

ESSAY P. 90

Use your answers to the first two comprehension questions on p. 84 to help you write this essay.

Discuss what qualities characterize good literature according to the information provided in Poem 1.

Support your assertions with references to the Latin text throughout the passage above. All Latin words must be copied or their line numbers provided, AND they must be translated or paraphrased closely enough that it is clear that you understand the Latin. Direct your answer to the question; do not merely summarize the passage. Please write your essay on a separate piece of paper.

Catullus indicates the qualities that characterize good literature in the opening lines 1–2, and then he elaborates on these ideas throughout the poem. Students can follow Catullus’s lead in how they organize and integrate their ideas into a coherent essay. In lines 1–2 the adjectives do double duty by referring to the poetry contained within the book as well as to the physical appearance of the book itself. *Lepidus* conveys the idea of charming or witty; *novus*, the notion of original; and *expolitus*, that of the highly polished condition of Catullus’s verse. The characteristics of Catullus’s poetry also can be construed as pertaining to the history written by Cornelius Nepos. *Libellus* (line 1) and *omne aevum explicāre tribus cartis* (line 6) suggest smallness of scope (Cornelius condensed all of his history into three papyrus rolls). *Pūmex* and *labōriōsis* (lines 2 and 7) both convey the notion of polish and attentiveness to detail. The phrase *ūnus Italōrum* (line 5), like *novum* in line 1, suggests originality. Finally, the adjective *doctis* in line 7 refers to learnedness, a quality highly esteemed by Catullus and his fellow poets.



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Instructors may point out that some critics see the relationship between Catullus’s achievement and that of Nepos as antithetical. For example, while the scope of Catullus’s literary work is small, that of Nepos’s universal history is immense. Other negative details might include the adjective *labōriōsus*, which can mean “wearisome” (in addition to the positive interpretation of “attended with much detail”), and the adjective *doctus*, “learned,” which can be interpreted as being diminished by the exclamatory *Iuppiter*. The contrast would contribute to the subtle and droll humor characteristic of the poem.