

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 1



Key Paragraph – p.7

“My parents never acted mean to black people, even though they never questioned the system of racial discrimination that permeated every aspect of life. Daddy, an attorney, represented a slew of black clients, charging them five dollars for his services, and he helped several families buy property and, eventually, own their own homes. It would take me a long time to understand how systems inflict pain and hardship in people’s lives and to learn that being kind in an unjust system is not enough.”

Writing Prompt

The author, Sister Helen, describes her childhood and her call to become a nun. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe Sister Helen and her passion for social justice. How do you think Sister Helen’s childhood influenced her passion for social justice? What series of events led Sister Helen to advocate for social justice? What social justice issues is Sister Helen passionate about? “Leadership requires positive civic engagement.” How does Sister Helen demonstrate positive civic engagement?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 2



Key Paragraph – p.17

“A boy and girl, their young lives budding, unfolding. Snipped. And their parents, condemned to wonder for the rest of their lives about their children’s last tortured hours; sentenced for the rest of their days to fear for their families, their other children; startled out of their sleep at night by dreams of the terror that ripped their children from them. The details of the depravity stun me. It is like the spinning merry-go-round that I had once tried to climb aboard when I was a child, but it was spinning too fast and it threw me to the ground.”

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are a news reporter. **In an informative article describe why Patrick is on death row. How did Patrick and Eddie choose to spend their time and efforts? Were they a positive example of leadership? Explain. What series of events lead Patrick to death row? How was Eddie involved in the murder crime? Describe Patrick and Eddie’s trials. What sentences did Patrick and Eddie receive?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 3



Key Paragraph – p. 27- 28

“It’s not a ward in a hospital where sick people wait to die. People here wait to be taken out of their cells and killed. This is the United States of America and these are government officials in charge and there’s a law sanctioning and upholding what is going on here, so it all must be legitimate and just, or so one compartment of my brain tells me, the part that studied civics in high school, the part that wants to trust that my country would never violate the human rights of its citizens.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen describes her first visit with Patrick and the oddity of visiting a death row institution. What do you think were Patrick’s first impressions were of Sister Helen? Pretend you are Patrick. Write a journal entry that explains your visit with Sister Helen. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe your thoughts of Sister Helen and how you think she will be helpful as a spiritual director. Consider the following questions to develop your answer: What were your first impressions of Sister Helen? Why do you think she wanted to visit you? What did you and Sister Helen talk about? How do you think Sister Helen will help you in this difficult time in your life? Why was it important that you requested her to visit as a spiritual advisor rather than a friend?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 4



Key Paragraph – p. 38

“Nobody was supposed to get killed. Eddie was upset. We had just gotten him out of jail. He had come unglued over a girl who was pregnant with his child. She wouldn’t marry him, and he had gone to her house with a sawed-off shotgun, cut the telephone wires, and threatened to shoot her and her whole family. They had him put in jail and every day Mama was calling me at work. ‘Get your brother out. Get my baby out.’ We got him out, got the charge dropped, but his nerves was messed up. Something I think the boy David said to him teed him off and he shot the kids. I should’ve known he could blow. I shouldn’t have let us get mixed up in the bad things we was doing.”

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Eddie. Write a journal entry that explains the true events during the night of the murder. **In an informative paragraph describe the series of events. What took place first, second, and third? Explain the choices that you made. Explain why Patrick confessed to the murder.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 5



Key Paragraph – p. 50

Finally Millard says, summing it all up, race, poverty, and geography determine who gets the death penalty – if the victim is white, if the defendant is poor, and whether or not the local D.A. is willing to hear a plea-bargain.

Writing Prompt

Option 1: Sister Helen becomes enlightened to the injustice of the criminal justice system. Pretend you are Sister Helen and write an article that describes the injustice of the death penalty. **In an informative paragraph, describe how race and social class play into account of those who are prosecuted for murder. How do these two characteristics (race and class) factor into the death penalty sentence. Provide three facts to support your answer.**

Option 2: There were many flaws in Patrick's initial defense. Millard has strong opinions about the injustice of the criminal justice system. **In an informative paragraph, describe the errors and missed opportunities in Patrick's first trial. Include a description of Millard defense strategy. Provide three reasons Millard believes the courts should accept Patrick's appeal.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 6



Key Paragraph – p. 57

“I tried to get the legislator to remove the whole process from the governor, but I recognized that in the final analysis some one person has to have to take an affirmative action to make it happen. The whole process is in the judicial system; then, all of a sudden, in the last thirty days to have it sitting on the heart and mind and soul of one man is a very difficult position to be in.’ In 1978 he transferred responsibility for signing the death warrants from the governor to the sentencing judge, a task that in most other states remains with the governor.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen talks to the governor about his leadership responsibilities when implementing the death penalty and the moral grief it causes. **In an informative paragraph describe the leaders that have the power to enforce the death penalty. Who are the people that are enforcing capital punishment? Who has the power to overturn the death sentence? Who has the power to influence these leaders? How does Sister Helen use her influence to foster support against capital punishment?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 7



Key Paragraph – p. 74

“Such powerlessness before his executioners is one thing, but in the hands of his attorneys too? I feel terrible that I followed Millard’s judgment without question I haven’t practice blind obedience like this since the old days of convent life, when I obeyed by superiors unthinkingly.”

Writing Prompt

Option 1: Sister Helen exposes that she blindly followed Millard’s judgment without questioning his decisions. She alludes to the importance of questioning the judgment of leadership. Throughout history there are examples of immoral leaders. **Think of a personal or historical example where groups of people followed a leader of poor or immoral judgment (For example, some may argue Napoleon, Hitler, Mao Zedong, Idi Amin, Kim Jong Un). Provide three reasons why it is important to question the judgment and choices of leaders.**

Option 2: Eddie claims responsibility for the murder and confesses through a note. As Eddie, write a note that confesses to the murder. **Include one informative paragraph that describes why you didn’t confess sooner and a second informative paragraph that explains why you wanted to write this note. End the note with an apology.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 8



Key Paragraph – p. 94

“Look how shamefully secret this whole thing is,” Millard says. “A few select witnesses brought deep inside this prison in the dead of night to watch a man be killed. If most people in Louisiana would see what the state did tonight, they would throw up.”

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are a news reporter. **Write an article about Patrick’s execution. In an explanatory paragraph describe the process of the execution and the interactions among the witnesses involved. Include as many details as possible. Describe the execution process and the secrecy of the process. What was Patrick’s last meal? What were Patrick’s last words? Describe Patrick’s interactions with Sister Helen before his death. How did Sister Helen provide a source of comfort for Patrick? Who else was present at the execution?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Dead Man Walking, Day 9



Key Paragraph – p. 101

“Who killed this man? Nobody. Everybody can argue that he or she was just doing a job – the governor, the warden, the head of the Department of Corrections, the district attorney, the judge, the jury, the pardon Board, the witness to the execution. Nobody feels personally responsible for the death of this man.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen talks about the workers that contribute to the execution of prisoners on death row. Pretend you are the executioner. **In an explanatory paragraph describe your thoughts on your job and contribution to the execution. Do you believe you are participating in a state-sanctioned crime? Why or why not? Provide three reasons to support your answer. What leadership role do you have to influence the execution? Who do you think is ultimately responsible for the execution?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 10



Key Paragraph – p. 110

“Evidence that executions do not deter crime is conclusive. In the U.S. the murder rate is no higher in states that do not have the death penalty than those that do.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen becomes more involved with abolishing the death penalty. She realizes the need to inform community leaders and the public of the injustice of capital punishment. **In an explanatory paragraph describe Sister Helen’s argument that the death penalty is ineffective. What facts does she present? Provide three reasons to support this statement. Describe how Sister Helen is leading the death row abolitionists’ efforts. How is this an example of “Leadership requires engagement.”**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 11



Key Paragraph – p. 127

“He’s aware that ‘time’s gettin’ short’ and says how he’s been reading and studying every law book he can get his hands on. ‘When you’re in a place like this you learn the law fast. Let’s just say you have special motivation.’”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen begins to counsel Robert Lee Willie. **In an explanatory paragraph describe Robert and his character. What is his reaction to being sentenced on death row? How does he demonstrate initiative and leadership even while on death row? How does this leadership benefit other inmates?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 12



Key Paragraph – p. 130

“If we believe that murder is wrong and not admissible in our society, then it has to be wrong for everyone, not just individuals but governments as well....It involves all of us. We’re all complicit. Government can only continue killing if we give it power. It’s time to take that power back.”

Writing Prompt

Explain why it is difficult for the public to view death row inmates as humans. **In an explanatory paragraph describe how criminals are portrayed. What does the media focus on? How can the media better portray inmates in a more human light? How can a more human portrayal of the prisoner make it more difficult to execute death row inmates? Explain.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 13



Key Paragraph – p. 144

“Support for the death penalty also drops dramatically – well below the majority - when the alternative is presented of long term imprisonment (at least 25 years) for offenders plus restitution by the offender of the victim’s family.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen proposes an alternative punishment to the death penalty. Pretend you are Sister Helen. **Write a speech that explains the need for an alternative punishment. Provide three reasons why an alternative punishment is important in order to respect the dignity of human life. How can the death penalty be a crime? Can the death penalty eliminate the pain of the victims’ families? Is the death penalty a true form of justice?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 14



Key Paragraph – p. 165

“He ends with a quote from Dostoyevsky, that famous quote about how a society is judged not by how it treats its upstanding citizens, but how it treats it’s criminals.”

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Liz Scott and you are writing an article on Robert Willie and Vernon and Elizabeth Harvey. **In an explanatory paragraph describe the Pardon Board hearing. Set the scene of all who are present and where they are sitting. Describe the interactions among all who are present.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 15



Key Paragraph – p. 171

“Are you saying that if the Pardon Board recommends the death sentence, then the governor has something to stand behind and can say that he’s only following the recommendation of the Board, and that way he doesn’t have to face the political fallout of commuting a sentence?”

Writing Prompt

The Pardon Board system entrusts its members with the responsibility to decide the fate of death row inmates. With time, Marsellus comes to realize his individual responsibility. Pretend you are Marsellus. **Write a journal entry that explains why you believe you are personally responsible for the fate of prisoners on death row. In an explanatory paragraph, describe your change of heart about your role in enforcing the death penalty. Why did you not believe that you were personally responsible for the death penalty sentence? Describe the corruption of the Pardon Board. Why do you now accept responsibility for the death penalty process? (Provide two reasons).**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 16



Key Paragraph – p. 179

“I hope my death gives the Harveys some peace. I really do. Maybe my death will help them get some relief, some peace.”

Key Paragraph – p. 182

“To a reporter for NBC news he says he’d like to talk with the executioner face to face and say, “ Hey, man, you shouldn’t be killing people for no four hundred dollars. You shouldn’t be killing people for the government.”

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Robert. As your execution date draws near you feel remorse. Write an apology letter to the Harvey’s. **In an explanatory paragraph describe what you are feeling during this time. Explain the suffering you think the Harvey’s may be experiencing. Provide three key reasons for why you are sorry. End your letter with a request for their forgiveness.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 17



Key Paragraph – p. 189

“I have to keep positioning myself inwardly to grasp the reality of imminent death, because Robert Willie, through mysterious resources of his own, seems to have a firm foothold in the present moment and is calm and obviously enjoying this conversation very much.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen reflects on one of her last conversations with Robert and his ability to live in the present moment and enjoy the “now” and not worry about the future or regret the past. Reflect on the importance of living in the present. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe how living in the present help humans overcome challenges and difficult circumstances as well as enjoy happy moments. Provide three reasons to support your answer.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 18



Key Paragraph – p. 197

“That, I believe, is what it’s going to take to abolish the death penalty in this country: we must persuade the American people that government killings are too costly for us, not only financially but – more important – morally.” – Page 197.

Key Paragraph – p. 197

“I am convinced that if executions were made public, the torture and violence would be unmasked, and we would be shamed into abolishing executions.”

Key Paragraph – p. 207

“It would be a good thing for people to see what they are really doing, executing people. I’ll bet if they saw it, it would change some minds..”

Writing Prompt

Option 1: The procedure to complete the execution is calculated in a timely routine that could overlook the humanity of the inmate. **Pretend you are Sister Helen and you want to raise awareness about the death penalty by writing an article that informs readers of the execution process and highlight Robert’s humanity. In an informative paragraph describe the step-by-step process leading up to Robert’s execution. Provide three details that portray Robert’s humanity.**

Option 2: Pro-death penalty advocates, often refer to the “eye for an eye” passage in Exodus. Sister Helen argues that this passage is taken out of its original context. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe Sister Helen’s argument of the original context of this passage. Provide three details from the novel that support Sister Helen’s statement.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 19



Key Paragraph – p. 221

“Oh, Robert, Robert, my boy, O God, help me,’ she says weeping. ‘Oh, Robert, how much I love you,’ and she leans over to kiss him and faints, collapsing on the floor. ‘Mama! Mama!’ Todd says and he begins to cry. Elizabeth is brought to an adjoining parlor and remains for the rest of the service.”

Writing Prompt

After Robert’s execution, both Robert’s family and the Harvey’s felt strong emotions. Pretend you are a family member from the Harvey’s family or from Robert’s family. Write a journal entry reflecting on Robert’s execution. **In an explanatory paragraph describe your joys and relief or your pain and sorrow. Provide three reasons to justify your sentiments.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 20



Key Paragraph – p.230

“My husband and I are getting a separation. We just have different ways of dealing with our son’s death. He wanted to get rid of all his clothes right away. I wanted to keep the. He said he had to move on in his life and I’m still grieving. ‘Until death do us part’ has a new meaning for me.”

Writing Prompt

Sister Helen attends a victim’s support group meeting and is surprised by the unknown struggles of family and friends face. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe the legal and emotional challenges faced by victims’ families and friends. Provide three examples to support your answer.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Dead Man Walking, Day 21



Key Paragraph – p. 245

“Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won.”

Key Paragraph – p. 226 (from last weeks reading)

“Vernon begins to cry. He just can’t get over Faith’s death, he says. It happened six years ago but for him it’s like yesterday, and I realize that now, with Robert Willie dead, he doesn’t have an object for his rage. He’s been deprived of that, too. I know that he could watch Robert killed a thousand times and it could never assuage his grief.”

Writing Prompt

Option 1: Lloyd and Vernon processed the death of their children differently. Lloyd has been able to reconcile his lost, yet Vernon still suffers from pain and grief. Pretend you are Lloyd and write a letter of support to Vernon. **In an explanatory paragraph describe the importance of forgiveness in order to reconcile the pain of death. Provide three suggestions on how he can heal his pain.**

Option 2: Sister Helen reflects on Lloyd’s ability to forgive and live with peace regardless after a horrific tragedy. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe Lloyd’s character. How does he lead and teach others through examples of positive actions and choices. Provide three examples to support your answer.**