

The Assignment: My American Dream

Write a 3-5 page essay about what "the American Dream" means to you.

Be honest and speak in your own voice. Use anecdotes from your own life to clarify who you are and what you want or what you don't want. Focus less on WHAT you want to be and more on WHO you want to be. You can say what you are by giving a label--I'm a farmer--but to say who you are you need to tell a story. I'm the person who did this and said that. . .

Jot down notes and ideas as you think about things like, such as what do those "big themes" in American literature have to do with you? After all, everyone has experiences that force us to think about

community and family
liberty and oppression
justice and injustice
success and failure
innocence and experience

Most of the words in those big themes have been used in so many ways and for so many purposes, that they don't communicate much to a reader unless you slow down and talk about things that have actually happened to you that illustrate what you mean with them. In other words, you'll need to slip out of abstraction and be specific.

Run through the things we've read and what you really thought, in your private self. Think about these readings:

William Bradford: "A History of Plymouth Plantation"
John Winthrop: "A Model of Christian Charity"
Mary Bradford's story of growth through hardship
Ben Franklin's story of how he invented Ben Franklin--the virtues he sought
Patrick Henry "Speech"
Thomas Paine "Crisis"
Thomas Jefferson: "Declaration of Independence"
Frederick Douglass' quest for knowledge and freedom

You can agree or disagree with any of the writers we have read, using things they said as either good examples or bad examples.

Are there ways you wish your life was more like the lives of Pilgrims? Or ways you're glad your life is not like theirs? Is your dream similar to or different from the dream of living in a unified and loving community, as John Winthrop described, or from being dedicated to success, as Ben Franklin suggested?

What role does liberty play in your dream? What does it take to be free? What about equality? Justice? Money? Spirituality?

What virtues will you need to realize your dream? Are there aspects of yourself you think you need to change? What knowledge and skills will you need to master? What are you doing to get there?

Does your dream grow out of your family? Is your dream a continuation of a family dream, or a rejection of one?

How do you define success? Where might you want to be when you are 30? 50? 70?

Scoring Criteria:

1. Your essay has a clear theme. It makes a clear statement. It doesn't just wander around (on one hand, on the other hand etc.). It has at least 5 well-developed paragraphs.
2. Use of personal anecdotes that illustrate who you are--what you like or don't like. It's interesting.
3. Style: You write in active voice, with vivid verbs and precise nouns.
4. You make no fatal errors: Sentence fragments. Run-on sentences. Spelling errors. Capitalization errors.