**100 Books to Read before College  
  
Ancient**  
These texts are old to be sure, but still have a lot to offer the modern reader.

1. ***Beowulf*, Anonymous:** While many will have read this in high school, if you didn’t try picking it up in college. This [epic poem](http://books.google.com/books?id=SXkm5xC04DoC&dq=beowulf&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=puF61i-e1Y&sig=qf_Dpm8QfCDAaSahN1qmGai9OUM&hl=en&ei=XxRgSq_iIsaHtgfN2KzFDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=15) may not be an easy read, but it has stirred much debate, theory and analysis and is well worth a read.
2. ***The Iliad*, Homer:** Learn more about the final year of the Trojan war in one of the most commonly read pieces of [Greek epic poetry](http://classics.mit.edu).
3. ***The Odyssey*, Homer:** In Homer’s other great epic poem and sequel of sorts to the Iliad, readers will follow the hero Odysseus as he journeys homeward.
4. ***The Republic,* Plato:** One of the most influential works on philosophy and political theory, this book uses a Socratic dialogue to engage the reader.
5. ***Oresteia*, Aeschylus:** This trilogy of Greek tragedies follows the House of Atreus and the unpleasant events that follow upon the return of Agamemnon to his home.
6. ***Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles:** Students should read this well-known Greek tragedy to learn the origins of the famous Freudian [Oedipus complex](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/psychoanalysis/concepts/oedipus_complex.htm) as well as to better understand the construction of Greek dramatic works.
7. ***The Aeneid*, Virgil:** In this poem readers will follow the story of Aeneas, a man who traveled to Italy to become the ancestor of the Romans.

**Classics**  
These classic books are part of must-read lists the world over, and offer students not only the chance to gain hours of enjoyment through the tales they tell, but gain greater understanding of human nature, periods in history, and even satirical social criticism.

1. ***1984*, George Orwell:** This dystopian novel explores the idea of “Big Brother,” a governmental system where citizens are monitored and controlled at all times. It has become increasingly relevant in [modern society](http://www.bigbrothergovernment.org) where computers, cameras and other tracking devices monitor our every move.
2. ***Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad:** Serving to later inspire the movie [Apocalypse Now](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078788/), this novella takes readers in the depths of the Congo with Marlow, employed on a mission to retrieve the mysterious and potentially dangerous Kurtz.
3. ***Gulliver’s Travels,* Jonathan Swift:** This satire on human nature has inspired several film versions and is an entertaining work of English literature.
4. ***Candide,* Voltaire:** Check out this biting work of social satire by the philosopher Voltaire that was banned due to its blasphemy, political sedition and hostility. It remains one of the most widely read and taught works of French literature and is an essential read for the well-rounded individual.
5. ***Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky:** Originally published in installments, this famous novel follows the student Raskolnikov as he plans to plot and kill an unscrupulous pawn broker.
6. ***Don Quixote,* Miguel de Cervantes:** The bumbling old knight in this famous Spanish Golden Age work, is a classic literary character and the work’s humor, inventiveness and philosophical musings make it worth a read.
7. ***The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner:** This book is by no means [an easy read](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/soundfury/) with much of it written in stream of consciousness. For those who can muddle through, however, it offers an insightful look at the Compson family and their fall into ruin.
8. ***Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert:** In this classic novel, Emma Bovary engages in affairs and lives well past her means in order to escape what she sees as a banal and empty peasant life.
9. ***Catch 22,* Joseph Heller:** Set in WWII, this novel uses a non-chronological plot to form a critique of bureaucratic operation and reasoning.
10. ***Frankenstein,* Mary Shelley:** Fans of the iconic character will appreciate reading the novel that inspired it all.
11. ***Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Herman Melville:** While many may have already read Moby Dick, Melville’s novelette is well worth a read as well, following the sad and strange character of Bartleby.
12. ***The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway:** Exploring the values of the “Lost Generation,” this Hemingway novel takes readers to Spain for the running of the bulls and a tragic relationship, or perhaps lack thereof, between a war veteran and an engaged woman.
13. ***In the Penal Colony*, Franz Kafka:** This work by famous author Franz Kafka takes readers to an island penal colony where a strange machine tortures and kills the inhabitants.
14. ***The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera:** Another Czech author, Kundera’s work intersperses the progression of the story with philosophical reflections.
15. ***A Brave New World,* Aldous Huxley:** This well known work imagines a future world where happiness is paramount but individualism is considered obscene, delving into what Huxley called the creation of a negative utopia.
16. ***One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez:** Using [magical realism](http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_mr.html), this novel explores themes of time, reality and eternity eventually winning the author a Nobel Prize in literature.
17. ***Lolita*, Vladamir Nobokov:** While controversial to this day for exploring themes of pedophilia, this novel also offers humor and intrigue to the willing reader.
18. ***The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald:** This book is often read in high school literature courses, and for good reason as it offers an easily accessible avenue to the disillusionment some felt during the decadent Jazz Age.
19. ***Cannery Row*, John Steinbeck:** Set in the [Great Depression](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/depression.htm), this novel follows the residents of a small street filled with sardine fisheries as they attempt to throw a party for their friend.

**Fiction Based on History**  
These novels are fictional, but are based around real historical events or pressing social issues, letting the reader not only read the story but learn about the past as well.

1. ***The Grapes of Wrath,* John Steinbeck:** Winning both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize for literature, this iconic novel describes the hardships endured by one family during the great depression and their journey to California in an attempt to find a better life.
2. ***A Tale of Two Cities,* Charles Dickens:** Set before and during the [French Revolution](http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/), this book exposes the battle of the peasantry against the aristocrats and the startling brutality that comprised much of the war.
3. ***Slaughterhouse Five,* Kurt Vonnegut:** Based on Vonnegut’s own experiences as a captured soldier during WWII, this novel blends a critique of war with elements of science fiction and escapism.
4. ***The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper:** While quite a lengthy read, this novel takes place during the [French and Indian War](http://www.philaprintshop.com/frchintx.html), detailing the often tragic results of this conflict.
5. ***All Quiet on the Western Front,* Erich Maria Remarque:** Drawing on his experience as a German WWI veteran, Remarque exposes the horrors of war and the difficulties of returning to civilian life.
6. ***A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway:** This semi-autobiographical novel tells the tale of a young ambulance driver in [WWII](http://www.worldwar-2.net) who falls in love with [a nurse](http://www.onlinecollegecourses.com/professionals/licensed-practical-nurses/) after he is wounded.
7. ***The Jungle,* Upton Sinclair:** This novel helped expose the corruption and sometimes unsanitary conditions that comprised the meat packing industry in the early 20th century.
8. ***The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien:** While based on many of his own experiences, the stories in this collection are a work of fiction, following a platoon of soldiers in Vietnam.

**Beyond the Standards**  
If you’re looking to read something published more recently or off the beaten track, these novels are quality literature that can be a big part of creating a well-rounded foundation of knowledge.

1. ***Infinite Jest,* David Foster Wallace:** Widely regarded as one of the best minds in contemporary literature, the work of David Foster Wallace is making its way into college courses all over the nation. This lengthy and complex work touches on a number of issues in a future version of North America.
2. ***Dead Souls,* Nikolai Gogol:** This Russian author is often overlooked in favor of Tolstoy and Doestovesky, but Gogol is worth the time to read as well, even if his greatest work remains unfinished.
3. ***Watership Down,* Richard Adams:** While based around a seemingly childlike plot, this novel addresses much more serious social and political issues through the guise of a warren of rabbits.
4. ***Dandelion Wine*, Ray Bradbury:** Bradbury may be best known for his novel *Fahrenheit 451,* but this semi-autobiographical novel is a great story of simple pleasures and nostalgia.
5. ***I Served the King of England*, Bohumil Hrabal:** This well-known Czech novel tells the story of a man who works his way up in society and the loves he encounters on the way.
6. ***Lord of the Rings,* J.R.R. Tolkein:** Widely known due to [the films](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lord_of_the_Rings_film_trilogy) based on it, this series of books is considered one of the best examples of the fantasy genre.
7. ***The Road,*** [**Cormac McCarthy**](http://www.flakmag.com/books/cormacoprah.html)**:** This recently released novel focuses on a man and his son in a desolate and sometimes violent post-apocalyptic world.
8. ***The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle,* Haruki Murakami:** Known for his dream-like plots, this story by Murakami is no exception, as it takes the reader on a journey into a mysterious other world as a young man searches for his missing cat and his wife.
9. ***On Beauty*, Zadie Smith:** This novel published in 2005 follows the lives of a mixed race family living in the United States and the clash between liberal and conservative values.
10. ***A Clockwork Orange,* Anthony Burgess:** Perhaps better known through the iconic movie directed by Stanley Kubrick, this dystopic novel explores the themes of mind control and violence.
11. ***The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov:** Banned for being critical of the [Stalinist regime](http://library.thinkquest.org/C0112205/stalinsrussia.html) and of organized religion, this novel is a comedic examination of both through a visit from the devil to Moscow.

**Nonwestern, Minority and Female Authors**  
Unfortunately, the bulk of what is considered great literature still comes from white, European or American males. These books show that [great work](http://aalbc.com) comes from people of all genders, races and origins and is essential to those wanting to broaden their horizons.

1. ***Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe:** Nigerian author Achebe tells the story of a man who’s life in his community and his role as a leader are questioned by [colonialism](http://ares.southernct.edu/organizations/hcr/2002/nonfiction/colonialism.htm) and missionaries.
2. ***Beloved,* Toni Morrison:** This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is loosely based on the life the slave Margaret Garner, and has been widely chosen as one of the best works of modern literature.
3. ***Invisible Man,* Ralph Ellison:** The only book that Ellison published during his lifetime is also a significant one, addressing many of the [social issues](http://www.tate.org.uk/node/236905/infocus/section5/img1.shtm) facing African Americans in the early 20th century.
4. ***The Color Purple*, Alice Walker:** Perhaps better known through the film adaptation, this book garnered both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for the story detailing the lives of black women in Georgia during the 1930′s.
5. ***Native Son,* Richard Wright:** The novel tells the story of 20-year old Bigger Thomas, an African American living in poverty in Chicago’s South Side ghettos during the 1930s.
6. ***My Antonia,* Willa Cather:** This novel by strong-willed woman Willa Cather tells the story of several families who have [moved to Nebraska](http://www.onlinecollegecourses.com/nebraska/) to start a new life.
7. ***Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte:** Partly autobiographical, this gothic novel is full of social criticism.
8. [***Uncle Tom’s Cabin***](http://books.google.com/books?id=gTw7045TBdgC&dq=uncle%2Btom%27s%2Bcabin&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=T6mgk1qItc&sig=1b8fETxWHSWZPnN6o1SuSN26Ey8&hl=en&ei=txdgSpOdG9G3twfLkbHTDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4)**, Harriet Beecher Stowe:** Stowe’s abolitionist work has been both criticized and praised and forms a part of many college history and African American studies courses.

**Biography, History and Social Theory**  
Check out these books to learn about the lives of important figures, understand the basis for major social shifts, and get a deeper appreciation for the thinkers who shaped our modern world.

1. ***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass:** Read this book to learn more about the inspiring life of Douglass, a man who was born a slave and became an intellectual and diplomat, a firm believer in equality for all including women and Native Americans, views not popular at the time.
2. ***The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Benjamin Franklin:** Through this book you can get to know one of the [founding fathers](http://www.fi.edu/franklin/) more intimately.
3. ***The Communist Manifesto,*** [**Karl Marx**](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/)**:** Changing the shape of Europe, Asia and countries around the world, the ideas presented in this book have had a profound impact on modern society.
4. ***The Prince,* Niccolo Machiavelli:** This political treatise, sometimes regarded as a satire, explains how to maintain power, based on the author’s own experiences in constant conflict in war-stricken Florentine Italy.
5. ***The Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine:** Paine’s controversial book posits that revelations are acceptable when governments are not safeguarding their people, their rights and their security.
6. ***The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques** [**Rousseau**](http://www.iep.utm.edu/rousseau/)**:** Learn about some early ideas of political organization that attempts to best represent the will of the public.
7. ***Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington:** An influential figure in American history, this book tells how Washington began life as a slave onto to end up founding several vocational schools for African Americans.

**Philosophy and Religion**  
No matter what you believe, these works will help you better understand the role religion, philosophy and mythology have played in world culture.

1. ***The Stranger,* Albert Camus:** This [existentialist](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/) novel addresses the importance of personal choice, the indifference of the universe and living in an often absurd world.
2. ***The Bible:*** Even if you don’t believe in the teachings of the Bible, knowing what it says can make a big difference in your understanding of art, literature and history and it is an essential read for anyone looking to have a better comprehension of modern society.
3. ***Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, Edith Hamilton:** This book is a great anthology of Greek, Roman and Norse mythology, many stories of which inspired paintings, literature and countless cultural references.
4. ***Confessions,* Saint Augustine:** Confessions is an autobiographical work, documenting the saint’s youth and conversion to Christianity as well as lamenting his many sins before his conversion.
5. ***Siddhartha,* Herman Hesse:** This novel, based loosely on the story of the Buddha, takes the reader on a journey of spiritual discovery and enlightenment.
6. ***Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant:** Published in the 1780′s, this book is largely regarded as one of the most influential works of philosophy.
7. ***Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All,* Friedrich Nietzsche:** Here you’ll find powerful philosophical issues discussed like self-mastery, eternal recurrence, and the will to power.
8. ***Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre:** This often misunderstood work attempted to define consciousness through its relationship to nothingness.
9. ***Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand:** Set in a dystopian United States, this novel is perhaps the strongest of Rand’s work in showcasing her ideas of [objectivism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objectivism_%28Ayn_Rand%29).
10. ***The Art of Happiness*, The** [**Dalai Lama**](http://www.dalailama.com)**:** Get a Buddhist take on how one can attain happiness and fulfillment in life in this series of interviews with and insights from the Dalai Lama.
11. ***The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James:** Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James explores the often tumultuous relationship between religion and science in this text.
12. [***The Golden Bough***](http://books.google.com/books?id=FIlAAAAAIAAJ&dq=golden%2Bbough&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=8xhgStb9IZqEtgfh0qXbDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4)**, James George Frazer:** Anthropologist Frazer wrote this study on mythology and religion treating them scientifically as cultural phenomenon and examining their origins, meanings and impact on society.

**Drama and Poetry**  
These works of poetry and drama are well worth a read for their innovation, impact and all around quality.

1. ***Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett:** This Nobel prize-winning author was known for his absurdist tendencies and this play is no exception, telling the story of two men waiting for a man named Godot, whom paradoxically neither of the men actually know.
2. ***The Cherry Orchard,* Anton Chekov:** One of Chekov’s last plays, this semi-satirical work examines ideas of cultural futility in mid to late 19th century Russia.
3. ***The Divine Comedy,* Dante:** Perhaps one of the most famous epic poems in the world, this work shows the medieval view of Christian afterlife including the infamous nine circles of Inferno.
4. ***The Glass Menagerie,* Tennessee Williams:** Originally written as a screenplay, this work is supposedly [semi-autobiographical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Glass_Menagerie).
5. ***Hamlet,* William Shakespeare:** Often parodied, reinterpreted and redone, this is one of Shakespeare’s most well-known plays and an ideal read for those who began with *Romeo and Juliet* in high school.
6. ***Paradise Lost,* John Milton:** Innovative in its [humanization of the devil](http://books.google.com/books?id=9LU6AAAAMAAJ&dq=paradise%2Blost&printsec=frontcover&source=bn&hl=en&ei=nxlgSof3HaKltgek4eHdDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4), this poem follows the arrogant angel Lucifer as he falls from grace and tempts Adam and Eve into sin.
7. ***The Misanthrope,* Moliere:** Like most of Moliere’s work, this play is a comedy satirizing French aristocracy and the flaws of humanity.
8. ***Faust,* Johann von Goethe:** This tragic play tells the tale of a supernatural bet, pitting the soul of the man Faust against the wills of God and Mephistopheles.
9. ***A Doll’s House,* Henrik Ibsen:** Highly critical of contemporary marriage, this play was controversial at the time but has since become a standard in many college courses.
10. ***Mother Courage and Her Children,* Bertolt** [**Brecht**](http://www.brechtsociety.org/)**:** Some consider this to be one of the greatest anti-war dramas of all time, sharply criticizing and condemning Nazism and Fascism.

**Science and Mathematics**  
If you’re more into science and math than into reading fiction, these books can be a good place to start learning more.

1. ***Origin of Species,* Charles Darwin:** While perhaps not the most engaging of reads, this book is nonetheless an integral part of the foundation of modern understandings of science, and is worth a read if for nothing else but to better understand what Darwin was truly saying about evolution.
2. ***A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking:** This popular novel attempts to explain some of the most complex ideas in astrophysics in a way that the layman can understand.
3. ***Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Jared Diamond:** Ever wonder why some societies flourish while others are easily conquered? This novel explains it using science as a basis.
4. ***Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson:** This important novel was one of the first to expose the dangerous effects that chemical pesticides were having on local ecosystems and is still a controversial book today.
5. ***The Double Helix*, James D. Watson:** Learn more about one of the most important discoveries of our time: the [structure of DNA](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/do53dn.html).
6. ***A River Out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins:** This work avoids the religious antimony that makes up much of Dawkins’ work and gives a simple and beautiful explanation of the process of evolution.
7. ***The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould:** In this book you’ll learn more about how science has been used to legitimize genocide, racism, sexism and all kinds of prejudice.
8. [***Principia Mathematica***](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/principia-mathematica/)**, Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell:** This three volume work explains the foundations of mathematics and is widely regarded as one of the most important works on mathematical logic of the 20th century. Fans of math may want to have it on hand as useful reference material.

**Art** If you want to learn more about the history of painting, photography, drama and writing give these works a read.

1. ***Illuminations,* Walter Benjamin:** With essays on [mechanical reproduction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Work_of_Art_in_the_Age_of_Mechanical_Reproduction), the work of Kafka and more, this novel is an essential theoretical read for those interested in modern issues related to artistic expression.
2. ***The Lives of the Artists,* Vasari:** While questionable as a work of non-fiction, this novel is one of the first art historical accounts and details the lives and work of many of the Renaissance greats.
3. ***On Painting,* Alberti:** Alberti was a man of many talents from architecture to linguistics, the quintessential “Renaissance Man.” In this book he examines the common ground of art and science through the use of optics and perspective.
4. [***Poetics***](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html)***,* Aristotle:** Here you can read Artistotle’s ruminations on what he thinks makes great drama, the types he thinks are best, and what elements go into creating the ideal plot.
5. ***Art and Illusion*, Ernest H. Gombrich:** Check out this book to learn more about the mental processes that take place when we look at art.

**Miscellaneous**  
Check out these great books to learn about a wide variety of subjects from war to living a simple life.

1. ***Walden*, Henry David Thoreau:**This classic American novel deals with independence, self-reliance and spiritual discovery based on Thoreau’s retreat to the wilderness of Walden Pond.
2. ***The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell:** A fairly recent publication, this book explains how the littlest of things can make a big difference in sociological situations.
3. [***The Elements of Style***](http://bartleby.com/141/)**, Strunk and White:** First published in 1918, this English writing guide is the most influential and highly regarded authority on grammar and usage and is an essential text for anyone wanting to learn how to write more professionally.
4. ***The Art of War*, Sun Tzu:** This classic work gives advice on strategy and planning that can not only work well in battle but in the workplace as well.
5. ***Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud:** While widely disregarded as incorrect in his views by many, Freud’s ideas still form a major part of our modern culture and understanding of the world. Read this essay to get some perspective on why Freud thought humans lived in society they way they do.