

Commonplacing Guide



The Ambrose School

Academic Year 2019-20

*"To read and not reflect
is to eat and not digest."
- author unknown*

On Commonplacing

A commonplace book is a treasured book of quotes and ideas encountered by a reader. It serves as a reader's memory: a central location to keep and store those quotes and ideas, where they can be easily found and accessed over a lifetime.

Keeping a commonplace book is a time-honored tradition dating back to at least the middle of the 15th century. Such notable luminaries as John Milton, Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Virginia Woolf kept commonplace books. Though one can argue that the proliferation of information in the 21st century has made keeping a commonplace book obsolete, the opposite is actually true: the constant drone of information along with the incessant distractions of the digital age have made commonplacing more important than ever.

Why is commonplacing so important? Commonplacing serves four instrumental purposes in the intellectual life of a person:

- It serves as a central repository for great ideas and quotes encountered by a reader; in short, it serves as *a reader's memory*.
- *It encourages attentive reading* as readers actively look for engaging, influential, and beautiful passages and ideas within a book.
- *It empowers a reader to engage with and meditate on passages* as he locates them, transfers them from book to book, and sees them topically with other passages from other authors within his commonplace book.
- *It facilitates a reader assimilating a passage*, getting it from the written word into his own memory, through the careful process of copying it from one place to another.

A teacher's greatest challenge is to cultivate both the habit of and love for commonplacing in the life of his students. The Ambrose School commonplacing program has been developed to assist in accomplishing this lofty goal. Through a carefully constructed and consistent sequential approach that links the grades together, it is our best hope that students will see both

the beauty and utility in keeping commonplace books, and it will be a habit they continue through the rest of their lives.

There are four main components of the TAS Commonplacing system:

- **Vision** – Teachers will regularly reinforce to their students the purpose and vision for commonplacing. As part of this, all US teachers will be expected to keep their own commonplace books, if they do not already do so.
- **Consistency** – All students will commonplace passages weekly, beginning in 7th grade. There will be a grading category for regular commonplacing in each humanities class that equals 10% of a student's overall grade and is assessed every two weeks as a standard.
- **Usage** – Commonplace books will be a regular and daily resource for students in all humanities classes. Students will be expected to refer to them in every formal discussion and on every humanities test.
- **Organization** – All commonplace books will be organized topically by the Great Ideas around which each humanities course is oriented, as well as the classical virtues and other beautiful, favored passages.

A student's natural inclination may be to view the Commonplace Book as a personal journal. While journaling may have its merits, it is antithetical to the practice of commonplacing: journaling teaches a student to look inward at their own thoughts, feelings, and emotions, while commonplacing teaches a student to look outwards for truths and ideas that transcend the self. Teachers should be proactive and adamant in directing students towards quotes that reflect Truth, Goodness, and Beauty and away from passages that highlight simple personal preferences.

The Ambrose School commonplace program is built around a 2 year cycle, beginning in 5th grade. Students are expected to fill up their commonplace books every two years; as such they are given new books in 5th grade, 7th grade, 9th grade, and 11th grade. Homeroom teachers in those grades bear the weighty responsibility of consistently ensuring that students set up their commonplace books according to our standards. Most important of those standards are the Index of Virtues, Ideas, and Beautiful Passages around which each commonplace book is organized.

<i>School of Logic: Index of Virtues, Ideas, and Beautiful Passages</i>	
Justice	Community and Fellowship
Prudence	Courage
Temperance	Family
Fortitude	Glory and Honor
Faith	Immortality
Hope	Law
Love	Man
God	Treasured Passages

<i>School of Rhetoric I (9th and 10th Grade): Index of Virtues, Ideas, and Beautiful Passages</i>	
Justice	Fate
Prudence	Government
Temperance	Happiness
Fortitude	Immortality
Faith	Liberty and Slavery
Hope	Punishment
Love	Revolution
Change and Progress	Truth
Duty and Desire	Treasured Passages

<i>School of Rhetoric II (11th and 12th Grade): Index of Virtues, Ideas, and Beautiful Passages</i>	
Justice	Duty and Desire
Prudence	Fate
Temperance	Goodness
Fortitude	Harmony
Faith	Hierarchy
Hope	Liberty and slavery
Love	Relation
Appearance vs. Reality	Theology
Cause	Treasured Passages
Change and Progress	

"[L]et us take down one of those old notebooks which we have all, at one time or another, had a passion for beginning. Most of the pages are blank, it is true; but at the beginning we shall find a certain number very beautifully covered with a strikingly legible hand-writing. Here we have written down the names of great writers in their order of merit; here we have copied out fine passages from the classics...; and here, most interesting of all, lists of books that have actually been read, as the reader testifies with some youthful vanity by a dash of red ink."
- Virginia Woolf

Organizing Commonplace Books

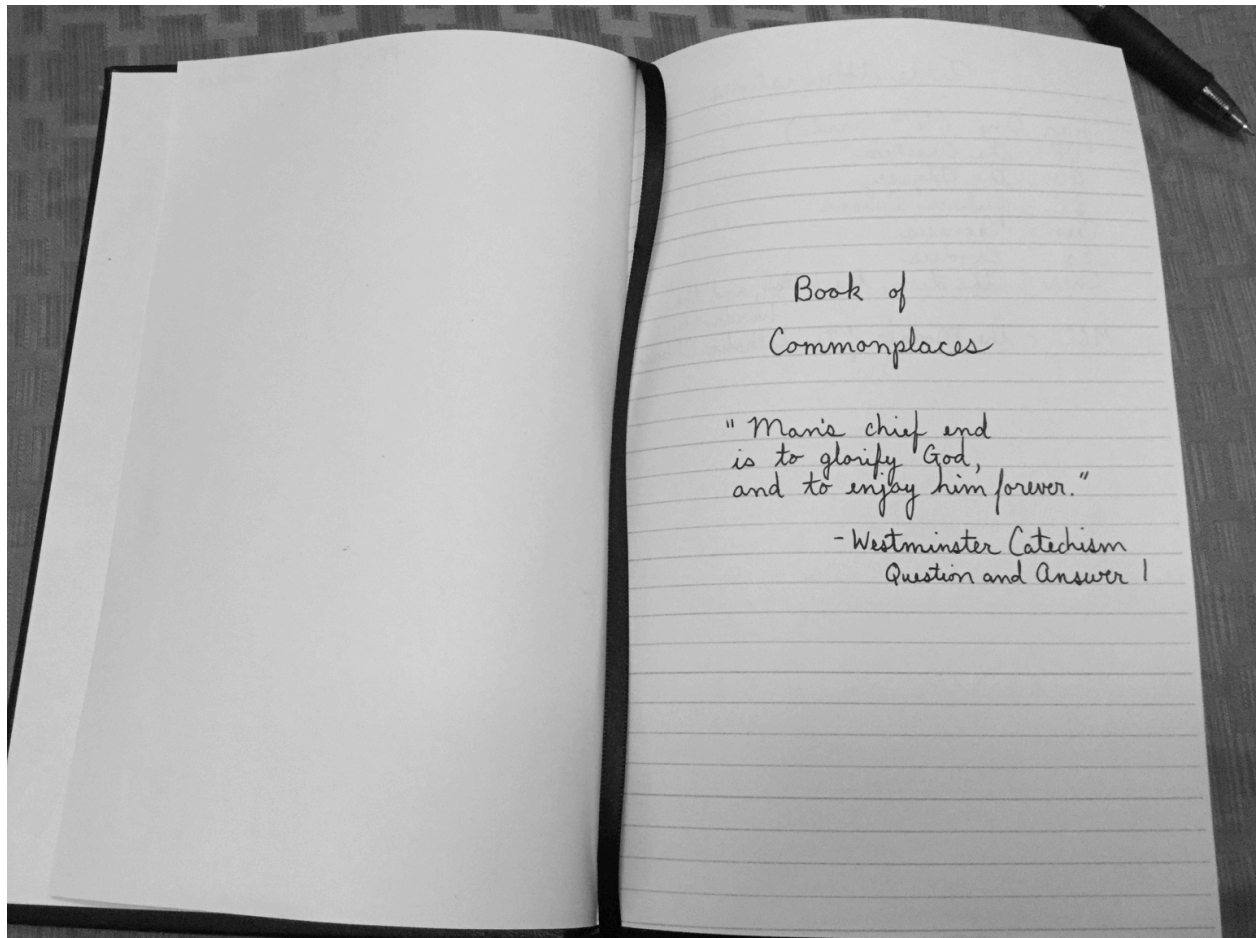
To encourage consistency in commonplacing, students are required to format their commonplace books according to this standard beginning in 7th grade. This must be done with the teacher's oversight as an in-class exercise during the first week of school. Setting the books up on the first or second day of class will leverage a student's initial enthusiasm for the new school year, and will ensure students do their best work and format it correctly. An initial grade should be given to assess that a student has set their book up correctly, including a revision step for students who do not meet the standard the first time.

To set up a commonplace book, teachers should walk students through the following steps:

- Write their name in the upper right corner of the first recto page.
- Number each page centered on the last line of the first, non-table of contents page (pg. 4.) Number the entire book, but consider doing so in two or more separate sittings, with a break in between.
- Create a Title Page on the first lined page, centered vertically and horizontally, and including a student's prized or favorite quote below (quote may be added during the year), e.g. (see Image 1 below):

Book of Commonplaces
"Man's chief end is to glorify God,
and to enjoy him forever."
-- Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 1.

Image 1.



- On the first lined verso page, create a key for book title abbreviations to be used, titled "Title Abbreviations" (Note: if you are teaching in Year 1 of a cycle, leave room for Year 2's abbreviations; this may necessitate two columns or an additional page), e.g.:

OR – The Oresteia

OD – The Odyssey

JC – Julius Caesar

GEN – Genesis

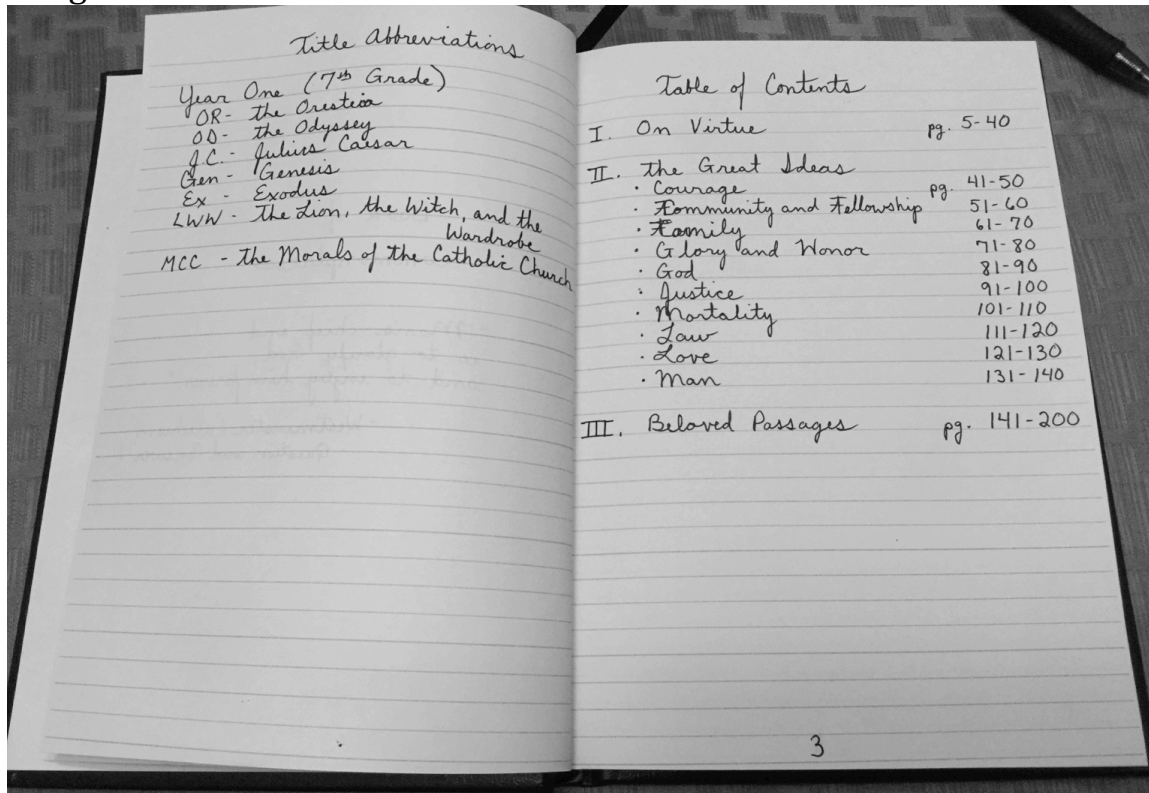
EX – Exodus

LWW – The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

- Create an index page on the second lined recto page (see Image 2 below).
 - Title the page on the top line: "Table of Commonplaces."

- Every commonplace book contains three main categories of commonplaces:
 - **On Virtue:** a section for quotes on virtue from each author.
 - **The Great Ideas:** a section on quotes reflecting the Great Ideas of from each author relevant to the course.
 - Teachers in Year One will need to collaborate with Year Two teachers on their GI index.
 - Teachers may use discretion in the number of pages allowed for each GI; i.e., if passages on “Community and Fellowship” are more prevalent than other GIs, allow for more pages.
 - **Beloved Passages:** a section for treasured quotes that do not fit in the other categories; alternatively, students may name this section “Treasured Passages.”
- Each section is to be titled and listed in the Table of Contents

Image 2.



At the Entrance indeed upon any Study, when the Judgement is not sufficiently confirm'd, nor the Stock of Knowledge over large, so that the Students are not well acquainted with what is worth Collecting, scarce any Thing is Extracted, but what will be useful for a little while; because as the Judgment grows Ripe, those Things are despis'd which before were held in esteem. Yet it is Service to have Collections of this Kind, both that Students may learn the Art of putting Things in Order, as also the better retain what they Read.

*-- John Locke, A New Method of Making
Commonplace Books*

Commonplacing Principles

- Early in the program, particularly in the Grammar School and in the School of Logic, teachers should direct commonplacing by identifying key passages for students. By 10th Grade, students should be able to identify their own commonplace passages with fewer exceptions.
- As a general rule, students should commonplace passages after they have completed a reading, and not during a reading. While reading, they should actively search for key passages and treasured quotes, identifying these passages by annotations, highlighting, tabs, etc. Teachers should intimate Great Ideas or key passages for students to look for in each reading. Also, teachers should allot class time for commonplacing whenever possible (e.g. the last 10 minutes of a seminar class.)
- Formatting should be consistent across grade levels, including:
 - Two lines should be skipped between quotes.
 - Use bracketing and ellipses for original wording and to trim unnecessary portions from a quote.
 - Each quote should be cited with Author, Title Abbreviation, and page number; also, students should be trained in the use of *ibid.* for repeating citations.
 - For direct character quotes, entries should include quotation marks and the speakers name where appropriate.

- Frequency of commonplacing is important to encourage it as a habit. Commonplaces must be a weekly exercise, assessed every two weeks. The following are minimum standards, but teachers may increase them based on the students and texts involved:

Grade Levels	Minimum Commonplacing Frequency
7 th and 8 th Grade	3 times per week, two of which must be Virtue or Great Idea oriented.
9 th and 10 th Grade	5 times per week, three of which must be Virtue or Great Idea oriented.
11 th and 12 th Grade	More than 5 times per week, three or more of which must be Virtue or Great Idea oriented.

- Teachers should use student aides to quickly check commonplace books whenever possible. This will help facilitate their quick return to their owners so as to not disrupt the habit of commonplacing. A trustworthy student aid may use sticky notes to highlight good and poor passages for a teacher to review. Where possible, teachers are encouraged to comment on individual passages through the use of Post-It notes, noting that this will likely not be feasible with larger classes.
- Teachers should keep a portfolio of exemplary student commonplace books to share with subsequent classes. A photo library of beautiful work is a great method for capturing student work. This will help students catch a vision for a beautiful commonplace book. In addition, artistic students may decorate the inside front and back cover with illuminated manuscript-style artwork. Encourage students to treasure the commonplace book and make it their own.

Commonplacing With a Purpose

Foundational to The Ambrose School commonplacing program is the regular practice of casting a vision for commonplacing for students. As a key to this, in the first week of the 9th grade year, the homeroom teacher will walk his students through the following commonplacing-with-a-purpose exercise:

- The students are divided into groups of four.

- Each student will be given a short reading with a set of questions attached (see Appendix A and B).
- Unknown to students, each student has the same reading, but there are two different sets of questions: Questions A, which pertain to the reading; and Questions B, which are designed to take the student's mind away from the reading.
- Each student reads the selection individually and quietly, and then they complete the questions following the reading, also individually.
- After each student in a group has performed the reading and completed the questions, they come together as a group to answer the Group Discussion Questions – Set 1 (see Appendix C).
 - These questions are designed to simulate a typical seminar discussion, asking the group to interact with the reading in general and specifically the designated passage copied by Question A students.
 - Students who had Question A will be best prepared to dialogue about the text, while most Question B students will struggle.
- After completing the Group Discussion Questions 1, the group moves on to Group Discussion Questions – Set 2.
 - These questions are designed to make the students analyze their discussion as a group. Who was best prepared to discuss the text? Who remembered the highlighted passages and could identify the ideas in them? Who was able to connect the passage to other texts, Scriptures, and their own life? Who was able to make and draw conclusions and insights about the excerpt?

Appendix A

Below is an excerpt from the story “Of Beren and Lúthien” by J.R.R. Tolkien. Read the excerpt and then carefully follow the instructions at the end.

It is told that Huan pursued the sons of Feänor, and they fled in fear; and returning he brought to Lúthien a herb out of the forest. With that leaf she staunched Beren’s wound, and by her arts and by her love she healed him; and thus at last they returned to Doriath. There Beren, being torn between his oath and his love, and knowing Lúthien to be now safe, arose one morning before the sun, and committed her to the care of Huan; then in great anguish he departed while she slept upon the grass.

He rode northward again with all speed to the Pass of Sirion, and coming to the skirts of Taur-nu-Fuin he looked out across the waste of Anfauglith and saw afar the peaks of Thangorodrim. There he dismissed the horse of Curufin, and bade it leave now dread and servitude and run free upon the green grass in the lands of Sirion. Then being now alone and upon the threshold of the final peril he made the Song of Parting, in praise of Lúthien and the lights of heaven; for he believed that he must now say farewell to both love and light. Of that song these words were part:



- 1 *Farewell sweet earth and northern sky,
for ever blest, since here did lie
and here with lissome limbs did run
beneath the Moon, beneath the Sun,*
- 5 *Lúthien Tinúviel
more fair than mortal tongue can tell.
Though all to ruin fell the world
and were dissolved and backward hurled
unmade into the old abyss,*
- 10 *yet were its making good, for this—
the dusk, the dawn, the earth, the sea –
that Lúthien for a time should be.*

And he sang aloud, caring not what ear should overhear him, for he was desperate and looked for no escape.

But Lúthien heard his song, and she sang in answer, as she came through the woods unlooked for. For Huan, consenting once more to be her steed, had borne her swiftly hard upon Beren’s trail. Long he had pondered in his heart what counsel he could devise for the lightening of the peril of these two whom he loved. He turned aside therefore at Sauron’s isle, as they ran northward again, and he took thence the ghastly wolf-hame of Draugluin, and the bat-fell of Thuringwethil. She was the messenger of Sauron, and was wont to fly in vampire’s form to Angband; and her great fingered wings were barbed at each joint’s end

Appendix A

with an iron claw. Clad in these dreadful garments Huan and Lúthien ran through Taur-nu-Fuin, and all things fled before them.

Beren seeing their approach was dismayed; and he wondered, for he had heard the voice of Tinúviel, and he thought it now a phantom for his ensnaring. But they halted and cast aside their disguise, and Lúthien ran towards him. Thus Beren and Lúthien met again between the desert and the wood. For a while he was silent, and was glad; but after a space he strove once more to dissuade Lúthien from her journey.

‘Thrice now I curse my oath to Thingol,’ he said, ‘and I would that he had slain me in Menegroth, rather than I should bring you under the shadow of Morgoth.’

Then for the second time Huan spoke with words; and he counseled Beren, saying: ‘From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love she is now subject to it. You can turn from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you – hopeless, yet not certain. Further counsel I cannot give, nor may I go further on your road. But my heart forebodes that what you find at the Gate I shall myself see. All else is dark to me; yet it may be that our three paths lead back to Doriath, and we may meet before the end.’

Then Beren perceived that Lúthien could not be divided from the doom that lay upon them both, and he sought no longer to dissuade her. By the counsel of Huan and the arts of Lúthien he was arrayed now in the hame of Draugluin, and she in the winged fell of Thuringwethil. Beren became in all things like a werewolf to look upon, save that in his eyes there shone a spirit grim indeed but clean; and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings. Then howling under the moon he leaped down the hill, and the bat wheeled and flittered above him.

They passed through all perils, until they came with the dust of their long and weary road upon them to the drear dale that lay before the Gate of Angband....

Appendix A

Do the following:

1. As he prepares to enter Angband, Beren sings the song of parting. Copy the last 6 verses of the Song below, beginning at line 7 - *Though all to ruin....* :

2. What did you think these verses mean? Try rephrasing them in your own words:

3. What do these verses tell you about Beren? What does he love? What are the most important things to him? Given your limited knowledge of him, would you say his affections are rightly ordered?

Put your pencil down and discuss with your group the questions on the blue sheet found in your envelope.

Appendix B

Below is an excerpt from the story “Of Beren and Lúthien” by J.R.R. Tolkien. Read the excerpt and then carefully follow the instructions at the end.

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Appendix B

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Appendix B

Do the following:

1. List the three things you are most excited about this coming school year:

2. What are your three favorite moments from the past summer?

3. Copy to the best of your ability the Lord's Prayer below:

4. Who is the person from history that you would most like to go back and meet? Why did you choose them? What are 3 questions you would like to ask them?

Put your pencil down and discuss with your group the questions on the blue sheet found in your envelope.

Appendix C

Group Discussion Questions – Set 1:

1. *Can anyone closely recite the 6 lines of verse from Beren's Song of Parting?*
2. *Even if you cannot remember these lines verbatim, to the best of your ability, try to dialogue as a group about their meaning. As a group answer the following:*
 - a. *What is the meaning of these 6 verses? What argument is Beren making? Do you agree with him?*
 - b. *If you were to commonplace the Song of Parting, what Great Idea would you categorize it under?*
 - c. *What do the lines tell you about what is important to Beren?*
 - d. *What does the excerpt tell you about Beren's virtue?*
 - e. *Would you call Beren's affections rightly ordered? Why or why not?*

Group Meta-Discussion Questions – Set 2:

3. *What observations can you make about the group discussion? Who was best prepared to discuss the story?*
4. *Who was best equipped to dialogue about the Song of Parting? Why was this true?*
5. *What principles can you draw regarding the benefit and importance of copying something down and reflecting on it individually before trying to discuss it corporately?*