

Dear Elliot,

It has been a pleasure to get to know you over the course of Brown Summer High School. You are an exceptional student in that not only are you successful at academic work, but you enjoy learning and you always appear engaged in the material discussed in class. You are a highly motivated person and I am sure you will be very successful with your senior year of high school and at whatever college you decide to attend. Your enthusiasm to read outside of class impressed me and I encourage you to maintain this enthusiasm throughout the year as it will help you improve your writing. The way you describe your parents makes it sound like you come from a very supportive environment that encourages you to do well in school. It is clear you work very hard at school to excel in academics, which is also impressive that you do not merely rely on your natural academic talent. As a part of getting to know you through this literacy case study, I have learned tremendously about what motivates a high achieving student and how to keep a student like you interested in class. I appreciate your honesty during the two interviews I recorded with you and your willingness to participate in this literacy case study. After reviewing your class work, the interviews, and the reading record I took with you, I have the following recommendations for how you can improve in reading and writing.

You have a reading accuracy rate of 99.2% (I recorded this when I had you read a section from the Chideya book to me). This is a wonderful accuracy rate! You are clearly able to read quickly and correctly. You also did very well with correcting yourself on the few errors you did make. After you read, I asked you questions to see if you could restate and summarize the text. You did well with pointing out a few specific facts you read in the text. You were able to identify a few main points of the text you read, but you missed some of the overall main points Chideya tried to get across in that section. It was very impressive that you could remember specific facts like who Crispus Attucks was and where the first Africans arrived in America. I think that this skill probably comes from your involvement with debate since you are used to remembering facts for your arguments. But, reading academically should be a little different than reading for debate. It seemed to me that you associate fast reading with good reading and that's not always the case. While it is a great skill to be able to read quickly and this will save you time on some types of reading, I think you will miss several of the main points by treating reading like a race to the last page. You could try to slow down by using some of the active reading strategies we introduced in class. Underlining/Highlighting phrases that are important and circling words you do not understand will help you take your time evaluating the text. If you look up the words you circled, it will help you improve your vocabulary – a goal you brought up to me many times that you have for yourself. I highly recommend writing down questions for the author or about the text when you are reading. You are a naturally inquisitive person and writing down questions will help you connect better with the text and remember more of the main points after you finish the text. You could also write down predictions towards the beginning of the book for what you think the characters will do next and what you think will happen in the end. This will also help you feel personally involved in the books you read. You mentioned to me that sometimes you have a hard time choosing what books/authors to read. At the end of this letter, I have included a list of authors that have similar writing

styles to Tim O'Brien or that I enjoy reading myself. Since you liked Tim O'Brien's book, you can see if these other authors interest you as well.

Being involved in debate has made you a very articulate person. You are able to make arguments when you speak in class and voice your opinion well verbally. However, as we discussed when reviewing your paper, you tend to write in the same way that you speak in debate. I noticed this quality in both your journal and your final paper. While you do a great job with writing down the main points of your paper very clearly, you should try to focus more on supporting and explaining your opinions. It is not enough to state that the media portrayal of the Patriot Act is unfair. You must explain why and how it is unfair, as well as who else thinks the portrayal is unfair. I also recommend trying to avoid 'debate' phrases like "you cannot argue with the fact that", "therefore", and "completely out of bounds". These phrases are useful when you are debating to emphasize your point verbally, but they do not really support your point when you are writing. You could even try not to use the phrase, "the fact that", as it is unnecessary (if something is a fact, you should make it clear with your writing that it is a fact – you shouldn't have to qualify it). Since you are an advanced student, one skill that will help you write better, especially when going to college, is learning to avoid passive voice. It is very hard to explain this in a letter and I hope you will ask a teacher to explain it in person. On very simple terms, avoiding passive voice means that when you write, all your verbs are active – the reader knows who performs all the actions. For example, instead of saying a law was passed (which is passive), you should write Congress passed a law.

Your writing displays a great start to higher level writing skills. Your journal and paper demonstrate that you personally connect to topics when you write about them. That is a great skill! When people read your writing, they can see your vibrant personality coming through the words on the page. By learning to support your arguments and explaining your opinions, your work will only become more trustworthy and exciting to read. If you plan on reading more outside of school (like you said you wanted to in our interview), your writing will naturally improve with practice. To improve your reading and writing, the best thing you can do is practice and read as much as you can. I also think you have a lot to offer to your peers in classroom settings. School comes a lot easier to you than it does to many other students in class. By possessing this academic talent, you have the ability and, in my opinion, the responsibility to help others understand concepts discussed in class. By teaching your peers to become better readers and writers (like you are), you will in turn become a better reader and writer. You could consider helping friends edit their papers or teaching others the skills you have learned so well through debate. I hope these suggestions help you think about ways you can improve your literacy skills. Keep up the great work next year! Feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions about the letter or to let me know how you're doing. Good luck with college applications!

Sincerely,
Ms. Larkin
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If you like Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, you should try...

1. O'Brien's other books – Going After Cacciato and Northern Lights are fabulous!
2. John Irving – especially A Prayer for Owen Meany, The World According to Garp, and Cider House Rules – I've read almost all of Irving's books. He is by far my favorite author.
3. Richard Wright's Native Son (not similar to O'Brien's writing, but it's very engaging and has a similar subject to the book you told me about that you read for English that you liked – maybe the book you read for English is another one of his books, Black Boy?)
4. Toni Morrison's books – Sula, Beloved, Song of Solomon – these books are confusing at first, but once you're half-way into them, you're hooked! Morrison makes several religious references that I think you would enjoy.
5. Barbara Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible – this book combines a discussion of religion with history references in the Congo region of Africa. Since you were interested in parts of African history, I thought you may be interested in reading this book. It's one of my favorites!
6. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, this book also stretches your imagination by asking you to believe in things that seem impossible. I find his writing as easy to read as O'Brien's, but the book itself is kind of confusing. I think you're up to the challenge!
7. Jonathan Safran-Foer – Everything is Illuminated and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Foer is a new, very young author. I think his first book came out when he was 21. His writing style is also very easy to read and he engages you in the book. It seems like he's having a conversation with you when you read his work.