

Otterbein Common Book 2026

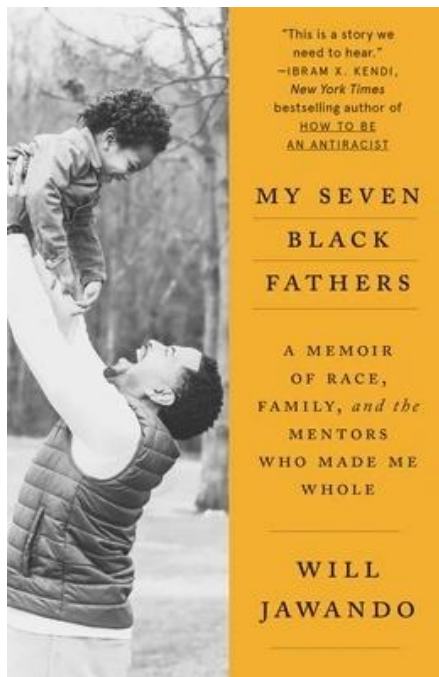


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About the Common Book Author



Otterbein's Common Book Program, one of the University's signature programs, offers a shared reading experience for all incoming first-year students, and for faculty, staff, and other members of the Otterbein community.

The 2026 Common Book is Will Jawando's *My Seven Black Fathers: A Memoir of Race, Family, and the Mentors Who Made Me Whole*. Jawando's memoir begins with an experience of loss—the divorce of his parents and the departure of his Nigerian father. "Black men like me," he writes, "carry the heavy markers of absence" (15). But

Jawando found a set of mentors who each became a significant presence in his life. Devoting individual chapters to each of these mentors, Jawando conveys "the distinct and indelible ways these men, my Black fathers, set me on the path of self-love, service, and wholeness" (11). Ultimately, the impact of these mentors set the stage for a meaningful reunion between Jawando and his own biological father.

My Seven Black Fathers is not just the story of a single person. Jawando insists, indeed, that "the never-ending pursuit of a better America" (12)—in particular, the widening of economic opportunity to all—is linked to the power of mentoring relationships.

Common Book Assignment

Respond to this prompt in a thesis-driven essay consisting of multiple paragraphs:

In the first chapter of his memoir, Jawando names the brotherhood to which he belongs — "a brotherhood of boys and men who had lost their fathers" (15). Remembering what his father's departure felt like as a young kid, Jawando writes, "If only Dad had stayed, I would have been whole" (21).

A Memoir of Race, Family, and the Mentors Who Made Me Whole: as the book's subtitle suggests, however, Jawando's story ends up being about the achievement of wholeness — thanks to a set of mentors or non-biological fathers who made a profound difference in his life.

In your essay, **choose two** of the non-biological fathers that Jawando writes about who filled in the absence left by his departed father. For each, write well-developed and organized paragraphs in which you describe and analyze what they contributed to the formation of Jawando's sense of himself.

Be sure to introduce and focus on specific encounters or experiences in your paper, citing details and passages from the book. Elaborate on those details, emphasizing their significance. Be sure to say what Jawando is trying to illustrate or deepen our understanding of.

In your concluding paragraph, discuss how these non-biological fathers created the conditions for Jawando — in the book's final chapter — to reunite with his biological father.

Criteria for Success

A well-written essay will contain the following:

1. An introductory paragraph that effectively identifies and contextualizes the book and engages the reader.
2. A thesis statement that presents the main idea of the essay and that is phrased using the last name of the author.
3. Supporting paragraphs that engage in "close reading" in order to introduce evidence that supports the essay's thesis. Supporting paragraphs that engage in "close reading" rely on paraphrase and direct quotation to show a command of the book's details. Too, supporting paragraphs do not just introduce evidence; they *analyze, take apart, and elaborate on* the evidence that's been introduced, tying it back to the essay's thesis. The best rule of thumb for supporting paragraphs is to make "at least two moves to illustration" i.e., to have at least two direct quotations per supporting paragraph.
4. Quotations from the book that are chosen carefully and judiciously. Quotations can be complete sentences from the book, or they can be just phrases or even single words.

When they are complete sentences, they should be appropriately introduced and punctuated and correctly cited according to MLA guidelines.

5. A Work Cited page that is complete and correct.
6. Sentences that are varied in length and structure and that demonstrate the author's mastery of Academic English syntax.
7. Evidence that the paper has been proofread for typos and grammatical miscues.
8. Proper first page formatting (see next page), consistent double-spacing, and the presence of page numbers.

Document Design

Essays submitted to your professors should be written according to a standard format: font, spacing, margins, headings, page numbering, and documentation style are all prescribed. See the following page for an example that illustrates these features according to one style of documentation, the MLA 9th edition.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How long should the essay be?

A: The essay should be about 750-1000 words, which will typically be three or four printed double-spaced pages.

Q: What if I don't take my FYS until spring?

A: You still need to complete the essay before you come to Otterbein. Your essay will be collected at First Flight and given to your FYS instructor, even if your FYS course isn't until the Spring semester.

Q: Who reads my essay?

A: Your FYS instructor, who might grade your essay, use your writing to begin discussion of the book, or simply offer comments.

Q: What supplemental materials are available?

A: The Otterbein University library, Courtright Memorial Library, creates and curates a LibGuide dedicated to each year's Common Book.

<https://otterbein.libguides.com/CommonBookOU/iftin>

Q: Who can I contact with questions?

A: If you have other questions or concerns, please contact David Bahgat, Coordinator of New Student Transitions in Student Success & Career Development at dbahgat@otterbein.edu.

Important Dates to Remember, Fall 2026

Your essay will be the first writing that you submit to your FYS instructor. You will want to have completed your common book assignment by First Flight so that you have an **electronic file** to upload to Brightspace during First Flight. The electronic copy of your assignment will be collected and discussed during your **FYS course meetings**:

- First Flight – August 16-18, 2026
- FYS Meeting 1 – August 17, 2026
- FYS Meeting 2 – August 18, 2026
- Classes begin Wednesday, August 19, 2026.

The Common Book Convocation ceremony will be held on Tuesday, October 6. There will be additional visits with Will Jawando on October 6 and 7.

Your Name

Professor's Last Name

FYS #####

17 August 2026

Title here

Academic writing follows certain conventions. These rules are typically dictated by a style manual, such as the one published by the Modern Languages Association and commonly cited as the MLA Style Manual or simply MLA. These rules ensure that essays have a consistent form and are clear and readable.

Typical rules for font choices will dictate not only the typeface to use, but also its size, spacing, and indenting. A common standard is 12-point Times New Roman font, double spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides. That style is demonstrated here. Notice how everything is consistently double-spaced. There are no extra line spaces, for example, between the date and the title of your essay, or between the title and the first line.

Another fundamental concern when writing on a book is the incorporation of textual material. Direct quotations are the most common and demonstrable way of showing your knowledge of the text. Quotations are used to back up claims, to *show* what an author is saying as opposed only to making general assertions about what an author is saying. Here is an example: Recalling his elementary school experience, Jawando remembers being made to feel like he was constantly being reprimanded and how miserable it made him feel. He writes, "Repetitive chastisement narrows us, saps us of joy and potential by ceaselessly reminding us how little is possible" (41). See how, in this example, a claim is made, and then a citation is introduced to show *Jawando's own words* to support the claim? Note, too, here, how a **signal**

phrase is used before the citation. Signal phrases such as **Jawando writes**, or **Jawando contends**, or **Jawando insists** or **As Jawando puts it** are followed by commas. Sometimes you will cite only a phrase or single word from the text. These do not require signal phrases; they can just be folded directly into the sentences you are writing. Like this: Jawando refers to his third-grade year as "a kind of dystopian nightmare" (49). He likens the classroom to "a hostility bubble" in which his teacher, Mrs. Hays, exercised "a menacing authority" (49).

Regardless of the plurality of ways to incorporate direct citations, your analysis of the evidence is the most important part of the essay. The analysis of evidence is where you connect textual material to your own arguments. In other words, after introducing evidence, you must *link the evidence back to your thesis and to a larger idea that is being illustrated*. This is what it means to analyze evidence — i.e., to articulate how the evidence works in support of a larger idea you are advancing (or see Jawando advancing). Here's an example:

In chapter four, Jawando describes going to a sleepaway Christian camp. Moved by the music and by the words of the preacher—who speaks "about having the courage to stand against what others think you should do and live a life dedicated to God" (93) — he experiences a strange weightlessness. He begins to weep as he is "filled with an overwhelming sense of warmth and love" (93). He is embraced by one of the male worship leaders. Here, Jawando tries to let us glimpse something about masculinity and the importance of creating experiences for boys to talk about and experience love.

Note how evidence is introduced here by means of paraphrase and then is linked explicitly back to a larger argument.

Work Cited

Jawando, Will. *My Seven Black Fathers: A Memoir of Race, Family, and the Mentors Who Made Me Whole*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2022.

Active & Attentive Reading

Reading at the college level can be demanding.

As a college student, you can expect **more** reading, reading that **challenges** your thinking, reading that **broadens** your view of the world, reading that **transforms** you. Your professors in college are going to expect you to have done more than just run your eyes over the readings they assign in their courses. If you are going to read effectively at the college level, you cannot read passively; you must be an **active** and **attentive** reader. This means interacting with your text in ways you might not have before. To help you begin to cultivate the habits of such a reader, we recommend this strategy:

Locate: Choose a time when and a place where you are alert and focused. The conditions for active and attentive reading are ones in which your attention is not divided.

Survey: Look at chapter titles, section headings, intros, topic sentences, words in bold type, graphics, and footnotes or endnotes.

Question: Note the question(s) you have been asked to address about this text. Be on the lookout for textual moments that you see as connected to the questions you have been asked.

Read: Armed with a view of the layout of the text and with questions you're reading to answer, read in chunks of 10 pages. Try to read 100 pages at a sitting. Your readings will be more efficient if you chunk the assignment into these more manageable parts.

Write: As you read, write—annotate the text, taking notes in the margin. This is your book to keep, so make the most of it! Use a pen or pencil, not a highlighter; ask questions, circle unfamiliar words, connect with prior knowledge or other parts of the text, list names, underline key passages, and make marks to remind you of the importance of a part of the text. Annotations work in the present, to help you engage with the text, and in the future, when you review the reading for a test or collect information for a paper. Some of the observations you make when reading will be very helpful when you sit down to write your essay.

Outline or Summarize: Outlining as you read helps you situate what you are reading into a larger context of information. Summarizing after you read a chapter, using your own words, is a good measure of your understanding of the text.

Journal: Keep a reading journal in which you note observations, reflections, and questions as you read. Pause to write every so often—using your reading journal as your ten-page break is a good start. Keep your outlines and summaries, as well as images, patterns, connections, significant people, and new ideas here. The journal will help you interact with the information in the text as well as serve as a record of your reading. This can be helpful for class discussions, assignments, and program events during the author's visit. The reading journal also consolidates your ideas into one place for your reference when you write your First Flight essay.