Directions
Read the assigned selections and answer the following questions for each section on binder paper. Answer each question thoroughly, using complete sentences, and be sure you number your answers.

As you read and reflect on these questions, it is important to remember that The Alchemist is a fable. In fact, The Alchemist is subtitled "A Fable about Following Your Dreams." Like most fables, The Alchemist has a theme/moral that reflects a universal truth concerning life and human existence. The universal point this story makes is that everyone has a special destiny, and yet not everyone tries to achieve it because it takes hard work. Reaching one's destiny requires leaving behind familiar surroundings. It also demands courage, persistence, the ability to change when appropriate and the willingness to respond to omens that point the way.

Also, like many fables, the story told in The Alchemist does not make its universal point directly, or in so many words, by the author telling the reader in plain language what the moral of the story is. Instead, the story of the main character in The Alchemist is what we call an allegory. An allegory is a narrative that has two levels of meaning: a literal one and a figurative or symbolic one. As a reader, your challenges with this fable are to watch for and try to interpret symbols (symbolism=something that is itself but also represents something else or something deeper). Remember, most anything in a story can have symbolic meaning, including objects, characters, places, names, events, etc. We will apply what we have learned from Joseph Campbell’s model of the Hero’s Journey in order to delve beneath the surface of The Alchemist and examine its symbolic meaning.

Beginning through page 25
1. What is the name of the shepherd boy? How long has he been a shepherd? What is the name of the region in Spain where he grazes his flock?
2. What is the significance of Santiago becoming a shepherd rather than a priest, as his parents had hoped? Why did he make the choice to leave the seminary at the age of sixteen after learning to read and write? What does being a shepherd allow him to do?
3. As Santiago considers why he needs to keep his jacket, even though he spends most of the day carrying it around in the heat, a central theme of his hero’s journey is introduced. The jacket, therefore, is a symbol, or something that is itself but also represents something else or something deeper, in this case, a theme. What is that theme or lesson, and how does the jacket embody, or symbolize that theme?
4. The boy spends a lot of time reflecting on his flock; he notices that the sheep care only for food and water, and are content to make no decisions of their own, trusting him to care for them. What might the habits of these sheep symbolize?
there any similarity between their life and the lives of the boy’s parents? How is the boy different from others?

5. The novel begins with the boy deciding to spend the night with his flock in an abandoned church. The church has no roof and an enormous sycamore tree has grown up where the sacristy once stood. Here he has a recurring dream for the second time. He travels to Tarifa in the hope that a gypsy woman will be able to interpret his dream and tell him what it means. Describe the dream that the boy tells the woman about and explain what she tells him it means.

6. “Dreams are the language of God,” says the gypsy woman. What might she mean by this?

7. In Tarifa, Santiago meets an old man while sitting on a bench in the marketplace. At first, the old man annoys him. Then the old man reveals that he knows the names of everyone in Santiago's life, which catches Santiago's attention. The old man says he is a king, and his mysterious knowledge supports his claim. The old man tells Santiago the book he is reading, like almost all other books, contains the world’s greatest lie. What is this lie?

8. The old man, whose name is Melchizedek, tells the boy he is from Salem. (Note that there is a character in the Bible named Melchizedek who was king of Jerusalem, also called Salem.) He tells Santiago that when people are young, they all know their reasons for being, but they give up too soon. He has sensed that Santiago is on the verge of trying to realize his Personal Legend. According to the old king, what is a Personal Legend?

9. The old king tells Santiago that he often appears in people's lives just at the moment they are about to give up on their destiny. He appears in many different guises. What are some of the guises he takes?

10. King Melchizedek tells the boy that when we are children, "everything is clear and everything is possible," but as time passes a mysterious force convinces us to abandon our dreams (p. 21-22). Do you think this is true? What are the "mysterious forces" that threaten to hold us back as we grow older? Using the terms you learned from the Hero’s Journey model, what is another way to describe these mysterious forces?

11. Why do you think Melchizedek tells Santiago about the life of the baker? What point is he trying to get across to Santiago?

12. What elements of the hero’s journey do you think you recognize so far in this story?

Pages 25-47

13. After he meets Melchizedek, Santiago considers traveling to Africa to start his journey. He even goes so far as to approach a ticket window to book passage on a ship to Africa (across the Strait of Gibraltar to Tangier in Morocco). In the hero’s journey model, Santiago is, perhaps, standing right on the Threshold of Adventure: he has to decide whether to respond to The Call, or not. At this point, we see his uncertainty when he momentarily changes his mind and decides to stay and continue being a shepherd. What makes Santiago hesitate?

14. As he stands gazing across the Strait toward Africa, Santiago feels a strong wind, called the “levanter” on his face. What does he realize that the wind symbolizes,
and how does this realization help him decide to cross the Threshold and start on his journey? How do we know that Melchizedek’s advice helps him make this decision?

15. The King tells the boy that when you really desire something "all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (p. 22). And he explains the principle of "favorability," or beginner’s luck. How has Santiago benefited from beginner’s luck so far? What can we anticipate will happen at some point in his journey based on his favorable luck so far?

16. What does Melchizedek give Santiago to help him on this journey, and how does he tell the boy to use the gift? In the hero’s journey model, what is the term we use to describe this sort of object given by a mentor to an initiate? Hint: this gift has symbolic meaning. Can you guess what the gift symbolizes?

17. Melchizedek tells Santiago the fable of the oil and the spoon. Those who understand the moral of the fable hold the key to happiness. Santiago believes he understands the moral of the story. What does he think the lesson of the story is?

18. One of the first major diversions from Santiago's journey is the theft of his money in Tangiers. How is Santiago’s money stolen? Using the terminology of the hero’s journey model, we could describe this experience as a Test/Ordeal. How does the fable of the oil and the spoon relate to this Test?

19. After he has been robbed of all his money in Tangier, Santiago at first begins to despair and regret that he ever set out on his journey. As he gazes at the stones, however, he realizes what his mistake was in dealing with the thief who robbed him. What was his mistake, and how will need to change in order to find his treasure?

20. What happens when Santiago asks the stones to tell him if he will find his treasure? Santiago believes this is an omen. What might it mean?

21. Santiago realizes that he has a choice to make: he has to choose between thinking of himself as a poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of this treasure? What choice does he make, and how does this relate to the idea of Tests and Ordeals in the hero model?

22. How has the character of the Crystal Merchant been tricked over time into believing “the world’s greatest lie,” as Melchizedek called it?

23. The Crystal Merchant tells Santiago that even if the boy worked for a year in the shop his earnings wouldn’t pay for his passage across the Sahara Desert to Egypt. What does Santiago say in response to this news? How does his response confirm the omen that was revealed when he asked the stones if he would find his treasure?

Pages 51-65

24. In the character of the Crystal Merchant, the author Paulo Coelho creates a character foil for Santiago. A foil is a character whose behavior and values contrast with those of another character in order to highlight the unique personality of that character (usually the main character, or protagonist). Foils are useful to writers in lots of ways. For example, they can be used to establish the personality traits of a character, or they can be used as a way to force a character to a deeper level of self-understanding that precedes character change or character
development. Compare and contrast Santiago with the Crystal Merchant by examining how each one approaches the possibility of expanding the shop’s business, first by building a display case and second by selling tea to customers. How is Santiago different from the shop’s owner?

25. Author Paulo Coelho says that the biggest obstacle most people face in pursuing their Personal Legend is, “the fear of realizing the dream for which we fought all our lives.” (viii). How does this explain the Crystal Merchant’s failure to travel to Mecca?

26. Coelho says another on of the most common obstacles to realizing our Personal Legend is, “the fear of the defeats we will meet on the path” (vi). When his money was stolen in Tangier, Santiago suffered a defeat that forced him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, while he labored for a whole year to earn money to return to his life as a shepherd in Andalusia, Santiago learned many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Coelho says that, while defeats are an unavoidable result of the mistakes we make in pursuing our Personal Legends, “The secret of life is to fall seven times and get up eight times” (vii). By the end of today’s reading, how do we know that Santiago has learned this lesson of persistence, which is one of the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend?

27. Language is an important part of the theme of this fable, and although the story is told in rather simple terms, the ideas that it expresses are philosophical and deep. Santiago is an educated young man, capable of understanding many languages because of his seminary training. Yet, he is clearly interested in learning about the world and about his reason for being in a way that goes beyond mere speaking and writing. He chooses to travel, first as a shepherd and then as an adventurer seeking his destiny, because he wants to learn how to communicate in the Language of the World. There are many references throughout the text to this language, and clearly it is a language that goes beyond words. He often reflects on the "language without words," which describes the way that people communicate to each other when they do not speak each other's language. The language without words is also the language he speaks with his sheep. What are some of the literal and figurative languages that Santiago realizes he has learned by the time he completes his year of work for the crystal merchant?

28. Specific words themselves also carry deep meaning. The crystal merchant introduces Santiago to the Arabic word maktub; this word loosely translates into "it is written," and is mentioned at important moments in the story. The word carries the connotation that in every situation or action there is a hand of fate involved. Why do you think the Crystal Merchant speaks this word when he and Santiago part ways on page 61?

Pages 65-79

29. The Englishman, whom Santiago meets when he joins the caravan to the Egyptian pyramids, is—like Santiago—joining the caravan as part of a quest. What is the Englishman searching for?

30. As the caravan travels, the Englishman spends his days poring over his books to learn the secrets of alchemy; Santiago, meanwhile, throws his book away, instead
opting to observe the desert and listen to the wind. The Englishman represents the type of character who has book knowledge, but not practical knowledge. He tries to learn alchemy through the intellect. The Englishman’s character is a foil, or contrasting character, to Santiago’s character: Santiago has rejected the life of the mind for a life of interaction and a journey of purpose. Action, personal experience, and observation, Santiago believes, will bring him closer to understanding the language without words…the universal language. Based on the conversation between Santiago and the Englishman on page 79, does it appear that the two have anything to learn from each other?

Pages 80-104

31. As the caravan crosses the Sahara, Santiago and the Englishman each make an effort to gain new insights by practicing the other’s method of learning: Santiago reads the Englishman’s books about alchemy, and the Englishman spends several days observing the caravan and the desert. When the Englishman asks Santiago what the boy learned about alchemy from reading his books, Santiago sums up his reading in a few short sentences (on page 83). What does he say he learned?
32. Santiago says he believes all the things he learned about alchemy are so simple they could be written on the surface of an emerald. This description, of course, depicts the Emerald Tablet the Englishman told Santiago about. The Englishman is exasperated because he believes Santiago is simple-minded and has failed to grasp the complexity of alchemy. Yet, the gypsy Santiago met in Tarifa told him, “It’s the simple things in life that are the most extraordinary; only wise men are able to understand them” (15). Is the Englishman right, or is Santiago?
33. According to the Englishman, how were the alchemists he read about changed by the years they spent “in their laboratories, observing the fire that purified the metals” (81)?
34. Nearly every encounter Santiago has contains a lesson for him, if the boy is observant enough to perceive it. Even the thief who stole his money in Tangier had a lesson for Santiago: Read the conversation on pages 84-85 between Santiago and his new friend, the camel driver. What life lesson is the camel driver trying to impart to the boy? As you read about Santiago’s response to the appearance of the oasis on the horizon, do you see evidence that Santiago has internalized the bit of wisdom offered by the camel driver?
35. How does Santiago feel when he meets Fatima? How does he know this is love?
36. Who finally shows Santiago how to find The Alchemist? Why is it significant that it is this person, and not someone else, who points the way to The Alchemist, who is the key to Santiago’s search?
37. Why do you think The Alchemist gives the Englishman the response he does when the Englishman tells him what he is seeking? What point do you think the author is trying to make by showing how the Englishman feels once he spends some time following the advice given to him by The Alchemist?
38. Recall that each encounter Santiago has presents him with the opportunity for personal growth provided that he can understand what it is he should learn from the interaction. What lesson is there for Santiago to learn from the fact that Fatima
tells him not to stay at the oasis but to go to the pyramids after he has pledged his love for her?
39. Santiago believes he has seen an omen in the desert. What has he seen, and what does he think it signifies?
40. According to the camel driver, why would God allow Santiago to see this vision of the future?

Pages 104-127
41. Disturbed by the omen, Santiago decides to go tell the chiefs of the desert tribes about it. In what ways is Santiago (our budding hero) being tested as a result of his decision to trust his intuition and tell the tribal chieftains what he has seen?
42. Santiago leaves the chieftain and encounters a powerful, intimidating stranger on horseback, who terrifies him at swordpoint. The stranger turns out to be The Alchemist, who demands to know who is reading the omens in the hawk's flight. What sort of test is The Alchemist subjecting Santiago to? After the test is over, what reason does The Alchemist give for testing Santiago in this way?
43. When Santiago meets The Alchemist, he wants to give up his journey and remain at the oasis. He believes he has already found his treasure. What does this treasure include, according to Santiago?
44. The Alchemist persuades Santiago to sell his camel and buy a horse. The next night he takes Santiago into the desert and gives him his second test. What is the task The Alchemist gives Santiago, and what skill is being tested in this task?
45. When Santiago passes his test in the desert, The Alchemist is convinced that Santiago is a student worthy of this teaching. The Alchemist then offers to guide Santiago across the desert in search of his treasure. At first, Santiago refuses to leave the oasis because he does not want to part from Fatima. What does The Alchemist tell Santiago to try to convince him to go on? What sort of test does this decision represent for Santiago?
46. The Alchemist tells Santiago "you don't have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." With this in mind, why do you think The Alchemist chose to befriend Santiago, though he knew that the Englishman was the one looking for him?
47. The Alchemist says that for the boy to find his treasure he must listen to his heart. Why does The Alchemist feel that the heart is more important, or more trustworthy, than the mind? How and why is the heart able to understand things the mind can’t grasp?

Pages 127-143
48. Santiago spends the next week trying to “listen to his heart” as The Alchemist has instructed him to do. There are several pages of dialogue between Santiago and his heart in this section. What do you think the writer wants the reader to understand about this dialogue? Is Santiago literally having a conversation with his heart, or is something else going on here?
49. Once Santiago believes he understands his heart, what agreements does he ask of it, and what does he promise it in return?
50. According to The Alchemist, every search starts with Beginner’s Luck. How does every Search end? How is this belief consistent with the Phases and Steps of the Hero’s Journey model? What does this foreshadow for Santiago?

51. When they are just two days from the pyramids, Santiago asks The Alchemist to teach him about alchemy. The Alchemist says that Santiago already knows about it. Alchemy is about searching for and finding the treasure that is uniquely his. Santiago is frustrated, because what he meant by the question was that he wanted to know the secret of successfully turning metal into gold. How does the process of alchemy compare to finding a Personal Legend?

52. Though The Alchemist obviously understands the Language of the World and has special tools and powers at his disposal, he does not actually offer to help Santiago out of a challenging and dangerous situation. On the contrary, he places Santiago in the center of an apparently dangerous situation when he tells the chief and his men that Santiago is an alchemist who can turn himself into the wind. If he is supposed to be a mentor to Santiago, why does he do this?

Pages 143-167

53. When Santiago and The Alchemist are captured by one of the warring tribes, Santiago must turn himself into the wind to save his life. He asks the desert, the wind, and the sun to help him. As he talks to the sun on page 150-151, Santiago explains why alchemy exists and what alchemists do. What does Santiago say to the sun about these things?

54. Although Santiago asks the desert, the wind, and the sun to help him, none know how to turn a man into the wind. Where does the boy find the answer? What is the larger significance of this answer?

55. The chief allows The Alchemist and Santiago to go free and they ride on toward the pyramids. The next day, just before they part ways, Santiago thanks The Alchemist for teaching him the Language of the World. How does The Alchemist answer him when Santiago offers his thanks? Why is this answer significant?

56. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the pyramids?

57. At the very end of the journey, why does The Alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it?

58. Earlier in the story, The Alchemist told Santiago "when you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed." At the end of the story, how did this simple lesson save Santiago's life? How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for?

59. How do you interpret the novel’s ending? Why is it significant that Santiago’s treasure is buried not at the Pyramids but back in Spain at the abandoned church where his journey began?

60. What is the meaning of the fact that Santiago learns this from a man who also had a dream but refused to follow it?