

AP English Language and Composition 2009 Summer Reading/Writing Assignment

1. Read *Fist Stick Knife Gun* by Geoffrey Canada.

This is a classic coming-of-age memoir that examines urban youth violence and its causes.

Long before *U.S. News and World Report* named him one of America's Best Leaders and Oprah Winfrey called him "an angel from God," Geoffrey Canada was a vulnerable, scared boy growing up in the South Bronx. Canada's world was one where "sidewalk" boys learned the codes of the block and were ranked through the rituals of fist, stick, and knife. Then the streets changed, and the stakes got even higher. Canada relives a childhood in which violence stalked every street corner. He tells of his experiences in the Bronx and makes a strong plea to end violence in America.

2. Be prepared for a reading comprehension test during the first week of school.

3. Compose an essay of 350-500 words, typed and double-spaced on the following prompt. This essay is due Friday, August 28.

<p>Prompt: In FSKG, Geoffrey Canada tells of his experiences in the Bronx and makes a strong plea to end violence in America. In this passage from Chapter 6, what does Canada argue about violence? What rhetorical strategies does he use to make his argument convincing? Answer these questions in a well-organized essay.</p>
--

Passage from Chapter 6 of *Fist Stick Knife Gun* by Geoffrey Canada

Rules like the ones surrounding our behavior on Union Avenue and at P.S. 99 by and large still exist today in the ghettos across this country. If you wonder how a fourteen-year-old can shoot another child his own age in the head, or how boys can do “drive-by shootings” and then go home to dinner, you need to know you don’t get there in a day, or week, or month. It takes years of preparation to be willing to commit murder, to be willing to kill or die for a corner, a color, or a leather jacket. Many of the children of America are conditioned early to kill and, more frighteningly, to die for what to an outsider might seem a trivial cause. The codes of conduct on the streets of our slums have always been hard, cold, and unforgiving. But with the influx of hundreds of thousands of handguns, you have a new brand of gunslinger among the young. Countless young people today are more dangerous than Jessie James or Billy the Kid ever were. Indeed, the Wild West was never as wild as many communities in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Boston (and on and on) are today. And, just as important, there’s no Wyatt Earp—no one person or one program powerful enough—coming to town to clean up the mess.

It’s handguns that make living in the inner city so lethal today. People have been armed and violent for a long time, but the weapon of choice used to be a bottle or a knife: the explosion of killing we see today is based on decades of ignoring the issue of violence in our inner cities. Every indicator I see suggests that it’s going to get worse. How much worse? I don’t think we understand the potential of how bad it can get.

A crucial part of the problem is that there are so few natural checks on killing today. This might sound strange, but while killing another person is not natural, it’s not that difficult to learn. No, I’ve never killed anyone. But for those of you who think killing is somehow impossible to imagine, just look around the world. Wars abound—intentional starvation, the killing of civilians, women, and children—and these atrocities are sometimes committed by farmers, laborers, and other ordinary people. Even in this country the military can take an eighteen-year-old boy and turn him into a killer in a matter of months. People can be *taught* to kill. And children growing up under the conditions of war that we find in many poor communities today learn to think about death and killing as a matter of survival. And of course there are always those who are willing to teach children how to kill, and how to die. These are usually the real role models in our inner cities, older boys or girls who teach the codes of conduct and enforce the rules of order.