Formal Essay Topics

Some of these topics will work for struggling students while others are meant for students who come to the classroom with a degree of writing sophistication. Ideally, students will brainstorm and come up with their own topics, but these topics are offered as examples to give students some guidance. (They are, more or less, in chronological order as you go through the book.)

1. Alison Hawthorne Deming says that we need to use the “power of language” to change the culture we live in. Do you think that the power of language can be effective? How so? What will be the medium that changes the world in this coming decade? You can discuss books, or online journals, or speeches, or songs, or movies, or social media, or text messages, or internet articles, or memes, or YouTube clips, or talk shows, or blogs, or poetry, or any medium that uses the “power of language.”

2. Many of the authors of these letters are well-known writers. Choose one to research. What have they written? How were they educated? What’s their area of expertise? Where are they from? What is unique about their voice? What is important about what they are saying? Do they have anything on YouTube? Have they written longer pieces for Terrain.org? Caution: Once you’ve done the research, you need to come up with an overarching thesis that will dictate the structure of your paper. You will want to pick and choose what details you include. You need more than just a list of random facts in the order that you found them.

3. These writers argue that the dominant culture in this country is harmful to the earth -- and to many of its inhabitants. Present a vision for how things could be different. Be careful not to just say the obvious. Your ideas should make your readers think – or see things in a new way.

4. Many of these writers talk about their own experiences and where they are from. Choose and research an environmental issue in your hometown. Then write an essay to educate us about it, explaining what is going on and why this is an important issue.

5. Taylor Brorby (page 44) vows to “end the fossil fuel industry.” What do you think is the answer to the energy crisis? Do some research and write an essay on energy alternatives. It’s unlikely you will have the time and resources to come up with the whole solution: think of your essay as contributing one piece of the solution.

6. Deborah Thompson (page 51) says that “plastic begins as crude oil and ends in debris.” Can you imagine a world without plastic? How do we achieve that? Legislation? Consumer boycotts? Economic incentives? You need to move past “we should eliminate single use plastic” to explaining just how we can achieve that goal.

7. In the second section of the book (Extractions, Extinctions, and Depletions) many of the writers talk about the extinction of species and other losses in the natural world, along with the grief that comes from those losses. Choose a species that is critically endangered...
or extinct: do research on that species and tell us their story.

8. Traci Brimhall writes a “photoless photo essay” (page 94) in which she makes her overarching point by describing photographs and giving them captions. By the end of the essay, we see the connections amongst the photos. Choose images from the internet (or elsewhere) and write a photoless photo essay of your own.

9. How does border militarism (and the building of border walls) affect wildlife? Scott Warren (page 84) says that “conservation in the borderlands, if it is to succeed, must find common cause with humanitarianism, human rights, and indigenous rights.” What would that look like?

10. Write an essay in which you explain climate change to a 12-year-old.

11. What role does community and relationships play in solving environmental problems? How important is it that people from different disciplines/backgrounds/ideologies work together on environmental solutions?

12. What role can creative arts play in environmental activism? You may choose to focus on just one artist/musician/photographer and tell us about her/him/them.

13. Christopher Merrill (page 114) says that a commitment to the free flow of information and freedom of expression are essential to any enduring creative enterprise. What do you know about net neutrality? Do some research, and write an essay explaining what it is and why it’s been in the news so much.

14. Scientist Anita Desikan (page 120) thinks that science should inform public policy. Do you agree with that? Why?

15. What happened at Standing Rock? Do some research if you need to. Why was the rallying cry “Water is life”? Write an essay in which you explain what happened at Standing Rock and why it was historically significant.

16. How are the ways we treat other human beings connected to how we treat other species and the earth we live on? What are the connections?

17. Many of the writers in the section Memories (Imaginings) and other Americas remind us of essential parts of history. What historical event in this country do you think is especially relevant to current events and important for us to remember? Research that event, give us the important details, and tell us why it’s important for us to learn from that piece of history.

18. Ann Beatty’s piece (page 143) gives us a glimpse into an American school. Think back to the school you graduated from and write about it from an outside perspective. What does it tell us about this country?

19. In her essay Yelizabetta P. Renfro (page 156) talks about the flag as a symbol and used the flag to make a point about the differences between the United States and the Soviet
Union. Can you think of another symbol that would be worth writing about? You need to talk about the symbol but also make some other, larger, overarching point.

20. Allen Gee (page 164) describes the community at the end of the San Luis Pass pier. What is appealing about that community? Have you ever experienced such a community? Describe that community and the factors that created it.

21. Propose a solution to end (or at least decrease) gun violence in this country. Whatever you propose, be sure to back up what you say with facts and evidence that support your ideas.

22. The premise of ecofeminism, according to writer Greta Gaard, is that “the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature.” How do some of the writers in this book demonstrate connections amongst different kinds of oppression in this country?

23. What is the purpose of art? Of literature? Of online journals? What can they achieve? Be sure to give specific examples.

24. Many of the writers in this book talk about earth as home. What are the implications of that? How does our worldview change when we think of earth as home? How might that impact legislation, policy, and design? Be sure to give specific examples.

25. In his essay, Michael Branch (page 257) talks about the power of humor. Can you give examples of comedians, talk show hosts, writers, or vloggers who use humor? What do they achieve with humor? Can humor bring about cultural change?

26. Nicole Walker (page 265) says that “if we’re going to be able to change the way people use their vote to vote not only for themselves but for their neighbors or even the betterment of those they have never met but can only imagine, then we’re going to have to tell our individual stories to make that imagination fully sensible.” Can stories teach empathy?

27. Is satire an effective tool against corruption? Can satire raise awareness or bring about cultural change? Try writing a satirical piece that addresses some of the issues raised in this book.

28. David Gessner (page 322) imagines a debate between Roosevelt and Trump. What do we learn about Trump from this comparison? Choose two historical figures, at least one of them contemporary, and write your own comparison. Be sure that you have an overarching point to make.

29. David Gessner (page 322) says that saving wilderness is important, even in an overheated world full of violence and racism. Write an essay in which you make the case for saving wilderness.
30. Joe Wilkins (page 326) begins his essay by describing a rich, imaginative outdoor experience he had as a boy. When he describes camping with his own children, he says they have been transformed. Have you had a transformative outdoor experience? Write an essay about it. Be sure to give specific details.

31. Joe Wilkins (page 326) makes a good argument for children spending unstructured time in nature. Is there any way to ensure that American children are able to do this? What do we need to achieve it? Changes to public education? The expansion of parks and nature centers?

32. Lawrence Lenhart (page 329) writes his essay in the form of a letter to his infant son. Write a letter to a child (could be a niece or nephew or friend’s child) explaining current events. What would be the most important thing for that child to understand about this time in history?

33. Both Sean Hill (page 316) and DJ Hollars (page 334) tell the story of father/son roadtrips. What are some of the similarities and differences? What are the perspectives that shift for each of the characters?

34. After reading Tim McNulty’s essay (page 346), research the Elwha River restoration project. What were the factors that made this restoration project a success?

35. Many indigenous cultures have suffered losses when their ancestral homes have been damaged. Research one such culture and analyze what would need to happen to repair that damage.

36. The letters to America cover a range of environmental issues. Choose just one issue and propose something that might be at least part of a solution to the problem. Because you only have a couple of weeks to complete this assignment, you will have to choose just one thing, and convince us that it’s important. Think of yourself as educating your readers.