

## **HIGH SCHOOL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Like their middle school counterparts, high school writing assignments can vary significantly, but literary analyses are quite common. We also find much variation with regard to pedagogy. In some instances, teachers have students work through multiple drafts, whereas in other cases they do not. Some teachers strive to have a process orientation, whereas others do not. The sample assignments and papers that follow reflect this variation to a modest degree.

### **Frank Montenegro (Grade 10 at a Southeast High School)**

#### **Assignment 1**

Works of literature often feature characters who overcome hardship and misfortune and experience change in the process. Examine Richard Selzer's "Imelda" and analyze whether the character overcomes adversity and whether he changes.

#### **Analysis**

This type of assignment is fairly common in high school language arts classes. We see, for example, that the writing task is linked to a piece of literature that students are expected to analyze. The question that always arises with such assignments is whether the teacher provided any writing instruction or whether the instruction was limited to reading and discussing the work of literature. Although it is not dispositive, one way to gauge the amount of writing instruction associated with such assignments is to look at students' responses and to examine the level of evidence used to support the analysis. If there is a preponderance of opinion rather than evidence, the amount of writing instruction is likely to have been minimal.

Another factor to consider in this assignment is that it does not specify for students

which character they are to analyze. Is it Dr. Franciscus? The narrator, Richard Selzer? Imelda? The mother? Equally important, the assignment does not ask students to provide any support for the analysis. Support is crucial because analysis is a form of argument. In the case of literary analysis, assignments should specify that students must include both primary and secondary sources. Doing so serves to help students gain proficiency in producing evidence-based writing.

**Student Papers** (no initial drafts were submitted from Mr. Montenegro's class)

**Sharon Chou (Grade 10)**

Analysis of "Imelda"

I thought that this was a sad but inspiring story. The opening lines set the tone: "I heard the other day that Hugh Franciscus had died. I knew him once." Franciscus was the head of a team of doctors who travel to Third World countries to help people. The narrator who I assume is Richard Selzer the author was his student in medical school. He describes Dr. Franciscus as a very cold man who doesn't have much patience with patients.

They go to a country in South America to help the people there and Dr. Franciscus is a plastic surgeon. Everything is going well until they try to help Imelda, a little girl who has something wrong with her mouth so she covers it with a rag. She seems ashamed, but Selzer describes her as a beautiful bird. I don't know why he said that because if she is ashamed then it is probably because she has some deformity that she hides with the rag.

Anyway, Imelda is prepare for the operation and is given anesthesia to put her out. Everything should go smoothly and we want that to happen because Imelda seems like a nice girl. But something goes wrong. Maybe she has a bad reaction to the drugs because she starts to

get a fever. Her blood pressure goes really high. Someone screams for ice and the narrator runs outside to the village and can't find any ice. Then he runs back into the room where Dr. Franciscus is with Imelda and he learns that she is dead. How it could happen so fast is not explained.

Dr. Franciscus knows that the girl's mother is waiting outside, so he goes to talk to her. She is sitting on a bench holding the dirty rag that her daughter used to hide her mouth. Dr. Franciscus as the narrator explained at the beginning of the story is a cold man and we expect him to be really cold with the mother but he isn't, not really. We get the sense that he is trying to be kind but doesn't know how. The mother walks away.

The next day the mother comes to pick up the body of her daughter and the narrator meets with her. He is confused when the mother thanks the doctors for making her daughter look like an angel before being buried. The mother seems to think that Dr. Franciscus operated on the girl and fixed her deformity, and the narrator knows that he didn't. But then he pulls the cover aside to look at the girl and he sees the truth. Dr. Franciscus, while everyone else was asleep, completed the operation and made Imelda look beautiful.

This part was very moving and sad because it shows that Dr. Franciscus had a hard exterior but a soft interior. He was a good man. We see more of this at the end of the story when Dr. Franciscus is showing slides to students who want to be doctors. The slides are of different types of problems that can be fixed with plastic surgery. But then one slide seems to come up by accident. It is a picture of Imelda. He quickly takes the slide out and moves on, but the fact that he kept the picture of the little girl shows that she touched him in ways that he could not forget.

We can't say that Dr. Franciscus experienced any hardship. He was successful and probably had lots of money. But I think that something bad happened to him before the story

began that hurt him and made him cold to others. It was a way of protecting himself. When Imelda died it had an impact on him that was very strong. In the night while no one could see, his true self came out and he fixed Imelda's mouth. That self was kind and generous. The story says that he retired not long after returning from South America. I like to think that he changed after Imelda died, that he couldn't hide his true self any more. If I'm right, then he changed without experiencing any hardship or adversity.

### **Analysis**

When asked to analyze a work of literature, young writers often focus on plot summary, and we see this tendency in Sharon's paper. Part of the problem is that students don't seem to have a clear understanding of what analysis entails. More often than not, the reason is that they simply have not received sufficient instruction in analysis. Their experiences with literature commonly involve focusing on plot summary through fill-in-the-blank exercises. If we were to extract the plot summary from Sharon's paper, we would be left only with several sentences from the last two paragraphs.

Another important factor is that Sharon failed to provide any support for her analysis. Even though we might agree with her assessment of Dr. Franciscus, the argument is very weak because it lacks supporting evidence. An important question, given these factors, is how we should grade Sharon's work. Has she met the requirements of the assignment? I would argue that she has not and that, at best, the paper could receive a C-.

### **Matthew Border (Grade 10)**

Character in "Imelda"

In the beginning of the story, we see that Dr. Franciscus is distant and cold. He does not have any kind of relationship with patients or his medical students. Selzer writes, for example, that “he seemed to me a man of immense strength and ability, yet without affection for the patients. He did not want to be touched by them” (218). I think that the reason for his coldness is because he wanted to be entirely professional and wanted his students to follow his lead. Feelings should not get in the way of medicine.

This way of being shut off from his feelings and his soul left him cut off from God. God is love, and Dr. Franciscus had no love. So when he met Imelda it was a shock to his mind. The impact was more than he could handle. Franciscus changed as a doctor and person and became closer to God.

Dr. Franciscus could not see Imelda as he did other patients. Maybe it was because she was so young and fragile. Maybe it was because he saw something of himself in her. She is wounded but she hides her wound with a dirty rag. I think Dr. Franciscus is like that. He was wounded somehow and hides his wound for others by being cold. When he forces her to remove the rag he sees himself in her eyes. Selzer writes that “Hugh Franciscus, in spite of his years of experience, in spite of all the dreadful things he had seen, must have been awed by the sight of this girl” (Selzer 222). But I think “awed” is the wrong word. I think that when Franciscus looked into Imelda’s eyes he saw how vulnerable she is and he became more aware of his own. They were both broken but in different ways. They connected in “heart, mind and soul” (Coles 20).

When Imelda dies on the operating table, a part of Dr. Franciscus also dies. The hard part that makes him appear cold—the hard part that has protected him from sadness for years and that prevented him from seeing that his soul needed healing. He will “fix” her, and maybe in

completing the operation he feels that he may fix himself. The fact that he does it at night while everyone is asleep shows that he is now more vulnerable. So vulnerable that he cannot continue practicing medicine because he runs the risk of losing more patients.

Dr. Franciscus never recovers. We see this when he and Selzer are showing slides from his trips abroad to teach students. One slide is of Imelda, and it shouldn't be there. He pauses for a moment and then Selzer quickly removes the slide. This shows that Imelda still impacts him and that he kept the picture of her to remind himself of her and her death. Through his pain, Franciscus is able to become closer to God.

#### Work Cited

Coles, Robert. "The Moral Education of Medical Students." *A Life in Medicine*. Ed. Robert

Coles, Randy Testa. New York: The New Press, 2002.

Selzer, Richard. "Imelda." *On Doctoring: Stories, Poems, and Essays*. Eds.

#### Analysis

There are several good points in Matthew's paper. One of the more important is that he made an effort to support his analysis using primary and secondary sources. Moreover, his use of the MLA documentation format is correct. In my experience, Matthew's effort in this regard is significant. Also well done is Matthew's proposal that Dr. Franciscus and Imelda are alike—both damaged, both striving to hide their damage. This proposal is quite insightful and warrants praise.

It is the case, however, that the paper has a number of problems that more revision and editing feedback would have solved. On a fairly simple level, Matthew (and by extension all writers) did not need to state "I think"; the reason is that readers understand that the ideas

expressed are those of the author. Stating “I think” is simply redundant. On a more complex level, Matthew’s paper contained several assertions that he failed to support or explore. Consider, for example, how operating on Imelda at night illustrates the doctor’s vulnerability or how the tragedy of Imelda’s death brought Franciscus closer to God.

In the final analysis, we should recognize that Matthew has produced a good first draft but that he should have subjected it to thorough revision and editing before submission.

### **Brittany Jacobs (Grade 10)**

#### **An Analysis of Richard Selzer’s “Imelda”**

Richard Selzer practiced medicine for many years and yet still somehow found time to write. Much of his writing is about medicine and “Imelda” is one example. It tells the story of Dr. Hugh Franciscus, one of Selzer’s teachers in medical school, and their trip to Honduras to provide free medical treatment to the people there.

At the beginning of the story, Selzer describes Franciscus as cold and abrasive. He is professional but does not interact with patients. He has no friends. When they arrive in Honduras, Franciscus is pretty much the same. He sees the poverty and disease of the people there but these things do not impact him. He just goes about the business of healing. He does just what is necessary. That is, until he meets Imelda. She is a young girl with a cleft palate, which means that her mouth is very deformed. She is ashamed of the way she looks and keeps a dirty rag against her face to hide her mouth.

When Franciscus tries to examine her, Imelda refuses to remove the rag from her face so Franciscus pulls it forcefully away. He does not try to persuade her but uses force to show that he is in charge. But while Imelda is being made unconscious for the operation, she has a bad

reaction and suddenly has a very high fever. Suddenly Franciscus realizes that he is not in charge. Something unexpected is happening and he has no control. He yells for ice and Selzer runs outside yelling, “HEILO! HEILO!” But there is no ice in the jungle, and the girl dies.

The next day, Imelda’s mother comes to pick up the body. She thanks the doctor for making her daughter “beautiful” and Selzer is confused. He knows that the operation was not even started, much less completed. Then he goes to the body and pulls away the cover and sees that her mouth had been fixed. He understands that Franciscus must have performed the operation afterwards in the night.

What we see at this point in the story is just how arrogant and proud Dr. Franciscus is. He is so arrogant that he will not let even death interfere with his medical practice. Selzer seems to be telling us that doctors are arrogant. In the case of Franciscus, he had no feeling for the girl or for her mother—he was only concerned with whether he could repair someone with a very deformed mouth.

## **Analysis**

As was the case of Sharon’s paper, Brittany’s essay provided a great deal of plot summary but very little analysis. In addition, she offered no support for her analysis of Dr. Franciscus. When we consider the emotional elements of the story—the panic in the operating room as Imelda reacts to the anesthesia, the cries for ice, the efforts of Franciscus to communicate with the devastated mother—Brittany’s view that the doctor was motivated by arrogance seems, at best, incomplete. Had she acknowledged that his actions might have had another motivation, thereby offering two possible perspectives, her paper would have been stronger. The reason is that Selzer himself seems uncertain about Franciscus’s motivation.



## **Anonymous (Grade 12 at a Northwest High School)**

### **Assignment 1**

“This I Believe” is based on a 1950s radio program of the same name, hosted by the journalist Edward R. Murrow. It was based on the premise that each of us has important guiding principles that we live by and that it is important to share those principles so as generate a sense of community. In 2004, this concept was developed into student essays that are reviewed and posted online by the “This I Believe” organization. For this assignment, you are to write an essay of no more than 500 words stating what “you believe.”

### **Analysis**

The “This I Believe” radio program was developed at time in American history of high anxiety over the threat of nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. Many people were building fallout shelters in their backyards, and their children were practicing “duck and cover” drills in their schools to instill some measure of comfort, as though crouching under a desk would provide protection from a thermonuclear explosion.

Arguably, the early 21st century is also a time of high anxiety. As in the 1950s, we face problems that seem to defy solution: global warming, radical Islam, a disappearing middle class, uncontrolled illegal immigration, extreme individualism, dysfunctional government, and so on. On this account, the idea of recreating “This I Believe” should strike us as positive, for many indicators show that the nation has lost its sense of community, and the time seems right for

positive, affirming messages. Understandably, the current “This I Believe” program is very popular among high school teachers.

Close examination, however, indicates that this popular program is problematic in several ways. The assignment lends itself to narrative, not exposition. Furthermore, it is unrelated to any type of writing activity that students will be asked to engage in when they matriculate at a university. Thus, as merely a “feel good” assignment, it is symptomatic of the misalignment between public school and university curricula. The brevity of the assignment compounds this misalignment. As discussed in *Preparing to Teach Writing*, the research on writing performance shows that students must produce significant quantities of writing if they are to improve. The 500-word requirement is congruent with the typical journalistic piece, but it is not congruent with the assignments students will receive in college.

In addition, the assignment necessarily results in significant challenges regarding assessment. What will be the assessment criteria? In any given class, the assignment is likely to yield various responses. Will the papers be judged on their authenticity? Their length? Their passion? Note that the teacher did not include any success criteria, which suggests that *anything* and *everything* that offers a statement of belief will satisfy the assignment.

### **Student Papers (no initial drafts were submitted)**

#### **Jesus Martinez (Grade 12)**

I believe that efforts to stop immigration from Mexico is illegal and evil. My parents they brought me and my brothers and sisters from Mexico when we were children. We first settled in Arizona. But one day the ICE came and arrested my parents. I and my brothers and my sisters we were placed in foster care and my parents were put into jail. Then we were all sent back to

Mexico. This was unfair because some of us had already started school. To take us out of school and send us back was unfair and evil. The problem was that my father he had got into trouble with some drugs.

I read once that nearly all of the United States once belonged to Mexico. The US government stole all the land from us and made it part of the US. This was illegal and wrong. We have a right to be here because it is our country, stole from us. My parents they came back into the US after only a few days back in Mexico and this time we didn't stay in Arizona but went to California. My parents they said that California was better because they welcome Mexicans there and provide lots of financial support for us. But the problem was that there were already so many Mexicans in California that my father he had a hard time to find work. So we moved to Washington. Washington also provide lots of financial support and my father he was able to find steady work.

We have lived here for many years now and I like it, even though I don't like the rain. It rains a lot here. But life is good here. So that's why I believe that efforts to stop immigration from Mexico is illegal and evil. This is our home from long ago. We are just taking it back.

## **Analysis**

On a structural level, Jesus's response shows some NESB characteristics. A legitimate question is why these characteristics exist at this level when, according to Jesus, he has been in the States since he was a child. The answer lies in the fact that the Spanish infrastructure is very well established, with Spanish-language TV networks, radio stations, newspapers, and so on, which reduces the necessity for native Spanish speakers to become completely fluent in English.

The severity of these characteristics, however, is minor here and should have been

addressed in revising and editing activities in the class. The fact that they were not suggests that more attention to such activities would have been beneficial. More problematic is that the response is mostly narrative, not a statement of belief. The assignment is likely to evoke a narrative from many students because it is quite hard to argue for one's beliefs. Indeed, certain beliefs, such as religious beliefs, are based on faith, not reason, and therefore defy argument. After stating what the belief is, there isn't much more to write!

### **Brittany Rostami (Grade 12)**

#### **What I Believe**

When I was a child, I was always happy. I loved playing with my dolls and singing songs. I loved going for walks in the park with my father. Things started to change for me after my parents divorced when I was ten. I was sad nearly all of the time. I missed my dad. The court had determined that I should live with my mom, but you see, I was always a "daddy's girl" and I really missed him. I got to see him every Wednesday evening and every other weekend, but that wasn't enough for me. Plus, my mom often said bad things about my dad, and that made it worse. When it was time for him to drop me back at my mom's house, I often cried.

I had been a good student up to that time, but as I grew more and more sad, I couldn't concentrate on school. My grades fell. I lost my friends. Mom was really angry all the time, and my low grades upset her. We had a meeting with my teacher, and my mom said that the problem was that my father didn't have me do my homework. That wasn't true, but I didn't say anything.

I withdrew more and more. My dad saw what was happening but I suppose he didn't really know what to do. But one night he asked me, and I told him that I would be happier if I was living with him. He didn't say anything for several minutes. Then he gave me a hug and said

that he would see what he could do.

A few weeks later he told me that he was going to ask the court to let me stay with him rather than mom. I'd still be able to see her, but the schedule would be reversed. I was pretty excited to think that I could live with my dad, but he warned me that it is very difficult for fathers to have custody of their children owing to what he called the "mother mystique," which is the belief that only mothers are good parents. I remember saying that I could tell the judge that he was a great parent, but he only smiled.

Well, the lawyers started arguing back and forth, and both my parents had to go to court again and again. The judge called me in to talk to me in his chambers, and he asked me what I wanted. I told him that I wanted to live with my dad. I thought that what I wanted would make all the difference, but I was wrong. It seems that the judge did not believe that I was old enough to make that decision, so he ordered a "custody evaluation." This involved a child psychiatrist who would meet with me, visit my parents, and perform certain tests.

The evaluation went on for an entire year. My mother frequently complained that it was very expensive. Finally, my dad said that the evaluation was ready. I was very, very nervous when he went to court to learn the outcome. I couldn't concentrate in class and couldn't eat. When my cell rang after school, I saw that it was my dad, and I could barely breathe. When he told me that the court had agreed to change the custody and let me live with him, I cried with happiness.

Now I'm happy again. After the decision, I started doing well in school again. In time I got new friends, and was able to sing once more. Now I'm fine.

I believe that people need to be with the ones they love. I believe that if they cannot be with the ones they love, they cannot be happy. I know my mom loves me—and I love her. But I

am not ashamed to say that I love my dad more. I believe in love.

## **Analysis**

It should be clear that Brittany is a competent writer. We find very few structural errors in her response, and she has a firm grasp of narrative structure. The details she provided suggest that her narrative recounts an authentic experience, not a fictional one. Nevertheless, only in the last paragraph does Brittany address the prompt. As we saw in Jesus's response, the focus is on narrative, illustrating the challenge the assignment presents to students. Moreover, we have to ask what it really means to "believe in love."

### **Tom (Grade 12)**

#### **What I Believe**

When I was a little boy, I believed in Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. Around the age of 9, I learned that these were inventions, stories provided to me and other children for reasons that only parents seem to understand.

When I was a young teenager, I believed in God and Jesus. I believed that God created the heavens and the Earth and that Jesus was my personal savior. I believed that all people have goodness in their hearts and that evil is a dark force in the world that we have the strength, through Christ, to overcome. Then I read Nietzsche in my AP English class and realized that these too were inventions when Nietzsche made me think. And when I did, I really couldn't discover any difference between the stories of Santa Clause and the stories of God.

What I believe now is that magic and miracles do not exist. This belief has been

reinforced in my AP Physics class, where I learned that for magic to exist—that is, the magic of flying reindeer and the magic of a powerful being that can create the universe just by ordering it to exist—yes, for magic like that to exist, everything we humans have come to understand about the universe must be false. I believe in science. I believe that magic and science cannot coexist.

Magic is by definition a violation of the laws of physics. After centuries of study, we have found nothing that violates those laws. We instead have found that those laws are consistent everywhere. They are elegant. They are uniform. And they can be demonstrated and proved. The only thing that anyone has been able to demonstrate about magic is that it is a fraud.

## **Analysis**

Tom's response is interesting on multiple levels, but I would suggest that its most interesting feature is the contrast it provides. Here is a student who tried to address the assignment. We therefore notice that he has very little narration but instead focuses on the issue of belief. This contrast presents significant challenges related to assessment: Any attempt to grade these responses would involve comparing quite different texts—the equivalent of trying to compare a tree to a bicycle.

## **Anita Wilks (Grade 12 at a Southwest high school)**

### **Assignment 1**

The law in some states is that to get a driver's license, a person must be at least 16 years old and a full-time student; or a person must have a high school diploma. Anyone who drops out of school before graduation loses their license. To get a license again, a person must return to school and graduate. Some people support these laws, but critics have argued that they too strict.

Assume that we have such a law here. Write a letter to the governor to persuade him either to continue supporting the law or to persuade him to work to repeal it.

## **Analysis**

Assignments that ask students to write persuasive letters of one kind or another are very popular, especially at the elementary and middle school levels. The rationale appears to be that introducing a topic that may have a direct effect on students will motivate them to engage with the topic and lead to better writing. As far as I know, there isn't any evidence to support this notion, and, on their face, such assignments are likely to strike many students as insulting. They understand that the identified audience will have scant reason to care about the wishes of children who can neither vote nor make campaign contributions.

When we find high school seniors being asked to respond to these assignments, we should be shocked and dismayed. The reason is that seniors, more so than students at lower grade levels, need to be practicing the types of writing that they can expect to encounter in college or the workplace. In neither venue will they be asked to write a persuasive letter. Furthermore, such assignments do not encourage evidence-based writing, and they also tend to be very short, providing insufficient writing practice.

## **Student Papers**

**Elizabeth Jones (Grade 12)**

Change the Law! (draft 1)

Dear governor,

My name is Elizabeth and I'm a high school student who is 17 years old. Although I'm



doing very well in school and already have my driver's license I am writing to convince you to repeal the law on driver's licenses. The reason is because its unfair.

I have a friend who for personal reasons had to quite school and get a job. He's also 17. Because he had to quite school he lost his license. Now he cant drive. He has a job. Getting to work is very hard for him because now he has to take the bus and that make him feel embarased. He feels like a low life and does't like riding with all the minorities on the bus.

So please repeal this unfair law.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Jones

**Elizabeth Jones (Grade 12)**

Change the Law! (final)

Dear Governor,

My name is Elizabeth Jones and I'm a high school student who is 17 years old. Although I'm doing very well in school and already have my driver's license I am writing to convince you to repeal the law on driver's licenses. I have a 3.9 GPA but not all my classmates are doing so well. The law is unfair to them because it impacts them in negative ways.

Let me give you just one example. I have a friend who had to quite school and get a job. He is also 17. He had a license and used it to drive to work each day. But when he quite school for his job the lost his license. This is unfair! He needs that job and now he has to take the bus to work. He doesn't like taking the bus. He is embarased because riding the bus makes him feel like a loser. The bus is full of minorities and he feels uncomfortable riding with them. This isn't fair either. The law of this great nation should not make people uncomfortable or make them feel

embarrassed. The constitution gives us certain rights. One right is the right to be happy. My friend is not happy because he lost his license and has to ride the bus.

I'm sure you would not be happy if you had to ride the bus to work with minorities each day, so I think you can understand how unfair the law is. I hope you will work hard to change this unfair law.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Jones

### **Analysis**

At some point, Elizabeth understood that her first draft was too short, so she increased the length for her final draft. The question is whether her efforts substantially improved her response to the assignment. I would suggest that they did not. The reasons are that Elizabeth does not have a clear sense of her audience, the topic, or what counts as evidentiary support. She noted that the law is unfair, but she failed to provide any convincing reasons to support her assessment. The example of her friend is irrelevant and offensive. Had she understood the nature of evidence, she might have been able to support her view that the law is unfair by pointing out that it targets a specific group. That is, it treats different segments of the population differently, which is at the heart of unfairness.

**Megan Jankowski (Grade 12)**

Driving and the Law (draft 1)

Dear Governor:

Over the last several months, there has been significant attention on teen drivers. The data

show that they have far higher accident rates than older drivers, and there have been many discussions statewide on how to reduce them. A large part of these discussions have looked at the state's dropout rate, which is very high, especially for the Hispanic students. Several years ago a law was passed to try to reduce teen accidents and to encourage students to stay in school. But today many are saying the law has failed to achieve its goals. I want to express my support for the law and give you my reasons.

First of all, teens want to drive. It is one of the most important things about turning 16. Losing the ability to drive is one of the worst things that can happen to a teen. I know because I violated my parent's curfew once and lost my keys for two weeks. This awful experience made me promise that I would never violate my curfew ever again.

What this means is that the loss of a license can be a big motivation for teens to stay in school. If you drop out you lose your license. Period. Now it is the case as people say that the dropout rate has not dropped since the law was passed and that's a big problem. But I would say two things. First, not enough young people know about the law and second that the law has not been in place long enough for it to have an impact. If more teens knew about the law, believe me, they would stay in school.

So I want to close by saying that you should support the law.

Thank you for your support,

Megan Jankowski

**Megan Jankowski**

Driving and the Law (final)

Dear Governor:

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Over the last several months, there has been significant attention on teen drivers. The data show that they have far higher accident rates than older drivers, and there have been many discussions statewide on how to reduce them. A large part of these discussions have looked at the state's dropout rate, which is very high, especially for the Hispanic students. Several years ago a law was passed to try to reduce teen accidents and to encourage students to stay in school. But today many are saying the law has failed to achieve its goals. I want to express my support for the law and give you my reasons.

First of all, teens want to drive. It is one of the most important things about turning 16. They also have to work, at least many of them. After school jobs are also important and teens—especially we seniors—need to drive to be able to get to those jobs. Losing the ability to drive is one of the worst things that can happen to a teen. I know because I violated my parent's curfew once and was not able to drive for two weeks. This awful experience made me promise that I would never violate my curfew ever again. Just imagine what it would be like for a teen whom needs to drive to work to lose his/her license.

What this means is that the loss of a license can be a big motivation for teens to stay in school. If you drop out you lose your license. Period. Now it is the case as people say that the dropout rate has not dropped since the law was passed and that's a big problem. But I would say two things. First of all, not enough young people know about the law and second of all that the law has not been in place long enough for it to have an impact. If more teens knew about the law, believe me, they would stay in school.

So I want to close by saying that you should support the law.

Thank you for your support,

Megan Jankowski

## **Analysis**

Megan's response is slightly better than Elizabeth's for a couple of reasons. She did not include any offensive comments, and she identified factors that are relevant to the law. A goal of the law was to increase high school completion rates. As Megan pointed out, being able to drive has the potential to motivate students to remain in school. In addition, some high school students do have jobs, and getting to and from work without a car is difficult in most communities.

Whether these factors offer persuasive support is questionable. Young people without a license could, in theory, drive anyway. Moreover, according to a 2012 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of high school students who are employed dropped by 50% from 1990 to 2012 (from 32% to 16%). The reason is that jobs that were once traditionally held by high school students—work in the fast-food industry, movie theaters, and shopping malls—are now held by adults. Megan's response would have been stronger had she provided some research on this issue and then pointed out that 16% is still a sizable number and that these young people need access to personal transportation.

As was the case in previous examples, Megan's response has a number of surface errors that should have been addressed during revision/editing. The repetition of “drop”/“dropped” in the penultimate paragraph illustrates a lack of attention to detail.

## **Assignment 2**

When people apply for jobs, they often are asked to write a letter stating that they are interested in the job and summarizing their training, work experience, and skills related to the job. Write a cover letter for the job of your choice detailing your strengths and skills for that

position.

## **Analysis**

Like the previous assignment, this prompt fails to provide students with a task that is aligned with what they will encounter upon entering college. More problematic is that application letters generally are associated with professional jobs: teachers, lawyers, and so on. They are rarely required for the entry-level jobs available to young people fresh out of high school. On this account, the assignment seems to be out of touch with the realities that these high school seniors face.

## **Student Papers**

### **Megan Jankowski (Grade 12, draft 1)**

Mr. Ted Harburt

President

NBC Broadcasting

Dear President Harburt,

I'm writing this letter because I'm really interested in a job reporting the evening news. I worked on my high school year book so I know something about what it takes to appeal to people. Also, I am considered by many to be very pretty so I would look good on camera. I think I would do a good job as an evening news anchor.

Although I don't have any experience as a reporter I am a quick learner and had done

well in school through all my studies. I'm good with people as evidenced by the fact that I have many friends. I also belong to several student clubs.

Although my schedule is a bit busy because its my senior year I would be happy to arrange my schedule to meet with you to discuss my future at NBC. Don't hesitate to contact me at your convience.

Yours,

Megan Jankowski

**Megan Jankowski (Grade 12, final)**

Mr. Ted Harburt

President

NBC Broadcasting

Dear President Harburt:

I'm writing this letter because I'm really interested in a job reporting the evening news. I worked on my high school year book so I know something about what it takes to appeal to people. I took some of the photos in the year book and I helped with the layout.

Although I don't have much experience as a reporter I am a quick learner. I did well in school through all my studies. I'm good with people so I would be able to get them to talk during interviews. I also belong to several student clubs. I think I would do a good job as an evening news anchor because I am considered by many to be very pretty so I would look good on camera. As you know this is important in TV.

My schedule is busy because this is my senior year. Even so, I would be happy to arrange

my schedule to meet with you to discuss my future at NBC. Don't hesitate to contact me at your convenience. I will look forward to talking with you soon.

Yours,

Megan Jankowski

### **Analysis**

Megan deserves credit for correcting some of the structural errors that existed in the first draft of her response. The fact that she added a bit more information is also positive.

Nevertheless, we must question the legitimacy of the assignment and Megan's response. I would argue that if a teacher gives an assignment like this, he or she is obligated to have students produce a realistic response—that is, one that is based on their education levels, their experience, and their training. Encouraging (or even allowing) students to write about what may be their dream job should strike us as merely busywork. What is the learning outcome in this case?

### **Martin Hernandez (Grade 12, draft 1)**

Michael Morhaime

President

Blizzard Entertainment

Irvine, California

Dear Mr. Morhaime,

I am writing this letter to you to introduce myself. My name is Martin Hernandez and I will be graduating in June from high school. I have long admired your video games especially



World of War Crakft. In fact I admire that game so much that I play it all the time. I have reached level 20. Which I think you will agree is pretty good.

The reason I am writing is because I would like to work for Blizzard. I could be a good worker for the team because as I said I really know World of War Craft. I know that Blizzard will keep releasing new versions. And I would do a great job of testing them to make sure that they are top quality. I wouldn't get bored or anything because I love the game. Some days I play is for many hours. Once I played it all night without stopping.

You can't go wrong with me Mr Morhaim. As I said, I'm a good worker.

Thanks and I will wait for your call.

Martin Hernandez

**Martin Hernandez (Grade 12, final)**

Michael Morhaime

President

Blizzard Entertainment

Irvine, California

Dear Mr. Morhaime,

I am writing this letter to you to introduce myself. My name is Martin Hernandez and I will be graduating in June from high school. I have long admired your video games especially World of Warcraft. In fact I admire that game so much that I play it all the time. I have reached level 20. Which I think you will agree is pretty good.

The reason I am writing is because I would like to work for Blizzard. I know that

Blizzard will keep releasing new versions of World of Warcraft. I really know World of Warcraft. I would do a great job of testing the new versions to make sure that they are top quality. I wouldn't get bored or anything because I love the game. .

I understand that you have an opening. You can't go wrong with me Mr. Morhaime. As I said, I'm a good worker.

Thanks and I will wait for your call.

Martin Hernandez

### **Analysis**

Like Megan, Martin has identified what may be his dream job without considering what the job requires. He clearly believes that being a World of Warcraft player qualifies him for the position. Far more likely is that anyone working in Blizzard's quality control department is required to have a bachelor's degree, perhaps in computer programming. Why? The popularity of video games like World of Warcraft is so great that Blizzard Entertainment receives many, many applications from top-drawer candidates. I would again suggest that the assignment itself facilitates a disconnect from reality—not only with respect to the goal of producing a application letter based on a job for which the student may be qualified but also with respect to preparing students for real-world writing tasks.

**Kiaisha Moore (Grade 12, draft 1)**

Ms. Juanita Volpe

Manager

Max Mara

Dear Ms. Volpe:

I am graduating from high school in June and have been admitted to North Lake Community College where I will study business in the fall. I am looking for summer work so that I can gain business experience in the retail industry. Last summer I worked parttime at Wal-Mart so I have some retail experience. Also, I am very fashion conscious which would make for a good fit at Max Mara.

I have been interested in the retail fashion business for a long time and I am also interested in marketing. I have been a subscriber to “Apparel Magazine” for some time. As you know this is an important publication for anyone interested in the business. I also can say that I am good with people. I learned at Wal-Mart that the customer is always right. This must be especially true at a high-end store like Max Mara.

I would like to meet with you to discuss the possibility of joining your team. If you think that I would be a good fit, please call me so I can come to meet with you at your convenience.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kiaisha Moore

**Kiaisha Moore (Grade 12, final)**

Ms. Juanita Volpe

Manager

Max Mara

Dear Ms. Volpe:

I am graduating from high school in June and have been admitted to North Lake Community College where I will study business in the fall. I am looking for summer work so that I can gain business experience in the retail industry. Last summer I worked part-time at Wal-Mart that gave me important retail experience. Also, I am very fashion conscious which would make for a good fit at Max Mara. I have spent much time studying the Max Mara line.

I have been interested in the retail fashion business for a long time. I am also interested in marketing. I have been a subscriber to *Apparel Magazine* for two years. This important publication has increased my interest in the retail clothing business and it has given me much knowledge about the industry. I also can say that I am good with people. I learned at Wal-Mart that the customer is “always right.” I am sure that this is especially true at a high-end store like Max Mara.

I would like to meet with you to discuss the possibility of joining your team. If you think that I would be a good fit, please call me so I can come to meet with you at your convenience.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kiaisha Moore

## **Analysis**

Kiaisha’s response is about as good as one could hope for on this assignment. The reasons are several. First, she identified a position that is feasible given her age and experience. Second, she stated her retail experience and described her interest in fashion. She supported that statement of interest by referencing her subscription to a trade publication. Third, she noted that she is looking for full-time work for the summer that would transition to part-time work in the fall, when she will begin college classes. These positives could have been improved had she

provided some detail about her experience at Wal-Mart.

Note that Kiaisha corrected most of the structural errors in her first draft. In doing so, she showed good attention to detail. An element of artificiality remains, however. The usual process for this type of position involves going to the store or going online to fill out an application. One just doesn't send a letter of interest in these cases. In addition, Max Mara is a high-end fashion retailer that caters to professional women and women of means. Given this clientele, it is questionable whether a store would entertain hiring a young woman of 18 or 19 as a sales clerk.

### **Assignment 3**

Write an essay analyzing the first three sentences of the Declaration of Independence. Consider how figurative language, word choice, imagery, and/or structure contribute to the reader's reaction.

1. When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.
2. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.
3. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new

Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

## **Analysis**

Assignments that call for analysis are useful because they have the potential to help students develop the ability to attend to details and to make critical examinations of material. Given the research showing that many students lack this ability, analytical assignments should hold a central place in secondary writing classes.

This particular assignment is likely to result in limited success. Meaningful analysis should have the potential to examine positive and negative features of the object under discussion. The Declaration of Independence is commonly so revered that it approaches sacred status, which may make it difficult for many students to deviate from the positive. The phrase “the reader’s reaction” is ambiguous and may be difficult for students to understand. Does it refer to the student as the reader or to “reader” in the generic sense? In addition, the assignment fails to provide any success criteria, which will leave students guessing as to what exactly they should do.

## **Student Papers (multiple drafts were not submitted for this assignment)**

### **Kiaisha Moore (Grade 12)**

The first three sentences of the Declaration of Independence are moving to many because they use figurative language, word choice, imagery, and structure. The words are powerful and the reference to God is designed to produce a strong reaction in the reader.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the Declaration states. That means that the

truths do not have to be proved. They do not need any evidence because they are self-evident to anyone who can see. This use of words is clever because if the English denied the colonies' claims for independence it would mean that they were unable to see the "self-evident" truth.

But there is no question that the most powerful part of the Declaration of Independence follows the statement of self-evident truths—"all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This statement is more than a declaration of political independence. It is a statement of philosophy. It is powerful because everyone wants life, liberty and the ability to pursue happiness. No one could disagree with the statement because everyone values these things.

The irony is that the Declaration used the expression "all men." This was a bad word choice. The Founding Fathers ignored women and they ignored the millions of slaves. Their failure to include these people as being "created equal" is sure to cause a negative reaction in the reader. All of those writing the Declaration were white men and they all had slaves. They also were rich. So does this mean that the Declaration is only for rich white men? It seems so.

The structure and word choices in the Declaration worked to appeal to the men who were ready to sign the document. It could not appeal to everyone in the colonies though and the reason is because it excluded slaves and women.

## **Analysis**

Kiaisha began her essay with a thesis, which in this case is perfectly acceptable. She then wrote a five-paragraph essay, which is generally taught as the standard in our public schools even though this structure is almost impossible to find in any published writing. The question is

whether she supported her thesis and fully addressed the prompt.

The answer is that Kiaisha was only partially successful. The first three paragraphs are good examples of analysis. Her discussion of “self-evident” truths is insightful and interesting. Worth noting, however, is that this analysis could have been more significant had she linked these lines of the Declaration to Jefferson’s philosophy and to some of the important ideas that were current in the late 18th century. Doing so would, of course, require some research, but performing research is a reasonable expectation for any assignment.

The essay begins to founder in the fourth paragraph. It isn’t that what Kiaisha wrote is incorrect but that it isn’t clearly relevant to the prompt. When she identified the phrase “all men” as a bad word choice, she was viewing the document from our perspective rather than the one that was prevalent in the late 18th century. In the process, she ignored the fact that, when the Declaration was written, views on women’s rights and slavery were different from our own. Some research would have shown Kiaisha that the issue of slavery was a matter of significant concern to men like John Adams and John Dickinson. Adams never owned any slaves, and Dickinson freed his slaves in 1777 as a matter of conscience.

### **Jorge Gallagos (Grade 12)**

#### **The Declaration of Independence**

The first three sentences of the Declaration of Independence use figurative language, word choice, imagery, and/or structure to contribute to the reader’s reaction. In stating that “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the Declaration makes it clear that a reader must accept the Declaration. Anyone who doesn’t is clearly unable to see or recognize what is self-evident. So if the reader agrees with the statement they will feel good about themselves and the reason is



because that they recognize what is self-evident, which not everyone can do.

When the Declaration states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, it also has an impact on the reader. The reason is because that anyone who denies the statement must deny God. This was important to people because everyone back then believed in God unlike today. What is a puzzle is that men are not created equal. Some are smarter or bigger or have more money than others. So they aren’t really equal. But it sounds good to claim that all men are equal because it makes us feel good to believe that we are. Also God granted certain Rights to us. The right to life and the pursuit of Happiness. This statement makes it difficult to support abortion because everyone even babies have a right to life from God. This impacts readers because some readers are for right to life and some are not. They are for abortions. These people then are violating the Declaration of Independence because they don’t believe in the right to life. And they are violating God’s will too. So I have shown how use figurative language, word choice, imagery, and/or structure contributes to the reader’s reaction.

## **Analysis**

Students are sometimes told, especially with regard to essay exams, that they should repeat the question in the first paragraph of their response. We see Jorge doing so in this response. The problem with this approach in this context is that the response lacks a context. It takes for granted that anyone reading the response knows the prompt. Stated another way, it assumes that the only reader of the response is the teacher. On this account, we can say that Jorge does not have a clear understanding of writing as a social action that aims to engage multiple readers.

In the second paragraph, Jorge's analysis is largely illogical. It does not follow that someone who denies the existence of "certain unalienable Rights" must also deny God. Jorge's willingness to question the statement that "all men are created equal" is positive because it lays the foundation for exploring what Jefferson meant in this context (e.g., that all men are created equal in the eyes of God), but he fails to follow through. Instead, owing to a misunderstanding of the text, he shifts to a discussion of abortion.

The last statement of the response is congruent with the opening statement. That is, just as many students are told that they should begin a paper by restating the central issue of the prompt, they often are told that they should repeat it at the end. Doing so is equally incorrect, however.

### **Melanie Shu (Grade 12)**

#### **The Declaration of Independence**

The Declaration of Independence is one of the most important documents ever written. The reason is because it not only started the process of America but it also served and still serves to inspire freedom everywhere. It does this because of its powerful language.

Part of the power of the Declaration is in the language. It states early on that it is based on God's will and his nature. Most people believe in God even if they call him by a different name. If the decision to break with England was supported by God anyone would be foolish to fight against it.

The most powerful part of the Declaration is the second sentence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This

is powerful because it states that no one is better than anyone else. If you are poor or oppressed these words can inspire you to fight for your fair share of everything. The image that God gave everyone certain Rights is also powerful. The reason is because many people think that some people are poor because they are unequal. But what the Declaration tells us is that that isn't the case. We are all equal and some people are poor because of social injustice and oppression.

Given these God given Rights everyone has the right to liberty and happiness. That means that rich people don't have the power to keep poor people poor. You are free to do what ever you want to be happy. That means that you can change society so that you get your fair share. These words inspire me to change society. It doesn't make sense that some people in this country have billions and billions of dollars and other people starve and live on the street. No one should be allowed to have so much money. The Declaration tells us that we can be better than that.

### **Analysis**

Melanie's response is in many respects similar to the previous two. It displays a lack of understanding of the Declaration and an inability to analyze the text. Whether or not we accept Melanie's statement that "The image that God gave everyone certain Rights is also powerful," we want to know why she thinks so. We therefore quite reasonably expect some analysis that sheds light on why the idea that "God gave everyone certain Rights" is powerful. But this analysis is not forthcoming. Instead, Melanie drifted into social issues without linking them directly to God and rights.

The last paragraph is also problematic because the right to "liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" does not grant the right to "do what ever [sic] you want to be happy." Melanie has

clearly misunderstood the text here. Moreover, she falls into a logical contradiction. If it were the case that we have the right to do whatever we want to be happy, then some of us have the right to become billionaires. Melanie's statement "No one should be allowed to have so much money" is incompatible with her perspective on freedom.