

Portfolio Assignment: Your Own Epigraph

As you know, an epigraph is a quote from another author at the beginning of a literary work (or a chapter of a literary work). An epigraph usually somehow encapsulates or adds meaning to the work that follows it.

In *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer uses epigraphs from Henry David Thoreau, Jack London, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and numerous others to highlight themes in each of his chapters.

Assignment: Pretend you are writing your autobiography. You would like to begin the book with an epigraph (or epigraphs) which somehow define you. What would you choose? Find 1-2 epigraphs to highlight a theme or themes in your own life. You may use a quote from a book or poem, part of a song lyric, or favorite motto or saying. (Consider this preparation for your senior quote!)

Print your epigraph on a piece of paper. Below it, write a paragraph explaining why you chose it. Why do you like this quote? What does it suggest about you or your life?

Sample Epigraphs

Read the sample epigraphs below. What might each author be trying to say using the selected epigraph? What does each epigraph tell you about the book it begins?

From *Color is the Suffering of Light*, a memoir of coping with depression:

“Child, little child with the chestnut hair,
You have been lost here
In order to be saved far away.”
—The Leaf-Diviner, Odysseus Elytis

From *Thinking Out Loud* by Anna Quindlen, a book of essays:

“My advice to the women of America is to raise more hell and fewer dahlias.”
—William Allen White

From *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, a memoir of growing up black in the Jim Crow south:

“They meet with darkness in the daytime
And they grope at noonday as in the night...”
—The Book of Job

Sample Epigraph Assignment

*“I do not want to be a rose,
I do not wish to be pale pink,
But flower scarlet, flower gold,
And have no thorns to distance me.”
—Karen Peris, “Bright as Yellow”*

This quote comes from the song “Bright as Yellow,” written by Karen Peris of the band The Innocence Mission. I have always loved flowers, so the symbolism is a good fit for me. I think this quote embodies me in several ways. First, it suggests that the speaker wishes to be unique. While most people see roses as the most beautiful flowers, the speaker does not want to be the classic stereotypical rose. In fact, the speaker points out that roses have thorns which can sting, and therefore keep others away. Close friends and family ties are extremely important to me; I would not want to be seen as threatening, cruel, or unapproachable. In fact, roses are rather duplicitous if you think about it. They beguile you with their beauty but are ultimately treacherous unless they are sheared of thorns. I don’t possess the treachery inherent in roses—I think my nature is much too kind and loyal to ever hurt another.

Peris also points out that roses can be pink. I am not pink. Though I may wear it on occasion, it is not the color of my personality. To me pink is cute and dainty. I am much too intense and outspoken to be pink, especially pale pink. I like the idea of being “scarlet” or “gold” rather than “pale pink.” I prefer the joyfulness of poppies and the boldness of zinnias to the placid pastels of carnations. While pink is pretty, it seems like a weaker color than scarlet or gold. Scarlet is a passionate color. I like to think that I am someone who is passionate about her ideals and her commitments.

