

Introduction from

Exploring America

by Ray Notgrass

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Introduction

My dad served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He endured the German bombing of Bristol, England, where he was stationed before the D-Day invasion. His unit landed on Utah Beach on the northern coast of France the day after D-Day. As the Allied army was advancing through France, the Germans bombed the train station where Dad was sleeping one night. On another occasion, as he stood on a small balcony, a German pilot fired at him and just missed him. Dad suffered through the bitter cold weather that occurred during the Battle of the Bulge.

My father participated in history. If you had suggested to him that the experience of millions of soldiers in World War II, as well as the experience of all those on the home front, was boring and irrelevant because it was history, I think he would have been confused and hurt. For him, history was literally a life and death story.

Yet somehow the teaching of this gripping, fascinating, life-changing story of mankind often brings groans of agony and pleas of “Do we have to study history?” Something has gone wrong in the way that history is usually taught. In this curriculum we tell the story of American history and present American literature in a way that will enable you to enjoy these subjects. We also present Bible lessons that will help you see how God’s Word teaches us important, practical lessons for our lives.

Exploring America Teaches History

Exploring America surveys American history from the first exploration by Europeans to the present day. We place great emphasis on original documents and speeches because these allow the participants in history to tell the story from their own perspective. The written and spoken word has a profound ability to move hearts and minds. In this curriculum you will read the words that have influenced millions of Americans.

One reason that history has so often come across as boring and irrelevant is that it has usually been taught with textbooks. Textbooks often homogenize history to make it as inoffensive as possible to the greatest number of people (and to potential textbook buyers). Textbooks make the unfolding adventure of history seem inevitable, so they take the drama and uncertainty out of the narrative, even though the people living in the times being described felt the intense uncertainty of unfolding events. Textbooks also leave out many of the fascinating stories that enliven history and make it personal. We hope that this curriculum avoids the pitfalls of textbooks while providing an understandable framework of information about our past. We encourage students to pursue on their own the stories of individuals, issues, and events that interest them.

Exploring America Shares Literature

Exploring America introduces some of the great literature that Americans have produced. Literature reflects and illuminates what is happening in a culture. A story often tells effectively what an historical summary can only outline. In practical terms, since most high school students study American history and American literature at the same time, it

makes sense to us that these subjects be coordinated and allowed to enhance each other. In this curriculum, we study novels, short stories, autobiographies, memoirs, essays, poems, hymns, and other kinds of writing.

Historical literature is either from a period or about a period. Literature from a period reflects the times and the kind of writing produced during that period. It is something of an historical document itself. Literature about a period may have been written many years after that period, but it reveals insights about the times and the people it treats. Such literature is an historical study. Both kinds of literature are valuable to us.

The Scarlet Letter, for example, was published in 1850; but its publication date is less important than the period about which it was written: colonial Massachusetts in the mid-1600s. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, on the other hand, was published in 1852 and was an important part of the drama of pre-Civil War America. Each work of literature in this curriculum is assigned in the period in which it is set to help illustrate the period being studied.

Exploring America Builds Faith

Exploring America demonstrates the significance of faith with regard to history. Faith is connected with history in two ways. First, people have often been motivated to act because of their faith in God. For instance, faith motivated the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower* to seek a new land in which to live. Faith caused people to oppose slavery. Faith has been expressed often in the speeches and documents that Americans have produced. We recognize and highlight the importance of faith throughout the American story.

A second way that faith should be connected to history is by looking at the overall story of American history through the eyes of faith. We encourage students to think about the faith lessons that they can learn from people and events in history. For instance, many God-fearing Americans owned slaves and had a strong prejudice against blacks. We need to understand what caused those Christian people to be blinded by their culture and how they missed the example of Jesus and the teaching of Scripture about this issue (see John 4:7-9, Galatians 3:28, and Ephesians 2:19). This may help us realize cultural blindnesses we suffer today. A study of history can inform, challenge, and strengthen our own faith.

How to Use *Exploring America*

Exploring America provides material for one entire school year in three subjects: American History, English (American Literature and Composition), and Bible (Issues in American Christianity).

Curriculum Package. The curriculum package includes *Exploring America Volume 1*, *Exploring America Volume 2*, and *American Voices*. Volumes 1 and 2 have a total of 150 lessons divided into 30 units of five lessons each. Volume 1 contains units 1 through 15 (lessons 1 through 75), covering the time period from Columbus through Reconstruction; it is used for the first semester. Volume 2 contains units 16 through 30 (lessons 76 through 150), covering the time period from the late 1800s through the present; it is used for the second semester. *American Voices* is an anthology of speeches, documents, poetry, short stories, essays, and some excerpts from longer works.

Literature Package. *Exploring America* assigns the student thirteen works of American literature which are not included in *American Voices*. These are available from the Notgrass Company as the *Exploring America Literature Package* (you may also purchase individual titles). The books are also available in libraries and from other retail sources. The titles include:

- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* by David Crockett
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass
- *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe
- *Company Aytch* by Sam Watkins
- *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott
- *Humorous Stories and Sketches* by Mark Twain
- *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington
- *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon
- *Mama's Bank Account* by Kathryn Forbes
- *Christy* by Catherine Marshall
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

Quiz and Exam Book (Optional): Some parents will want their children to complete the activities in the *Quiz and Exam Book*. The *Quiz and Exam Book* includes review questions on each lesson and on the assigned documents, review questions on the literature, a history quiz on each unit, and six major tests on history, English, and Bible that cover five units each. The *Quiz and Exam Book* comes with a separate answer key to all questions and tests. It is valuable for parents who need help assessing a student's progress and assigning grades. Student answers to reviews, quizzes, and tests should be written on separate paper. The reviews, quizzes, and tests are optional because our main goal is to encourage students to enjoy history and great literature and to become good writers. We believe that the assignments included with each lesson and each unit encourage this enjoyment.

Completing Three High School Credits. To complete one credit in American History, one credit in English, and one credit in Bible, the student must read the text in Volumes 1 and 2 and complete the weekly and daily assignments described in those volumes. The assignments include composition, Bible study, questions, and additional reading (i.e. the thirteen books listed above and the speeches, short stories, poems, and other material found in *American Voices*). All of the reading is integral to the course and should be completed. The emphasis should be on reading for understanding and enjoyment. A student should be able to complete this work in two to three hours per day.

A Typical Week for a Student Studying *Exploring America*

Each unit of *Exploring America* has five lessons; a unit is generally completed in one week. However, the curriculum only includes 30 units. A typical school year is 36 weeks long, so some units can be spread over two weeks.

The Unit Introduction. The student should always read the introduction at the beginning of each unit. It gives the following information for that unit:

- A brief description of what will be covered.
- A list of lessons.
- A memory verse to be learned.
- Books used in addition to Volume 1 or 2.
- A choice of writing assignments (the student chooses one).

Note: During some units, students will be reading one of the thirteen books included in the *Exploring America* Literature Package. When one of those books is assigned, the unit introduction will also include a brief description of that book.

The Daily Lessons. Each day the student reads the lesson in *Exploring America* and then completes the assignments at the end of the lesson. Daily assignments include one or more of the following:

- One or more readings in *American Voices*.
- A short writing assignment.
- One or more Bible study questions.
- A reminder to continue reading one of the thirteen literature titles.

In addition to the assignments listed at the end of each lesson, the student must remember to work on the unit memory verse and on the unit writing assignment he or she chose from those listed in the unit introduction.

Some Notes About the Bible Study and Writing Assignments

Composition. Since high school English courses usually include composition, this curriculum provides many suggestions for writing and research. Some good ways to improve writing skills, vocabulary, and spelling ability are to read widely, to look up words you don't know, and to practice writing often. (We avoid the phrase creative writing because we believe all original writing is or should be creative.) Each unit has two or more suggestions for a writing assignment. The student should choose the one he or she wants to do for that unit. A student will write more effectively on subjects about which he or she is genuinely interested.

We suggest developing a schedule for the writing assignments and following it every week. The discipline of a writing schedule will help to get the assignments done. For instance:

- Monday: Select a topic and do preliminary research. As part of that research, the student could skim other lessons in the unit to find information that deals with the topic chosen.
- Tuesday: Develop a preliminary outline, noting key points the student wants to make, and do any additional research.
- Wednesday: Write a rough draft.
- Thursday: Review the rough draft.
- Friday: Write the final version of the paper.

This schedule is not included in the daily assignments at the end of each lesson. The student should work out the schedule that is best for him or her and should be responsible for completing the writing assignments on schedule.

Research. Some of the writing assignments require research. The student will need to use family resources and the library for this research. Except for the sources needed for this research, everything you need to complete *Exploring America* is included in the curriculum and literature packages.

Bible Study. We show throughout the lessons the importance of faith in American history. One complete lesson in each unit is a Bible study that is intended to help students learn the spiritual implications of the historical events they are studying. Bible study activities are included with the other lessons as well.

Keeping An *Exploring America* Notebook

We recommend that students keep a three-ring binder that is used exclusively for *Exploring America*. It should have sections for weekly writing assignments, Bible study questions, and daily writing assignments. If you are using the optional *Quiz and Exam Book*, the binder should also include sections for review questions, tests, and exams.

How We Present Literature

Whole Books. In this curriculum we emphasize whole books in addition to providing an anthology of shorter works and some excerpts from longer works. We want to encourage students to read literature the way it was written. Too often, reading an anthology of excerpts actually serves as an inoculation against reading: it gives someone just enough to keep him or her from catching the real thing. We encourage the student to focus on reading works in their entirety.

Books Students Want to Read. We encourage students to read what they enjoy and to enjoy what they read. I wonder how many great pieces of literature have been ruined for people because they were required readings. For instance, I read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, as many American students did. I read it, took the tests, and, except for some of the main points, largely forgot it. Thirty years later, I picked it up of my own choice, read it, and was profoundly moved. *The Scarlet Letter* has been called the greatest American novel. I wonder how many people have missed its beauty and power because it was an assignment.

Imagine how you would feel if every time you went into a library or bookstore, you knew that if you got a book, you would have to take tests on it, look up vocabulary words, and write a three-page paper on some theme from the book. If this were the case, I expect that you would not read many books; but that is what is commonly expected from high school students. The study of literature in high school is supposed to encourage people to read as adults, but I am afraid it does just the opposite. Writers do not write in order to have their readers take pop quizzes and vocabulary tests on their work. They write to inform, uplift, educate, and move their fellow human beings.

We offer a few starting points to guide the student's reading of the books used in the curriculum, and some review questions are included in the optional *Quiz and Exam Book*; but mostly we simply encourage the student to enjoy the books he or she reads. We take the chance that a student might miss a few points of analysis about these books in the hope that he or she will become an avid reader for life.

Redemptive Literature. Our perspective of faith has influenced what literature we have included in this curriculum. We believe that good literature is not only well-written but is also redemptive; that is, it inspires and builds up the reader, strengthening his faith or enhancing his understanding of people and the world. Some works of American literature have been considered standard classics for high school study, but we decided not to include them because to us their overall faith-impact is negative. We mention some of these works, and the student may choose to read them on his own; however, we do not think that a student's faith should be torn down by reading a work of literature simply because critics have called it a classic.

On the other hand, we have included some works that are not always considered literary classics but have positive faith-messages. *In His Steps* and *Christy* are two examples. We believe that American Christians need to know these books because they are popular works with clear Christian themes. They are, as we define it, good literature: good writing that helps us "love what is good" (Titus 1:8). Some books that we recommend have harsh language, dark elements, and graphic portrayals of war. See the *Guide for Parents and Teachers* for details. Parents should keep these things in mind when assigning the books to their children. We believe the overall good of these works outweighs the bad. Our family chose to read some of these classics of American literature aloud as a family. That way I was able to skip bad words and we were able to discuss the bad things that happened.

Notes on Style

In writing this course, I have followed two rules of capitalization that may seem unusual to you. The first involves the word President. Generally speaking, the word is to be capitalized if it is referring to a particular president. Cognate words such as presidency and presidential are usually not capitalized. If I err, it is on the side of capitalization. The second involves the word federal. A friend of mine, who is an assistant district attorney in Tennessee, insists that the proper form when referring to the national government is capitalized: Federal. Most of the times you see the word used elsewhere, it is not capitalized. I have chosen to follow my friend's opinion because (1) it seems more respectful of the national government, (2) I have to look him in the eye when we visit each other, and (3) I don't want to get into trouble with an assistant district attorney.

Acknowledgments

As a close-knit family that operates a family business, we do most things as a family. This has certainly been true with this curriculum. I wrote the lessons. Our daughter Mary Evelyn and our son John did the page layout to make the material attractive, enjoyable to read, and easy to follow. Mary Evelyn did extensive research to find appropriate photographs and illustrations for the lessons. John worked on the mechanics of getting the books ready for publication. Our daughter Bethany prepared the subject index and kept us on schedule. My wife, Charlene, carefully went over the curriculum with the eye of a homeschooling mom and made it more user-friendly. All five of us worked on proofreading. My thanks to all of my family for helping to make this project possible.

We also want to say thanks to Olive Wagar, a homeschooling mom and long-time friend, who proofread this second edition and did a great job. The students in the Upper

Cumberland Tutorial program in Cookeville, Tennessee, who took this course from me were the guinea pigs for the first edition of this curriculum as it was being put into final form. I appreciate the suggestions and encouragement from many people with whom I have discussed this project. We have been richly blessed by the positive comments we have received from homeschooling families all across the country regarding the first edition of this curriculum. Most of all, I thank the Father, who put me in this great country, gave me a wonderful family, and blesses me in countless other ways. Any criticism should be directed toward me; give Him all the praise.

God has blessed us with a beautiful and fascinating country. He has given us the freedom to know Him and the opportunity to serve Him in our country. Knowing where we have been will help us know where we should be going by the grace of God as individuals, as families, and as a nation. Thank you for joining with us in the exciting adventure of *Exploring America*.

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Advice on Writing

Composition is part of most high school English courses. This subject usually involves learning how to express ideas, writing themes, and doing research papers. Practicing writing helps you to develop your style and skill, just as practicing any activity will help you to be better at it. Since I make my living by writing, I appreciate the importance of this skill.

One goal of high school composition is to prepare you for college composition. I have taught college students who never learned to construct a good sentence, let alone a paragraph. However, learning to write just for high school and college composition assignments is a limited goal. Life exists beyond college, or even without college. You will probably have many occasions to engage in research and to prepare your thoughts on vital subjects such as abortion or capital punishment. You will have numerous opportunities to write: letters to friends and family, journals, letters to the editor, advertisements for your business, and reviews and articles for periodicals, to mention just a few possible outlets for your writing. The Internet has created new opportunities for sharing your ideas in written form. Desktop publishing has brought the possibility of getting a book published within the reach of many people who might not get a contract from a big-name publisher.

Good writing style is important in getting your ideas across to other people. Writing skills will be helpful in your job or in conducting your own business. You will bless your spouse and children if you write thoughtful letters to them often. Being able to express yourself well in writing will make a difference in many aspects of life.

Three ways to improve your writing are to read good writing, to write often yourself, and to receive criticism of your writing with humility and a desire to do better. This curriculum provides the first two and helps with the third. In addition, reading and applying the guidance in *The Elements of Style* and other good books on writing will help you.

The classic form for an essay involves five paragraphs: an opening paragraph that states your purpose, three paragraphs that develop your three points, and a closing paragraph that summarizes your position. Of course, writing assignments can take many more forms than just this one; but this can provide the beginning point of a structure if you are floundering on a particular assignment.

Research

Research papers combine the work of investigation with the task of writing. When you write a research paper, you must define your topic as clearly as possible. You might have to do some general research before you can define your topic. The topic of Nathaniel Hawthorne is probably too broad for a typical research paper. Hawthorne's use of humor in three short stories is a more manageable topic for a research paper. The War of 1812 is another overly broad topic. American naval strategy in the War of 1812 is more defined.

When you do research, find books, periodicals, websites, and other sources that have material on your subject. Do not copy sentences directly into your paper from a source unless you are clearly quoting from that source. Using unattributed sentences from another source is called plagiarism. It is illegal and unethical. You can copy down the exact quote from the original source and then paraphrase it when you write your paper. You will need to give the

citation of the source in a footnote. Use a consistent format for citing sources. The *Harbrace College Handbook* or similar reference work will tell you how to cite works in footnotes. Gather the information, organize it into sub-topics, and then develop your paper in a logical manner. Write a clear introduction, a body that develops your presentation, and then a paragraph for a conclusion. Your teacher might only want a list of sources used (called a bibliography) and not footnotes. Even in that case, you may not copy sentences from the original source into your paper as your own work.

Writing Tips

I have learned some tips that have helped my writing and that help me appreciate effective writing. Here are some of them.

1. Write with passion. Believe in what you are saying. People have plenty to read, so give them something that will grip them. If you don't believe deeply in what you are saying, you give others no reason to do so either. A piece that has been struck white hot off the anvil of your heart is much more effective than one which merely fulfills an assignment. This raises an issue that is related to many writing assignments. Assigned writing is like assigned reading: a person often approaches it as a chore. Deep emotion and a passion for convincing others are difficult to express in a theme on "The American Interstate System" or "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." If a writing assignment in this curriculum does not excite you, change it or come up with one about which you can write passionately. By the way, if you ever do write about the interstate system, approach it in a way that makes it personal and compelling (for instance, you might note the sameness of most interstate exists or the trade-off of having a better network of roads that unfortunately often hurts the economies of towns that are not on an interstate).
2. Writing with passion means that you should not soft-pedal what you say. Phrases such as "It seems to me," "I think that it would be good if," or "My personal opinion, for what it is worth," take the fire out of your message. It is your piece, so the reader knows it is your opinion. Just state it. Related to this is the common use of quotation marks to highlight a word. Save quotation marks for when you are actually quoting something.
3. Develop your paper in an orderly and logical way. Using an outline helps me to structure what I am writing. Identify the major points you want to make, the order in which you want to make them, and what secondary points you want to include to support your major points. Be sure that each paragraph has one main point, expressed in a topic sentence, with the other sentences supporting that point. In a narrative, tell what happened first before you tell what happened later. In an essay, make your points in the order of their importance to your overall theme.

4. Don't try to put everything you believe into one piece. I have noticed that when young men get a chance to preach, they tend to throw every spiritual idea they have ever had into that one sermon. I have done it too. Trust that you will have the opportunity to write again, and stay focused on your topic. Your challenge is to narrow your topic sufficiently to be able to cover it completely.
5. Try to use relatively short, simple sentences. Using flowery language is easy, but longer sentences do not necessarily show greater intelligence or convey ideas more effectively. You are trying to teach or convince a reader who perhaps has not been thinking about the topic the way you have. He or she will need to see your ideas expressed simply and clearly. Shorter sentences generally stay with people longer: "These are the times that try men's souls." "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
6. Avoid habits that make writing weak:
 - Avoid beginning sentences with "There is" or "There are." Find a more forceful way to cast the sentence. Compare "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation" to "There was a country begun by our ancestors 87 years ago."
 - Do not habitually begin sentences with and or but. The grammar books tell you never to do this, but it has become a trendy habit in informal writing.
 - Avoid the current trend to overuse the word would. Such usage is an attempt to soft-pedal, to indicate customary behavior, or to describe something that is not a reality. "That would be a good idea" is less powerful than "That is a good idea." "Americans would often violate the terms of treaties made with Native Americans" is not as sharp as "Americans often violated the terms of treaties made with Native Americans."
 - Don't imitate someone else's style. That person didn't become a good writer by copying someone else's style; he or she developed his or her own style. You might become enamored with the writing of a favorite author and want to write the way he or she does. Learn from that author, but be yourself.
7. C. S. Lewis had good suggestions about writing (*Letters of C. S. Lewis*, edited by W. H. Lewis, first published in 1966; this edition New York: Harcourt Brace, revised edition 1988; pp. 468-469, 485):

- Write with the ear. Each sentence should read well aloud.
 - Don't say something is exciting or important. Prove that it is by how you describe it.
 - Turn off the radio (in our day, it is the CD player, iPod, or television).
 - Read good books and avoid nearly all magazines.
8. A key to good writing is rewriting. Writing is hard work, and you shouldn't let anyone tell you otherwise. You will not get every word and phrase just right the first time you put them down on paper or type them on the computer. Great, famous, well-paid writers have to rewrite their work and often have editors who revise and critique what they write. Don't be impatient, and don't wait until the last minute. Write something; then go back and rewrite it; then go back a day or two later to consider it again. This is where another pair of loving and honest eyes is helpful. People who have read my writing and who were willing to point out the faults in it have often helped me (although I admit that I have often winced inside when I received their criticism). Find someone who is willing to take a red pencil to your work; a favorite uncle or grandparent may not be that person. You may know exactly what you mean by a particular statement, but someone else may not understand what you said at all. I have often found that when someone doesn't understand a statement I have written, it is because I have tried to say something without really saying it. In other words, I have muddied what should be a clear statement; and that fuzzy lack of commitment showed through.
9. Your writing will improve with practice, experience, and exposure to good writing. I hope that in ten years you will not write the same way you do now. The only way you can get to that point is to keep writing, keep reading, and keep learning. I hope that this course helps you on your journey.