



The Catcher in the Rye (1951) Use of Evidence – Unit Assessment Assessment Key

Each of the questions below can be graded on a 10-point scale, using the Use of Evidence – Unit Assessment Rubric. To round up to 100 points total, you can give students up to 20 bonus points for pre-announced criteria, or for their overall command of evidence.

Question 1

Assume for this question that your overall interpretive position is **mental illness**. And assume that the claim that you are arguing for is: “Holden has lost the capacity to enjoy almost everything in life, a symptom of clinical depression.” Find the piece of textual evidence from Chapter 17 that best supports this claim. Limit your passage to 3 – 9 lines.

“Now, *listen*’ old Sally said. ‘Lots of boys get more out of school than *that*.’ ‘I agree! I agree they do, some of them! But that’s all *I* get out of it. See? That’s my point. That’s exactly my goddam point,’ I said. ‘I don’t get hardly anything out of anything. I’m in bad shape. I’m in *lousy* shape.’ ‘You certainly are’” (146).

Explain why this passage provides especially strong support for the argumentative claim.

While Sally here represents an average, “normal” student response to school – finding some things to dislike, but some things to like about it – Holden declares that he is distinguished from others by experiencing school as devoid of anything positive or enjoyable. He has a moment of clarity in having this conversation with “average” Sally. He is “in bad shape . . . *lousy* shape.” And of course he is referring to his mental state. He is able to see, while expressing the extremity of his unhappiness, that he is profoundly depressed. And Sally, too, affirms this self-diagnosis.

Question 2

Assume for this question that your overall interpretive position is **hyper-individualism**. In the essay you are writing one of the arguments you are making uses the following two pieces of textual evidence.

“I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don’t know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, ‘*Sleep tight, ya morons!*’ I’ll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out” (Ch.7, p.59).

“He was putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other very tricky stuff that gives me a pain in the ass. You should’ve heard the crowd, though, when he was finished. You would’ve puked. They went mad. They were exactly the same morons that laugh like hyenas in the movies at stuff that isn’t funny. I swear to God, if I were a piano player or an actor or something and all those dopes thought I was terrific, I’d hate it. I wouldn’t want them to clap for me. People always clap for the wrong things. If I were a piano player, I’d play it in the goddam closet” (Ch.12, p.94).

Carefully and precisely formulate an argumentative claim that unifies and aligns with this evidence cluster, and that is fully directed by your overall argumentative position.

Holden’s inward-looking and uncompromising standards deeply alienate him from others in public settings, such as in school or at concerts.

Explain in detail – referencing both pieces of evidence – how your argumentative claim accomplishes these purposes.

Holden leaves Pencey with a final act of disregard for all of his classmates. By calling all of them “*ya morons*,” in a very theatrical gesture, he signals to them that their viewpoints and values meant nothing to him. But, at the same time, he leaves Pencey “crying, I don’t know why.” Such a deep divide between himself and everyone is making him unhappy. And when Holden is in New York City he reflects on how much disdain he has for the public’s aesthetic judgment, at movies or concerts. “People always clap for the wrong things.” But Salinger has Holden unintentionally reveal the stark costs of such individualist tastes and judgment. It is absurd to think of a musician playing in his closet because he is so contemptuous of his audience’s understanding and critical tastes. Absurd and totally isolating.

Question 3

Assume for this question that you are reading a literary interpretation of the novel that has taken the **insensitive and insincere society** position. The writer is making claim that Salinger is indicting the clamorous and frenzied pace and noise of American post-war society. She uses this evidence to support the claim.

“That’s the whole trouble. You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any. You may *think* there is, but once you get there, when you’re not looking, somebody’ll sneak up and write ‘F--- you’ right under your nose. Try it sometime. I think, even, if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it’ll say ‘Holden Caulfield’ on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and then right under that it’ll say ‘F--- you.’ I’m positive, in fact” (Ch.25, p.224).

Critique the writer's use of evidence. What is flawed about it and why?

This is an instance where the credibility of the speaker, of the narrator, is dubious. Holden has experienced by himself a series of incidents in New York City that would frazzle and destabilize even a very balanced, mentally composed person, and Holden is far from that. This passage is less about the actual state of the world than it is a reflection of Holden's psychological state. Further, there have been no reports earlier in the novel of graffiti or defacement of the kind that Holden is describing. So the evidence lacks credibility as support of the claim that Holden's society doesn't allow anyone any peace. It is certainly far from sufficient to prove this claim. And, finally, it may have some alignment problem, since the passage discusses people's impulse to desecrate, whereas the claim refers more to the fast and frenetic pace of life. It is true that Holden references the absence of places that are "nice and peaceful, but the thrust of the passage is about widespread, unmotivated malice.

Question 4

Assume for this question that the overall interpretive position being argued about is **hyper-individualism**. But in this instance the question is, Does the passage below, spoken by Mr. Antolini, support this overall interpretive position or oppose this overall position?

"This fall I think you're riding for – it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn't supply them with. So they gave up looking . . . I don't want to scare you,' he said, 'but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause'" (Ch.24, p.207).

Explain why you think it either supports or opposes this overall interpretive position, and then explain how, even though the other side might try to use this passage, it actually more strongly supports your side than theirs.

The passage can be read to support the **hyper-individualism** interpretation because Antolini is warning Holden that because he is living with overly idealistic standards that he imposes on his surroundings (and in particular on other people), he is heading for a "a horrible kind" of fall. He calls this adherence to his unrealistically high personal standards of purity an "unworthy cause" for which Holden will die "nobly." It isn't necessary to construe literally Antolini's warning: Holden might not literally pass away, but his life might be ruined and made miserable, Antolini implies, by his idealistic hyper-individualism.

The passage might be read to oppose the hyper-individualism interpretation, however, by developing the same reading as above, but then arguing that because it is advanced by Antolini, an alcoholic abuser, it is actually being discredited and the reading in effect is being inverted. Those taking the position above might argue against this "inversion" by stating that (a) the observation Antolini is making can stand on its own, regardless of the speaker's character flaws, and (b) in other respects Antolini is credible (he's a college English professor, he has been perceptive about Holden in the past, etc.).

Question 5

Explain in detail how the following passage be used as evidence for each of the three overall interpretive positions.

“Boy, I was shaking like a madman, I was sweating, too. When something pervery like that happens, I start sweating like a bastard. That kind of stuff’s happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can’t stand it” (Ch.24, p.213).

Be sure to discuss each interpretive position individually. Also, identify which interpretive position you think the evidence provides **strongest**, most credible and sufficient, evidence for and why.

Hyper-individualism: It is startling that Holden relates that he has experienced abuse twenty times, but that he has apparently never reported it. This is an indicator of a person who is likely highly suspicious of authority, distrustful of others’ usefulness to him, and in the end someone who insists on handling even traumatic events entirely within and by himself. But of course the costs are very high: the impact of this abuse on Holden is undermining his emotional stability and confidence.

Insincere and insensitive society: Mr. Antolini is one of Holden’s very few, if not only, friends in the novel. And yet turns out to be someone who attempts to sexually exploit Holden. He pretends to be – and may actually think he is – a genuine friend to Holden, but underneath he is actually an abuser, utterly insensitive to Holden’s fragility and emotional needs. In this way he is an important symbol of hypocrisy and uncaring that dominates Salinger’s depiction of mid-century New York.

Mental illness: Holden is quite simply the victim of repeated, chronic sexual abuse as a child. This trauma is linked very directly to mental illness: depression, mood disorders, social anxiety, even schizophrenia. The fact that Holden describes himself “shaking like a madman” is no coincidence: he intuits the psychological damage that sexual abuse has done to him and his mental health.

This evidence can support all three interpretive positions, but most strongly supports the **mental illness** reading. The seriousness of this trauma, and its very close connection to mental health problems in its victims, gives this evidence both credibility and sufficiency, and the internal reference to madness in the evidence further points in the direction of this reading.

Question 6

Assume for this question that the overall interpretive position you are arguing for is **mental illness**. You are making a claim that Holden acts or threatens to act in certain impulsive ways that are characteristic of someone who doesn’t have the executive control over his actions of a sane person. Which of the following two pieces of evidence provides stronger support, and which provides lesser support, for your claim. In your explanation (particularly of which piece of evidence is lesser), consider the competing interpretive positions.

“I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don’t blame them. I really don’t. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it” (Ch.5, p.44).

“What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would’ve done it, too, if I’d been sure somebody’d cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn’t want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory” (Ch.14, p.116-117).

The piece of evidence from Chapter 5 provides the stronger support for the claim that Holden doesn’t have executive control over his actions. The passage recounts Holden smashing the windows in his garage, at considerable risk of injury from jagged glass, too, since he did so with his bare fist. The (presumably) factual details in this episode are convincing: they are, in effect, a documented case of highly impulsive, dangerous behavior. This piece of evidence adds two additional elements of internal credibility. One, it mentions that Holden’s family was planning on sending him to a psychiatrist over this incident. Two, it includes a source of mental anguish: Holden’s losing his brother at such an early age. These elements enhance the evidence’s credibility and build its sufficiency.

The evidence from Chapter 14 does reference Holden’s suicidal thoughts, and for that reason it is well aligned with the claim. But this incident never occurred; it is not factually concrete the way that the evidence from Chapter 5 is. Also, this passage underlines Holden’s hyper-individualist disdain or condescension toward others (“stupid rubbernecks” is how he characterizes those who would have witnessed his suicide). And this moment in the novel comes immediately after Holden went to the movies, an experience that elicited his declaration that others’ opinions about film are vastly inferior to his own, another expression of his **hyper-individualism**.

Question 7

Read the following two passages and then categorize one as supporting the **hyper-individualism** position and the other as supporting the **insensitive and insincere society** position. Explain your matching of the evidence and position for each.

“She meant why did I get the ax again. It made me sort of sad, the way she said it. ‘Oh, God, Phoebe, don’t ask me. I’m sick of everybody asking me that,’ I said. ‘A million reasons why. It was one of the worst schools I ever went to. It was full of phonies. And mean guys. You never saw so many mean guys in your life. For instance, if you were having a bull session in somebody’s room, and somebody wanted to come in, nobody’d let them in if they were some dopey, pimply guy. Everybody was always locking their door when somebody wanted to come in” (Ch.21, p.185).

“I mean do you hate it? I know it’s a terrific bore, but do you *hate* it, is what I mean.’ ‘Well, I don’t exactly *hate* it. You always have to –’ ‘Well *I* hate it. Boy, do I hate it,’ I said. ‘But it isn’t just that. It’s *everything*. I hate living in New York and all. Taxicabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being introduced to phony guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks, and people always –’ ‘Don’t shout, please,’ old Sally said. Which was very funny, because I wasn’t even shouting” (Ch.17, p.144-145).

Hyper-Individualism:

The passage from Chapter 17 is better support for the **hyper-individualism** position. The overall effect of the passage is to convey how living in New York City feels like an incessant imposition of *other people* and *other people’s*

norms and conventions on Holden. Holden hates “*everything*” about living in New York, and when he provides examples of what he hates, it is a series of quotidian moments when other people are telling him what to do and how to behave. Holden appears here to be suffering immensely from feeling penned in and constricted by other people and the demands and expectations that they impose.

Insensitive and Insincere Society:

The passage from Chapter 21 is better support for the **insensitive and insincere society** position. Holden is explaining to his sister why he so hated Pencey Academy. Pencey was “full of phonies” – insincere, vain, hypocritical young men. He also describes the students at Pencey as “mean.” Importantly, he provides a (presumably, again) factual example of the way that Pencey students acted insensitively to others, snobbishly keeping boys out of their rooms who they thought weren’t as good-looking or who had lower social status. There is certainly the question of the reliability (and therefore credibility) of Holden as narrator, but here the details lend his description some verisimilitude.

Question 8

Now, referencing the above question, apply the following **second** piece of evidence to one of the two overall interpretive positions – the one for which it best fits. Formulate an argumentative claim that unifies and aligns the two pieces of evidence. And explain how both pieces of evidence support your claim.

“You know that song, “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye? . . . What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over a cliff – I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be” (Ch.22, p.191).

Overall Interpretive Position

The position this evidence better supports is **insensitive and insincere society**.

Argumentative Claim Uniting This Evidence and the Evidence Above (Question 7)

The claim that this evidence and the evidence immediately preceding it (in Question 7) support is: Holden is committed to defending and protecting the vulnerable who are wounded by society.

Explain How Both Pieces of Evidence Support Your Claim

In Chapter 22 Holden describes the fantasy he has in which he is saving people who are running through a field of grain, which can be considered a kind of symbol of both work and of food (essential elements of a society). They do not realize that they are running off a cliff, and therefore they need to be saved. Holden really only wants to save the vulnerable, he tells us. He acted in a similar way at Pencey in that he was highly sensitive to the slights and exclusions that he witnessed all around him. In fact, we see Holden in the early chapters acting out of concern for the lower-status, picked-on fellow students at his school.