Sophomores are required to read two books for English this summer:

1) Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
2) Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*

We will give you a multiple-choice test on both books during the second English class next fall; therefore, please 1) read these books with care this summer; 2) bring your copies of them with you when you arrive in the fall and review the books before the test. (You should do most of this review before the night before the test, as you will have homework in a number of classes to do that night.) To do well on the multiple-choice test, you will need to know the action of the novels in some detail, as well as know their overall structure: we will ask questions both about details and about overall structure. For the most part, the questions on the test will follow the reading questions on this study guide, so you can help yourself by thinking about those questions (and the aspects of the novel they require a knowledge of) as you read. Be sure to bring this study guide with you when you arrive in the fall, to help you review for the test.

We will discuss these works during the first week of English class, and we will ask you to write an in-class paragraph about one of them. You will need your copy of the text to write this in-class. You will also write an essay on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at the end of the first semester.

Note: Your test and in-class writing will be graded and will count as an important part of your first-quarter grade.

Please use the following study guides as you read these novels: knowing something about the novels and thinking about the study questions will make reading the novels more enjoyable and should help you do well on your test and in-class writing. On the last page of this document, we give you two sample multiple-choice questions, to give you an idea of the kinds of questions you will need to be able to answer on the test.

**Study Guide for Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Although many readers consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be “the great American novel,” it hardly promises to measure up to such claims in its first few chapters. The narrator is a rather stubbornly ignorant 12-year-old boy, whose primary interests are smoking, fishing, and avoiding adults. One adult he most especially wishes to avoid is his mean, abusive, alcoholic father. In fact, it is Huck’s effort to escape his father’s clutches that forces him to leave his friends behind and flee down the Mississippi River in a canoe. Along the way, Huck meets—and gradually develops an unlikely friendship with—a runaway slave from Huck’s town, named Jim. That’s when things get interesting. Together, this poor, ignorant white boy, who nevertheless feels “naturally” superior to a slave, and this determined black man, who sees Huck’s value primarily in helping him to gain his freedom (in Ohio), overcome a handful of physical, social, and moral ordeals as they make their way down the great river on a raft.
Although Twain wrote the novel in the 1880s, he situates the action of the story in the pre-Civil War South – the time of his own childhood. Thus, Twain knew very well that the problem of slavery in America would eventually require a long and bloody war to bring about any kind of resolution. As Huck and Jim’s journey takes them deeper and deeper into the society—and, for Jim, the mortal dangers—of the slaveholding South, Huck is forced to choose between loyalty to certain truths he has always been told and the truth as he knows it in his heart. At that point, Huck’s struggle prefigures the national struggle that would take place some thirty years later.

The novel is a critique of racism, and yet its narrator, Huck, espouses racist views, ones that he has learned both consciously and subconsciously not only from the culture at large, but from the few kind-hearted people in his life, such as his Aunt Sally. He is a product of his culture, and yet he’s also to some extent an outsider—a runaway, the son of the town drunk. Twain intentionally uses Huck’s point of view as an outsider within slaveholding society to offer a poignant critique of racism. But this critique may at first be difficult to discern. Huck frequently uses the n-word, and in the era in which Twain wrote, the n-word was both commonly used and a term of deliberate racist intention. It is a troubling word, and Twain uses it with a strong sense of irony (meaning that there is a divide between Huck’s point of view and Twain’s intention). The novel is the story of Huck’s deep, radical friendship with Jim and of their joint quest to find freedom, and yet, even so, Huck uses the n-word repeatedly. Thus, the use of the n-word is deliberately disturbing, and its use reminds the readers of the violent dehumanization that was central to a slaveholding society.

1. As a narrator, Huck is a “talker” and not a writer. He says that “Mr. Mark Twain” wrote an earlier story about Huck and Tom and others (The Adventures of Tom Sawyer). What does the author gain by handing over “the sequel” to such a peculiar boy?

2. Although Huck doesn’t “know” nearly as much as Tom Sawyer, he’s still a pretty careful observer of the life around him. What kinds of things seem to capture Huck’s attention most often? How does that attentiveness come to play a significant role in the development of Huck’s character?

3. Once Huck and Jim miss “the turn” up the Ohio River—and Jim’s plan to gain his freedom is dashed—the story takes on a darker tone. How does the Grangerford episode contribute to that change of tone? What does Huck learn about “respectable people” from his short visit with the Grangerfords?

4. For twelve chapters, Huck and Jim are taken “prisoners” by two con-men who present themselves as the Duke of Bridgewater and the Dauphin of France (“son of Loopy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette”), though they also assume other identities. Twain obviously has fun developing humorous antics for these characters. But what does Huck—who does not find them entertaining—seem to learn through his encounter with them?
5. The last chapters of the novel bring Tom Sawyer back into the story. Some readers find Tom’s re-appearance an awkward reversion for Huck to a kind of behavior he had seemed to outgrow; others find Tom’s arrival, for Huck, a welcome return to Huck’s roots—and a clever way to resolve some plot elements. Do you sympathize with either of these reactions? Do you feel that all the detailed and complex efforts to help Jim “escape” (and the change of tone they create) add to the novel or detract from it?

Study Guide for Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*

Of all Dickens’ novels, none is more timely than *A Tale of Two Cities*, whose main action unfolds during the bloody “Reign of Terror” during the French Revolution in the last decade of the 18th century. For Americans currently involved in a protracted “War on Terror,” *A Tale of Two Cities* offers a prophetic look at the origins and nature of political violence and at the potentially terrifying relation between the individual and history. Dickens’ stylized (and occasionally sentimental) writing may at times try your patience; however, his descriptions of injustice, mob violence, and orchestrated slaughter anticipate such recent phenomena as the Nazi holocaust, the “killing fields” of Cambodia, the Rwandan genocide, and the recent videotaped beheadings of political prisoners in Iraq. Read this novel as an eye not only on the past, but on the present as well.

Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* nearly seventy years after the events that form its background. For his English audience, however, those events were still quite fresh in mind: the French Revolution made an enormous rupture in the history of Europe and helped ignite twenty years of bloody continental warfare. You will enhance your appreciation of this novel if you take the trouble to learn a little about the French Revolution, an uprising extraordinarily different from the American one. Read an encyclopedia article, or google “French Revolution”—fifteen minutes of background study will repay itself many times as you go through this novel. Here are some observations and questions you should consider in the course of your reading.

1. As the title of Dickens’ novel suggests, *A Tale of Two Cities* is about two distinct cities, nations, and peoples. Consider continually the national differences in language, politics, and character that distinguish these entities from each other. Consider as well how Dickens structures his novel between two distinct locations.

2. Dickens is a masterful plotter and structures many of his novels around mysteries and secrets. Try to keep track of the various secrets and mysteries in the novel, as well as their progressive revelation and resolution.

3. Only thirty years or so before Sigmund Freud began to develop his elaborate theories about the nature and “pathology” of the mind, Dickens showed a prophetic interest in human psychology, particularly in his creation of the
characters of Sidney Carton and Doctor Manette. Observe and attempt to explain how each of these men is psychologically disabled. Which man is harder to analyze? How is each cured of his psychic infirmity?

4. For all that *A Tale of Two Cities* revolves around the particular natures and needs of its central characters, the novel is also rich in characters we would call “subordinate” were they not drawn with so much color and affection. Miss Pross, Jerry Cruncher, Monsieur and Madame DeFarge, and others demand readerly attention and respect; be sure to follow the story of each of the minor characters with care. To what extent, in fact, are these minor characters more lively and endearing than the chief protagonists? How can you explain such a paradox?

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions:

1. Dr. Manette relapses into his psychological illness because

   A. he becomes reconnected to his past life through a marriage.
   B. he becomes depressed by the English climate.
   C. he is forced to return to France.
   D. he gets overtired while traveling.
   E. he has a series of nightmares.

2. What combination of elements allows Huck to fake a murder scene in his father’s cabin?

   A. a six-foot-long catfish, a whiskey jug, and a shotgun
   B. a woman’s bonnet and a playbill for the Royal Nonesuch
   C. a canoe, an ax, and a bucket of fake blood
   D. a wild pig, an ax, and a sack of grain
   E. a raft, a hairball, and a Bible

ANSWERS: 1. A; 2. D.