Your research assignment is to address this deceptively simple question:

As presented in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and August Wilson’s *Fences*, is the American Dream still real and alive?

To begin researching, start by reading the *Vanity Fair* article on The American Dream and the suggested other pieces to gain some background knowledge on the topic. Realize that the question above lends itself to many interpretations – is it real for everyone, regardless of race, gender, religion, age, etc. – and that there are many different approaches to answering it. Consider some of the following:

- Perhaps these plays are excellent, worthy masterpieces that celebrate the Horatio Alger-esque ideal that it is truly possible and achievable for all of those willing to sacrifice. These plays offer the true promise of America, the hope that all can climb the ladder of success provided they don’t fall prey to distraction, laziness, or temptation.
- Perhaps these plays are valuable because they present a balanced view of the theme. While cautionary tales in one sense, both plays also offer hope, however slim, to those audience members and readers willing to heed the authors’ timeless advice to work hard but tread lightly.
- Perhaps these plays are simply terribly dated; perhaps you believe, irrespective of all the “timely issues addressed”, that *Death of a Salesman* and *Fences* speak to audiences of the time but offer little more than nostalgic views of a simpler world long gone. Despite the troubles and issues tackled in these texts, the world as it now exists is ever more complex. The American Dream is just that today, a dream – a fictional hallucination of sorts that people willingly convince themselves of being true. The reality is that this idea is dead.
- Perhaps these plays are valuable precisely because they are problematic and complex: perhaps studying them is an invaluable way to address race, poverty, mental illness, sexism, ageism, etc. in our society, both throughout history and today. The use of stereotypes in art, the power of language to address social ills—these are obviously still relevant.

Now, remember that this assignment is for English and not for social studies or psychology or sociology. Take note of what we don’t want you to research: the legality behind teaching these books in schools, censorship laws/freedom of speech, Miller or Wilson’s own lives, public controversy surrounding the plays, the history of discrimination in America. Your focus is on the texts: *Death of a Salesman* and *Fences*.

No matter how you choose to jump into this assignment, and no matter where you choose to direct the red-hot laser beam of your research, you are not going to be able to avoid these two issues: 1) Why are people
still reading, watching, and teaching these plays and calling them classics and 2) are they good plays? It is possible to be heavily focused on one over the other, but as we hope the bullet points above show, the two are very often tangled together.

Some Requirements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum # of sources</td>
<td>6: 2 primary (the plays) + 4 secondary (relevant, vetted literary criticism)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum # of quotations/paraphrased ideas in essay*</td>
<td>10: 6* (from your sources) + 4 (from the plays)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Note cards</td>
<td>25: Include notes from both sides of the argument. Some will serve to bolster your argument. Others will represent opposing ideas that you may refute in your argument. You are not going to use all 25 notecards in your final paper!</td>
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<td>Outline</td>
<td>Thesis, topic sentences, and outline of support (what quotes will you be using, and where?)</td>
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<td>Works Cited Page</td>
<td>The page that follows the essay and indicates the sources you cited in your discussion. It should include at least 4 secondary sources and the plays and follow MLA formatting guidelines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>Include usual heading information and a clever (ideally), informative title for your paper.</td>
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Taking notes:

1. When you find a source that you think will be useful, list its bibliographical information in an on-going log — following the format on the MLA Style Sheet. You may choose to annotate the entry by adding a note about the kind of information the source provides. Noodletools will format your notes if you feed it the correct information. Example of a bibliographical entry for an essay included in a critical anthology of a novel/play:


2. After you have logged your source, take notes. Using Noodletools for notecards is fine (make sure you “share” your notecards with me), but resist the temptation to cram paragraphs of text into a single “card”. Keep a “physical note card” mentality. Use specific “slugs” or subject headings (see below).

Controversy background

“In the long controversy that has been Huckleberry Finn’s history, the novel has been criticized, censored, and banned for an array of perceived failings, including obscenity, atheism, bad grammar, coarse manners, low moral tone, and antisouthernism.”

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A final note/plea: This is a super-busy, super-stressful time of year. We are asking for a lot of research, and many of the sources are dense and difficult. Our time in the media center is limited. Many of you will be missing multiple classes for AP exams. The point here is that you need to a) resist the temptation to slack off/study for the next day’s exam when we are in the media center, and b) be willing to work independently at home (there will be no other homework due until this paper is over). I suggest the following approach: commit yourself to spending 1 hour of work on this project every day between May 1st and May 12th. The worst thing to be when you are doing research is frantic (“Oh no, I need to fill up 10 notecards for tomorrow!” is a good way to get 10 crappy notecards). The sad truth is that the research paper has, in the past, been the undoing of many excellent students who simply didn’t put in the time. It has also been a memorable and rewarding experience for those who did—this project can be an honest-to-goodness building block for success in college. Give it your all!

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2 A number of you won’t be in school this day—if you do your notecards on Noodletools, I can check them without your presence; simply email them to me.

3 Listen, if you turn in the paper late, there WILL be the 10% penalty—the due date isn’t changing, and I will be keeping close track of who gives me a hard copy in class on that last day before the holiday weekend.

Being absent isn’t an excuse. Having printer trouble isn’t an excuse. No excuse is an excuse. Make it happen!