

SHORT MODEL ESSAYS

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ANN M. TAYLOR

SALEM STATE COLLEGE



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for Frank

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For the Instructor

The oft-repeated student question, “Can you give me some idea of what you want?” is the major motivation for this book. In spite of detailed explanations and in spite of some lively discussions about “great” essays, my students continued to have difficulties deciding what I did want in my composition course. So I decided to show rather than tell them. I collected sample student essays that fulfilled most of my expectations for a freshman assignment, and I combed through published material gathering the most readable and imitable examples I could find. This collection has grown out of that very practical effort.

My main intention is that students immediately begin to see themselves as writers, not as inmates working out a one-year sentence. So I have chosen essays and other prose pieces that are complete, simply structured, and imitable in both content and method. Each one is, for the most part, short enough to be read closely in a single class. Because writing benefits from close reading, I have tried to include major essayists who reward such scrutiny, but the subject and structure of the essay were ultimately more important considerations than the reputation of the writer.

My intention is not to reduce writing to the commonplace or to limit it with rigid structural definitions, but simply to provide beginning writers first with the basic pattern for the whole essay and then with some of the countless ways of working with it. Each essay in the first section, including several student models, contains an introduction with a clearly recognizable thesis statement, body paragraphs that develop this thesis, and a separate conclusion. In the later sections the essays become more complex, providing developments, variations, combinations, and elaborations of the basic pattern.

This progression from a simple to a more complex structure is intended as a convenient order for study and imitation, but you might easily adapt later models in the book to the simpler plans of the earlier assignments. Within each section I have also arranged the models in the order of increasing difficulty, and in the last section, I have included examples of other writing assignments students are likely to encounter. Ideally, these models will be starting points for the students' own creative efforts.

At the beginning of each chapter, I have introduced the structural patterns to be noticed in the subsequent group of examples, and before each model I have called attention to the distinguishing characteristics. To prevent unnecessary stalling at possibly unfamiliar references, I have included footnotes where I thought necessary. After each selection, I have listed vocabulary words to be looked up by the student, plus questions on content and method to encourage study of those aspects of writing that can move the essay from exercise to art. Finally and most importantly, I have made suggestions for writing, some on analysis of topics or techniques, but most based specifically on the approach of the model.

Although the questions on method after each essay will often bring up major rhetorical principles, these principles are treated more systematically in the "Checklist for Readers and Writers" in the appendix. My students have found this list helpful for both reading the models and writing their own essays. Also included in the appendix is a discussion of the checklist questions, illustrated in a short piece by Kenneth Tynan, "The Difficulty of Being Dull." In the *Instructor's Manual* are suggestions for using the checklist in the course. For those who prefer an alternative approach or who may want to focus on particular rhetorical elements, the *Instructor's Manual* also contains a "Thematic Index" and a "Rhetorical Index."

My hope is that your students will become as eager to write as some of mine have when inspired by a model. As one freshman said, "It really helps to see what someone else did first."

I would like to acknowledge the help and support of stu-

dents at Salem State College, who continued to ask the right questions; teachers, colleagues, and friends—Raymond Blois, Ellen Vellela, Philip de Palma, Judith Saunders, Raymond Perry, William Mahaney, Francis Devlin, Guy Rotella, and Alicia Nitecki—and my husband, Francis C. Blessington. I would also like to thank the staff of Little, Brown—particularly Charles H. Christensen, Joan Feinberg, Jane Muse, and Elizabeth Philipps.

A.M.T.

For the Student

All of the essays in this collection have been chosen as models for your own papers, as patterns for you to imitate while you are learning the basics of good writing. Ideally, when you read one of these models you will say to yourself, “I think I can do that!” and run for your paper and pen. If the effect is not quite so dramatic, I hope that you will at least see some possibilities in the essays that will become more obvious as you study them closely. They all have something to teach. You will not be expected to duplicate these examples, but to mine them for ideas and inspirations that will help you to clarify your own thoughts and feelings for expression in prose.

In Part I you will study the basic pattern, the most simple structure for an essay and, in later parts, you will be looking at some of the many ways of working with this pattern. The subjects cover a wide variety of areas—memories, everyday life, the modern world, people, places, sports, writing, the natural world, and values. Some essays are personal, some objective, some simple, some complex; but they are all chosen because of their interest and value for you. The purpose is that with each new essay you will gain new ideas about writing. The introductions to the parts of the book and to each essay, plus the questions on content and method following each essay, are designed to help you do just this.

To get the most out of a model, read it through once without stopping at all. Read it again, this time looking up the words you do not know and answering the questions. Finally, read it at least once more in order to “put it back together again.” Analysis is only one step in the process of appreciation but it is an indispensable one—especially for a reader who wants to become a writer. After you learn as much as you can

from a model, the suggestion for writing following each one will give you a chance to try it on your own.

As an additional help for reading the models and writing your own papers, I have included in the appendix a "Checklist for Readers and Writers." This is a list of questions I wrote when students asked for a summary of things I considered important for every essay. Also included there is a discussion of the main points in the checklist, illustrated with a short, published essay.

With all these things on your mind, you may at first feel like a tripped-up beginner on a ski slope or a novice pianist trying to coordinate chords, keys, and pedals. Just remember that with understanding and practice, writing gets easier, as do skiing and piano playing. Try focusing on one assignment at a time and doing the best job you can so you will be learning new skills, not just repeating old, familiar errors. Be patient, write often, and keep a sense of humor—your progress will be faster. As the English poet Alexander Pope wrote, "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,/As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance."

A.M.T.

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I · The Basic Pattern

In everything we learn to do there is emulation. But if we make good on our imitation we soon begin to try wrinkles of our own. Possibilities suddenly appear, as chickadees and juncos do when seeds are scattered on the snow. . . . Sidney Cox

All complete essays do three things—introduce the subject, develop it, and conclude it. No matter how elaborate or idiosyncratic the pattern may become, these three basic elements are always present. In Part I, the three essentials and their arrangement in the basic pattern are most clearly visible.

The purpose of this part is that you read and then attempt to write a basic and well-organized essay. In all of the following selections, however simple or complex their subject matter and however personal or impersonal their approach, the introduction provides a clear statement of the thesis; the controlling idea governs the topics of all the body paragraphs, which are linked to one another by smooth transitions; and the conclusion (a separate paragraph) develops logically from the entire piece and ends it. It is out of this very simple pattern that all well-written essays grow.

Now read the following student essay. Look closely for the thesis, the controlling idea, the transitions and topic sentences. Be sure you understand the relationship of each paragraph to the introduction and the purpose of the conclusion. After you finish reading, you might try to write your own essay on embarrassing situations that you can remember. Be sure to think of tone. How do you feel about these experiences now?

Embarrassments at a Safe Distance

general
introduction

When I think of my years at St. Clement's School, 1
many memories return: the joy of buying a blue chiffon
dress and having my hair decorated with baby's breath
for my first prom, trying to stay awake after three A.M.
for an "Algebra I" test, sharing the sadness of gradua-
tion with old friends who soon headed to the dorms
of different colleges all over the country. But, out-
standing as these memories are, none are as memorable
as the embarrassing situations I got myself into at St.
Clem's.

thesis with
controlling
idea

topic
sentence #1

One such embarrassment was caused indirectly by 2
my school uniform. One day I was hurrying across the
crowded cafeteria trying to make a volleyball practice,
but I got only half way when I saw students pointing
at me and giggling. It didn't take me long to find out
that I had forgotten to button up my skirt as I hurried
from my locker and that now it was draped somewhere
between my knees and my ankles. Though I snatched
it up immediately, the damage had been done. It
doesn't seem like such a big deal now, but when things
like that happen to a twelve-year old, they have a way
of sticking in the memory. I'm still very careful of my
buttons.

transition

development
of topic

topic
sentence #2

Getting laughed at at age twelve by a group of kids 3
looking for a joke was bad enough, but flunking a sex
education test in the junior year of high school was
even worse. Sex education is a quick course at St.
Clem's. The nuns mention it for one day during the
junior year and never bring it up again. During our
day, we got a special class taught by a hired teacher
"from the outside" and supported by our parents.
At the beginning of the class, this teacher passed out
a questionnaire to see how much we knew. I flunked.
I thought an IUD was an abbreviation for a youth or-
ganization; I won't mention some of the other things I
thought. Needless to say, I learned a lot from the class

transition

development
of topic

that followed, after I got over the horror of passing my answers in.

But neither the skirt nor the test were as bad as my 4
disastrous role as a tooth in a skit on health. I was called "Bicuspid," a rotten, unbrushed tooth. In the play, a boy was brought to court and charged with neglect of his health. The fruit, milk, vegetables and toothbrush made their cases against him, but I was the main evidence of his shameful neglect. My costume, however, realistic as it was, was not easy to get around in. Made from a cardboard box and draped with an old, partly-blackened white sheet, my tooth outfit tripped me up as I ran out to make my charge against the untidy boy. I fell flat on my back and couldn't get up. I felt like a flipped-over turtle. By the time I did manage to roll over, crawl to a bench a few feet away, and struggle to my feet, the audience was alive with laughter, not with disapproval of my cavities. They didn't learn much about brushing bicuspids, but they did have a good time—at my expense.

And I too have fun—now. When I get together with 5
my old friends, I can look back at these embarrassments, happy that they are so far behind me and able to see how funny they actually were. After some good laughs at the silly things we all did, I inconspicuously check the button on my skirt and rush on to whatever new disasters might lie in store.

TINA MOSTACCI (student)

So Little to Do in So Much Time

In this essay, a student evaluates her most recent vacation—in this case, the Christmas break. Again, the structure is clearly based on the thesis—ways in which she wasted her time—and each paragraph develops details about her “nothing” vacation. Being concrete and honest can add a good deal of life to a potentially dull “What I Did on My Recent Vacation” paper.

During my first semester, my days were extremely full. In addition to the work for six courses, I also had my work at a mens' formal wear shop. When I wasn't memorizing the anatomy of a frog or learning the four forms of discourse or re-learning my high school French, I was helping to measure jittery grooms for their June weddings or planning wardrobes for local proms and Atlantic cruises. Busy I was. But when the Christmas break came along, everything changed. My courses were over, my hours at the shop were cut from twenty-five to six a week, and I was fast becoming a poverty case. So, what did I do? Nothing. At least nothing that I'm proud of.

For one thing, I took up knitting. I didn't have the money to buy Christmas presents for my mother, two brothers, two sisters, one grandmother, eleven cousins, and two bosses. So I began to knit. For ten dollars, I bought ten skeins of yarn and began to “knit one, purl two” my way through hours of cute tube socks. I could picture my grandmother out “boogie-ing” while I was being creatively monotonous at home. Maybe it was a “labor of love,” as my mother said, but I really got worried when I started to feel happy as another striped leg-warmer took shape.

This didn't last forever, however. Soon the thrill of knitting was done and I was forced to find another pastime. I did.

Eating. For two weeks after Christmas, I ate leftover lasagne for breakfast. Then I became a walnut addict. By New Year's Day, I was ready to resolve on a diet, but not before I downed the traditional Chinese food stuffed into our refrigerator. I ate it hot and cold for about a week into 1980. My little body metamorphosed into a chubby little body. I was so disgusted with myself that I didn't want to be seen outside of the house; all I really wanted to do was sleep.

So I went to bed at midnight (often without shaking the crumbs from my last piece of cake off the spread) and got up at one the next day. My thin dreams battled with my fat ones. I would appear at one time a slinky size ten, but then I'd start cheating on my diet and having visions of my next meal. I slept so much that I felt as if my brains were stuck to the back of my skull. But there really was nothing to be awake for, except maybe television.

When I did finally wake up, I tuned in the "Twenty Thousand Dollar Pyramid," and then, well-stocked with peanut butter, marshmallow and crackers, I settled in for my afternoon soap operas. I liked "As the World Turns" and "One Life to Live," but "Another World" (what an appropriate title) was my favorite—an hour and a half soap. What a treat! I began to worry if Janice would really poison Mack, or if they would ever discover Kit's true identity. Big problems.

The boredom began to get to me. I knew I had to get out of the house, but I did even better than that. I got out of the state. Going to New York to visit my sister was the best move I made during my whole vacation. I got up by eight A.M., I ate a balanced diet, I hiked all over the city, and I didn't care a bit what happened to Janice, Mack, or Kit. By the time I got home, I was ten pounds thinner, a lot more awake and ready to go. Back at the tuxedo shop for twenty-five hours a week and back in school, I'm busy again. So much to do in so little time.

Vocabulary

discourse (1), metamorphosed (3)

Questions

1. Did the student enjoy her vacation?
2. How did she escape from the boredom?