

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Catcher in the Rye

by J. D. Salinger

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Chapter 1

1. The narrator of this story is in a hospital or mental institution. Although he is going to tell the reader about his life, he is not going to write about his parents. He writes, “In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them.” My family was the same way, and I suppose most families are. If they have nothing to hide, why do you suppose families act like that?
2. As the manager of the fencing team, the narrator is responsible for the equipment when the team goes to New York for a match. Because he leaves the fencing equipment on the subway train, forcing the team to miss the competition, the team ostracizes the narrator on the train ride home. Assume you are a member of that team, and write a letter to the narrator telling him how you feel about his irresponsible mistake.
3. Holden knows he is not coming back to Pencey after the Christmas holidays because the school kicked him out for flunking four subjects. He writes, “They gave me frequent warning to start applying myself—especially around midterms, when my parents came up for a conference with Old Thurmer—but I didn’t do it.” Some people, myself included, don’t have much sympathy for people who are capable of doing work, but don’t do it. How do you feel about it?
4. The football game is not interesting to the narrator. He is hanging around because he wants to feel some kind of good-bye. He writes, “I don’t care if it’s a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to *know* I’m leaving it. If you don’t, you feel even worse.” He gets his good-bye memory when he recalls the fun he had throwing the football around with Tichener and Campbell. If you were going to switch English classes tomorrow, write about a good-bye memory you might have of your time in this classroom.

Response Journal

5. Holden frequently lets us know his thoughts on life, relationships, and living. What thoughts on life, or living, or how to live your life have you come up with?
6. At the end of this chapter, Holden visits Mr. Spencer. Write a short film scenario about what it might be like to visit the home of one of your past or present teachers.

Chapter 2

7. In this chapter, Holden expresses opinions that critics believe are typical for teenagers. In the following excerpt from the chapter, Holden states that people see him as immature when he is often mature.

“Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything.”

Where do you feel that you fit on the scale of mature versus immature behavior?

8. Holden tries to make Mr. Spencer feel better about having to flunk him by admitting that he (Holden) knows absolutely nothing about history, but Mr. Spencer will not drop the subject. He continues to criticize Holden by reading Holden’s terrible essay aloud. As Holden, write a letter to Mr. Spencer telling him how you feel about his nagging criticism of you.

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9. Complete the following dialogue between students:

Student One: Did you notice that Holden's mind wanders when old Spencer asks Holden if he blames him for flunking history.

Student Two: My mind wanders when I'm tense. Holden doesn't like being criticized by his teacher.

Student One: Maybe there's more to it. Maybe Holden is more worried about the ducks than he is about flunking. Maybe the ducks and the frozen pond represent something to Holden. What do you think?

You:

10. Holden says of Mr. Haas: "On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents." Why do you suppose Mr. Haas reacts differently to parents who are "funny-looking"? If you had the opportunity to spend time with Mr. Haas, what would you say to him? Do you see him as phony?
11. In movies and real life, we see many people who put on a jovial, phony front to impress people. Can you imagine instances in which you would behave that way as an adult?

Chapter 3

12. The first line in chapter 3 is, "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." Later, Holden lies to Mr. Spencer in order to get away. In your experience, do you suppose most people regularly tell lies? If so, why do you think people behave this way?

Response Journal

13. Throughout this story, Holden makes inconsistent statements about himself. For example in this chapter, Holden states that “I’m quite illiterate, but I read a lot.” If you understand his meaning, explain it to a friend who doesn’t understand.
14. Holden does not like Ackley. He criticizes Ackley’s appearance and personal habits. Yet, Holden goes out of his way not to hurt Ackley’s feelings concerning his teeth. Some critics believe Holden feels sorry for Ackley because they are both outcasts. What are your thoughts on this point?

Chapter 4

15. Critics applaud the author, J. D. Salinger, for the way his descriptions of daily life accurately reflect the personalities of the characters. Holden describes his roommate, Stradlater, by describing Stradlater’s razor.

“Stradlater was more of a secret slob. He always *looked* all right, Stradlater, but for instance, you should’ve seen the razor he shaved himself with. It was always rusty as hell and full of lather and hairs and crap. He never cleaned it or anything. He always *looked* good when he was finished fixing himself up, but he was a secret slob anyway, if you knew him the way I did.”

As Holden, write a short paragraph describing an inanimate object belonging to you. Try to copy Salinger’s writing style in your paragraph. Try to make the description you write accurately reflect one of your personality traits.
16. Explain to a friend who doesn’t understand why Holden feels it is “ironical” for Stradlater to want Holden to write the English composition for him (Stradlater).

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17. Stradlater asks Holden to do him a favor and write an English paper. Holden writes, “Just because *they’re* crazy about themselves, they think *you’re* crazy about them, too, and that you’re just dying to do them a favor.” Some readers think that their high school has more than its fair share of Stradlaters. If your school does, describe an incident in which someone behaved like Stradlater.
18. It appears that Holden is unable to say no to Stradlater. Why do you suppose that is?
19. What advice would you give to Holden on dealing with someone like Stradlater?
20. Complete the following dialogue between two students:
- First Student:** I don’t understand why Holden likes Jane so much. It seems silly to like a girl just because she keeps her kings in the back row of the checkers board.
- Second Student:** It is interesting, though. Holden does not seem to like anybody, but he likes Jane. I think she sounds young and childish.
- You:** Maybe that’s why. Maybe...

Chapter 5

21. Holden and Bossard are going to the movies. Why do you suppose Holden invites Ackley to come along, even though he does not particularly like Ackley? Have you ever done something like that? Could you picture yourself going to the movies with someone you disliked?