



Teaching Guide

A Manual for Nothing

by Jessica Anne

I. Key terms:

2nd person point-of-view, Dissociation, Refrain, Parataxis, Defamiliarization, Irony, Hyperbole, Fabulation, Self-reference, Autofiction

II. Further reading:

Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

Jen George, *The Babysitter at Rest*

Poems by Sommer Browning

Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*

...and listening:

"Maybe This Time" from *Cabaret*

"Everything's Coming Up Roses," from *Gypsy*

"Orphan Girl," by Gillian Welch

"I Love the Unknown," by Clem Snide

III. For discussion

1. If you were to assign *A Manual for Nothing* 5-6 hashtags, what would they be? Explain your choices.
 - a. Activity: Share your hashtags with a few classmates, and decide together on three (per group) that you think encapsulate the most important themes or elements of this book.
2. Does this book have a central plot, multiple plots, or no plot at all? In what ways does this formal structure match the content?
3. In what ways is this manual like a manual? In what ways is it not? For instance, could you actually follow these step-by-step directions to achieve a certain result? What would you say are the central goals of the manual? Find some specific language in the text to support your claim.

4. Who is “you” in the context of this book? Is it the reader? Is it someone else? Is it multiple people? It might be useful to consider the use of first-person in the very last chapter (beginning on page 145). How do the first-person (I) and the second-person (you) interact here? Why do you think it is only at the very end of the book that the narrator, “moves into the first person”?
5. How might the direct address to an implied “you” serve as catharsis? In particular, take a look at “WARNING” (page 110).
6. There are at least two timelines for the “you”—one representing childhood and adolescence, another representing the adult writer. Which of these versions of the second-person protagonist do we spend more time with? Which of the timelines were you more invested in, personally? Why do you think that is? What was your experience of moving between these different moments in time? Were you disoriented? What enabled you to get your bearings?
7. Why do you think the author might have chosen to use present tense throughout, instead of placing the childhood/adolescent episodes in the past tense? Are there any exceptions to this (i.e. where past tense is used)? If so, why might these exist?
8. We often talk about scene (i.e. discrete events occurring in a particular place, at a particular time) as a crucial element in a work of fiction, because they can heighten the sense of immediacy. Given the book’s overarching formal conceit (a manual), how is Jessica Anne able to create the effect of scenes? Find some examples of this. [*Hint: You might note how instances of direct dialogue often entail something like a mini-scene.]
9. Who are the most significant characters, besides “you”? When and how do we meet these people? Choose one of these characters [mother, DA-, Patti, husband, etc.] and track references to them throughout the book. Are the references chronological?
10. Do some biographical research on Patti LuPone, Cleopatra, and Anne Hathaway. What connections might the author be attempting to make in evoking these particular figures?
11. *A Manual for Nothing* makes extensive use of refrain. One notable example is the repeated references to the you-protagonist’s shoes. What is the effect of repeating an expression, observation, or piece of information over and over again? [*Hint: Does the implicit meaning seem to be transformed through repetition?]
12. Find some examples of self-reference within the text—in other words, places where the book is described as a writing project that is ongoing. What does this layer of “telling” bring to the book?

IV. *Fun and Games*

1. **Title thief.** Look over the list of chapter titles and choose your favorite. Borrow this title—but nothing else from the piece—to begin your own, original piece of writing in any genre. Then, once you’ve completed a draft, give it a different title.
 - a. Follow-up: Share your piece with a classmate.
 - b. Can they guess which title you started with?

2. **Word association.** Re-read the chapters “Maroon Chart” (page 34) and “White” (page 55), taking note of the great range of surprising and highly subjective associations which Anne derives from these colors. As a class, choose a common color and write it on the board. Take a few minutes to jot down every memory or image (or sound, or taste, or smell) this color calls to mind for you.
 - a. Follow-up/Game: Going around the class, each student should volunteer one item from their list to add to the board.
 - b. You may not say something that has already been mentioned.
 - c. The winner of the round is the person who has the greatest number of unique color-associations.
 - d. Repeat the game with another color.

3. **Show-and-tell.** Students should come to class with a manual of some sort, any sort. Take ten minutes to browse through the various manual-types, noting commonalities across examples. As a class, make a list of the findings, which should shed some light on the conventions particular to the manual genre.
 - a. Follow-up: Return to discussion question #3.

4. **“You have a tendency to…”** Write down this phrase, taken from the story “List.” Complete the sentence with a list of your own. You can either write about yourself, another person, or an imagined person.
 - a. Try the activity a second time, and choose a different “you” to write about.

5. **Star map.** *A Manual for Nothing* features some notable female figures: Joan of Arc, Cleopatra, Chelsea Clinton, Lena Dunham, etc. Make your own list of public figures/icons whose image has been important in your life. Try to draw from a range of sources—historical, literary, biblical, political, pop-cultural.
 - a. Create a word-cluster diagram of ideas and descriptors you associate with each of the people on your list. What are the qualities—good and bad—that most stand out to you?
 - b. Writing prompt: Find some documentary material (Youtube videos are great, Google images are good) of one of the individuals from your list. After carefully considering this documentary material, make a list of demands to that person based on whatever

they are doing in this image/video. Address them directly, in the style of “Acceptance, Anne” (page 92).

6. **Madlibs.** Using “The Rested Writer” (page 129) as a model, replace the adjective and noun in the title with your own set: an occupation and an adjective which might describe a person in that occupation. Then, begin your own piece of writing.
 - a. Constraint: To mimic the rhythm Anne achieves in this piece, begin all of your sentences with the same phrases she uses—i.e. *Has done nothing but _____*. *Didn't have to _____*. *Didn't have to _____*. *Didn't have to _____*. *Didn't have to _____*. *Wasn't _____*. *Has not been _____*. *Has not been _____ or _____ or _____*. *Has been _____*. *Not _____*. *Not _____*. *Not _____*.
 - b. Constraint #2: Use the text as a model for sentence length.
7. **Dear me.** Use the model of “Warning” to write to yourself at the moment where you met someone who would go on to deceive, disappoint, or otherwise hurt you in some way. Give yourself the warning you wish someone had given you.
 - a. Follow-up: How do you feel after writing this?
8. **Footnoted.** Choose one item from “List” (page 63) and expand on it in the way Jessica Anne has done with *orange cat*. You can share a personal anecdote or invent.
9. **Of many minds.** Discuss how Patti LuPone’s voice functions throughout the book. Then, try separating the voice inside your own head into multiple different voices with distinct personalities and priorities.
 - a. Give names to at least two of these voices.
 - b. Now, think about a conflict (real or imagined, big or small) and invent the dialogue that might occur between these two voices at the moment of the conflict.
 - c. Share and read these aloud.
10. **Cyberstalker.** Use social media to find someone you’ve lost touch with, then write a step-by-step account of what you discover about them—especially the surprises. Note what you notice; no detail is too small. Don’t worry about using complete sentences.
 - a. Repeat the activity, but this time investigating your own social media page or online presence as though it is unfamiliar to you.