



# CATHERINE PROJECT

*2022 Annual Report*

Dear Readers and Friends,

The Catherine Project was founded in September 2020 in order to spread the love of serious learning as quickly and simply as possible. Back then, the Project was essentially run out of a digital garage—that is, Zena’s Twitter and an email account. A handful of volunteers and 62 readers came together to study Homer, Greek tragedy, and Plato in our tutorials, and an eclectic handful of authors in our reading groups (Aristophanes, Kafka, and Kierkegaard). What we lacked in polish or organization, we more than made up for in enthusiasm. With no grades or money on the line, no certificates or credentials to be won, the animating force behind the Project was—and continues to be—the desire to learn for learning’s sake alone.

In 2021, our first full year of operation, we offered 39 courses and served 270 readers. We were awarded a \$100,000 grant from Emergent Ventures, which allowed us to hire an executive director, our sole employee. We successfully applied to the IRS for tax-exempt status, designed and launched a website, stepped up our volunteer recruitment efforts, and developed a scalable approach to enrollment. This foundation has allowed us to grow significantly as a community and expand access to truly liberal learning.

Two years after our founding, the Catherine Project served its 1,000th reader. We’ve organized over 200 courses on ancient languages and great books, music, and movies. Our readers have studied works by Mozart, Melville, and Maimonides—and that’s just from the M’s! With 1 grant, over 100 volunteers, and the incredible support of our community, we’ve created a space where adults from all walks of life can find fellowship and support in their pursuit of learning.

In a very real sense, the readers, volunteers, and friends who support our work *are* the Catherine Project. This report is offered with tremendous gratitude for their generosity and commitment to learning.

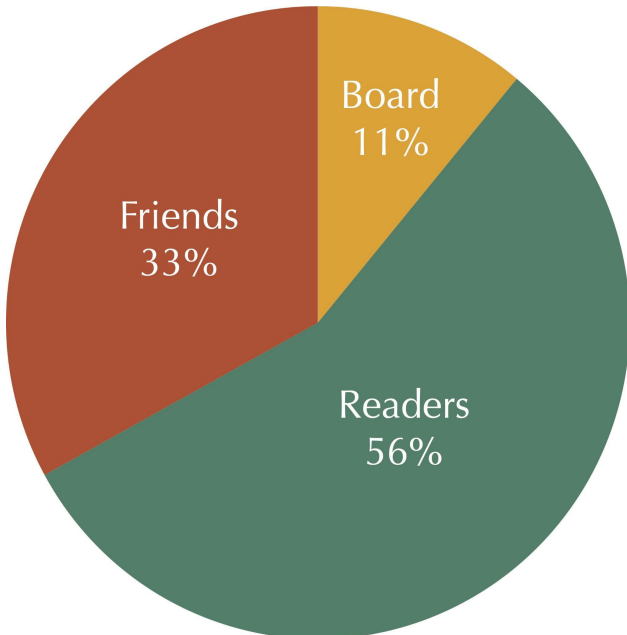
–Jordan Poyner and Zena Hitz



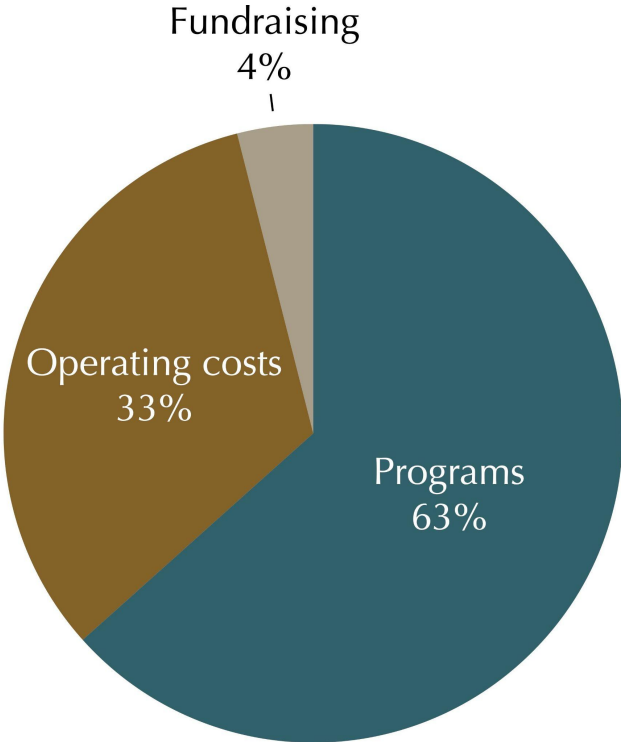
# Funding<sup>1</sup>

If 2021 was the year in which our organization gained formal shape, 2022 was the year when our community came together. Last summer we offered our first in-person reading groups in Berkeley, California and Bloomington, Indiana. During our fall term we crossed the threshold of 1,000 readers served. And by the end of the year, we raised 100% of our budget in individual donations from readers and friends. Thank you!

- Our **total revenue** in 2022 was \$91,265.
- Our **total expenses** were \$86,760.
- 21% of the 1,028 readers we've served from our founding in the fall of 2020 through the end of 2022 donated in that same period.
- 21% of readers who studied with us in 2022 donated in that same period.



*Where our donations came from*



*How we used them*

<sup>1</sup> Figures in this section are not audited. We use an accrual basis for accounting.

## Programs

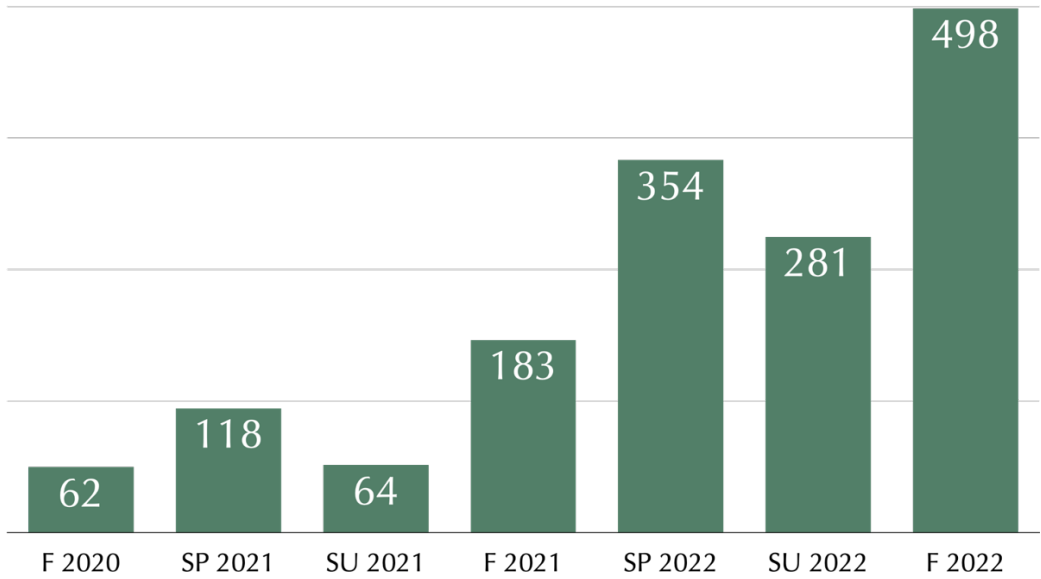
The Catherine Project launched in the fall of 2020 with a slate of 5 reading groups, 5 tutorials, and 1 subject tutorial in ancient Greek. Two years later, the catalog of offerings for just our Fall 2022 term comprised 45 courses.

Over the course of our Spring, Summer, and Fall terms, we offered **a total of 99 courses**<sup>2</sup>:

- 9 subject tutorials on ancient Greek and Latin, which served 93 readers
- 20 tutorials, which served 88 readers
- 66 reading groups, which served 789 readers
- 25 single-session Community Seminars during our spring and fall events, which served a total of 203 readers
- 4 in-person reading groups, which served 46 readers and met in Berkeley, California and Bloomington, Indiana

A total of 849 unique readers studied with us over the course of 2022, many of whom participated in multiple terms and courses.<sup>3</sup> The following graphs<sup>4</sup> illustrate the Project’s growth over the last two years.

*Number of unique readers served per term*

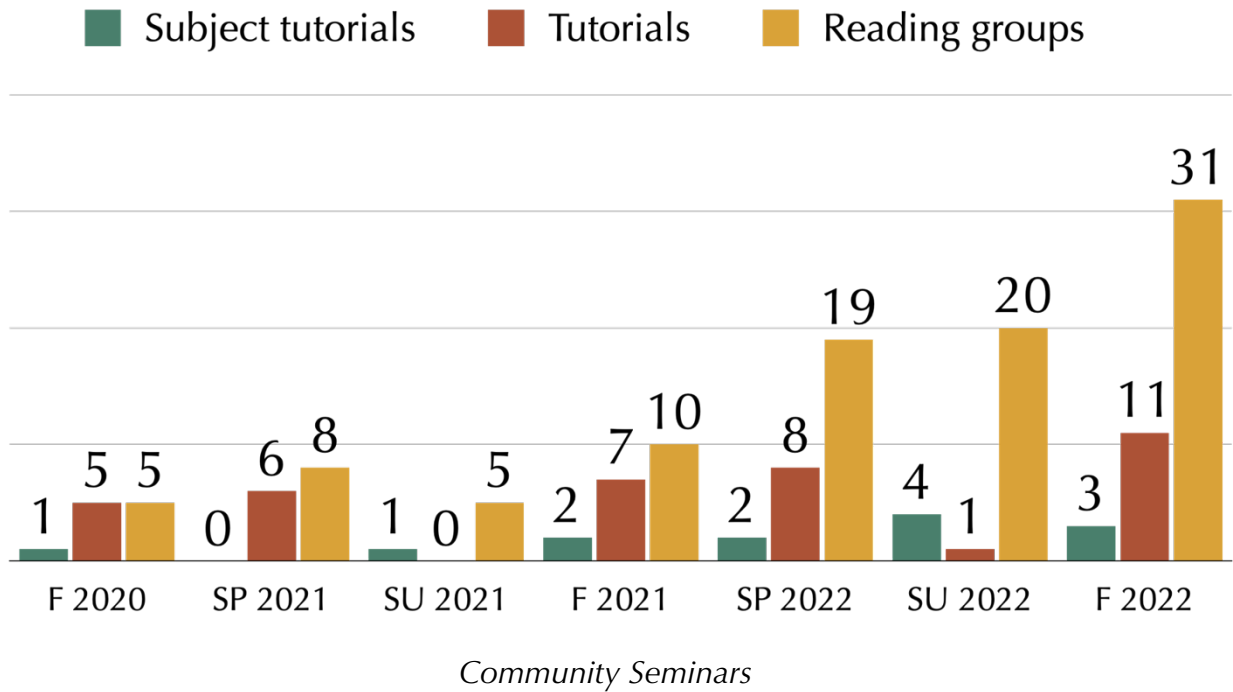


<sup>2</sup> See the end of this report for a list of all subjects and texts we studied in 2022.

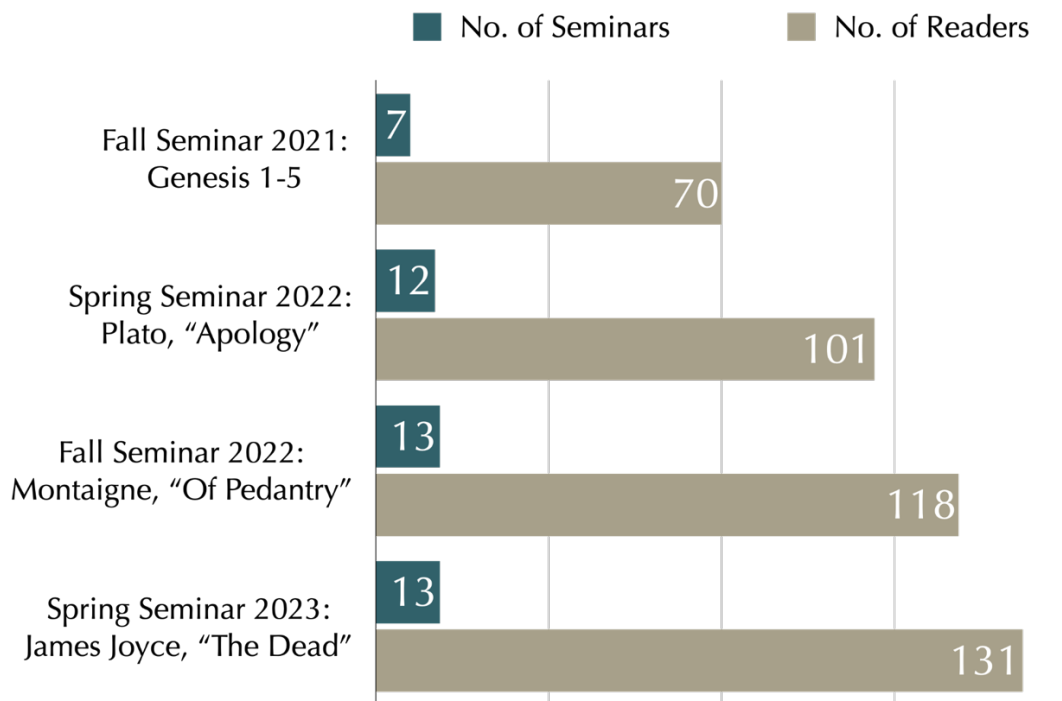
<sup>3</sup> For reference, the total number of seats available in courses was 1,194.

<sup>4</sup> F=Fall, SP=Spring, SU=Summer

Number of courses offered per term<sup>5</sup>



During our Fall 2021 term, we launched our Community Seminars. Each spring and fall term, we offer a day of single-session seminars on a brief text that are open to all.



<sup>5</sup> While there have been exceptions, our Tutorials traditionally go on break during the summer.

## Volunteers

The love of learning is contagious. Whatever gets us started reading and thinking for ourselves, the examples set by others in serious pursuit of these activities inspire and sustain us in our own learning. The testimonials<sup>6</sup> and statements of interest that we receive each term confirm how important it is to have others encourage us in the encounter with textual difficulty.

Our volunteer tutors and reading group leaders offer this encouragement and model practices of philosophical reading and conversation. They are the lifeblood of the Project, and our leadership and readers owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude. This debt can only be discharged by seeking to pass on the love of learning which they have demonstrated.

The Catherine Project singularly owes its existence and growth to our incredible volunteers. **In 2022, 75 volunteers contributed over 2,500 hours** facilitating nearly all of our courses, writing and reviewing grant proposals, solving problems with tech, publishing our journal, *Commonplace*, and moderating our community forum on Discord.

### Looking Forward

The Project's principles and goals are unchanged from those laid down in our founding. Unlike businesses and many nonprofits, we do not understand growth as an object in itself. We remain driven by the needs of individuals for serious intellectual connection and community. **As long as there is manifest desire to learn by way of reading and discussing great books in community, we will seek to grow our capacity to meet that desire.**

In 2022, we were unable to accommodate 18% of all readers who applied to study with us. Due to a lack of space, we were compelled to turn away over 200 readers. Of those who applied to study in our signature tutorials, we were unable to accommodate 70% of interested readers. To offer more eager readers access to our community and courses, we need more volunteers to facilitate those courses. Thus, we are particularly concerned with reaching potential volunteers and growing our faculty of tutors.

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<sup>6</sup> See the testimonials shared at the end of the report.

**To this end, it is essential that we continue to advertise the work we are doing and invite others to join us.**

- Public-facing articles (like those published last year in *Profectus* and *Plough*) have led many to offer to volunteer with us: an essay about the Project is forthcoming in *Athenaeum Review*.
- In the spring of 2023, the Catherine Project organized a panel for the Annual Conference of the Association of Core Texts and Courses.
- This summer, readers and volunteers published the first issue of *Commonplace* ([catherineproject.org/commonplace](http://catherineproject.org/commonplace)), a free journal designed to be shared widely in and beyond our community.

As our leadership actively seeks further opportunities to raise the Project's profile, we ask that our community take up this work as well. Write about your experience in the Project. Volunteer to help publish *Commonplace*. Talk to your friends, family, and teachers about the Project: we find that word of mouth is often the best way to find kindred spirits.

**As we grow, it is vitally important that we maintain a distinct and serious intellectual culture.** This summer we will be organizing an in-person retreat for long-serving tutors with the intention of developing a sequence of readings that are offered on a regular basis. Our hope is for this retreat to firmly establish a sense of fellowship and shared purpose, in addition to instituting a rich and coherent structure of study for both tutors and readers.

**In order to serve our current readers and make space for the hundreds we can't currently accommodate, we believe it is necessary to hire a second staff member.** We served 849 readers in 2022, which represents a 214% increase from 2021. During our Fall 2022 term alone, we enrolled a total of 498 readers. Enrollment for 2023 has thus far only continued to grow. Organizing courses, administering enrollment, and maintaining records for three regular terms, as well as in-person and one-off events, is a massive undertaking at this scale. Adding an additional staff member would allow us to both grow our enrollment capacity and improve how we administer it. Having a second staff member would also free our executive director to invest more time in recruiting volunteers and nurturing a shared intellectual culture among volunteers.

**To fund the hiring of a second member of staff, we need to raise \$80,000.** Thanks to a generous grant from the Apgar Foundation, we are halfway there! While we have

strategically used grants to make developmental leaps (hiring an executive director in our first year, for example), the Catherine Project was always meant to be sustained by our community. By donating, you hold us accountable for providing something of real value and demonstrate the stake you have in our community.

If you feel you have benefited from participation in one of our groups, or if you simply wish to affirm the work we are doing, we humbly ask for your support. We welcome one-time and recurring donations of any amount, and encourage all to donate in accordance with their means. Your contributions make it possible for both friends and strangers to live the life of the mind in community with others. Every donation is a way to share the learning experience you have had with others.

To make a contribution, visit [www.catherineproject.org/donate](http://www.catherineproject.org/donate). Donations by check may be mailed to:

Catherine Project, Inc.  
2631 Housley Road, Box 1006  
Annapolis, MD 21401

As always, we welcome any questions or reflections on the work of the Catherine Project, past or future.

It is one of the great privileges of our lives to have watched the Project take shape. With deepest thanksgiving and appreciation for all who make our community of learning possible,

Jordan Poyner and Zena Hitz,  
*for all at the Catherine Project*



## Testimonials

“The Catherine Project often seems too good to be true. At their best, which is to say nearly all the time, Catherine Project reading group sessions rival the quality of a university education. In my experience participants come to the discussion just as eager to contemplate others’ contributions as they are to present their own, and they have diversity of backgrounds. What is most remarkable about the Catherine Project is the contrast between its humble premise and its significance in the changing landscape of liberal education. There are many online education platforms but none that replicate the social and discursive components of learning, which are indispensable in remaining motivated to tackle, say, Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* or Einstein’s presentation of relativity. For someone like me, who must make the most of his free time to enjoy philosophy and literature to the fullest possible, the Catherine Project is a dream come true.”

“I am writing this email to express my sincerest gratitude for the Catherine Project. It has been a beautiful change in my life, it has helped me read so much more than I could have on my own, and has helped me reflect on my own life through these readings, conversations and beautiful friendships that it has nurtured. I have been part of a few other online communities, but the warmth and love at Catherine Project is incomparable. You have designed this project with so much love, keeping every little detail in mind.”

“As a high-school student, I’ve found the Catherine Project to be an unparalleled opportunity to meet like-minded people who are enthusiastic about the humanities and are willing to delve into serious, but exciting academic exploration. [...] I really appreciated how organized, yet flexible my reading group was. The atmosphere was incredibly warm and welcoming, and I got to meet people from diverse backgrounds who shared their unique perspectives on the texts and helped me gain a great appreciation of not just Plato, but the process of philosophy itself. One of my favorite things about the Project is its accessibility—its emphasis on the value of your input as a reader and learner, no matter the extent of your prior experience in philosophy. To those ends, I found my fellow readers extremely supportive and passionate in ensuring that no member of our group was left out and we could all move towards a richer and more nuanced understanding of the works we read.”

“I have been blessed to continue studying the Great Books with people from all over the world. People who do this do it out of pure love, so their engagement with the text is

manifestly humble and thoughtful. I love the discipline of the conversation which asks us to let the text interpret itself. We are to use clearer parts of the text to clarify the more complicated ones. We are not to import anything else, so we get to really unpack the great idea/book on its own terms. That elicits from us empathy that it is not only emotional but intellectual too, so truly our minds are stretched and challenged in a very salutary way.”

“For the first time, I have not been lonely reading philosophy and theology since my Catherine Project cohorts are reading along with me. As a scientist who never really had a chance to study non-quantitative topics, I’ve relished reading Maimonides and hope, in future courses, to read many other classical authors. Being in a group has not only staved off loneliness and held me accountable to reading, it has also taught me much about how to be more clear articulating arguments based on a text.”

“My experience with the Catherine Project, especially the opportunity to learn with and through others, has been both humbling and empowering. After journeying through Homer, I sense more deeply my own smallness in the wide swath of history, though it is a unique kind of smallness which illuminates the beauty and greatness of my own life. By entering into friendship with those of the past, I am more grateful for the tremendous human beings I have been given, here in this time and place. The Catherine Project has helped me cultivate a more contemplative eye for the events and circumstances of my own life and the confidence to continue mining the beautiful treasures of the intellectual life.”

“Discussing great works of literature with fellow lifelong learners is truly the highlight of each week for me. Engaging with readers of different ages, professions, and backgrounds enriches my perspective on these texts while expanding my thinking about big-picture ideas, from faith and philanthropy to ethics and education. I haven’t gotten to enjoy such in-depth conversations since leaving the classroom, and I love laughing with and learning from my groupmates, who constantly inspire me with their insights. There’s just something delightful about connecting with people who share the joy of close reading and thoughtful discussion, and I’m utterly grateful that the Catherine Project affords these spaces for reflection and this authentic sense of belonging.”

“For some reason, we all talked very little about the concrete details of our respective lives, and for some other reason, I loved this. It was nice not knowing what job someone has but knowing what they think love is, for instance. Just wanted to mention that.”

## List of texts and subjects studied in 2022

### *Tutorials*

- ⊗ Ancient Chinese philosophy *Analects, Mencius, Daodejing, and Zhuangzi*
- ⊗ Ancient Greek tragedy
- ⊗ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics, Politics, Physics, Metaphysics, and On the Soul*
- ⊗ Augustine *Confessions*
- ⊗ Enlightenment philosophy: Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, and Leibniz *Meditations on First Philosophy, Ethics, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and Monadology*
- ⊗ Homer *Iliad and Odyssey*
- ⊗ David Hume and Adam Smith *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals and The Theory of Moral Sentiments*
- ⊗ Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*
- ⊗ Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*
- ⊗ Michel de Montaigne *Essays*
- ⊗ Plato *Alcibiades I, Alcibiades II, and Symposium*
- ⊗ Plato *Meno, Apology, Euthyphro, Crito, Phaedo, Symposium, Hippias Minor, and Gorgias*
- ⊗ Rousseau *Emile*

## *Subject Tutorials*

- ⊗ Introductory Latin
- ⊗ Introductory ancient Greek
- ⊗ Intermediate ancient Greek    Translation: Euripides' *Hecuba*
- ⊗ Intermediate ancient Greek    Translation: Plato, *Republic*, Book I
- ⊗ Intermediate ancient Greek    Translation: Plato, *Republic*, Book II

## *Reading groups*

- ⊗ *I and II Samuel*
- ⊗ Hannah Arendt                    *The Human Condition*
- ⊗ Aristotle                            *Metaphysics*
- ⊗ Aristotle                            *Nicomachean Ethics*
- ⊗ Aristotle                            *Physics*
- ⊗ Aristotle                            *Politics*
- ⊗ Athanasius                         *On the Incarnation*
- ⊗ Augustine                         *Confessions*
- ⊗ Some films by Robert Bresson (as well as writings by Bresson, George Bernanos, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy)                    *Diary of a Country Priest, Mouchette; Au Hasard Balthazar, L'argent, Holiday, Notes on the Cinematograph; and The Forged Coupon*
- ⊗ Chaucer                              *The Canterbury Tales*
- ⊗ Cicero                                 *On the Nature of the Gods*

⊗ Cicero	<i>On the Republic and On the Laws</i>
⊗ Flannery O'Connor	<i>Selected short stories</i>
⊗ Confucius	<i>Analects</i>
⊗ Dante	<i>The Divine Comedy</i>
⊗ Charles Darwin	<i>On the Origin of Species</i>
⊗ Charles Dickens	<i>Bleak House</i>
⊗ Albert Einstein	<i>Relativity: the Special and the General Theory</i>
⊗ T. S. Eliot	<i>Four Quartets</i>
⊗ Euripides and Sophocles	<i>Electra</i>
⊗ Ralph Ellison	<i>Invisible Man</i>
⊗ Michel Foucault	<i>Discipline and Punish</i>
⊗ Ernest Hemingway	<i>The Sun Also Rises, The Old Man and the Sea, and A Farewell to Arms</i>
⊗ Soren Kierkegaard	<i>Repetition</i>
⊗ Giuseppe di Lampedusa and Luchino Visconti	<i>The Leopard</i>
⊗ Lucretius	<i>On the Nature of Things</i>
⊗ Martin Luther	<i>Epistle to the Galatians; Commentary on Galatians and selected writings</i>
⊗ Maimonides	<i>The Guide for the Perplexed</i>
⊗ Herman Melville	<i>Benito Cereno</i>
⊗ Herman Melville	<i>Moby-Dick</i>

⊗ Mencius	<i>Mencius</i>
⊗ Milton	<i>Paradise Lost</i>
⊗ Mozart	<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>
⊗ Nietzsche	<i>On the Use and Abuse of History for Life</i>
⊗ <i>Njáls Saga</i>	
⊗ Erwin Panofsky	<i>The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Euthyphro, Laches, Lysis, and Meno</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Gorgias and Protagoras</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Laws</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Meno</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Phaedrus</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Philebus</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Republic</i>
⊗ Plato	<i>Theaetetus</i>
⊗ Plato and Aristotle	<i>Gorgias and Rhetoric</i>
⊗ Plutarch	<i>Parallel Lives</i>
⊗ Presocratic philosophy	
⊗ Proclus	<i>The Elements of Theology</i>

- ⊗ Renaissance painting: Leon Battista Alberti and Giorgio Vasari *On Painting; The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, Architects; and some Renaissance paintings*
- ⊗ Selections from *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*
- ⊗ Shakespeare *The Merchant of Venice*
- ⊗ Shakespeare *Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, and Antony and Cleopatra*
- ⊗ Mary Shelley *Frankenstein and The Last Man*
- ⊗ Sei Shonagon and Kenko *The Pillow Book and Essays in Idleness*
- ⊗ Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone*
- ⊗ Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*
- ⊗ Tolstoy *Anna Karenina*
- ⊗ Sigrid Undset *Kristin Lavransdatter*
- ⊗ Virgil *Aeneid*
- ⊗ Zhuangzi *Zhuangzi (the Inner Chapters)*