

English 10

Culminating assignments: *The Confessions*

We have spent more than a month discussing Augustine's great memoir, *The Confessions*, one of the best known works of the most important non-Biblical writers of the Western Christian tradition. You have been writing short, low-stakes assignments designed to help you hone your academic writing and to encourage you to solidify your thoughts about the text. Now it's appropriate for you to see where it is all going and how your work so far can pay off.

### **Revised Study Questions (2)**

You are to choose two of your returned study questions and to revise them, using what you know generally about good academic writing as well as what I have marked on the page. The final version of the study question should provide a topic sentence that functions as a good thesis statement; short frequent quotations, blended and cited, to provide evidence; and solid academic writing in the literary present. The question should be answered completely, succinctly, and directly in a minimum of 5–6 sentences. Writing should be flawless, per the “Unlucky 13” error sheet, which you have received in class. You are welcome to use study questions whose subject matter overlaps with your essay topic.

Two revised study questions are due Thursday, October 6. You must turn in the old, graded versions along with the new writings.

### **Personal Essay**

In this component, you are to write a shorter essay, of 3–4 paragraphs (you may write more if you have more to say), in which you begin with a passage from *The Confessions*, a passage of no more than 4 lines of your type, and use it as a basis for your own personal philosophical or religious story. Feel free to identify with Augustine or to use a structure in his thinking or a snippet of content as your starting place; your story should be specific and contain a concrete, narrative component and should also contain some philosophical or theological musing. You may choose to quote from other passages in *The Confessions*, as you wish. As with all the writing you complete for English 10, the writing itself should show care on the levels of diction, syntax, and paragraph.

The Personal Essay is due Friday, October 14.

## **The Essay**

Here are some essay topics. They are designed to riff on the study questions, to provide you with a chance to take ideas you have and from class so that you can develop your thoughts within the logical, linear forms of academic writing. Choose one of these topics or propose your own by Friday, October 14. The final version is due Wednesday, October 26, uploaded to the turn-in on Jupiter by 10pm. You may not use outside sources as you write this essay. I would be happy to meet with you to go over a draft, but there is no official day for a draft due.

1. The garden. From the pear tree to the fig tree, Augustine has his most important experiences in gardens. Examine these two important scenes, exploring their purposes, and consider their relationships to important biblical gardens, the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane. Have a thesis that makes a claim about the effect of Augustine's use of biblical imagery in these key scenes.
2. Friendship. As one student brilliantly suggested, Augustine's need for Ambrose represents his need for the Church; indeed, Augustine's friendships show his growing maturity and aid his progress toward the conversion. Choose three important friendships and explore how each contributes to Augustine's progress. Consider not only what's happening while Augustine has a certain friend but also the actual contribution of each unique friendship to Augustine's spiritual progress. Finally, can you draw conclusions about the importance of friendship in one's journey toward God?
3. The role of prayer. *The Confessions*, addressed to God, is a prayer. As readers, we are a secondary audience of intentional over-hearers. What is the effect of this dual audience on the text's structure, content, and tone?
4. Confession. While Augustine tells us his sins, he also professes his faith. Consider the three different meanings of "confession" that we have discussed and explore the degree to which the work fulfills all three. You may have a thesis that argues that one meaning is the most important; alternatively, you may have a thesis that makes a claim for a particular effect of his use of all three meanings.
5. Pilgrimage. Augustine's journey is a kind of pilgrimage to the Church. Making a significant claim for what Augustine learns along the way, trace the main steps in his pilgrimage. If you choose this topic, be careful not to summarize the text but to show how the various steps promote your main argument.
6. Augustine and Aeneas. Explore the play of Augustine's allusions to *The Aeneid* throughout the text. What does his use of that text add to your reading of the memoir? While *The Confessions* chronicles a largely internal journey, Augustine alludes frequently and in a variety of interesting and diverse ways to this great epic about the founding of Rome. Using the places where the allusions are most prominent, argue for the knowable purpose of this move.
7. Augustine and Paul. Augustine alludes, both directly and indirectly, to the conversion of Paul in *The Confessions* in order to assert that salvation is the work of God, not the work of man. His

use of Paul's epistles also suggests the degree to which freedom is an effect of conversion. Explore how one or both of these is so, as developed in *The Confessions*.

8. Monica. What does the character of Monica add to the text? Make a claim about the contributions (or hindrances) of Monica to the conversion of her son; be careful not to summarize her episodes but rather to show her importance to the text.

9. Plato's Hierarchy of Knowledge. In class, we discussed Plato's Hierarchy of Knowledge. How does Augustine ascend from Imagination, through *pathoi*, *dianoia*, to arrive at *noesis* if not communion with the Good? Be careful to keep your exploration analytical as you make connections and track Augustine's ascent.

10. Death. How does Augustine's growing closeness to God affect his reactions to death?

11. "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" In Book 7, Augustine repeatedly makes the connection between Neo-Platonism and scripture, suggesting that Athens has, indeed, quite a lot to do with Jerusalem. What are the Classical influences Augustine mentions in *The Confessions*, and how can they be understood through a Christian lens? In your exploration, consider The Allegory of the Cave, Cicero's ideas on friendship, and/or the Neo-Platonist ideas of Book 7. I can imagine a great paper that is a Christian interpretation of The Allegory of the Cave—no matter what you do, make sure you are anchoring your ideas in *The Confessions*.

12. Qualities of character. What are the attributes of his character that lead Augustine to conversion and ultimately to become a bishop, a saint, a doctor of the Church? While he would be the first (or the second, after Paul) to say that salvation is the work of God, not the work of man, there are certain attributes that make Augustine especially open to receiving the graces God gives him. What are they? How do they contribute?