

**Assignment for New Student Weekend: Reading and Responding to the Common Book,  
*Strange as this Weather Has Been***

We can use writing to make sense of what we read. In the process of reading a challenging book, pausing to write and reflect at crucial parts can help us process and understand the writer's work. This year's common book at Otterbein, *Strange as this Weather Has Been*, by Ann Pancake, is a rich and complex work. One complication, for example, is that different characters pick up the story in different chapters, giving us multiple points of view on what's happening and deepening our understanding of how various characters are affected by the events of the novel.

To help you make sense of Pancake's powerful novel, you will write a reading journal.

**First**, take notes on notebook paper or annotate in the margins of the book as you read. Pay attention to details and to changes. Follow the stories of Pancake's characters. Summarize events, record images, trace patterns, find connections, and explain relationships.

**Second**, pause in your reading at the following significant points, and at each point write a two-page reflection on your reading of that section (you will eventually have three, two-page reflections):

1. After reading chapters 1 - 12, you will have read about and/or heard from the principal characters. Stop here and write: reflect on the life of this family; calculate the years that have been covered in these chapters; identify the places members of the family have lived and what those places have meant to them; describe changes in people and in the land.
2. Stop again after chapter 24, and reflect on what you've learned about the characters' connection to the land. How and why has Lace's family changed in these chapters? Think about the distinct voices of the two characters, Moge and Avery, each of whom has one chapter in the book, and whose chapters appear only in this section. Why has Pancake chosen to represent their voices in this way?
3. After finishing the book, write about the changes Lace and Bant have experienced. Think about what they have begun to see differently: Appalachia, coal, their land, their work, their homes, their families, and themselves.

Don't feel confined by the questions above; they are merely guides. For each reflection, write what you **saw** in that portion of the book, what you **felt** about what you saw, and what your observations and feelings have led you to **think** about.

**Third**, after you have finished your reading and your reflections, go back through the book and, for each of the sections, choose one quotation which is very important or very powerful; the passage may be beautiful, it may be disturbing, or it may be profound. Copy each of those quotations, in your own handwriting, onto a separate sheet of paper (include the page number for the quote). Be ready to read one of these passages in your INST class and comment on why you chose it.

For this assignment, keep in mind:

- Read carefully—perhaps not slowly, but carefully, to observe, record, and reflect on Pancake's writing.
- Read with your pen (or pencil), underlining, making notes, checking terms you want to look up or experiences you want to keep track of.
- Write your reflective pieces with your full self present. This is a journal of your responses, not a test or a quiz. Put down your own feelings, your own concerns, your own connections in your own way.
- For New Student Weekend, your reflective pieces should each be typed. See the handout titled Document Design for format (don't forget your name!). Staple the quotations you've chosen to each reflective piece.
- Bring your reflective pieces and quotations, your notes, and your book to New Student Weekend.