to one another. The author’s perspective should also be considered. What does Lepore have to say about her subject? What is her point in writing the book and what is the intended message to you, other readers and/or other scholars? Consider also what the flaws of the book are. For example, think about whether Lepore’s evidence is appropriate for the conclusions that she draws. Answers to these questions may fill the content of your margin notes.

Together, this above information should help you to have a productive reading experience, and thus prepare you for the assessment that will happen in the fall.

Have a great summer and enjoy the book!