



# Freshman Handbook for Writing



Narrative and Argumentative Essays

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## Part I

### Autobiographical Narrative Essay

An autobiographical narrative essay tells the true story of an experience that took place in the writer's life. It focuses on the details associated with that experience, lets the writer express his or her feelings about what happened, and ends with a reflection. It contains the elements below:

- An engaging story
- A well-developed conflict
- Sensory details and figurative language
- Dialogue
- Strong characterization
- A reflection

## Element 1: Engaging Story

- We tell stories to each other all the time. We are usually excited to tell our stories because we know that our listeners will be interested. We tell our stories with emotion; we build the suspense; we repeat key conversations; we might even act out certain parts. All of these things draw listeners in and keep them interested. The same holds true for writing an autobiographical narrative essay. We have readers instead of listeners, but it all starts with a good story. Defined simply, a good story is a story that holds the reader's interest—it engages them.

Below are some short examples of engaging stories and some not so engaging stories:

### **Not Engaging**

- I talked in class and got detention.
- We went camping this weekend. It was 95 degrees and raining the whole time. It was a horrible vacation.
- I broke up with Raul. He was my first serious boyfriend. I am heartbroken.

### **Engaging**

- Mr. Smith, the meanest teacher in the school, gave me a detention for whispering, "What page are we on?" He is the strictest man alive. After school, when he was done yelling at me, we started to talk. I found out he grew up as I am, without a father. He helped me understand why I need to stay focused in class. He also let me know that things would get better. He said I could talk to him anytime I needed.
- We went camping this weekend. The second night I found my self drenched in sweat, not because it was 95 degrees, but because there was a bear lurking outside the door of the tent. I have never been so afraid in my life.
- Can you believe my longtime boyfriend, Raul, dumped me? I should mention he dumped me for my best friend or rather, my ex-best friend. I am beyond devastated. They both lied to my face for months.

## Element 2: Well-Developed Conflict

- A conflict is a struggle between two opposing forces. The conflict may occur within one character, between characters, or between a character and some other force. All narratives contain a conflict, and these conflicts are usually resolved by the end of the story.

Autobiographical narrative essays deal with a significant personal conflict in the writer's life. These essays are organized around this central conflict that develops through a series of actions and events. These events culminate in a moment of climax. Narrative essays conclude by aiming to make sense of the conflict and its resolution. The essential focus of the essay is how the narrator deals with the conflict.

### Types of Conflict

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Human vs. Nature     | Wilderness/ Disease/ Animals/ Weather                |
| Human vs. Human      | Political/ Economic/ Racial                          |
| Human vs. Gods/ Fate | Religion/ Higher Power/ Uncontrollable Circumstances |
| Human vs. Self       | Mental Illness/ Morality/ Physical Endurance         |
| Human vs. Technology | Artificial Intelligence/ Technology                  |

Below are some potential topics for writing autobiographical narratives essays.  
These topics will contain conflicts.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. a memorable wedding or funeral</li><li>2. one minute of a football game (or other sporting event)</li><li>3. your first day at a new school or college</li><li>4. your first day at a new job</li><li>5. your last day on a job</li><li>6. a disastrous date</li><li>7. a moment of failure or success</li><li>8. an encounter that changed your life</li><li>9. an experience that led to renewed faith</li><li>10. a strange job interview</li><li>11. an experience that demonstrated how labor-saving devices can be more trouble than they're worth</li><li>12. an experience that left you disillusioned</li><li>13. an embarrassing experience</li><li>14. a frightening experience</li><li>15. a memorable journey</li><li>16. an encounter with someone or something you were afraid of</li><li>17. an occasion when you experienced rejection</li><li>18. your first visit to a country (or to a large city)</li><li>19. the breakup of a friendship</li><li>20. an experience that showed how we should be careful of what we wish for</li><li>21. a significant misunderstanding</li><li>22. a dangerous experience</li><li>23. an experience that showed how appearances can be deceiving</li><li>24. an account of a difficult decision that you had to make</li><li>25. an event that marked a turning point in your life</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>26. a historic event</li><li>27. a memorable encounter with someone of authority</li><li>28. an act of heroism or cowardice</li><li>29. an encounter with a strange person</li><li>30. a rebellious act</li><li>31. a brush with greatness</li><li>32. a brush with death</li><li>33. a time that you took a stand on an important issue</li><li>34. an experience that altered your view of someone</li><li>35. a trip that you had to take</li><li>36. a vacation trip from your childhood</li><li>37. an account of a visit to a place</li><li>38. your first time away from home</li><li>39. two different versions of the same event</li><li>40. a traffic accident</li><li>41. a day when everything went right (or wrong)</li><li>42. an experience that made you laugh until you cried</li><li>43. the day you decided to change your life</li><li>44. the experience of being lost</li><li>45. an unexpected encounter</li><li>46. surviving a hurricane or a tornado (or other natural disaster)</li><li>47. an experience that taught you a lesson</li><li>48. an important discovery</li><li>49. an eyewitness account of an important event</li><li>50. an experience that helped you grow up</li></ol> |
|---|--|

## Element 3: Sensory Details and Figurative Language

- When writing an autobiographical narrative essay, it is essential to use details to bring life to your writing. By focusing on the sense impressions of specific things, a writer is able to make the story real for the reader. Writing sensory details requires the careful use of adjectives/adverbs and figurative language.

Below is a review of some common types of figurative language you can use to convey sensory details:

1. A **simile** is a description that uses the words ‘like’ or ‘as’ to set up a comparison.  
*Ex: His hair hangs like broken violin strings.*
2. A **metaphor** is a description that sets up a comparison without the use of the words ‘like’ or ‘as.’  
*Ex: his broken violin string hair or his sandpaper skin*
3. **Personification** is giving inanimate objects human qualities.  
*Ex: His hair moved like fingers around his shoulders.*

Below are some examples of sensory details. Notice how the writer uses adjectives, adverbs and figurative language to bring life to the writing:

| Sense       | Instead of Writing This:    | Write This:   |
|-------------|-----------------------------|---|
| • Sight     | • He has really long hair.  | • His brown hair hangs down to the middle of his sloping back.  |
| • Sound     | • He rides the noisy train. | • The train he sits on clanks metallicly beneath him.   |
| • Taste     | • His hair tastes gross.    | • His hair tastes like bad chemicals, sour and tinny.   |
| • Touch     | • His skin is dry.          | • His skin must feel like sandpaper.  |
| • Smell     | • He smells dirty.          | • There is something musty and moldy about him.   |
| • Intuition | • He seems sad.             | • He seems sad—like a stray dog lying on a dusty sidewalk—I sense his pain in the tired squint of his eyes. |

Below is an example of how you can use a simple chart to bring sensory details to your writing:

### A Day at the Beach

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Visual Details (sight) | children playing in the sand, people lying on the beach and swimming in the water, sparkling sand with white-speckled shells, water meeting the blue sky at the horizon, lifeguard stand, hot dog stand |
| Sounds                 | chatter and laughter of children, parents and children talking, the lifeguard's warning whistle, the lapping of the surf against the sand, the splashing of swimmers                                    |
| Smells                 | ocean air, slight fishy smell, whiff of roasting hot dogs, scent of suntan lotion   |
| Tastes                 | salt water, hot dogs  |
| Feelings/Textures      | heat of sun on back, sweat, cool water, and towel on skin, sand between toes  |

Below are two versions of the same story. Version B takes the sensory details from the chart above and uses them to bring the narrative to life. Version A does not.

A) *Last Wednesday I went to the beach with my friend. We swam, and it was nice.*

B) *I went to the beach last Wednesday with my best friend, Rachel. As soon as we got there, I saw children playing in the sand, laughing and shouting to each other as the water sparkled beneath the blue sky. I knew it was going to be a good day. The ocean air gave off a slight fishy smell, but that was soon taken over by the smell of sun block wafting from my skin. We lay around for a while, but my back began to feel so hot that an egg might fry there, so I jumped into the tepid warm bath of an ocean to relieve the heat of the sun on my skin. The salty water did the trick and my body felt revived.*

Both paragraphs are narratives that tell a story, but version B uses sensory details to support the narrative. Version A does not. Your goal as a writer should be to make your narratives alive with sensory details that transport the reader's mind.

## Element 4: Dialogue

- Dialogue is a verbal exchange between two or more characters written precisely as it was spoken. Well-written dialogue brings realism and life to a story by conveying emotion, defining characters (characterization), and demonstrating relationships between characters.

Remember there are specific rules for punctuating dialogue, but here are a few of the basics of its use:

- 1) The reader should always know who is speaking.
- 2) A character's exact words should be in quotes.
- 3) Each time a different character speaks, indent and begin a new paragraph.
- 4) "He said," "She said," "insert name said," are usually the best attributions. Fancy attributions like mumbled, screamed, screeched, exclaimed, etc. tend to just get in the way. The words inside the quotes should convey all the emotion.
- 5) Always use a comma after an attribution. Example: She said, "Don't forget the potatoes."

Below is an example of dialogue within a story:

Ralph looked at him sidelong and said nothing.

"I expect we'll want to know all their names," said the fat boy, "and make a list. We ought to have a meeting."

Ralph did not take the hint so the fat boy was forced to continue.

"I don't care what they call me," he said confidentially, "so long as they don't call me what they used to call me at school."

Ralph was faintly interested.

"What was that?"

The fat boy glanced over his shoulder, and then leaned toward Ralph.

He whispered.

"They used to call me 'Piggy.' "

Ralph shrieked with laughter. He jumped up.

"Piggy! Piggy!"

"Ralph-please!"

### Tips:

- ✓ Less is more when it comes to dialogue. Think about the way people actually talk to each other. We usually say things in the shortest way possible.
- ✓ Dialogue should always add something to the story. Before deciding to use dialogue, a writer should answer the question: “How does using dialogue here make the story better?”

## Element 5: Strong Characterization

- Characterization is the way in which writers convey information about their characters. Characterization can be direct, as when a writer tells readers what a character is like, or indirect, as when a writer shows what a character is like by portraying the characters actions, speech, or thoughts.

Characterization is a crucial part of making a story compelling. In order to interest readers, characters need to seem real. Writers achieve this by providing details that make characters unique. Good characterization gives readers a strong sense of characters' personalities and complexities; it makes characters alive and believable.

Below are some questions to you can use to help you understand how to characterize the people in your story:

- What does the character look like?
- How does the character behave towards others? How do others behave toward the character?
- What does the character seem to care about?
- What adjectives describe the character's personality?
- What does the character think or say?

Below are the various techniques you can use to create characterizations:

- **Tell the reader directly what a character's personality is like:**  
"Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point."  
—Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People"
  
- **Describe a character's appearance and manner:**  
"The Baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him the child would be eight years old next Monday. The baker wore a white apron that looked like a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around in back and then to the front again, where they were secured under his heavy waist. He wiped his hands on his apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk."  
—Raymond Carver, "A Small, Good Thing"

- **Portray a character's thoughts and motivations:**

"I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him. The odds were good that I'd never have to share a classroom with a girl named Jack. And I liked the sound. Jack. Jack Wolff."

—Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*

- **Use dialogue to allow a character's words to reveal something important about his or her nature:**

"Unable to contain herself, [Mrs. Bennet] began scolding one of her daughters. 'Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces.'"

—Jane Austin, *Pride and Prejudice*

- **Use a character's actions to reveal his or her personality:**

"He would hang around our place on Saturdays, scornful of whatever I was doing but unable to leave me alone. I couldn't be on the swing without him wanting to try it, and if I wouldn't give it up he came and pushed me so that I went crooked. He teased the dog. He got me into trouble—deliberately and maliciously, it seemed to me afterward—by daring me to do things I wouldn't have thought of on my own: digging up the potatoes to see how big they were when they were still only the size of marbles, and pushing over the stacked firewood to make a pile we could jump off."

—Alice Munro, "Miles City, Montana"

- **Show others' reactions to the character or person you are portraying:**

"No respect at all was shown him in the department. The porters, far from getting up from their seats when he came in, took no more notice of him than if a simple fly had flown across the reception room."

—Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat"

Remember: Characterization never stops. Stay aware of how a character is described, how others react to the character, and how those things change throughout the text. Changes in characters are often crucial to the meaning of a story.

## Element 6: Reflection

- When writing about an experience, reflecting is the process of trying to understand the experience. In simplest terms, the reflection shares what the author has learned. Therefore, an autobiographical narrative essay does not simply tell an engaging story, it analyzes that story to provide insight and understanding.

**Reflection may be the most difficult part of writing; it requires you to really think about your experience and make sense of it in a meaningful way. It is often easier to write about an experience that you have had time to process. Usually, the more emotional an experience is, the more time it takes to process.**

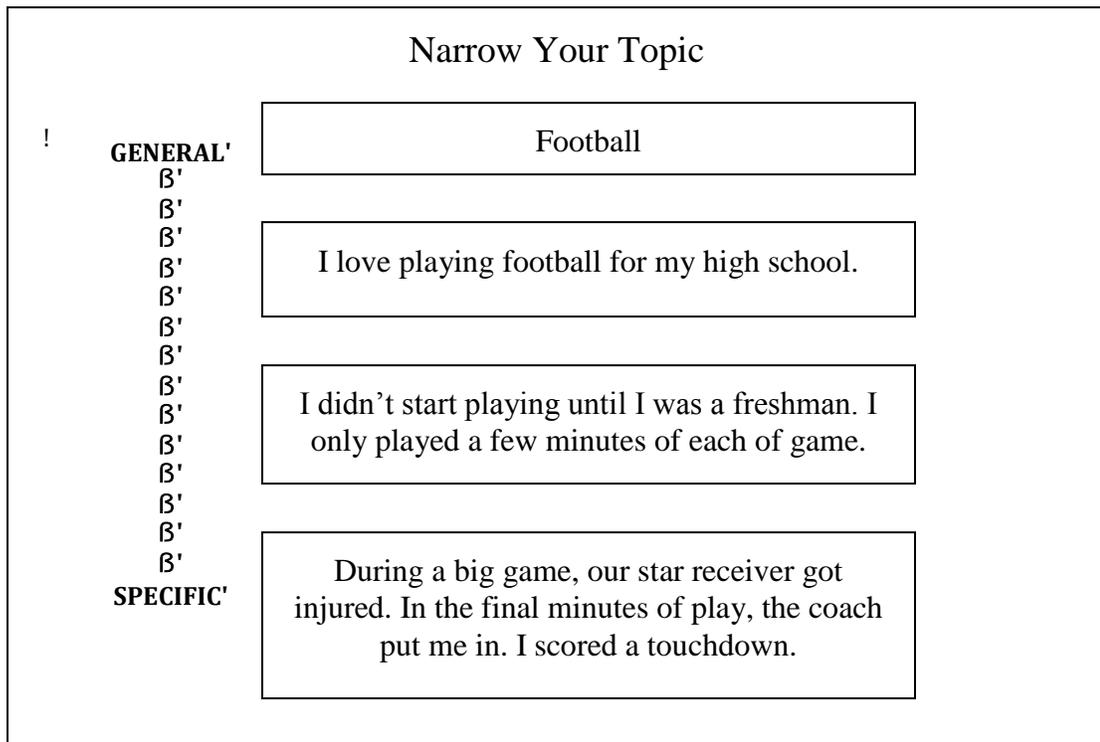
**An author might reflect on an experience in any number of ways, but usually focuses on one or two. Below is a list of questions that will assist you in writing reflections. These questions are only a guide. The possibilities for reflection are as endless and unique as the stories we tell.**

- How was I changed by the experience?
- How were other characters changed by the experience?
- What did this experience teach me about human nature?
- What did this experience teach me about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What would I do differently? Why?
- What mistakes did I make?
- What can others learn from this experience?
- What can I see now that I couldn't see then?
- What advice would I give others facing the same situation? Why?
- What questions do I have now?
- What is my plan for dealing with a similar experience in the future?
- What really caused the situation?

# The Writing Process:

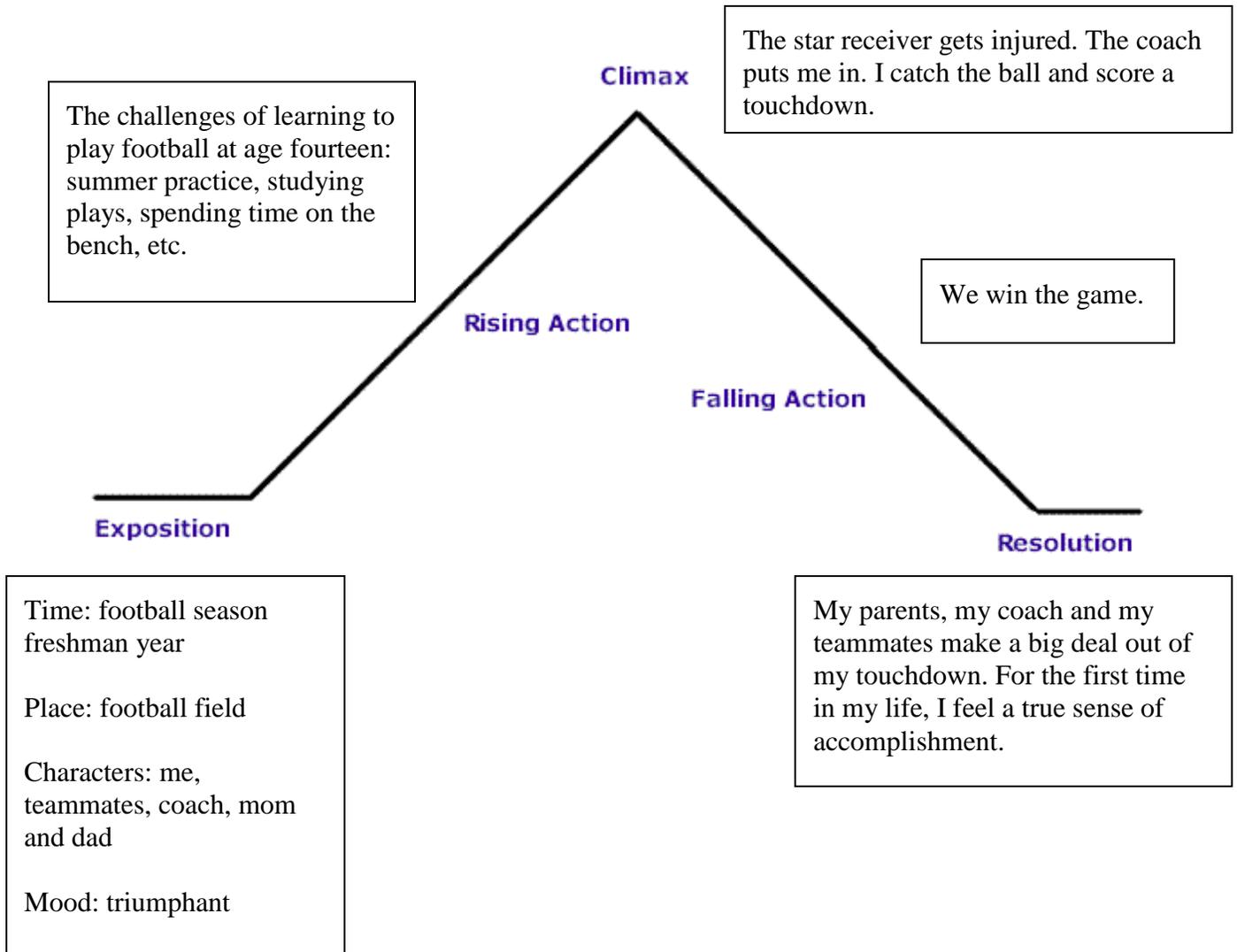
## Step 1: Prewriting

In the prewriting stage of writing, a writer determines about which topic he or she is going to write. Some writers use graphic organizers; some make notes; some simply think. When choosing a topic, be sure that it is specific enough to keep the readers interested. Writers call this narrowing the topic. Below is an example:



## Step 2: Plan

During the planning stage, a writer maps out the plot events. Below is the typical plot diagram with the important information mapped out:



## Step 3: Drafting

During the drafting stage a writer puts ideas on paper. Try to avoid revising at this point. The initial stages of drafting are about giving your story shape: beginning, middle and end.

### Beginning

- Open your essay with a sentence that draws your reader into the story.
- Set up the conflict or problem by giving the details that make up the exposition.
- You can also hint at the theme of your reflection.

### Middle

- Show the reader the events and details as the conflict develops to its climax. Try to create some suspense. Don't rush it.
- Develop the characters.
- Write the climax as vividly as possible.
- Throughout your writing use figurative language, dialogue, and details to bring this section to life.

### End

- Bring your conflict to its resolution.
- Reflect on the experience.
- End in your essay in a way that recalls the beginning of your story and leaves the reader feeling satisfied.

## Step 4: Revising

Revising is the process of polishing your writing. When you revise, you focus on your ideas and how skillfully you have conveyed them. Revising is not about correcting grammar and punctuation. That happens in the next step.

When a writer revises he or she keeps these basic questions in mind:

- Does my writing say what I want it to say?
- Will a reader understand what I am trying to explain?
- Does everything I have written have a purpose within my story?

As you continue to refine your work, these questions will help you polish your essay further:

- Does my essay stay on track and remain focused?
- Did I achieve my purpose for writing?
- Do the resolution and reflection match what was introduced at the beginning of the essay?
- Does the writing flow?
- Are there a variety of sentences structures?
- Are my sentences interesting?
- Do my paragraphs stick to one idea?
- Does the last paragraph tie everything together, or does the paper just come to an abrupt end?

Revising is not quick or easy. Giving your revision the proper attention can elevate your writing from student essay to art.

## Step 5: Editing

Editing is process of making your paper correct. The focus is on correcting grammar and punctuation errors. Some tips for editing are:

- Don't edit from a computer screen. Print your paper.
- Read your work out loud. Focus on reading exactly what is written on the page.
- Start by reading your sentences from the end of the paper. This helps you focus on the sentences and not on the story.
- Ask a friend to proofread your work, too.

# Autobiographical Narrative Essay Example

## Carelessness

Blake W. of William G. Enloe High School in Raleigh, North Carolina

What is the use of crossed wires built into some windows and glass in doors? I have been told that they are to strengthen the glass, to protect it from bumps and bruises. However, this could be debated. A year and a half ago, I was selected to perform in one All-District Band, on timpani. The clinic where we were to rehearse and to play in a concert over the course of a weekend was at a high school in Durham, North Carolina. The doors and windows at this particular school all had the aforementioned crossed wires built in them. I would soon learn about these doors and about caution.

We were taking a break from rehearsing on a Saturday in February to eat lunch. The concert was to be put on the following day. My friends and I had just finished lunch, and we were meandering around the cafeteria, bored out of our minds. We ambled up to a door that led to outside of the building, where a concrete path led to another building. I, being the one-man clown troop of the group, decided to entertain my friends with a little physical humor. An idea popped into my head, and I exclaimed to the group, "Hold on; I will be back presently."

I then proceeded to run out of the building, and I hid behind a corner of the wall to the left of where my group stayed. Of course, the door locked behind me, which I failed to realize. I noticed that the concrete on the path was moistened with previous rain to a dark, creamy gray. All of my friends were watching me from inside, curious as to what humorous stunt I was going to pull this time. I start singing the theme from "Mission: Impossible." "Dum, dum, DUM-DUM, dum, dum, dum-dum," I sang, getting steadily louder with each passing moment. I ran along the path, crouched, with my hands in front like a gun, playing the funny spy part to the T. I started running all over outside, acting like a spy, as my friends laughed on from inside.

In a moment of carelessness, I started running towards the door with my hands stretched out in front of me. At this time I noticed the door had a three-by-four foot rectangle of glass (with wires in it, of course) near the bottom of it, glaring at me villainously, almost mischievously. In front of the door, there was a black rubber mat, with the grooves lying perpendicular to the door. The mat was slick with rain. I ran towards the door, the "Mission: Impossible" music blaring from my lungs. I was a speeding train off its tracks, about to crash. I stepped on the black mat, and my feet slid out from under me. I was sliding forward with my knees out, headed towards the ground. My knees hit the glass rectangle, and went through,

shattering the glass like a hot air balloon bursting from intense air pressure. I immediately got up, as I saw the look on my friends' faces. They were all stunned, and they were all laughing, immaturely. I saw my own face in the reflection in the window, and it was sheer terror. My first thought was that I was going to get kicked out of the clinic for misbehavior. I knocked on the door, frantically, trying to get back in. My friends ran away, but one of them came back and let me in. At this time, I felt a slight trickle down my leg. I looked down, and my right knee was bleeding from an inch-wide gash. Later, after I had been examined by teachers and directors running the camp, I was taken to the Duke emergency room, where I got three stitches in my knee. Thankfully, I was not kicked out of the camp.

This experience taught me how to behave properly. The fear I had of getting in trouble, combined with my mother's disappointment in me, changed my attitude greatly. I now have learned how to restrain myself. I no longer do crazy things just to make my friends laugh. I'm smart enough to think of safer ways to accomplish this feat. Carelessness is one trait I am trying to get over. The wired glass just helped me to realize I needed to change. By the way, I guess the wire in glass isn't all that strong, is it? In a way, I'm glad it isn't.

## Part II

# Writing Argumentative Essays

Writing an argumentative essay requires the writer to investigate an issue; consider the various points of view on the issue; collect, generate, and evaluate evidence; establish a position, and prove that position.

### Outline of Argumentative Essay

- I. Introduction
  - a. General Information
  - b. Specific Information
  - c. Thesis Statement
- II. Counter Argument Paragraph
  - a. Topic Sentence
  - b. Explanation of Counter Argument
  - c. Evidence
  - d. Explanation of Evidence
  - e. Closing Statement
- III. Supporting Body Paragraph
  - a. Topic Sentence
  - b. Explanation of Argument
  - c. Evidence
  - d. Explanation of Evidence
  - e. Closing Statement
- IV. Supporting Body Paragraph
  - a. Topic Sentence
  - b. Explanation of Argument
  - c. Evidence
  - d. Explanation of Evidence
  - e. Closing Statement
- V. Conclusion
  - a. Restate Thesis
  - b. Summarize Each Argument
  - c. Thoughtful Comment

## Direct Citation

**Direct citation** is a simple way to use **evidence** from the text to support your opinions. This is a skill that you must understand before starting to write argumentative essays because **you will be required to use evidence in the form of direct citation in each body paragraph that you write**. Below is an explanation of what direct citation is and how it works within the paragraphs you will learn about in this section.

### Example

Imagine the class has read an article about the death penalty. The article discusses the current debate over whether or not the United States should still allow the use of the death penalty as a punishment for some crimes. The students are given a **writing prompt** by the teacher.

**Prompt:** The concept of the death penalty is one that is controversial in America today. America is one of the few modernized countries in the world still practicing the death penalty within its judicial system. The death penalty has been a source of controversy for many years. Some people say it is time to end the practice, while others support its continued use. Should the death penalty be abolished in America?

After having read the text, you decide that the death penalty should be abolished. You then look back at the article to find good pieces of **evidence**. **Evidence is any part of the text, copied exactly word-for-word, that can be used to support your position**. When you draft your paragraphs, you will include these pieces of evidence. The evidence goes within quotation marks. At the end of the evidence you will need to include the **citation**. **A citation is simply a label at the end of the evidence that tells the reader who wrote it and where in the text it came from**. The citation is made up of:

- The author's last name
- The page number the evidence came from

Imagine the student finds the following good piece of evidence in the article to support the position of abolishing the death penalty:

*Studies done by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more often than Caucasian offenders.*

If this article about the death penalty was written by a woman named Sandra Marquis and the evidence was found on page 2 of the article, the evidence and direct citation would look EXACTLY like this:

“Studies by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more than Caucasian offenders” (Marquis 2).

Please note that the period goes outside of the parenthesis.

A piece of evidence like this, using proper direct citation, is found in each of the body paragraphs you learn about in this section. Now that you understand **evidence** and **direct citation**, you can begin to learn how to draft a full argumentative essay.

## Step 1: Examine Both Sides of the Topic

- When writing an argumentative essay you will be required to take a position in response to a prompt.
- The essay must include a **counter argument paragraph** and **two supporting paragraphs**.
- In order to organize your essay, you must decide on the three topics of these paragraphs before beginning to write.

To find the topics of your three paragraphs you will:

- 1) Read the prompt.
- 2) Read the text with the purpose of answering the prompt.
- 3) Using what you have learned from the text, decide your position, and come up with three reasons that support your position.
- 4) Using what you have learned from the text, determine three reasons that support the opposite position.
- 5) Choose the two strongest reasons that support your position.
- 6) Choose the one reason in support of the opposite position that you can easily challenge. This will be your counter argument.

Example:

**Prompt:** The concept of the death penalty is one that is controversial in America today. America is one of the few modernized countries in the world still practicing the death penalty within its judicial system. The death penalty has been a source of controversy for many years. Some people say it is time to end the practice, while others support its continued use. Should the death penalty be abolished in America?

The student reads the text with the prompt in mind, and after careful consideration of both sides of the argument, decides that he believes the death penalty should be abolished in America. Now the student must find reasons to support this position:

1. The death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment.
2. DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.
3. The death penalty is too long and expensive a legal process.

The student then finds three reasons that support the position opposite than his.

1. The death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders.
2. It helps decrease the murder rate of the country.
3. The death penalty forces murderers to agree to life in prison.

After looking at the three reasons supporting his position, the student should choose the two strongest reasons. **These will be the topics of the two supporting paragraphs.**

1. The death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment.
2. DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.
3. The death penalty is too long and expensive a legal process.

The student then chooses the one reason in support of the opposite position that he can logically challenge. **This will be the topic of the counterargument paragraph.**

1. The death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders.
2. It helps decrease the murder rate of the country.
3. The death penalty forces murderers to agree to life in prison.

## Step 2: Writing Thesis Statements for Argumentative Essays

- A **thesis statement** is one sentence that tells the reader exactly what the entire essay will be about. It will include the **counter argument, the position** and the **two reasons supporting the position**.
- The thesis statement will be the last sentence of the introductory paragraph.

To write a thesis statement for an argumentative essay you will:

- 1) In one sentence, state your counter argument, your position and the two reasons that support your position.

Example:

Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished because the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment, and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.

Argumentative thesis statements should follow the format above. Notice how the student's *counter argument, position* and *two supporting reasons* are all clearly included in the thesis statement.

**Counter Argument** = the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders

**Position** = the death penalty should be abolished

**Two Supporting Reasons** = the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent

Below is a very simple template for creating argumentative thesis statements.

Although \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ because  
(counter argument) (position)  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.  
(reason 1) (reason 2)

### Step 3: Writing Topic Sentences for Argumentative Essays

- A **topic sentence** is one sentence that tells the reader exactly what a paragraph will be about. The topic sentence is always the first sentence of a paragraph.
- Topic sentences in argumentative essays are based on the thesis statement created by the student.

To write topic sentences for an argumentative essay you will:

- 1) Break apart your thesis statement. Create three separate sentences.
- 2) Your first topic sentence will be your counter argument.
- 3) Your second and third topic sentences will be the two reasons supporting your position.

Example:

**Thesis Statement:**

~~Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished because the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment, and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.~~

**Topic sentence** for counter argument paragraph

~~Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished.~~

**Topic sentence** for first supporting paragraph

~~One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment.~~

**Topic sentence** for second supporting paragraph

~~Another reason the death penalty should be abolished is because DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.~~

## Step 4: Writing Introductions

- An introductory paragraph for an argumentative essay should provide **general information** on the topic, move to more **specific information** on the topic, and include a **thesis statement**.
- The main goal of an introduction is to give the reader information on the topic so that they can properly understand the arguments.

To write an introduction for an essay you will:

- 1) Give the reader general information about the topic.
- 2) Move to more specific information about the topic.
- 3) End your introduction with the thesis statement.

Think of your introduction as answering three simple questions:

What is the general topic of the essay?

*US laws, sports, modern wars, hunger in the world, etc.*

Within the large general topic, what is the specific focus of this essay?

*The death penalty, steroids in the NFL, the use of technology in recent US wars, the lack of clean water in third world countries*

What is my position on this topic?

Your thesis statement answers this question perfectly and thus is always the last sentence of your introduction.

EXAMPLE:

**General Information:**

Introductions should start out general. The word general means “not specific.” You want to introduce the topic by giving an overview. This helps the reader understand the issue.

The laws of the United States are a constant source of debate. This is a very big part of the way our country’s legal system works. The punishments that are given to criminals in response to their crimes have always been a source of controversy. At one point in our history, it was legal to hang people or throw them in a dungeon to die. While everyone agrees that these are cruel and unusual punishments, there are still arguments today about how to fairly punish people who break the law.

**Specific Information:**

The next step in writing an introduction is to provide specific information about the topic.

The laws of the United States are a constant source of debate. This is a very big part of the way our country’s legal system works. The punishments that are given to criminals in response to their crimes have always been a source of controversy. At one point in our history, it was legal to hang people or throw them in a dungeon to die. While everyone agrees that these are cruel and unusual punishments, there are still arguments today about how to fairly punish people who break the law. One example of this argument is the debate over the death penalty and whether or not the U.S. should continue to allow executions in some states. Currently, there are only a few countries left that still execute criminals for some crimes, and the United States is one of them. Many people believe that the death penalty is a good idea and that we should continue to allow it in the United States.

**End with a thesis statement:**

This step is as easy as writing in the thesis statement you already created to finish the introduction. The finished introduction is written below.

The laws of the United States are a constant source of debate. This is a very big part of the way our country's legal system works. The punishments that are given to criminals in response to their crimes have always been a source of controversy. At one point in our history, it was legal to hang people or throw them in a dungeon to die. While everyone agrees that these are cruel and unusual punishments, there are still arguments today about how to fairly punish people who break the law. One example of this argument is the debate over the death penalty and whether or not the U.S. should continue to allow executions in some states. Currently, there are only a few countries left that still execute criminals for some crimes and the United States is one of them. Many people believe that the death penalty is a good idea and that we should continue to allow it in the United States. **Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished because the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment, and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.**

## Step 5: Writing the Counter Argument Body Paragraph

- The **counter argument** paragraph contains a reason supporting the opposite position, but explains why this opposite position is wrong and why your position is still correct.
- You will “attack” and “disprove” the reasoning of the opposite position in order to show that your position is correct.

To write the counter argument body paragraph you will:

- 1) Write the topic sentence that contains the counter argument.
- 2) Write an explanation of why this is a reason that supports the opposite position.
- 3) Explain why the counter argument is wrong. Include evidence, in the form of direct citation, from the text.
- 4) Write an explanation of how the evidence disproves the opposite position.
- 5) Finish by writing an explanation of why your position is still correct.

Example:

**Prompt:** The concept of the death penalty is one that is controversial in America today. America is one of the few modernized countries in the world still practicing the death penalty within its judicial system. The death penalty has been a source of controversy for many years. Some people say it is time to end the practice, while others support its continued use. Should the death penalty be abolished in America?

**Thesis Statement:** Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished because the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment, and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.

1. Write the topic sentence that contains the counter argument. The topic sentence is created from your thesis statement (see Step 3). It includes the counter argument and your position.

*Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished.*

Below is a very simple template for creating a topic sentence for a counter argument paragraph.

Although \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ .  
(counter argument) (position)

2. Write an explanation of why this is a reason that supports the opposite position.

Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished. **People who believe that the death penalty is a good idea argue that since we only execute the most dangerous and violent criminals it is okay. People believe that if you do something bad enough that you should be killed for it and that these executions will reduce crime.**

3. Explain why the counter argument is wrong. Include evidence in the form of direct citation from the text. This evidence should help prove that the opposite position is incorrect.

Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished. People who believe that the death penalty is a good idea argue that since we only execute the most dangerous and violent criminals it is okay. People believe that if you do something bad enough that you should be killed for it and that these executions will reduce crime. **However, this opinion is incorrect. The text states, "Despite the fact that mass murders and terrorists have been executed routinely for years, the statistical evidence shows absolutely no indication that it has had any impact on lowering the occurrence of these crimes by others in the future" (Marquis 1).**

4. Write a full explanation of how the evidence disproves the opposite position and why the opposite position is wrong. This is where you have to work very hard as a writer to explain, in detail, the flaws in the logic and reasoning of the opposite position.

Although, the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished. People who believe that the death penalty is a good idea argue that since we only execute the most dangerous and violent criminals it is okay to continue to do. People believe that if you do something bad enough that you should be killed for it. However, this opinion is incorrect. The text states, "Despite the fact that mass murders and terrorists have been executed routinely for years, the statistical evidence shows absolutely no indication that it has had any impact on lowering the occurrence of these crimes by others in the future" (Marquis 1). **This shows that executing the worst criminals does not stop the worst crime. Killing people as a punishment for killing people does not make any sense. Criminals will still break the laws even with the death penalty as a possible punishment. Executing people like Timothy McVeigh did not stop terrorism in the U.S. Killing Ted Bundy did not stop mentally troubled people from committing horrible acts. One look at a newspaper or a news channel clearly proves this.**

5. Finish by writing a closing statement that finalizes your point and states what you have proven in the paragraph.

Although, the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished. People who believe that the death penalty is a good idea argue that since we only execute the most dangerous and violent criminals it is okay to continue to do. People believe that if you do something bad enough that you should be killed for it. However, this opinion is incorrect. The text states, "Despite the fact that mass murders and terrorists have been executed routinely for years, the statistical evidence shows absolutely no indication that it has had any impact on lowering the occurrence of these crimes by others in the future" (Marquis 1). This shows that executing the worst criminals does not stop the worst crime. Killing people as a punishment for killing people does not make any sense. Criminals will still break the laws even with the death penalty as a possible punishment. Executing people like timothy McVeigh did not stop terrorism in the U.S. Killing Ted Bundy did not stop mentally troubled people from committing horrible acts. One look at a newspaper or a news channel clearly proves this. **This proves that executing the worst criminals does not stop crime and that the death penalty should be abolished.**



1. Write an explanation of how your reason supports your position.

One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment. **States that have the death penalty do not use it fairly. The death penalty seems to be racist because white people are not sentenced to death as much as other people.**

2. Include evidence in the form of direct citation to support your reasoning.

One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment. **States that have the death penalty do not use it fairly. The death penalty seems to be racist because white people are not sentenced to death as much as other people. The text states, "Studies by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more than Caucasian offenders" (Marquis 2).**

3. Write an explanation of why this evidence supports your position.

One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment. **States that have the death penalty do not use it fairly. The death penalty seems to be racist because white people are not sentenced to death as much as other people. The text states, "Studies by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more than Caucasian offenders" (Marquis 2). This shows that the death penalty is unfair. People of every color and type should be treated the same and if the crime gets the death penalty then that should be true for everyone who commits that crime no matter what. If the states are not going to hand out something as serious as the death penalty fairly then we should get rid of it completely.**

4. Write a closing statement that declares what you have proven in this paragraph.

One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment. States that have the death penalty do not use it fairly. The death penalty seems to be racist because white people are not sentenced to death as much as other people. The text states, "Studies by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more than Caucasian offenders" (Marquis 2). This shows that the death penalty is unfair. People of every color and type should be treated the same and if the crime gets the death penalty then that should be true for everyone who commits that crime no matter what. If the states are not going to hand out something as serious as the death penalty fairly then we should get rid of it completely. **This proves that the death penalty should be abolished because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment.**

This same process would be repeated again using your the third topic sentence:

Another reason the death penalty should be abolished is because DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.

You can see this second supporting body paragraph below.

[1] Another reason the death penalty should be abolished is because DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent. [2] Mistakes should not be made when you are considering ending someone's life. DNA testing has shown that inmates waiting to be executed for their crimes were actually innocent. [3] In the text it states, "States such as Illinois found so many death row inmates freed by DNA evidence that they halted use of the death penalty until an investigation could be conducted" (Marquis 3). [4] This shows that mistakes are being made and people who are innocent might be killed if we continue using the death penalty. If there is a chance that someone who did nothing wrong could be killed by the death penalty then we should get rid of it. [5] This proves that the death penalty should be abolished because DNA testing has shown death inmates to be innocent.

#### KEY

[1] = Topic Sentence

[2] = Explanation of Argument

[3] = Evidence

[4] = Explanation of Evidence

[5] = Closing Statement

## Step 7: Writing the Concluding Paragraphs

- A concluding paragraph for an argumentative essay should restate the **thesis**, **summarize the arguments**, and end with a **thoughtful comment** that brings the essay to a close.

To write a conclusion for an argumentative essay you will:

- 1) Restate the thesis statement of the essay.
- 2) Summarize the arguments presented within the three body paragraphs.
- 3) End with a thoughtful comment that brings the essay to a close.

Example:

1. Restate the thesis statement.

Try to state the same thing the thesis did but in a different way.

The death penalty should be abolished because it does not work. Executing only the people who do really horrible things does not work at stopping horrible crimes from happening, and judges and lawyers can make mistakes when charging people.

2. Summarize each argument.

Write one or two sentences that summarize each of your three body paragraphs. Instead of simply rewriting your topic sentences, try to state them differently.

The death penalty should be abolished because it does not work. Executing only the people who do really horrible things does not work at stopping horrible crimes from happening, and judges and lawyers can make mistakes when charging people. **If the people who are getting the death penalty are not being chosen based on their crime, but on the color of their skin, then the country has to stop it. Also, so many people have been sentenced to death and then proven innocent that any person who can imagine their own loved one wrongly sentenced to death must agree that the death penalty needs to go. The only reason to accept these mistakes would be if the death penalty really reduced crime. Since it clearly does not, the only right thing to do is to abolish the death penalty.**

### 3. End with a Thoughtful Comment.

Thoughtful comments can include a warning, a vivid image, a call for action, or a statement of why your position matters.

The death penalty should be abolished because it does not work. Executing only the people who do really horrible things does not work at stopping horrible crimes from happening and judges and lawyers can make mistakes when charging people. If the people who are getting the death penalty are not being chosen based on their crime, but on the color of their skin, then the country has to stop it. Also, so many people have been sentenced to death and then proven innocent that any person who can imagine their own loved one wrongly sentenced to death must agree that the death penalty needs to go. The only reason to accept these mistakes would be if the death penalty really reduced crime. Since it clearly does not, the only right thing to do is to abolish the death penalty. America is a country that stands for a lot of things to a lot of different people. One of those things should not be executing people.

## Proper Essay Format

- The proper essay format is shown below:
  - **Times New Roman** font style
  - **12pt** font size
  - **Double Spaced**
  
- The first page of your essay should have a basic **Four-Line Heading** in the upper left hand corner and a **Title** that is centered.
  - Four-line heading includes:
    - Name
    - Class and Period
    - Teacher's Name
    - Date (always use the due date of the assignment)
  
  - A good title will be an expression of your essay's main point.
    - Abolishing the Death Penalty in America

On the next pages you will see the entire example essay as it would look when handed in for grading.

John Student

English 2, Period #3

Mr. Teacher

April 1, 2013

### Abolishing the Death Penalty in America

The laws of the United States are a constant source of debate. This is a very big part of the way our country's legal system works. The punishments that are given to criminals in response to their crimes have always been a source of controversy. At one point in our history, it was legal to hang people or throw them in a dungeon to die. While everyone agrees that these are cruel and unusual punishments, there are still arguments today about how to fairly punish people who break the law. One example of this argument is the debate over the death penalty and whether or not the U.S. should continue to allow executions in some states. Currently, there are only a few countries left that still execute criminals for some crimes and the United States is one of them. Many people believe that the death penalty is a good idea and that we should continue to allow it in the United States. Although the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished because the death penalty is handed out unfairly as a punishment, and DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent.

Although, the death penalty is reserved for only the most violent offenders, the death penalty should be abolished. People who believe that the death penalty is a good idea argue that since we only execute the most dangerous and violent criminals it is okay to continue to do so. People believe that if you do something bad enough that you should be killed for it. However, this opinion is incorrect. The text states, "Despite the fact that mass murders and terrorists have been executed routinely for years, the statistical evidence shows absolutely no indication that it has had any impact on lowering the occurrence of these crimes by others in the future" (Marquis 1). This shows that executing the worst criminals does not stop the worst crime. Killing people as a punishment for killing people does not make any sense. Criminals will still break the laws even with the death penalty as a possible punishment. Executing people like Timothy McVeigh did

not stop terrorism in the U.S. Killing Ted Bundy did not stop mentally troubled people from committing horrible acts. One look at a newspaper or a news channel clearly proves this. This proves that executing the worst criminals does not stop crime and that the death penalty should be abolished.

One reason the death penalty should be abolished is because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment. States that have the death penalty do not use it fairly. The death penalty seems to be racist because white people are not sentenced to death as much as other people. The text states, “Studies by Stanford University have shown that the death penalty is handed down to minority offenders, especially African Americans, 52% more than Caucasian offenders” (Marquis 2). This shows that the death penalty is unfair. People of every color and type should be treated the same and if the crime gets the death penalty then that should be true for everyone who does that crime no matter what. If the states are not going to hand out something as serious as the death penalty fairly then we should get rid of it completely. This proves that the death penalty should be abolished because it is handed out unfairly as a punishment.

Another reason the death penalty should be abolished is because DNA evidence has proven death row inmates to be innocent. Mistakes should not be made when you are considering ending someone’s life. DNA testing has shown that inmates waiting to be executed for their crimes were actually innocent. In the text it states, “States such as Illinois found so many death row inmates freed by DNA evidence that they halted use of the death penalty until an investigation could be conducted” (Marquis 3). This shows that mistakes are being made and people who are innocent might be killed if we continue using the death penalty. If there is a chance that someone who did nothing wrong could be killed by the death penalty then we should get rid of it. This proves that the death penalty should be abolished because DNA testing has shown death inmates to be innocent.

The death penalty should be abolished because it does not work. Executing only the people who do really horrible things does not work at stopping horrible crimes from happening and judges and lawyers can make mistakes when charging people. If the people who are getting the death penalty are not being chosen based on their crime, but on the color of their skin, then the country has to stop it. Also, so many people have been sentenced to death and then proven innocent that any person who can imagine their own loved one wrongly sentenced to death must agree that the death penalty needs to go. The only reason to accept these mistakes would be if the death penalty really reduced crime. Since it clearly does not, the only right thing to do is to abolish the death penalty. America is a country that stands for a lot of things to a lot of different people. One of those things should not be executing people.

## Writing Argumentative Essays in Response to Fictional Texts

The following pages contain an essay written in response to the fictional text “The Possibility of Evil” by Shirley Jackson. The main difference between writing in response to informational texts and writing in response to fictional texts is that **when writing in response to fictional texts, the writer is trying to make an original statement about the text and then goes about proving that statement correct.** This is slightly different from arguing right or wrong in response to a current or historical issue.

You will see that although the paragraphs follow the same format, they are a little different because of the approach the writer takes when responding to a fictional text. Looking at two writing prompts—one for an informational text and one for a fictional text—can help illustrate this point.

Prompt for an Informational Text:

*Based on the readings and discussions in class, should the United States increase the severity of the laws controlling the production, sale, and ownership of firearms?*

Prompt for a Fictional Text:

*Based on your reading of the novel The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins, how is the main character an example of strong female leads in 21<sup>st</sup> century literature?*

You can imagine the difference between these two essays. The first writing prompt requires the writer to argue for or against a change in national policy toward guns; the second requires the writer to explain his or her opinion on a character in a book. One way to think about writing in response to a fictional text is that you, the writer, must make the evidence out of the text.

Look for the differences throughout the following example essay based on the prompt:

*The story “The Possibilities of Evil” by Shirley Jackson describes a woman who does very cruel things. Based your reading of the text, is the protagonist truly an evil person?*

Joanna Student

English 2, Period #5

Mrs. Teacher

May 14, 2014

### What is Evil?

What makes, creates, and sustains evil is a subject that many pieces of literature have covered. From children's books all the way through to adult novels, the actions of certain characters force readers to debate what is good and what is evil. The story "The Possibility of Evil" by Shirley Jackson is an example of one of these pieces of literature. In this story, we see a woman, Adela Strangeworth, do very cruel things to other people. She somehow seems to be oblivious to the fact that what she is doing is awful and mean. She does not seem to understand that what she is doing is harmful, but still, her actions make her evil. Although Ms. Strangeworth does not seem to know what she is doing is wrong, she is truly evil because she chooses the most sensitive parts of a person's life to write about, and she tries very hard not to get caught.

Although the protagonist of "The Possibility of Evil" does not seem to know what she is doing is wrong, she is truly evil. Ms. Adela Strangeworth acts as though she has no idea that what she is doing is wrong. She even talks about how helpful she is to everyone around her and how much she helps the entire town with their problems. However, this is not really true. The text states, "But, as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Ms. Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it . . . It was far more sensible for Miss Chandler to wonder what Mr. Shelley's first wife really died of than to take a chance on not knowing" (Jackson 6). This shows that Ms. Strangeworth thought she was doing something helpful by keeping people aware of dangers in the town. But if she really thought Miss Chandler was in danger from her husband she would not write an anonymous letter that is nothing more than gossip. She must not really think she is doing something good and helpful if she isn't willing to put her name to it. All she has

done is make Miss Chandler worry and make her suspicious of her husband. Creating that kind of fear and unease in a person when you have no real proof is very cruel and evil. This is why, even though she acts like she doesn't know what she is doing is wrong, Ms. Strangeworth is truly evil.

One reason that Ms. Strangeworth is truly evil is because she chooses the most sensitive parts of a person's life to write about. If Ms. Strangeworth was only trying to help people, her letters to the people of the town would cover many different topics, both big and small. But Ms. Strangeworth only writes letters about the most sensitive and personal parts of a person's life. When she comes across a mother and baby in town she acts very nice, but later writes, "Didn't you ever see an idiot child before? Some people just shouldn't have children should they?" (Jackson 5). This shows how cruel she can be because nothing is more sensitive or would make someone feel worse than to have horrible things said about their new baby, especially things that suggest that the baby had problems. By choosing such a sensitive topic, she is maximizing how much it will hurt the person to whom she is writing. This proves that Ms. Strangeworth is truly evil because she only writes letters to people about things that would make them feel horrible and never about anything else.

Another reason that Ms. Strangeworth is evil is that she tries very hard not to get caught. This really proves that she knows what she is doing is wrong. If she actually thought what she was doing with her letters was a good thing, then she wouldn't try so hard to make sure no one knows that she was the one writing them. She says she doesn't sign her name because she could never put her name that close to such trashy stuff. But if that was true she wouldn't do anything else to keep people from knowing about her letters. The text states, "she had always made a point of mailing her letters very secretly . . . consequently, she timed her walk so she could reach the post office just as darkness was starting to dim the outlines of the trees" (Jackson 7). This shows that she works very hard to not get caught. She only mails her letters at night so that nobody will

know it is her writing them. If she was not evil but just a crazy old lady who didn't know any better, she would not think to mail the letters when no one else was around. Because she does this, she knows that what she is doing is wrong and does it anyway just to hurt people and make them feel bad. This proves that Ms. Strangeworth is truly evil.

Ms. Strangeworth is an evil person even though she acts like she doesn't understand what she is doing. She only attacks the most personal and sensitive aspects of a person's life in order to be especially cruel, and she does things to specifically not get caught. This shows that she writes these letters for one reason and one reason only; she wants to make people feel horrible and question their loved ones. Nothing could be crueler than this. Readers tend to think of evil as a mass murderer or a super villain, but in Shirley Jackson's "The Possibility of Evil" we learn that this is not always the case.