

Choosing Your Texts: Think of Them as Different Lenses

You do **not** need to find three or four texts that are all about the same theme.

Instead, think about the **different work each text does** for your question.

A strong project usually has an **Anchor**, a **Companion**, and a **Counterpoint**. If a fourth text genuinely adds something new, it may work as an **Extension**.

TEXT 1 - ANCHOR

This is the text that first makes your group interested in the question.

Ask:

What does this text make us notice or begin to question?

This text gives your project its starting point.

TEXT 2 - COMPANION

This text helps you develop the question further.

Ask:

What does this text add, change, deepen, or complicate?

It does not need to give the same answer as Text 1.

TEXT 3 - COUNTERPOINT

This text should make your thinking less simple.

Ask:

What assumption in our discussion does this text challenge?

or

What does this text make us see differently?

A counterpoint does **not** need to share the same obvious theme. It may come from a different country, period, genre, or historical context.

That difference may make the comparison more interesting.

TEXT 4 - EXTENSION / REFRAMING TEXT (*optional*)

Use a fourth text only if it genuinely changes the discussion.

Ask:

What new dimension does this text introduce that the first three do not?

It might:

- move the question into another historical or cultural context;
- introduce another literary form or genre;
- offer a radically different response;
- connect the question to another aspect of human experience;
- or help your group reformulate the original question.

Do not add a fourth text simply to have more material.

If three texts already allow you to develop a rich argument, three are enough.

A useful test

Instead of asking:

Do these texts have the same theme?

ask:

Do these texts help us think about the same question in different ways?

Your project might therefore work like this:

Text 1 makes us notice...

Text 2 complicates this because...

Text 3 makes us question whether...

Text 4, if used, reframes the question by...

If all your texts simply repeat the same idea, reconsider your selection.

Some Possible Text Constellations

These are **examples, not assigned topics or required combinations**. You may create your own constellation.

SUCCESS / WHAT MAKES A LIFE WORTH LIVING?

Franklin - The Great Gatsby - The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Possible question:

How do we know whether the life we are working toward is actually the life we want?

Franklin may provide a model of self-making; *The Great Gatsby* complicates it through aspiration, class, and recognition; *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* questions the value of the entire model.

A possible fourth text:

Wordsworth

He may shift the discussion toward attention, value, nature, and what we fail to notice while pursuing achievement.

FREEDOM

Locke / The Declaration of Independence - Frederick Douglass - Heart of Darkness

Possible question:

Is being legally free the same as having control over one's life?

A possible fourth text:

Animal Farm

It could extend the question from individual freedom to political revolution and the reproduction of power.

BELONGING / OUTSIDER

Heart of Darkness - The Catcher in the Rye - "A Rose for Emily"

Possible question:

Who decides whether someone belongs - and what happens when a person cannot or will not fit the social world around them?

A possible fourth text:

Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

This could introduce race, history, anger, and belonging to a national community.

KNOWING ANOTHER PERSON

"The Dead" - "A Rose for Emily" - The Great Gatsby

Possible question:

How much of another person can we ever really know?

Joyce explores the limits of Gabriel's knowledge of Gretta; Faulkner shows a community constructing Emily through collective narration; Fitzgerald gives us Gatsby through Nick, stories, performances, and rumours.

A possible fourth text:

The Catcher in the Rye

It could add the problem of an unreliable or highly subjective narrator who constantly judges other people.

These texts therefore connect not simply through a theme, but through **narrative knowledge and the limits of interpretation**.

IDEALS VS. REALITY

Candide - The Great Gatsby - Animal Farm

Possible question:

What happens when an idea that promises a better life encounters lived reality?

A possible fourth text:

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

It could move the question from political or social ideals toward the ideals governing an individual life.

EDUCATION / KNOWLEDGE

Frederick Douglass - Candide - Premchand

Possible question:

Does education necessarily make people freer?

or:

What kinds of knowledge actually help people live?

A possible fourth text:

The Death of Ivan Ilyich or Wordsworth

Either could challenge the assumption that formal knowledge, professional achievement, or intellectual sophistication necessarily produces wisdom.

ANGER / INJUSTICE

Frederick Douglass - Baldwin - Animal Farm

Possible question:

When does anger become a source of clarity, and when can it reproduce the violence it opposes?

A possible fourth text:

Heart of Darkness

It might broaden the discussion toward violence, domination, and the moral language used to justify power.

THE PAST

“The Dead” - “A Rose for Emily” - The Things They Carried

Possible question:

What does it mean to live in a present that the past refuses to leave?

A possible fourth text:

Baldwin

It could extend private and cultural memory into historical and racial memory.

NATURE / MODERN LIFE

Wordsworth - Keats - Neruda

Avoid simply asking:

How do these poets describe nature?

Instead consider:

What becomes difficult to see when everyday life teaches us to value usefulness, speed, and productivity?

A possible fourth text:

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

It could shift the project from representations of nature toward the larger question:

What does it mean to pay attention to being alive?

Remember

Your texts do not need to agree.

In fact, a strong project often becomes more interesting when:

**one text opens the question,
another complicates it,
another challenges it,
and - if necessary - a fourth reframes it.**

The goal is **not to prove that several works contain the same theme.**

The goal is to show:

What can we understand because we have read these works together that we might not understand from reading only one of them?