

Instructions for the Essay

Read the text below and write a single response that addresses both questions. Give your essay a title. Use full sentences and paragraphs, and respond to the questions directly. You have 60 minutes to complete this essay.

Your essay should be between 300-500 words. Please stay within the word limit.

Please do not include a discussion of your personal life. It is not necessary to properly complete this exam.

Context: Alfred, a young black man living in New York City, is looking to start boxing in a gym owned by Donatelli. Alfred hopes that boxing will give him a new life outside of the gangs and crime that have ruined the life of his best friend, James...

“How far did you go in school?”

“Eleventh grade.”

“What happened?”

“I quit.”

5 “Why?”

“Didn’t seem like any reason to stay.”

“What makes you think you won’t quit here too?”

Alfred swallowed. He suddenly wished he hadn’t come up the steps, that he was somewhere else, anywhere.

10 “Well?”

“I want to be somebody.”

“Everybody is somebody.”

“Somebody special. A champion.”

15 Donatelli’s thin lips tightened. “Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there’s a good chance he’ll never get to the top, the man who’s willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him. That must sound corny to you.”

“No.”

20 “It’s the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward.”

“I want to try.”

Donatelli shrugged. “Boxing is a dying sport. People aren’t much interested anymore. They want easy things like television, bowling, car rides. Get yourself a good job. Finish high school. Go at night if you have to.”

25 “I’ll try hard.”

“Talk it over with your parents.”

“I don’t have any. I live with my aunt.”

30 The pale blue eyes came around again. They seemed softer now. But the voice was still cold and flat. “It’s not easy trying to become a contender. It’s never any fun in the beginning. It’s hard work, you’ll want to quit at least once every day. If you quit before you really try, that’s worse than never starting at all.”

Essay Questions:

- Discuss the conflict that the author is presenting between Alfred and Donatelli.
- How does the author use dialogue to set the pace of this conversation, and why?

Source: *McDougal Littell Literature*, by Janet Allen et al., McDougal Littell, 2008, p. 443. Excerpt from "The Contender" by Robert Lipsyte