

**MIAMI UNIVERSITY  
BEST OF PORTFOLIOS 2003**

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# port • fo • lio

1. a hinged cover or flexible case for carrying loose papers, pictures or pamphlets
2. a set of writings on various and sundry topics chosen to show a writer's best work
3. a cool way to earn college credit

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1990, Miami University became the first institution of higher learning to award students college credit and advanced placement based on a collection of their best high school writing. Few universities across the country present first-year students with the opportunity to receive advanced credit by submitting a portfolio; Miami's program is unique, and we hope you take advantage of it.

The Miami University Portfolio Writing Program was established by Laurel Black, Don Daiker, Jeffrey Sommers, and Gail Stygall in order to value and encourage high school writing and to provide a fairer way of evaluating it than the standard timed placement examinations. The success of the program owes much to the continuing support of Keith Tuma, Chair of the Department of English; former Chairs, Dianne Sadoff and C. Barry Chabot; College Composition Director Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson; and former Directors, Diana Royer, Jennie Dautermann, Mary Fuller, John Heyda, Susan Jarratt, and Max Morenberg.

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## INTRODUCTION

*I am a gymnast. Since the age of four I have been swinging on the high bar, jumping over the vault, and throwing myself across a long narrow stretch of mat in the most creative floor routine I can muster. Along with my heroic efforts, however, have come a long line of physical injuries. Several sprained ankles, popped wrists, dislocated shoulder blades, mild concussions, bloody hands and feet. . . you get the idea. Injuries are so commonplace for me that the local emergency room keeps my card in what they term the “frequent flyer” file. Yet through it all I remain dedicated to my sport. Why? Every time I compete I improve; I learn something about myself and the particular apparatus that I simply did not know before. It is stressful yet exhilarating in the same moment.*

*As I view the pile of papers that I hope to turn into a viable portfolio, I realize that my athletic endeavors have much to do with my academic ones. Attacking a new piece of writing is much like putting together a new routine for any of the gymnastic events. I start with what I know, consider more sophisticated techniques to make the routine a standout piece, and listen carefully to my coach (teacher) to learn how my efforts might appear to my judges (audience). A great gymnastics routine, like a great piece of writing, is in constant revision.*

Michael Middleton, Reflective Letter

Michael Middleton’s vibrant extended analogy, comparing writing to gymnastics, aptly conveys the complexity, energy, and tension of the writing process. He describes both activities as sometimes heroic, humorous, or humiliating. Writing involves energy and practice, risk and creativity—like launching oneself “across a long narrow stretch of mat in . . . [a] creative floor routine.” Writers struggle with their apparatus—pen, paper, computer, language, experiences, ideas, forms and genres, the needs of an audience and of the assignment. Like a gymnast, a writer strives to integrate all these into a smooth and balanced performance, so graceful that it seems almost effortless. That’s the goal, but writers, like gymnasts, often fall short or crash. Just as in gymnastics, learning how to keep writing and revising despite the bruises requires a sense of humor, motivation to continue, and the ability to listen to and learn from reader feedback, other writers, and a writing coach. The writer and writing are, as in Michael’s words, “in constant revision.”

The ideas of growing as a writer and improving writing through revision are central to the first-year Composition Program at Miami University and the Portfolio Program. A portfolio provides incoming first-year students not only with the opportunity to demonstrate their skill and depth as writers now but also their potential growth as future college writers. Miami University values writing instruction at the college level, but recognizes that some students are already writing at a very high level and can benefit from submitting a portfolio for credit. Over the last 10 years we have averaged 300-400 portfolios submitted for credit out of entering first-year classes of about 3000 students. Over these years, about 40-50 % of portfolios submitted earned either 3 or 6 hours of credit.

We encourage students to submit portfolios as early after admission as possible so that they may learn whether they have earned credit for some or all of the two course, first-year composition sequence. We now accept portfolios from January 1 to July 8. All portfolios are evaluated by at least two readers who teach first-year composition according to a six-point scoring scale (the 2003 Scoring Guide is reprinted in the Appendix). A portfolio rated “very good” or “excellent” (“5” or “6” on the scoring scale) earns six credits in college composition and completely fulfills the university writing requirement. A portfolio rated “good” (“4” on the scoring scale) earns three credits in college composition as well as

advanced placement into English 113. A portfolio rated “3,” “2,” or “1” on the scoring scale means the student will enroll for two semesters of college composition. In 2004, students will learn the results of their portfolio within three to four weeks of submission. (See the 2004 Portfolio Submission Information at the back of this book.)

*The Best of Miami University's Portfolios 2003* consists of three complete portfolios and selections from twelve others. A complete portfolio consists of four pieces: 1. A Reflective Letter introducing the author and the portfolio; 2. A Narrative or Short Story; 3. An Explanatory, Exploratory or Persuasive Essay; and 4. A Response to a Text. There are three student samples for each of these categories. Each section, as well as the one containing complete portfolios, is prefaced with an introduction explaining why Portfolio Committee members evaluated it so highly.

The process of creating a writing portfolio involves selecting and revising pieces, as well as thinking about how the selections fit together to demonstrate the writer's skill and knowledge of writing. The following portfolios and essays were chosen for *The Best of Portfolios 2003* because they exemplify the processes of careful thinking and revising, which lead to pieces that address a specific audience and achieve a purpose with articulate voice and style. For example, in her Reflective Letter, Julia Nayfeld dramatically conveys her struggle to compose her portfolio as she describes its contents. In the Narrative or Short Story category, Lindsay Stolberg's "Dedicated to Life" is actually a poem that tells the story of who she is in a distinctive form. Nicholas Delphia's Explanatory, Exploratory, or Persuasive Essay, "Doctor Dirtyhands: Antiseptic Discoveries of the Nineteenth Century," demonstrates the persuasive power of research effectively integrated into a clearly articulated and logically arranged argument. In her Response to a Text, "The Most Important Things," Lindsey Lewis provides a close textual analysis of Li-Young's poem "Persimmons," while also developing a thoughtful reflection on the growth of a bicultural sensibility. Complete portfolios by Michael Middleton, Anna Minnis, and Aftyn Wise represent, from the 2003 submissions, overall excellence in writing and compiling the portfolio. These exemplary essays and portfolios in *The Best of Miami University's Portfolios 2003* offer a myriad of approaches to writing, but should not be used simply as templates or models. We hope these pieces challenge future writers to explore dynamic styles of writing and new subjects.

While creating a portfolio requires an investment of time, the endeavor is worthwhile not only for the potential it affords of earning college credit but also for the valuable writing experience it promotes. Students will likely be required to compile portfolios in college. Portfolios encourage authors to approach texts with an eye to revision and permit readers to experience the many facets of a particular writer's abilities. *The Best of Miami University's Portfolios 2003* is meant to encourage all writers to produce and submit what they feel is their best work.

In composing your portfolio and in your college writing, we hope that you will agree with Michael Middleton that writing requires energy, persistence, motivation, risk-taking, and constant revision. We hope that you see writing as a lifelong endeavor and that you keep writing—in college and beyond.

Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson  
Director of Composition for the Portfolio Committee

## REFLECTIVE LETTER

*The reflective letter, addressed to Miami University writing teachers, sets the tone for the portfolio, introducing not only the writer but the individual pieces as well. Readers are not expecting a narrative of your experiences and growth as a writer, but rather, evidence of the critical reflection used in assembling and producing the portfolio. To that end, most useful letters explicitly introduce the pieces and explain the purpose and audience for each piece. Both creative and more traditional letters of introduction are acceptable.*

In many ways, writing the reflective letter which opens each submission to Miami University's Portfolio Program can be the slipperiest writing task we ask of applicants, not least because it is the only element you must compose from scratch. The rest can be culled from your prior work. Oh sure, you have to revise and refine and mind your *p*'s and *q*'s, but in most cases you won't be required to compose something entirely new. You'll be able to dig around in that old trunk (or desktop) and find something that, with a little sprucing up, should be serviceable.

How can you keep from sliding off track while still writing a letter that readers whom you have never met will enjoy reading? A lot of students handle this by sticking to the straight and narrow; they play it safe. That's okay, but it's not likely to get you noticed. The reflective letter is also your calling card. It comes first in the portfolio. It's the first thing that teachers see when they start digging through those piles of submissions. And everyone knows that first impressions are important.

To add to the writer's difficulties, a reflective letter is supposed to perform a number of functions, and these don't necessarily fit easily together. A good reflective letter has to introduce the writer to her audience while also contextualizing the writings that follow and offering some sort of rationale that supports her selection. It needs to grab the reader's attention and make him want to read on, but it should also be economical enough that it doesn't overshadow the work to come. Maybe a good reflective letter is a little like a good emcee, able to throw down the crucial info with verve and style without upstaging the acts soon to take center stage. All three of these writers make the most of their time in the spotlight.

Julia Nayfeld's letter starts with an honest admission: putting together her portfolio was something she wasn't exactly dying to do. Some career counselors might say this is a bit risky: after all, don't you always want to put your best foot forward in a piece like this? Julia turns conventional wisdom on its head by taking us through her portfolio-assembly process and showing us how this activity turned out to reward her in ways she didn't foresee.

Process turns out to be a recurring theme in Julia's letter. Soon we learn that "The Sound of Silence," her personal narrative describing her encounter with the Tikochin killing fields in Poland, was constructed from scraps of "a reflective journal" in which "some pages contain[ed] random words... whereas others consist of neatly written poems." Clearly, Julia is no stranger to the hard, gradual work necessary to produce superior writing.

This is no less true of her exploratory piece "Learning to Read and Write Russian: Easy as *Ras, Dva, Tree*." Here Julia once more walks us through the process of her work's construction but now she does so to highlight its personal importance. By writing her "I-Search" essay, Julia says she learned things about herself that she "otherwise would have never learned."

Mary Rossetti takes a different tack. She builds her letter around a quote from Einstein that, she believes, informs all of the pieces that follow. By introducing a complex concept at the outset—the gap between the individual's perception of the world and the thing-itself—Mary shows a level of intellectual ambition that impressed her readers.

She devotes two paragraphs to interpreting the Einstein quotation, showing an appreciation for the complexity of large, abstract ideas as well as a genuine concern for the perceptions and values of others.

Jenna Sauber's letter takes the most radical approach. She begins by claiming "I am Laura Ingalls, chasing my dog Jack across the endless Kansas prairies." Soon, she morphs into other women: authors and heroines of famous tales. These incarnations, each only a sentence long, serve to embody her powerful drive toward self-identity and expression through the twinned acts of writing and reading. For Jenna, "Becoming an author was never a dream; it has always been a reality."

For more examples of successful reflective letters, see the Complete Portfolios at the end of this collection.

## REFLECTIVE LETTER—JULIA NAYFELD

Dear Miami University Writing Faculty,

Each day for the past two weeks I have written myself a memo in my daily planner to remind myself to assemble this writing portfolio. Each day, I procrastinated and put it off. Finally, as the deadline approached, I forced myself to sit down in front of my computer and began the tedious task of sorting through every piece of writing I had written during the past four years of high school. To my surprise, what I had thought would be a boring, time consuming activity—rereading old papers—turned into a positive experience. I was thrust into the past. Nostalgically, I reread letters to long time friends and a myriad of my unfinished poems. After two hours, I closed the last document and leaned back in my chair, drumming my fingers against the keyboard, not knowing how to choose one piece over the other. My goal in compiling this portfolio is to illustrate my growth as a writer through a variety of works. But seeing as I am very critical of my writing, I did not think anything I had ever written was up to par. Glancing at the calendar hanging on my wall, I realized that I did not have the sufficient time to write three new pieces. I compromised by writing one new piece, “The Sound of Silence,” but simply revised my other two writings.

It was not a difficult task to choose which piece I wanted to write from scratch. Having returned from Poland just two weeks ago, where I toured five concentration camps, I had not yet had the time to truly reflect on the horrors I had seen. Throughout my trip, I kept a reflective journal. However, there was no structure to it. Some pages contain random words which described the way I was feeling at the time whereas other pages consist of neatly written poems. I decided that it would be therapeutic for me to read through my journal and attempt to describe a particular episode. Thus, after several hours of reflecting on my trip, I decided to write about my experience at the Tikochin killing fields.

The response to a text that I chose is a piece I wrote in reaction to Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*. Though I find all of Shakespeare’s writing to be intriguing, *Hamlet* is my favorite play. In my English class, we examined the play from many different angles. By utilizing an eclectic collection of study aids and addressing a range of themes, I feel as if I went one step beyond a simple reading of the play. My English teacher took the time to explain the psychological aspects of the play, applying Freud, as well as sociological perspectives to the work. I feel as if my response to *Hamlet* effectively displays my comprehensive understanding of the work as a whole, as well as my ability to objectively reflect on a given piece of writing.

My most personal piece of writing in the portfolio is the exploratory piece, “Learning to Read and Write Russian: Easy as *Ras, Dva, Tree*.” This piece is a compilation of excerpts from a much longer writing assignment, the I-Search. One of the requirements each senior at my high school must meet in order to graduate is to successfully complete an I-Search paper. Although the I-Search must include a variety of research, it is research about some aspect of your own life. Having emigrated from Russia at an early age, I fully assimilated to the American lifestyle in a matter of six months. I failed to learn to read and write Russian at an early age and lately I have regretted it. Thus, the I-Search presented the perfect opportunity for me to reexamine my heritage, genealogy, and ultimately learn to read and write Russian. The six-month long process of writing and researching the paper was a very emotional period for me. I had to navigate through personal family history and deal with unfortunate life circumstances, such as my elderly grandpa being hospitalized. In writing this piece, I learned things about myself that I otherwise would have never learned.

When I write it is with the intention of having each piece of my writing offer the reader a small glimpse into my life. Larry L. King, author of *None But a Blockhead: On Being a Writer*, said: “Good writers are in the business of leaving signposts saying: ‘Tour my world, see and feel it through my eyes; I am your guide.’” I hope that the works in this portfolio demonstrate my growth as a writer; but above all, I hope that after reading my portfolio, the reader can confidently say that I am able to express myself through the art of writing.

Sincerely,

A Future Redhawk

## REFLECTIVE LETTER—MARY ROSSETTI

Dear Miami University Writing Faculty,

I would like to begin my letter of reflection with a quote I read over the Internet, attributed to Albert Einstein, which ties my three pieces of writing together: “A person experiences life as something completely separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. Our task must be to free ourselves from this self-imposed prison, and through compassion, to find the reality of Oneness.”

This quote shows how in life we can never fully separate ourselves from our own perceptions. We live inside ourselves and experience our own senses and emotions individually. In doing so, we each create an “optical delusion of consciousness” because of our inability to detach ourselves from the world each of us uniquely creates. This quote suggests that our task, maybe the meaning of life, lies in seeing the differences between our personal reality and the actual reality experienced by mankind as a whole.

The quote’s message is that through compassion—by opening our heart to others—we can begin to realize how complicated each individual person is, yet how we are all connected. Through these connections, we catch a glimpse of the “self-imposed prison” we create by perceptions that may be faulty or self-centered. Compassion shows us that our perceptions are only fragments of the actual reality of oneness since each person sees and experiences life in different ways.

It is my hope that each of the writing pieces I am submitting will illustrate my growing understanding of this concept. For my narrative, I chose “Address to the 2003 Graduating Class” which I wrote in order to try out for speaker at my upcoming graduation. The focus of this narrative is how high school has shaped our lives to date and will continue to do so in the future. Although I was not selected as one of the four speakers, I enjoyed the exercise of putting my feelings about the significance of the high school experience into writing.

For my Exploratory Essay, I have submitted my research paper entitled “*A Beautiful Mind: An Analysis of John Nash and the Origins of Schizophrenia.*” This piece explores the differences between genetic and environmental causes of schizophrenia using the example of John Nash, the protagonist of Sylvia Nasar’s novel *A Beautiful Mind*. This piece directly relates to my interest in psychology and how people’s altered perception of the world can influence their behavior over the course of their lives. John Nash is an extreme example of the effects of altered perception in that his inability to connect with reality on the most basic level almost robbed him of his brilliant intellect.

For my response to text, I submitted “Comparison of the Jazz Singer Bessie Smith and the Protagonist from the Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*” Both Janie, the protagonist from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the famous jazz singer Bessie Smith were black women who came of age in the 1920’s. This essay examines how each of these women, one fictional and one historical, overcame the confines of their individual backgrounds and the restraints placed on them by society to achieve self-awareness. They each discovered their inner voices through external influences through music in Bessie’s case and through experiences with men in Janie’s case.

It is my hope that by exploring the concepts presented in my portfolio that I have moved closer to perceiving the “reality of Oneness.”

Sincerely,

A Future Miami Student

## REFLECTIVE LETTER—JENNA SAUBER

Dear Miami University Writing Professors:

I am Laura Ingalls, chasing my dog Jack across the endless Kansas prairies. I am Anne of Green Gables, attempting to bleach my freckles with lemon juice. I am Jo March, penning tales of adventure to pay for my family's food during a civil war. I have been all of these characters and many more, living their lives, dreams, and experiences. I am Ann M. Martin, creator of the beloved *Babysitters' Club*. I am Jane Austen, weaving intricate romances between unlikely couples. I am Elizabeth Barrett Browning, transferring my emotions to paper through moving sonnets. I have been all of these authors and numerous others, immortalizing myself by means of paper and pen, fulfilling my urge for creative expression.

The very first time someone read to me I was hooked. To me, the lives of three little pigs, a cat in a hat, and Peter Rabbit were more exciting than my own, and I wanted to be a part of them all. I was reading chapter books by the time I started first grade, and had already begun my own book series, about two girls who were best friends. I devoured all the books I could get my hands on, regardless of their content. If medical journals were all that my mom had lying around, then I'd read them. I had a spiral notebook full of stories that I would start and never finish. I dove into the genre of poetry at age twelve and am still at it. Recently, I collected fifty of my poems together into a chapbook based on my experiences in love. Becoming an author was never a dream: it has always been a reality. It is the path I have taken naturally, and I have never thought twice about a different career. I love literature, and I love being able to express myself with the written word.

The pieces I have chosen for this portfolio strongly reflect who I am as a person, as well as my writing personas. "Crabs, Cajuns, and Comfort" is a story that conveys my strong family ties, cultural background, and lighthearted nature. Written as a loose frame-story it shows how the little experiences in my life have impacted who I am today and what I value most in life.

"All the World's a Stage" is one of my favorite expository pieces because of the subject. My love of Shakespeare allowed me to focus fully on *Hamlet* and what it has to offer. My interest in movies and entertainment made this comparison and contrast paper enjoyable to write because I was actually intrigued by the topic. Combining two of my interests was a fun assignment, and I believe it reflects my attention to detail and the meanings behind the play.

It is often hard to respond to a written text because there are so many different topics one could address, and within a topic, many different analyses. In "Value of Life," my response to Albert Camus' *The Plague*, I found that various characters corresponded to my own ideas and values. Questions about the existence of an afterlife and one's purpose on earth not only form the topics of debate for Camus' characters but are questions I ask myself as well. I share uncertainties about religion and life's destiny with Camus' Dr. Rieux and Jean Tarrou. These questions in common make "Value of Life" an essay that both reflects the person I am and foreshadows who I am capable of becoming.

I am Anne Frank, writing straight from the heart and hoping to change the world. I am Madeline L'Engle, combining fantasy and reality into one. I am a girl, writing because it is my greatest passion. And because it is the only thing that makes me feel like *me*.

## NARRATIVE OR SHORT STORY

*This piece can be based on personal experience as a non-fiction narrative or can be a short work of fiction. Its aim is to communicate the significance of an experience or event through description, dialogue, and/or narration. Put another way, successful pieces “show” rather than tell. The writing can be personal and informal. This narrative or short story should have a title.*

Non-fiction essayists may change dates and names, and fiction authors may create entire universes from scratch, but no matter what the genre, successful writers capture the truth of the human condition. Though very different in form and style, each of the following works details events and characters that have a certain clarity and authenticity...that have a certain “truth.” Successful submissions in this category often explore the power of language, make use of scene, and engage or challenge the reader.

Though Elisabeth Glass’s “My Mountain” is a personal narrative, the piece borrows from both poetry and fiction. The author manipulates punctuation and sentence length to control pacing, causing the narrative to read faster or slower in order to mirror the very race that is being described. For example, when describing swimming strokes, commas—“Pull, kick, pull, kick,”—are used for speed, and periods—“Pull. Kick. Pull.”—are used when the swimmer is slowing down. To bring the scene to life, Glass uses vivid imagery, involving several senses, like the “sandpaper” feel of the starting block and the screaming of her teammates. Finally, the author uses just enough foreshadowing to earn the satisfying twist in the conclusion.

One of the early lines in Paul Ricard’s work of short fiction, “No More Tears,” reads “Oh my God...I’ve fallen asleep.” The narrator’s thoughts, along with an eerie setting description, quickly establishes conflict, scene, and mood. Tension is created through action, internal monologue, and foreshadowing. The character of Sarah makes an unlikely protagonist, and for some the story may be difficult to read. However, this author successfully provides a glimpse into the mind of a victim without proselytizing.

In “Dedicated to Life,” Lindsay Stolberg frames a personal narrative in the form of a poem. Each sentence in this piece does double-duty by both characterizing the narrator and creating vivid images that will resonate with most readers. For example, the line “a rubber band ball that really bounces,” recalls a common childhood memory. At the same time it tells us that the author didn’t limit herself to stereotypical “girl” toys; she might have been a bit of a tomboy.

For more examples of narratives and short stories, please see the Complete Portfolios section of this collection.

*Editor’s Note: Though not in prose form, “Dedicated...” still fulfills the portfolio requirements. Several “experiences or events” are described in enough detail, and with enough feeling, to show their significance, even though that significance may be implied.*

## NARRATIVE OR SHORT STORY—ELISABETH GLASS

### *My Mountain*

I dip my toes in—feels cold. My nerves rise up and spread like fire throughout my body while I watch—while I wait. Stomach hurts. All those butterflies clash and crowd. They come every time that I race—it never fails. There is so much noise—the splash of water, talking, yelling, whistling, cheering. Can't think. My body shakes and screams from the tension. Heart pounding, nerves tingling, every muscle contracted. Stop. Focus. Deep breath and close everything out. I shut my eyes and the turbulent world in which I am submerged goes black and silent. Coach says visualize the race. Visualize your ideal race. I visualize....

The one hundred fly—it is my mountain. This mountain is rocky, snowy, and steep, and that is why I love it. These ugly obstacles are exactly what make my mountain beautiful; the challenge and the difficulty of the climb make the ascent itself even more appealing. Over the speaker, the starter says dryly, “Heat four step up.” One foot at a time, I step onto the coarse block. Feels like sandpaper. Hope I don't slip. I take my stance. Both feet on the edge, toes curled over, clammy hands on my bent knees. I prepare to confront my opponent: the black line. I feel my face. Goggles on tight, cap in place. Waiting in silence. Face feels hot. “Women's one-hundred yard butterfly.” Get ready. “Take your mark.” I crouch like a tiger. I grab the block, knuckles turn white. Every muscle tight and anxious—ready to pounce. Feels like forever. Crowd is silent. *Beep*. I leap. Simultaneously, my arms go up into streamline position and I squeeze my ears with my arms. I enter the water. Cold. Kick, kick, kick, kick. Go, go. Fast. Kick, kick. Almost to the surface—way past the flags. Good. Water rushes past me. Cheering becomes a little more audible. I break the surface and spread my wings—pulling with full force. Pull, kick, pull, kick. Breathe. Rhythm, where's your rhythm? Pull, kick, pull, kick. Got it. Arms straining, hands pulling. Keep your fingers closed, don't let water through. Don't take it out too fast in the beginning. Remember: even pace, it's only the first lap. Pull, kick, pull. In a split second, I see the wall as I breathe—teammates cheering. Face back down into the cold water. Black line, water rushes past. Almost to the wall. Breathe—teammates cheering. Black line. Pull, kick, pull, kick. Touch the wall and go. Second lap—streamline. Kick, kick, kick. Past the flags again. Kick a little harder. Second lap should be faster. Go, go. Break the surface. Pull, kick, pull, kick. Faster. I shove the water behind me and kick forcefully. Coming up to the wall. Go, go. Touch and go. Push off the wall! Kick hard! Kick, kick, kick. Third lap is always the hardest. Legs are burning now. Past the flags again. Break the surface... pull, kick, pull, kick, pull. Slowing down now. Breathing almost every other stroke now. My arms burn—they feel full of lead. Come on, don't slow down. Pull. Kick. Pull. Approaching the wall—feels like an eternity. Teammates are yelling, screaming. Don't give up... push yourself! Almost to the wall... make this turn a fast one. Touch. Push off and go! Last lap now. Tight streamline. Kick as far out as possible. Good. Way past the flags! Give this all you've got. Breaking the surface. Pull, kick, pull, kick, pull. Faster. Burning sensation feels toxic now—taking over my shoulders, hips, and thighs. Joints are straining. Finish hard! Go! Almost there. Get your arms out of the water. Kick, kick! Just think: best time. Approaching the wall. Closer. I slam my hands onto the touch-pad. Perfect finish. Look... 1:09.18. Best time! Yes! Out of breath.

I open my eyes...back to reality. The race before me is just finishing. The starter says dryly, “Heat four step up.” One foot at a time, I step onto the coarse block. “Women's one-hundred yard butterfly.” Get ready. “Take your mark.” I crouch like a tiger. I grab the block, knuckles turn white. Every muscle tight and anxious—ready to pounce. Feels like forever. Crowd is silent. *Beep*. I leap.

*No More Tears*

The cold November wind blew loudly outside the small two-bedroom home. A tree branch fell up against the window and awakened Sarah with a start. Oh my God, she thought, I've fallen asleep. Sarah frantically ran into the kitchen and rummaged through the pantry, trying to find a meal that she could throw together. Nothing. She then remembered that she had planned to go to the store that afternoon before she must have passed out from exhaustion. All day Sarah had been cleaning the house from top to bottom, doing most rooms two or three times to make sure she didn't miss anything. How could I be so stupid, she thought, as she tried to find her keys. It was now 6:00 PM and her stomach began to feel the same queasiness it did everyday around that time. Sarah then remembered her keys were on the bedroom dresser and ran to the back of the house to retrieve them. She saw that the bed sheets were rumpled where she had been resting. Don't want him to know I was sleeping, she thought, as she made up the bed.

Sarah huddled deeper into her parka as she hurried out to her truck, but her coat was no match for the icy bite of the November wind. As she was driving down the street, her neighbor, Mrs. Anderson, waved but Sarah didn't see her as she sped past. Mrs. Anderson had been over a few times in the past year, bringing Sarah cookies, or a good book she had just finished. Sarah never had time to talk to her though, and Mrs. Anderson always shrugged it off as a lack of manners. Sarah checked the clock—6:45. Please God, she thought to herself, please not tonight. Please let him be in a good mood.

Sarah squealed into the parking lot at 6:50, rushing immediately to the meat counter at the back of the store. She chose the largest package of steaks they had and went off to find something to go with it, hoping she would have it ready on time. Passing the beer coolers, Sarah picked up a six-pack of Coors. It was a little pricey, but she knew it would be worth it if it made him happy. Sarah paid for the groceries with the last bit of money she had.

Braving the cold on her walk back to the truck, Sarah checked her watch again— 7:05, twenty-five more minutes, she thought. Her hands began to shake and she had trouble unlocking the truck. Focus, Sarah, focus, she told herself. Get a grip! You know what's going to happen if you mess this up.

Sarah was five minutes from home when suddenly, Bam! her tire blew when it ran over a pot hole. She swerved the wheel to regain control but the truck smashed into a nearby mailbox, mud and plastic flying everywhere. Sarah tried to put the truck in reverse but it just sank further into the mud. The truck was stuck and she was still over a mile from home. Sarah jumped out of the truck and stood next to it in the dark. "What do I do?" she cried, "What do I do?" Sarah checked her watch...it was 7:25. Sitting down in the front seat, she began to cry, waiting for someone to come and help her.

The AAA truck dropped Sarah off in front of her house at 8:30. The wind was still blowing tree branches against the bedroom window, and the moon looked down upon her from the safety of the sky. Sarah walked slowly up the steps, the grocery bags in her arms and the bill for the tow-truck in her mouth. She had been crying so much there were no more tears left. Sarah simply took a deep breath and walked in the house. He was sitting in his chair in the living room, smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer.

"Where the hell were you?" he yelled, as he stormed from his chair.

"I was in an accident and..." Sarah never even got the chance to defend herself.

She awoke the next morning in a hospital bed with her doctor looking over her.

"Your husband said the accident was quite serious, but we should have you ready to go home in a few hours." Sarah's husband looked down on her and smiled. She smiled back, but deep down inside she was already hoping she could put together a nice dinner, and tonight, make sure it was ready on time.

## NARRATIVE OR SHORT STORY—LINDSAY STOLBERG

### *Dedicated to Life*

I am from blonde ponytails and twirling party dresses,  
From leather seats and from the scent of public transportation.  
From all religions  
From all races

I am from the fruit stand on the corner, from the flies brushed away by an Asian man  
I am from East 30<sup>th</sup> Ave, between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>.

I am from the laces of pointed shoes and the burning stage lights, from the hum of a cheering crowd,  
from the perfect kicks of a chorus line. I am from stacks of proposals and rows of numbers, from multi-  
colored paperclips, from a rubber band ball that really bounces if you throw it, from a view of Hudson  
Bay, from Lady Liberty.

I am from an address my parents did not share.

I am from a white sailor hat, the sand, and salty sea  
From Tollbooth and hurdles. From a companion just my height, from never being right.  
I am from trying hard, from being scared, from always being right behind, from loving every minute.

I am from a tall, cold, moving truck, from the sting of cardboard box paper cuts, from hoping nothing  
material was left behind.

I am from a nose pressed against a steamy window of the gray Honda.

I am from good-bye.

I am from the sidewalk where riding a bike alone is allowed, from skinned knees, and Band-Aid brand to  
cover up the scrapes.

I am from two new additions that fight and hit, from the number changing to five.

I am from new spiffy shoes, from warm sweater-worn arms pushing me through the door. I am from  
lumpy paste and construction paper.

I am from the founding sisters, from playground gravel, and from snacks of juice and crackers, from  
Dixie cups with colored dots, from holding small thin hands, from Kleenex boxes, and from strawberry  
jam.

I am from long sleepovers, from covers pulled over frightened faces, from a baby doll hidden in the closet.

I am from blushing cheeks and secrets revealed, from long telephone conversations, from nosy questions.  
I am from an old Coke bottle spinning on the floor, from shaking hands and nervous laughs, from  
thudding hearts, from trying to act cool about it all.

I am from raging fights, from words not meant, from scratched out yearbook pictures, from a long letter,  
and from one I never wrote.

I am from the confusion of a double family, from cheeks hot with frustration, from a soft pillow. I am  
from eyes watering with aggravation, from pacing. I am from knowing no one understands.

I am from long lectures and aching hands, from squinting eyes, from an equation that can't be solved,  
from a date not remembered. I am from late nights, from seeing the sunrise above my computer.

I am from knowing no one, from feeling so intimidated I could cry. I am from Margaret, Natalie, and Claire, from laughing so hard my sides ache with joy. I am from a blue Explorer, from a wall my stepmother didn't see, from quickly leaving it all behind for a few minutes, from tasting how good food is when not at school.

I am from I don't want to wait, from Wednesday nights, from the WB. I am from an obsession with the Creek, from a storyline that sucks me in further each year.

I am from an alarm clock sounding the new day, from a twice-pushed snooze button. I am from the wonder of new experiences, from the craziness of family. I am from the chaos and beauty of living.

## EXPLANATORY, EXPLORATORY, OR PERSUASIVE ESSAY

*Generally speaking, essays in this category should be focused, informative treatments of specific subjects. This essay should provide much more than convincing examples of supporting data; it should examine multiple points of view and show strong evidence of critical thinking, awareness of audience, and attention to social context. If secondary sources are used, they must be documented correctly. This explanatory, exploratory, or persuasive essay should have a title. You may find that you've written an essay that fits this category for a class other than English.*

This essay often poses challenges for students since it is so widely defined. Past essays have included explorations of historical and/or political subjects, explanations of technical processes or persuasive commentaries on social issues. Essays should critically examine a subject thoughtfully and carefully but should not rely on the author's opinion alone if outside sources are crucial to the effectiveness of the argument.

Nicholas Delphia's "Doctor Dirtyhands: Antiseptic Discoveries of the Nineteenth Century" explores the scientific process and subsequent discovery of the antiseptic procedures used in the fight against germs. Nicholas outlines the discovery through the careers of three specific doctor/researchers: Ignaz Semmelweis, Louis Pasteur, and Joseph Lister. He argues that one researcher was overlooked in the origin of such a scientific discovery. Nicholas writes, "I also can't help but feel badly for Ignaz Semmelweis. Semmelweis made his discoveries nearly 20 years before Pasteur or Lister, but whom are we taught about in school?" This exploration concludes with an observation about the researchers' relevance to contemporary medicine, thereby supporting his argument with evidence demonstrating the continuing importance of the work of all three of the men.

In "To All Those Struggling to Believe," author Patrick LaFleur addresses the reader directly beginning with the title of his essay, creating a relationship with his audience in the understanding that believing in Santa Claus might be a struggle. One of the elements that stands out most in his essay is his use of repetition of his own personal statement of belief: he repeats "I believe in Santa Claus" and "I believe" in order to affect the reader with the importance of what he is asserting and the sincerity of his argument. This purposeful repetition, in the way of a vibrant preacher's sermon to his congregation, heightens the drama that LaFleur is using to bring his readers into the passion of his argument.

Finally, Amanda Staggs uses a bit of humor to introduce the reader to the issue of gun control in "Mommy, Can My Gun Have a Picture of Big Bird On It?" Styled after Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," Amanda uses satire to make her point, arguing tongue in cheek that guns should be made available to all, including children. She asserts that gun control laws would not be an issue if the use of handguns were to become an everyday activity, thus lessening the fascination with owning and using guns. Amanda describes what the future could look like if guns become available to everyone, using one of the popular arguments for the unregulated sale of guns: "Children will learn the proper way to use a gun at a younger age, and they will be able to use that gun more responsibly when they become adults. This is why I propose that children receive their first guns the day they start kindergarten. Each student would be responsible for his or her own gun, much like a vehicle owner is responsible for license plates. A class about guns would become a regular part of every student's day like gym or math." As is demonstrated in the quote above, Amanda constructs her argument using supporting evidence from the many sides of the gun control issue and provides "solutions" to how such a project may be enacted.

All the essays chosen for publication in this category represent ways in which the explanatory, exploratory or persuasive forms of writing can interest an audience by making connections, utilizing rhetorical strategies and playing with style through satire or familiar themes. For more examples of essays in this category, see the Complete Portfolios in this collection.

## EXPLANATORY, EXPLORATORY, OR PERSUASIVE ESSAY—NICHOLAS DELPHIA

### *Doctor Dirtyhands: Antiseptic Discoveries of the Nineteenth Century*

In early times, like today, people tried to find ways to explain things that they did not understand. There was a time when mice and rats were thought to have grown from cheese left in the corner, frogs were believed to grow from pond scum, and maggots were thought to come from rotting meat. By the nineteenth century, scientists had abandoned this theory (called spontaneous generation) as an explanation for the existence of visible animals, but not for diseases. Infections and illnesses were thought to have been caused by impurities in the air. Doctors did not understand the necessity of cleanliness when dealing with patients and were unaware that they could be transmitting diseases from one patient to another with their unwashed hands. Doctors in the mid-nineteenth century made revolutionary advances that influenced modern medicine. Three such men were Ignaz Semmelweis, Louis Pasteur, and Joseph Lister.

Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis was born in Buda, Hungary on July 1, 1818. Although he was born in Hungary, his family was of German origin. Semmelweis traveled to Vienna in the fall of 1837 and enrolled in medical school. His father had wanted Ignaz to study law, but shortly after he arrived in Vienna, Ignaz was attracted to medicine. At the age of twenty-five he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Vienna in 1844. Later on that year he earned his Master of Midwifery. Once he received his Master's degree, he applied for and was given the position of Assistant in the Lying-in Division of the Vienna General Hospital (Wilson).

The Lying-in Division was where poor or unwed women often came to have their babies. Childbirth was not a safe thing in those days. The Vienna General Hospital, along with most hospitals of the time, had many women die from an infection that was called endemic childbed fever. Childbed fever is also known as puerperal fever. Ignaz Semmelweis was a deeply sensitive and humanitarian man. He devoted his life to finding a way to control this deadly infection.

The hospital had two obstetrical clinics, each averaging about 3,000 deliveries per year. Semmelweis tabulated the deliveries and deaths for each clinic, month by month, for the period from 1841 to 1846. He found that the death rate from puerperal fever in First Clinic, where medical students were trained, was 9.9%. All the deliveries in Second Clinic were done by midwives. Second Clinic had a death rate from puerperal fever of 3.3% (Wilson). Semmelweis was disturbed by the fact that one clinic could have three times as many deaths as another. Semmelweis found it particularly disturbing that in 1847, when he had been in charge of First Clinic for over a year, the death rates from puerperal fever remained just as high.

Semmelweis attacked the problem from every angle imaginable. By 1847 there was no doctor in Vienna with greater knowledge of puerperal fever than Ignaz Semmelweis. He had learned all that the current information allowed, but was unable to come up with a theory until he happened to witness the peculiar circumstances of the death of his friend, Dr. Kolletschka. Dr. Kolletschka worked with Semmelweis in the hospital and was his former teacher. Early in 1847 Kolletschka cut his finger with a scalpel during an autopsy. The wound became infected and Kolletschka died from it. Semmelweis studied the reports of the death and his friend's autopsy. The reports stated that after the cut, Kolletschka had developed lymphangitis and phlebitis in his finger. The infection then spread, and he developed pericarditis, pleurisy, meningitis, and peritonitis. A couple days before he died, he developed an abscess in one of his eyes (Wilson). These basic symptoms of infection were exactly the same as those of the women that Semmelweis had seen die of puerperal fever. Semmelweis was struck with the notion that puerperal fever must be contagious.

Semmelweis theorized that the cause of Dr. Kolletschka's infection was what he called "cadaveric particles" (Wilson). He reasoned that the particles entered circulation in Kolletschka through the cut on his hand. The particles entered all the victims of puerperal fever, Semmelweis reasoned, through the hands of medical students who had done vaginal examinations after contaminating their hands during

an autopsy or examination of a woman with puerperal fever. He also realized that bed sheets or instruments could be transporters of infection. Semmelweis's hypotheses were eerily similar to the germ theory that would not arise or be taken seriously for a couple of decades.

Once he felt that he knew how to prevent the disease, Semmelweis instituted a policy of hand washing. All doctors or students that entered the wards to make examinations had to initially wash their hands in a chlorinated lime solution, and then wash them in soap and water between individual examinations. During the first full year of the experiment, the deaths due to puerperal fever dropped to 1.27% in First Clinic and 1.34% in Second Clinic. Semmelweis's 'doctrine,' as his method was called, divided the faculty of the hospital. Professor Klein, head of obstetrics, was against it altogether. Professor Skoda, head of chest diseases, wanted a commission to evaluate the effectiveness of Semmelweis's methods. Klein prevented this from happening, and refused to renew Semmelweis's contract when it expired in March of 1849. Disgusted, Semmelweis left Austria and went to Hungary where he was made head of the obstetrical service at the St. Rochus Hospital in Pest. He then conducted an extensive trial of his methods over the six-year period of 1850-56. He achieved a mortality rate of just 0.85%. In 1855 he became Professor of Midwifery at the University of Pest. There he conducted another study where he achieved a death rate of 0.39% (Wilson).

As soon as he was confident in his doctrine, Semmelweis spent the rest of his career promoting it. In 1861, Semmelweis published a 543-page document called The Etiology, Concept, and Prophylaxis of Puerperal Fever. Semmelweis was not very successful at convincing other institutions to use his methods. The fact that other doctors called his methods unsound was particularly distressing to Semmelweis when he considered that these same doctors were losing up to 25% of their patients to a problem that Semmelweis had all but eliminated among his own patients. The many years of preoccupation with defending his methods eventually caused Semmelweis to go insane. He was admitted into a sanatorium for mental disorders where he died of an infection very similar to that of his friend, Kolletschka. In 1865 Semmelweis died at the age of forty-seven (Wilson).

Part of the reason why Semmelweis couldn't get his methods accepted might have been that he could not actually prove what caused the infection, or why it was contagious. Where Ignaz Semmelweis failed, Louis Pasteur succeeded. As a young man, Pasteur had been an able artist (some of his pastels can now be seen in museums), but science was his true passion. Pasteur ignored his father's advice to pursue mathematics, and as a young man he left his riverside home for Paris to study physics and chemistry (Angel and Birch 18).

Like Semmelweis, Pasteur was frustrated by the theory of spontaneous generation. It was believed by the supporters of spontaneous generation that as long as oxygen was present, organisms could randomly start to appear. Pasteur disproved this with his famous experiment using broth and a unique bottle. Pasteur put various broth-like food sources in bottles that had a long, thin tube for a neck. The necks of these bottles bent down and then curved back up again, much like the trap on a modern drainpipe. The curving tube allowed air to enter and exit the bottle freely, but dust and other particulate matter was trapped in the dip of the tube. In April of 1864, Pasteur demonstrated the results of his experiment to a crowd of 500 in the auditorium of the Sorbonne, a university in Paris. He showed them that although air could freely enter the bottles, no mold or fermentation of any kind had occurred in over a year. This was, of course, a difficult experiment to argue against, and still is. Today, one hundred and forty years later, some of Pasteur's original bottles remain untouched by bacteria (Angel and Birch 38). Through his experiment, Pasteur was able to disprove spontaneous generation, and demonstrate that particles in the air caused fermentation. All one had to do was break off the neck of one of his bottles, and the broth would go bad in a matter of days. These results, like Semmelweis's, supported the theory (called the 'germ theory') that diseases are caused by microbes.

If the discoveries of Semmelweis and Pasteur were merged together, the result would be Joseph Lister. Lister was born in Essex, England, to a Quaker family. His father was a wealthy wine merchant and his mother was a schoolteacher. Like Pasteur, Lister was a good artist. His father had hoped that Lister would pursue art, but biology was Lister's real passion (Francoeur 129-30). Lister received his

Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1852. While working in hospitals, Lister noticed that the only injuries that became infected were those involving some sort of break in the skin. Lister reasoned that infections must be caused by something entering the broken skin. In 1865, the next big hint came when a chemist at Glasgow University, where Lister was Professor of Surgery, told him about Pasteur's swan-neck bottle experiment (Francoeur 130).

Pasteur's experiment demonstrated that fermentation was caused by microbes in the air. Lister reasoned that the same microbes that caused fermentation could be causing wound sepsis. Lister also noted that an engineer named Crooks had removed the smell of sewage (thought to have been caused by fermentation) by adding carbolic acid to the sewage (Kandela). Lister began to institute a new method in which wounds were dressed with bandages soaked in carbolic acid and then wrapped with foil (Francoeur 131). Surgeons' hands and their instruments were also washed with carbolic acid solution. Using this method, Lister drastically reduced death rates. Like Semmelweis, Lister had to fight to get his methods accepted. Unlike Semmelweis, Lister gained acceptance and recognition within his own lifetime.

The phrase that continually popped up in my head as I was gathering information was *stubborn, close-minded doctors*. The refusal of Semmelweis's peers to accept his methods, despite their high-patient death rates and his low ones, is sickening. All the evidence was right there in front of them. Any person with a scientific mind should have been able to accept Semmelweis's methods after seeing the evidence. Instead of admitting that their traditional beliefs were wrong, Semmelweis's peers preserved their egos while letting countless patients die needlessly.

I also can't help but feel badly for Ignaz Semmelweis. Semmelweis made his discoveries nearly 20 years before Pasteur or Lister, but whom are we taught about in school? Pasteur or Lister. I am not saying that Semmelweis made more important discoveries, or even that he was a better scientist. I just feel that when teaching about antisepsis, it is unfair to mention the discoveries of any one of these three men without then mentioning those of the other two.

I understand why Semmelweis doesn't get the same recognition as Pasteur. Semmelweis could only explain his theory with the results of this experiment. Much like many European nations won't believe that Iraq has "weapons of mass destruction" until the U.S. actually finds some, Semmelweis's peers wouldn't believe that puerperal fever could be spread by particles until he could show them the particles. Pasteur's swan neck bottle experiments proved the existence of those particles.

I don't want to criticize a man that has done as much for modern medicine as Joseph Lister, but I do feel that Lister's use of antisepsis was much less of a leap than Semmelweis's. Lister had the work of Pasteur and Crooks from which to form his own hypothesis. Ignaz Semmelweis drew his assumption from pure scientific observation and experimentation. Although I do feel that Semmelweis has not received the recognition he deserves, I still believe that all three men, Semmelweis, Pasteur and Lister, were revolutionary scientists whose world-changing discoveries will not soon be forgotten.

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## EXPLANATORY, EXPLORATORY, OR PERSUASIVE ESSAY—PATRICK LAFLEUR

### *To All Those Struggling to Believe*

So you don't believe in Santa Claus. It's understandable. We find ourselves in an age of pure skepticism. We question everything. Science has taken hold of our lives, providing answers for all questions and dismissing anything that cannot be explained as either myth or fiction. So it's quite understandable why you don't believe, with no physical proof of his existence. It's indeed understandable to lose sight of Father Christmas with the transformation of this holiday into one that, as of late, is used commercially as a lucrative crutch solely to make profit. It's understandable to abandon Santa Claus after hearing countless people deny his very physical or even spiritual existence. After all, one tends to believe something if it is repeatedly reported as true. But, let me tell you something, something that may lead you to quite a spectacular, fulfilling life.

I believe in Santa Claus.

"Why," you ask, "position yourself only to be disappointed upon realizing that all you hold as true is in fact false?" I will tell you that I grew up believing in Santa Claus—the jolly, old, fat man who annually descended the chimney with his endless sack of treasures. I will tell you that I still believe that Santa Claus exists, despite being told otherwise by both parent and peer. I will tell you not only that Santa Claus exists, but that he exists in you and your family and your friends and every person who gives a little extra in any way thinkable.

I believe. Every year, as the air becomes dry and the ground sparkles with the fluffy white of the snow, I see in the eyes of those who surround me a beard of white and a suit of red. I see society morph as the last month of our year pays its toll. Generosity rises with the growth of the eternal Jesse Tree or the pile of donated food or unwrapped gifts in grocery stores or the hallways of the local school. With the wreaths and Yule logs that come standard with this holiday comes a caring from deep in the hearts of people unbeknownst to them at any other time of the year. At the sight of the Christmas decor and the flames roaring at the hearth, a warmth envelops the heart, one with which no flame, however hot, could compete. We see in our gift-wrap and our greeting cards and our holiday stockings an entirely new persona occupying this world we live in, relieving us from the daily heartaches we all know as familiar. Santa Claus must exist. How else would you describe this change in the way humans interact during these otherwise dreary winter months? Santa Claus is the catalyst of human goodness, sparking within us a genuine care for our neighbor, bringing us together for this wonderful season. Think of a world without Santa Claus!

While your intelligence is gnawing at the lack of proof (the absent shred of red cloth torn by the fireplace or the nonexistent cookie crumbs leading from the tree up the chimney), I believe even still, just as millions upon millions believe in some type of god. As you deny Santa Claus on the grounds of no proof, I accept him on those same grounds. Who are we to deny something we cannot understand and therefore cannot explain? No amount of persuasion can convince me that Santa Claus does not exist through people who celebrate Christmas, just as Christians believe Jesus exists through them today, or Allah through Muslims or Yahweh through Jews. These groups mirror an otherworldly being by believing in and embracing the ideals those deities represent. Now, do not be confused; I am not suggesting we worship Santa Claus as a god, for he is not. Instead, we should better society by acknowledging a charity clearly greater than that which we can show ourselves. By following the example set by the being known as Santa Claus, we only add to his existence, creating not only one, but many Kris Kringles to grace the world we call our own, making a better home with a finer heart.

No doubt about it, Santa Claus exists, as surely as love or devotion or generosity. As doubt creeps in, creating a world in which people watch out only for themselves, we lose sight of what Christmas

is truly about. Forgetting the being of Santa Claus only makes us slight the kindness on which this holiday is based. Not believe in Santa! You may as well not believe in the very gifts laid under the tree on Christmas morn. Without your faith, Santa Claus would be nonexistent. There would be no yearning in your soul to give of yourself to others, no example to follow. Thank God, Santa Claus exists and exists forever, lightening the heavy heart as the sight of the snow blankets the soul and defines the heart of childhood.

The modern person believes upon seeing. Perhaps, one sweet day, far ahead, believing will be seeing once more. I'm lucky though; I can see Santa Claus every day, in each and every one of you, through the words you say and the moves you make, and I know you'll see it, too, someday.

Sincerely,

A Lifelong Believer

## EXPLANATORY, EXPLORATORY, OR PERSUASIVE ESSAY—AMANDA STAGGS

### *Mommy, Can My Gun Have a Picture of Big Bird On It?*

If the second amendment to the United States Constitution clearly states that, “The right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed,” why do our lawmakers constantly debate the topic of weapons? Radical Democrats wish to make all guns illegal, meaning only policemen and servicemen would be equipped with guns (“Mission”). Radical Republicans (i.e. Charlton Heston), on the other hand, wish to place no restrictions whatsoever on guns, making semi-automatic and fully-automatic guns available to everybody living in or visiting the United States, without a background check or profile of the gun buyer (Heston). It seems that every time a terrible crime is committed in the United States involving a gun, the debate about gun control flares up again. The Columbine massacre and other school shootings, shootings at churches and in the workplace, the serial sniper near Washington D.C., and rises in gang activity are all examples of such events that have sparked debates in Washington.

Both sides, Democrat and Republican, have good points, but they are far from a solution. Radical Democrats have reason to want to eliminate guns from America because every year in America thousands of people are injured or killed by a firearm. It is also true that in the early 1990s there were an estimated 200 million privately-owned guns in the United States, and to try and confiscate all of those guns would be ridiculous (“Gun Control”). Radical Republicans have the 2nd amendment on their side in their quest to make all guns legal and unrestricted. They don’t have practicality or the safety of the country on their side, however. The release of fully-automatic guns into the public would only increase the number of people killed in rampages like the one at Columbine High School, because it is very unlikely that a gun that shoots numerous bullets in a short period of time would ever be used for practical hunting purposes (“The Assault Weapons Ban”).

I propose a solution somewhere between the aforementioned extremes. Guns won’t be taken away from everybody, but the current laws preventing the sale of semi and fully automatic weapons will remain in place. I am not proposing that things stay the way they are today. The fact that only a percentage of the population owns a gun makes America unsafe for the percentage that doesn’t own guns. As I’ve already mentioned, taking guns away from the common person would be against the Constitution, and it would give the military the authority to create a military state. I instead propose the opposite. I propose that every man, woman, and child in America be supplied with a gun and the training required to use it. Every person will receive a .22 caliber pistol and a hunting rifle. There will, of course, still be laws regarding guns. It would still be illegal to shoot a gun at a person, and all guns would be required to have child safety locks. No illegal immigrants would be supplied with guns either, for fear they would take them back to their own countries and use them to kill.

Advances in the behavioral sciences have taught us that children learn foreign languages better at a young age. I feel, that with enough study, we will find the same theory to be true with guns. Children will learn the proper way to use a gun at a younger age, and they will be able to use that gun more responsibly when they become adults. This is why I propose that children receive their first guns the day they start kindergarten. Each student would be responsible for his or her own gun, much like a vehicle owner is responsible for license plates. A class about guns would become a regular part of every student’s day like gym or math. Every student grades K-12 would be required to spend at least three hours per week in a class meant to improve their shooting ability, and to learn the proper way to handle and clean a gun, and how to use a gun responsibly. Once out of school, every citizen will be required to take a test every other year to make sure they are still a good shot, and they still understand how to responsibly handle a gun.

You may be asking, “How is supplying every citizen in the United States with a gun going to

help this country?” Well, it’s going to help this country a lot, with internal and foreign affairs, as well as with the economy. I’ll talk about the economy later, but now I’m going to focus on internal and foreign affairs. If every citizen is equipped with the same gun, everybody would be afraid to commit a crime for fear of being shot. No banks would be robbed because every patron, security guard and teller in the bank at the time of the robbery would have a gun and any one of them could shoot the robber at any time. The same is true of robberies at convenience stores, jewelry stores, and any other store that would be robbed. Gang activity would decrease, because every gang member would have the same gun and the same shooting skills, so it would be harder for a gang member to pull off a drive-by or a murder without getting hurt or killed themselves, and they would realize that their own lives are more important than any revenge that they need. Rampages like the one at Columbine High School would no longer go unstoppable for long lengths of time, if they occurred at all. With every student at the school carrying a gun, it would be easier for one of them to permanently stop the crazed gunman. In international affairs, supplying every citizen with a gun is also a big plus. The United States would almost certainly be guaranteed protection against invasion by a foreign country. No army could outnumber the army of the American people. With every citizen equipped with a gun and the skills to use it, a foreign army wouldn’t stand a chance. Not even Saddam Hussein would be stupid enough to invade a country with an army of 283 million people.

The introduction of guns as a daily tool would greatly affect the economy. New stores dedicated to selling guns would spring up across the country, and gun specialists would be hired to work at chain stores such as Wal-Mart, Sears, Target, and even Macy’s. The manufacturing and selling of guns would become a billion-dollar industry in America. The style of guns on the market would range from the basic kindergarten model to the platinum, jewel-encrusted million-dollar gun owned by billionaires such as Bill Gates. Accessories including decals, holsters, and decorative covers to go over the guns, much like the faceplates sold for cell phones, would be sold everywhere. These accessories could come in all styles, including *Sesame Street* for younger kids, *Power Rangers* for older kids, pink leopard print and camouflage for teens, velvet for the opera crowd, leather for corporate types, and, for the dedicated soccer mom, a model could be personalized with the name and colors of her child’s team. Automakers could also get into the game by offering gun racks as extras on their cars. I’m sure that there are several other things that people will come up with to sell; the possibilities are endless.

Giving a gun to every citizen of the United States is the only way to make our streets safe. It is also a very good way to stimulate the economy and prevent against foreign invasion. It may even save your life.

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## RESPONSE TO A TEXT

*This essay should respond to a written text (short story, novel, poem, play, or essay) or a cultural text (film, music, or visual art) produced by professionals, classmates, or yourself. The response should interpret or evaluate all or part of the text. Possible approaches include analyzing textual elements, explaining the text's significance, comparing the text to other texts, relating the text to personal experience and/or connecting it to larger social or cultural contexts. Use support from the text to develop ideas and strengthen the focus without overshadowing your own response or giving extensive summaries. If secondary sources are used, they must be documented correctly. (If the print text is not common, a copy of it should be included with your portfolio.) This response to a text should have a title.*

Zachary Taylor's "Reflection on the Human Condition" begins by connecting Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men based on an overarching theme of human struggle to overcome adversity. In his essay, Zachary is able to present how he sees Steinbeck exploring this theme in the context of larger social or cultural issues. Specific to his discussion of Of Mice and Men, Zachary demonstrates through the use of textual evidence and critical analysis how Steinbeck reveals the complicated relationship the United States has had with its mentally disabled citizens. Connecting both of Steinbeck's texts, Zachary shows how each portrays the economic and political problems between employer and employee in America. Finally, Zachary concludes his essay by illustrating how the Dustbowl could also be considered a social issue that impacted how Americans related to one another.

In her essay "The Most Important Things," Lindsey Lewis develops a thorough analysis of Li-Young Lee's poem "Persimmons." Lindsey describes the impetus for Lee's poem by explaining that "The poem begins with a painful memory from the speaker's sixth grade classroom where he was slapped on the head and commanded to sit in the corner for not knowing the difference between the two words 'persimmon' and 'precision.'" She points out that Lee writes "Persimmons" in order to describe the larger socio-cultural issue of Lee's bi-lingual, bi-cultural American status. By recalling the specific, painful images recreated in the poem, Lindsey shows how Lee reveals the difficulties of living as an ethnic minority in America. She also provides textual examples to show the reader how Lee has learned to manipulate the English language with "precision." As a framework for constructing her essay, Lindsey consistently returns to what she considers Lee's "sensory imagery," "precise diction" and "informal stanza[ic] structure."

In "Social Ladder: The Poor Against the Rest," Bonnie Harris argues that social institutions such as the church and school create economic distinctions that thwart social mobility among the characters of Angela's Ashes. Paying attention to the complexities involved in an analysis involving social class, Bonnie organizes her essay around Frank's interactions and experiences with the Catholic Church and his local, church-sponsored school. Bonnie uses specific textual examples and quotes to describe the ways in which Frank is discriminated against based on his poverty, showing how economic institutions such as the church and school influence the more fortunate to feel justified in chastising and acting violently toward the poorer classes.

## RESPONSE TO A TEXT—ZACHARY TAYLOR

### *Reflections on the Human Condition*

John Steinbeck's novels The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men reveal and confront the struggles of common individuals in their day-to-day lives. The Grapes of Wrath creates a greater verisimilitude than Of Mice and Men as it illustrates the lives of Oklahoma farmers driven west during the Dustbowl of the late 1930's. Of Mice and Men deals with a more personal account of two poor men and the tragic ending of their relationship. Steinbeck expresses his concern for multiple social issues in both The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men. Tightly-knit relationships appear prominently in both books and provide the majority of the conflicts that occur. The decency of common people is written about to a great extent in The Grapes of Wrath and is also prevalent through numerous examples in Of Mice and Men. As in all effective writing that bares the soul of the author, each novel reveals Steinbeck's core beliefs.

In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck uses the relationship between George and Lenny to express the decency of common people. Lenny is mentally disabled and George is his companion because Lenny is too incompetent to live on his own. Throughout the book, it becomes increasingly apparent that Lenny is incapable of interacting appropriately with people (other than George) without unknowingly causing some sort of trouble. Even George is sometimes overcome with the hassles of taking care of Lenny. "‘God, you're a lot of trouble,’ George said. ‘I could get along so easy so nice if I didn't have you on my tail. I could live so easy and maybe have a girl’" (7). Yet, George looks beyond the ways in which Lenny irritates and inconveniences him and realizes that Lenny is as human as he is. He believes that regardless of Lenny's disability, he should be treated as respectfully as anyone else. Contrary to his earlier remarks, George has great affinity for Lenny. George understands that Lenny necessitates a watchful-eye, and he is willing to be that caretaker. Ultimately, if George did not love and care about Lenny, he would have most likely abandoned him. However, George's fundamental decency did not allow him to do this.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the overall struggle of the Okies, while on their mass exodus to California, is Steinbeck's platform to examine human beings' innate goodwill. The Okies are treated as if they are an inferior race to all, especially by California farm owners. However, they have done nothing to deserve this defamation. They were hard workers from Oklahoma and would not have traveled to California if the Dustbowl had not devastated their own land. Nevertheless, they are looked upon as people less worthy, much like Lenny was in Of Mice and Men. Despite their treatment as impoverished barbarians, Steinbeck writes about their civility and grace under pressure.

The common decency of humans in The Grapes of Wrath appears multiple times in interludes of narration that are not present in Of Mice and Men. In one such chapter (Ch. 14) two men, who have both lost their land and are camping on Route 66, meet and come together. These men have lost almost everything they had and would be perfectly justified in fearing one another due to their desperation. Yet, the decency of the men brings them together. They take strength in numbers, "for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one" (151). One of the men has no food and the other only has a little, but together they share a small amount of food, and the situation is improved.

In Of Mice and Men, several social issues are explored: two prominent themes are society's interactions with mentally disabled people and the relationship between employer and employee. When George and Lenny first come to the vegetable fields, George attempts to conceal Lenny's disability by stating that as a young boy Lenny was kicked in the head by a horse. George does this not because he is embarrassed or ashamed but rather to preserve the dignity Lenny deserved as a human. Steinbeck also addresses the stereotype that disabled people cannot make a contribution to society. This misconception is disproved early in the novel when Lenny's brute strength and speed assist him greatly while working on the farm.

The relationship between land owner and field worker is examined in Of Mice and Men but is not displayed by as many examples as it is in The Grapes of Wrath. In Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck is specific and singular with the owner of the farms. There are not a great number of conflicts between the owner and George and Lenny, but the power that the owner has over them is apparent. The foreman regulates George and Lenny's lives. At this time, the owners of such farms were able to monopolize workers because of the scarce amount of work and the plethora of readily available employees. Food, shelter, and decreasingly small wages were exchanged for intense labor and minute personal freedom. Steinbeck, however, did not explore this theme in Of Mice and Men as extensively as he did in The Grapes of Wrath.

In The Grapes of Wrath, the relationship between the employer and employee was more severely strained than that in Of Mice and Men. Not only was there not as much work to go around as was publicized, but those who did work rarely earned enough money to stave off the eminent threat of starvation. Also unlike Of Mice and Men, the workers were becoming increasingly organized in their demands for better wages and living conditions. The formations of potential unions were a threat to the employers who abused their workers. These sections of the book illuminate Steinbeck's contempt for the corrupt employers and the police who helped them.

Other social issues that are detailed in The Grapes of Wrath are natural disasters and their effects on the people who experience them. The Oklahoma drought-ridden land caused the Joads to move to California and leave their lives behind in the wake of the Dustbowl. This act of horrific weather introduces the novel and another catastrophe concludes it. With the coming of heavy rains at the end of the novel, Steinbeck shows how the weather can hold everybody's attention, with hope and fear.

The women watched the men, watched to see whether the break had come at last. The women stood silently and watched. And where a number of men gathered together, the fear went from their faces, and anger took its place. And the women sighed with relief, for they knew it was all right-the break had not come; and the break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath. (434)

John Steinbeck's novels The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men serve as a platform to express his beliefs on important issues. While exploring the human condition, Steinbeck revealed his reverence for the sheer strength and perseverance of common people. He illustrated the decency of common people and what they can accomplish when they join together. In each book Steinbeck emphasized and explored various social issues involving labor conditions, natural disasters, and the treatment of people who were deemed outsiders.

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*The Most Important Things*

The speaker in Li-Young Lee's poem "Persimmons" has been clearly raised in a bi-lingual, bi-cultural atmosphere. His experiences, although not entirely positive, have helped him grow into the man he is today. By using sensory imagery and "precise" diction along with the informal stanza structure, the speaker shows the reader that, despite his bi-cultural past, he now has realized, thanks to his experiences, that some of the most important things are not "visible" and that he is indeed proud of his ethnicity.

The poem begins with a painful memory from the speaker's sixth grade classroom where he was slapped on the head and commanded to sit in the corner for not knowing the difference between the two words "persimmon" and "precision." Immediately the speaker's attitude is that of confusion. The next stanza, however, proves that he does in fact know the difference between the two words. The speaker shows his understanding of "precision" in choosing the diction to describe how to choose and eat a persimmon. The words "soft," "sweet," "sniff," "suck," and "swallow" all alert one's senses. The alliteration further proves the speaker's "precision." The speaker then leaves the reader with a feeling of fulfillment after having explained how to "peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat" of the persimmon. The speaker's attitude, like the reader's, is proven here to be that of gratification, too. Although he suffered through rocky situations in the past because of his bi-cultural upbringing, he has proven that he has overcome these experiences by clarifying his present knowledge of the difference between "persimmon" and "precision."

The next stanza further proves he has overcome his hardships by introducing "Donna" whose "stomach is white." The image of her "white" stomach implies that she is not Chinese like the speaker, while at the same time demonstrates that his "bi-lingual, bi-cultural" lifestyle has ceased to burden him. For he then even attempts to "teach" Donna Chinese, but cannot remember certain words. He does, however, remember "to tell her she is beautiful as the moon," which is not a typical compliment an American male would give. In this stanza, the speaker's Chinese heritage is actually coming in handy, a thought that probably never crossed his mind when he could not differentiate "persimmon" from "precision."

The speaker's attitude here of gratification is further demonstrated through imagery. Once again, the imagery, like the diction, is sensory. In the sentence, "I gave him persimmons, swelled, heavy as sadness, and sweet as love," the reader can imagine, by the use of a simile, exactly what the speaker is trying to make us see. Other images that can be easily captured are the last lines, "the texture of persimmons, in your palm, the ripe weight." The speaker also provides the reader with the color of the persimmon by comparing it to the sun. When he says, "my mother said every persimmon has a sun inside, something golden, glowing warm as my face," he is trying to help us visualize exactly what this specific fruit looks and feels like. All of the information the speaker provides further proves his complete understanding of his past misconceptions, which thus show his attitude of contentment through recognition.

The gradual flow from stanza to stanza is very natural. Each stanza has an idea that leads to the next. There is no specified rhythm; it just flows by itself. Somewhat like peeling a persimmon, the reader peels until he/she gets to the "sun" inside. The whole poem is past experiences up until the present, last, italicized stanza. The past experiences that lead up to the last stanza represent the peel and the present confrontation with his father while his realizations about life represent the meat or "sun." For when the speaker finds a painting his father had painted and shows it to him, his father says, "I painted these hundreds of times eyes closed. These I painted blind." Thus the "sun" of the poem is revealed. His

father further states, “Some things never leave a person: scent of the hair of one you love, the texture of persimmons, in your palm, the ripe weight,” implying that the most important things in life will stick with one forever. One thing that will never leave his son, the speaker, is his “bi-cultural” heritage.

The fact that this is the last stanza and the italicized font demonstrate that the speaker has come to an understanding of this realization and that he is okay with it. Even though his “bi-cultural” lifestyle had brought him some hardships in the past, he has overcome them and now appreciates his heritage. Through the use of “precise” diction, vivid sensory imagery and a natural flowing stanza structure, the speaker in Li-Young Lee’s poem “Persimmons” has literally showed the reader how his attitude has developed over time from confusion, to contentment to deep gratification. The speaker has also helped the reader understand that sometimes in life, the most important things are not things we can “see,” but are rather things we can feel.

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## RESPONSE TO A TEXT—BONNIE HARRIS

### *Social Ladder: The Poor Against the Rest*

As Jerome K. Jerome once said, “It is easy enough to say that poverty is no crime. No; if it were men wouldn’t be ashamed of it. It is a blunder, though, and is punished as such. A poor man is despised the whole world over.” This famous quote describes the way poor people are discriminated against and despised around the world by those who are better off. In the novel *Angela’s Ashes*, by Frank McCourt, the characters are greatly discriminated against by all different parts of society because of their poverty. This makes their constant struggle to survive even harder and prevents them from climbing to the next rung in the social ladder. The poor are discriminated against and held down by the church, school, and their fellow impoverished neighbors, as well as the rest of the world around them to the point where they often give up trying to get out of poverty all together. Shockingly, the place where the McCourts are most discriminated against is the one place where they should feel wanted, loved, and equal to those around them, the Catholic Church. Frank McCourt, the main character who was a young teenager at the time, had the door slammed in his face by the Catholic Church on at least two occasions because of his poverty. The first time he is turned down by the church, Frank’s quest is to become an altar boy. The priest declares that the church is not looking for any more altar boys. However, the real reason Frank is turned down is because of his poverty. Angela, Frank’s mother, is infuriated and exclaims, “I’ll tell you what it is, ‘Tis class distinction. They don’t want boys from lanes on the altar. They don’t want the ones with scabby knees and hair sticking up. Oh, no, they want the nice boys with hair oil and new shoes that have fathers with suits and ties and steady jobs. That’s what it is and ‘tis hard to hold on to the Faith with the snobbery that’s in it” (Mccourt 184). Angela recognizes the class distinction and is depressed by it because if the church will not accept their poverty, who else will? The second time that Frank is turned down by the church, he is attempting to study for the priesthood. Both his teachers and a librarian have told Frank’s parents that Frank is destined for the priesthood so they decide that he will study to become a priest. He is turned down once again and once again Angela is infuriated and declares, “That’s the second time a door was slammed in your face by the Church...You are never to let anybody slam the door in your face again. Do you hear me?” (365). Even though the McCourt family is poor, no one can take away their pride, something that Angela is trying to teach Frank when she orders him not to let people ‘walk all over him.’ The fact that this happens not only in the world but in God’s house leaves the family with little hope of ever being respected or viewed as people worthy of a descent life. Angela feels that she is discriminated against by God because she is poor, and it is with great sorrow that she says to Bridey, “Bridey drags on her Woodbine, drinks her tea and declares that God is good. Mam says she’s sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn’t been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick” (179). Angela feels that not only the church, but God, is holding her back in life because she is poor. As a result of the discrimination that they face in the church, the McCourts lose both their respect for and faith in the church and God.

Like the church, the poor are also discriminated against in the school system. While the wealthy children are enrolled in elite, private schools where they wear crisp, clean uniforms, the poor go to a school run by the church where most of the children do not even own a pair of shoes. The conditions of the two different schools also reflect on the education that each school system supplies. The rich children get a good education whereas the poor children are abused by their teachers more than they learn from them. The poverty-stricken children learn from an early age to take the back lanes to school so that they

are not made fun of by the children that go to the rich schools. The wealth of children ultimately determines what they are to do when they are older and what their position in society will be. Frank explains the system:

The Christian Brothers' boys... We know they're the ones who will get jobs in the civil service and help the people who run the world. The Crescent College boys... We know they're the ones who will go to university, take over the family business, run the government, run the world. We'll be the messenger boys on the bicycles who deliver their groceries or we'll go to England to work on building sites. We know that... Ye have no right to raise your hands to a better class of people so ye don't. (343)

This class discrimination in schools is evident to children when they are at an early age, so that by the time they are older, they give up the dream of ever rising to a higher social status knowing that whether they try or not, they will always fail. Their positions in life are already determined before they are born. The school system holds the children back and they are discriminated against as they are told that no matter how hard they try, they will not succeed in life.

Neighbors, as well as other people in general, also discriminate against and taunt the McCourt's because of their poverty. The most shaming moment of Frank's life occurs when he is forced to carry home a pig's head from the butcher shop for his family's Christmas dinner because they could not afford anything else. Frank describes the humiliation he is forced to endure on the long walk home: "Boys from Leamy's National School see me and they point and laugh. Aw, Gawd, look at Frankie McCourt an' his pig's snout" (119). Frank is being made fun of by boys at his own school who are in some cases even poorer than he himself is. Boys also torment Frank at his school when he and his brother Malachy are forced to tie rubber from tires to the bottoms of their shoes to plug up the holes and to keep the shoes from falling to bits.

The poor are also discriminated in their jobs. Paddy, a neighbor boy, has a dream of going to India and being in the army. When Frank gets wind of his dream he says, "But, Paddy, would the quality of India talk to you if they knew you were from a lane in Limerick and had no shoes? Course they would, but the English quality wouldn't. The English quality wouldn't give you the steam off their piss" (201). The children have already learned that people in life will not even give them a chance to succeed in life. The way the McCourt's are discriminated against by the people of the world in general makes one wonder what they had to live for.

The poor are discriminated against and held down by the church, school and their fellow impoverished neighbors as well as the rest of the world around them to the point where they often give up trying to get out of poverty all together. The church will not allow them to be in any sort of position in the church, namely altar boys or priests. The school holds them back by putting them into filthy, run-down schools and teaching them very little while drilling into their minds the fact that no matter how hard they try, they cannot succeed in life. Unfortunately, even their neighbors hold them back by discouraging them to try anything in order to succeed and making fun of their impoverishment. The discrimination that they face daily holds them back and eventually stops them from even trying to succeed and better their lives. As Jerome K. Jerome once explained, the poor will be discriminated against, snubbed and despised the world over.

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## COMPLETE PORTFOLIO

Michael Middleton's reflective letter is an extended metaphor comparing his writing to his gymnastic endeavors—an approach earning him points not only for the difficulty of the maneuver, but also the flawlessness of its execution. Here is no stale repetition of a tired theme, but a series of fresh, critical inquiries into the nature of his abilities as a writer—his “routine” which he states “is in constant revision.” His descriptive piece, “A Salve’s Sleight,” caused something of a sensation among our panel of judges for its risk-taking legerdemain. His mood becoming more somber, the essay “Beyond the Jungle” looks at portrayals of lesbian lifestyles in Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* and asks the important question: are they compatible with our modern-day culture? Finally, while Middleton acknowledges his readers’ alleged weariness with responses to *Hamlet*, he is confident enough in this literary finale to flex his critical muscles upon this time-honored text, anyway—with great success. This savvy display of audience awareness, combined with Middleton’s evident ability to perform to different styles and moods, leaves us no choice but to award this athletic young writer with a well-deserved score of “10.”

The first line of Anna Minnis’s reflective letter seems a startling opening gambit for a submission to a writing portfolio committee—she tells her readers that she does not truly enjoy writing. Nevertheless, she writes persuasively and powerfully in a number of genres, cleverly handling the craft she claims to fear. In “Conversing with the Moon,” she shows the incongruity of ancient and modern day life side by side in the city of Salzburg, Austria, highlighting the sensory details of buzzing scooters and clip-clopping horseshoes to transport her audience abroad with her. Her explanatory essay, “The Media: Dividing Our Future,” is a frank and unsettling argument about the current derogatory portrayal of African American men on national television. The personal anecdote she shares at the start of this essay creates the effect that Minnis intended—we become as worried as she is about the “ramifications” of her young students’ belief that “television is a good representation of reality.” Finally, her response to Tim O’Brien’s novel, *The Things They Carried*, is a cogent explanation for the lingering guilt and depression felt by soldiers who have experienced the loss of a comrade-in-arms, citing repeated textual evidence from the book to construct a strong argument. Clearly, this portfolio presents readers with a writer who can maneuver her way through diverse writing tasks.

Aftyn Wise tells us she came to writing through an expatriate’s felt sense of dislocation. “I’ve always had this inexplicable sense that I’m out of place,” she says, and therefore turned to writing stories. This early experience stands her in good stead in the short story, “A Sunless Day,” capturing the oppressive heat of an Italian summer afternoon with metaphoric detail: “the sun only a hope somewhere, a pale thumbprint, a mistake of a splotch.” Wise’s choice for the persuasive essay is a self-consciously literary one, contrasting the motivations of neo-classical and pre-romantic authors. This savvy piece features sophisticated sentence structures, a disarmingly broad vocabulary, and a mature and developed understanding of the way in which literary movements inform and influence one another. Lastly, Wise examines the canonical *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, wading into the enduring fray that surrounds the ostensibly racist novel, striking a few blows for realistically representative dialogue and the power of historical fiction to drive certain unpleasant truths home to young readers. This collection of writing might well be considered a credit to any writer of any country—we’re glad she’s ours.

## REFLECTIVE LETTER—MICHAEL MIDDLETON

Dear Miami University Writing Teachers,

I am a gymnast. Since the age of four I have been swinging on the high bar, jumping over the vault, and throwing myself across a long, narrow stretch of mat in the most creative floor routine I can muster. Along with my heroic efforts, however, have come a long line of physical injuries. Several sprained ankles, popped wrists, dislocated shoulder blades, mild concussions, bloody hands and feet...you get the idea. Injuries are so commonplace for me that the local emergency room keeps my card in what they term the “frequent flyer” file. Yet through it all I remain dedicated to my sport. Why? Every time I compete I improve; I learn something about myself and the particular apparatus that I simply did not know before. It is stressful yet exhilarating in the same moment.

As I view the pile of papers that I hope to turn into a viable portfolio, I realize that my athletic endeavors have much to do with my academic ones. Attacking a new piece of writing is much like putting together a new routine for any of the gymnastic events. I start with what I know, consider more sophisticated techniques to make the routine a standout piece, and listen carefully to my coach (teacher) to learn how my efforts might appear to my judges (audience). A great gymnastics routine, like a great piece of writing, is in constant revision. What was good enough at the start of the season just might not stand up to a more critical audience later on. And the injuries? How many times I have hit that “wall” when trying to create something special! Thus, I submit to you what I consider to be some of my very best writing efforts—bumps, bruises, and sprains included. The first piece is a narrative that I designed to express my frustration after an early morning band practice. Much like a run at the vault, it is fast yet full of energy, taking the reader through the angst that develops when routine task falls into uncontrollable chaos. Next, the explanatory/exploratory/persuasive essay is a longer, more arduous attempt at analyzing a piece of literature in terms of its relevance in the classrooms of today. I was surprised by my own reaction to *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and tried to express my emotional response to this controversial novel in an honest, yet well-supported format. I liken this work to my floor exercise routine, in that it is built upon sound structural requirements, yet filled with unexpected twists and turns. Spectators often react to the height I achieve in my flips on the floor; I tried to reach new heights in my writing with this very difficult piece. My final submission is that *Hamlet* paper that I know fatigues your committee, but to me is a work in which I take great pride. My goal was to assess what the play is *really* about; I forced myself to push beyond simple plot and character development. Like my final high bar routine of my high school career, I like to think that it is just a little different than other efforts.

Am I a great gymnast? No. Yet I try to learn and grow from every attempt that I make. And even though that journey of self-evaluation and gradual improvement is often a painful one, it is rewarding beyond words. In just the same way, my life as a writer is an athletic season that never ends. It is full of preparation and training, trying new techniques, taking chances, and daring to expose my efforts to the critical eyes of others. While I am certainly proud of my own efforts, I know that my potential is what I am truly exploring; there can never be a final product.

Respectfully submitted,

Writer in training

*A Salve's Sleight*

My trumpet felt cold against my palms as I lifted it from its softly padded case. Leaning it against the wall momentarily, it reflected a gleam of early morning sunlight streaming through the windows of the awakening band room. As I pulled the mouthpiece to my desperately chapped lips, its hard curvature found its home. Warming up with low, sultry tones, I slowly moved on to more vibrant scales. Yet my fingers involuntarily flinched at the resistance they met on the newly polished valves; I realized that my efforts were in vain. Reaching back into the dark case, I removed a tiny, translucent vial of oil. Nestling the trumpet gingerly on my lap, I began to remove each valve one at a time, struggling against the lock of moisture holding each in its place. The first of three in my grip, I attempted to open the precious oil with only one hand. The top of the vial, held in place partly by the crusty residue of my negligence, resisted my initial efforts. After much squeezing and gouging, however, it gave way, a burst of viscous fluid shooting across the instrument and onto my hands and shirt. I leapt to my feet, turning the chair on its side as the trumpet slid between my legs. Reaching for a savior, my hands groped along the music stands to my side in search of a cloth or towel. Finding none, my eyes were forced down by the oozing sensation of the liquid seeping between my fingers and onto my pants. Unable to stand the sensation any longer, I vainly attempted to wipe the substance from one hand onto the other, as though the sticky, oily residue would adhere to only one portion of my body. Failing at this attempt, I violently moved to rubbing my hands against the inside of my pant legs, now hoping only to relieve any part of this agony. Yet the sensation continued! Oozing, flowing, sticking relentlessly to fabric and flesh alike, the oil that would return my instrument to vigor was now stripping me of my sanity.

*Beyond the Jungle*

The growth of gay people as individuals and as a group has been astonishing. It is not possible to guess how exactly we will grow from our experiences in the years ahead, but it is possible to predict that growth will continue, one way or another. A diverse and strong global community has been established. We are here. (Clark 60)

Dr. Don Clark, clinical psychologist and university professor, boldly expresses his views on the changing nature of the gay and lesbian community in his text, *Loving Someone Gay*. Clark describes how far gay people have advanced in the last thirty years, moving from isolated and fearful existences to lives marked by political power and potential. Indeed, the gay community, and lesbians in particular, have transformed into large and respected forces in American culture. As with any societal group, their cultural contributions have continued to expand and develop along with their newly acquired political finesse, giving the gay community a sense of pride in its artistic and literary achievements. Since education is a primary source of transferring cultural understanding and awareness, it is essential that educational institutions respect the achievements of this newly empowered community in the selection of relevant curriculum. But they must also be careful; while many texts offer a representative portrayal of the gay community, there are others which reveal a more narrow view. For example, in 1973, author Rita Mae Brown published a shocking exploration of one girl's growing up lesbian in America. Creating images of rape, incest, and promiscuity, Brown portrayed a cold, angry character willing to blame her sexual identity on a dysfunctional family and an unyielding educational system. While uniquely American in both its authorship and perspective, *Rubyfruit Jungle* should not be included in a curriculum of contemporary American literature. Because the novel presents a portrayal of lesbianism that is far removed from current gay culture, it is not truly contemporary to the audience for which it was intended. To include it in such a curriculum would be an insult to the lesbian community of today.

When first introduced, *Rubyfruit Jungle* was a tremendous commercial success. Hailed by many as the ultimate lesbian novel of its time, it took a bold and bawdy look at the lesbian experience in America. The storyline moved quickly, tracing the experiences of Molly Bolt, a young southern girl who had been adopted by a severe, conservative mother and her more liberal husband. Brown's novel set a tone that was direct and controversial, and employed language that had never before been used in connection with the lesbian experience (Pela 2). The novel is uniquely American, as it traces Molly's young life from her earliest years in York, Pennsylvania, through a move to a small southern town in Georgia, and finally to the city of New York, where Molly feels as though she belongs. In each setting, Brown forcefully exhibits her craft by capturing not just the dialogue, but the mannerisms, biases, and cultural peculiarities of each locale. Molly's reactions to each move in her life reveal much, not just about her character and motivations, but about life in the latter half of the twentieth century. America began a shift toward a period of inclusion and acceptance of minorities and other subcultures in the 1960's (Ibieta 3), and Brown's character encounters the bigotry and racism that accompanied this shift in the national experience. However, Brown implies through her writing a love for America and its potential. Born and raised in this country, she prides herself in identifying those aspects of American culture that are in need of drastic change (DiStefano 2). *Rubyfruit Jungle* tells a story that captures the pain, heartache, and anger of an unrepresented minority scrambling to find acceptance and identity; it has meaning and purpose for the people sharing in this struggle at the time it was written.

Published in the early seventies, Rita Mae Brown's work was a largely autobiographical attempt to share the author's frustrations in being accepted as a lesbian (Pela 1); she was not necessarily determined to defend her sense of social injustice. Nonetheless, she created a character whose life virtually

mirrors her own. Tossed out of both the University of Florida and the National Organization for Women for openly displaying her lesbian lifestyle (Levy 2; Worth 1), Brown's protagonist is ejected from the University of Florida for the same transgression. Molly Bolt's "bastard" origins are the focus of the early chapters of the novel, and serve as an unspoken excuse for the conflicts she faces throughout her life. Brown's experience was nearly identical, shaping her views on the difficulty of an openly lesbian lifestyle (Levy 1). As Brown explained in a 1996 interview for *The Daily Mississippian*, "If you don't know where you came from, I don't think you know where you are going ..." (Worth 1). She believes that people gain identity from an understanding and acceptance of their roots, and to reject such understanding is to reject acceptance of the self. Yet the character of Molly finally surmounts life's obstacles to graduate Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude from New York University, parroting Brown's own academic credentials from the same university. However, the author blends these autobiographical moments with explicit scenes designed to titillate the reader. Seeking to provoke and amaze, Brown has her protagonist lose her virginity to a schoolmate at the age of twelve, hurl grapefruits at a naked man to pleasure him for money, and initiate forceful relations with a woman twice her age just to prove that the woman is indeed a lesbian. Rita Mae Brown created a novel with tremendous shock effect, and she enjoyed the publicity she received for doing so (Pela 1-2). Humorously dubbed the "lavender menace" by feminist Betty Friedan (Worth 1), Rita Mae Brown wrote a novel for her time and her need to make a raucous literary statement.

However, even though *Rubyfruit Jungle* was received as unique and unsettling upon its release, it is no longer valid to consider the novel contemporary. To create a viable canon of contemporary American literature, it is essential to question the concept of "contemporary." Authors and academics have struggled with the definition of this elusive term, many choosing to simply assign any novel to this category that was published after World War II (Carlsen 727). Others believe that a truly contemporary novel transcends its publication date, citing relevance and the ability for literature to reach its intended audience on a personal level as more appropriate criteria (Kiernan 1). Since *Rubyfruit Jungle* is an attempt to express the frustration of the lesbian experience in America, the latter offering seems more appropriate. Yet it is this very attempt that negates any labeling of the novel as contemporary. Written before the lesbian movement was an established force, before the onset of the AIDS/HIV epidemic, and before the development of an identifiable gay culture, the images created by the storyline of this novel are not only dated, but deleterious. As explained by Edgar V. Roberts in an introduction to his literary anthology, literature is a powerful force with an impact that must be weighed carefully. He states that:

Literature helps us grow, both personally and intellectually. It opens doors for us by providing us with an objective basis for knowledge and understanding.... It provides the comparative basis from which to see worthiness in the aims of all people, and it therefore helps us see beauty in the world around us. (1)

Roberts stresses the difference that literature can make, and alludes to its ability to influence cultural understanding. Particularly when representing a minority culture, it is critical for a contemporary novel to represent that culture as a progressive moving force: to do less is to undermine that culture's attempts to be recognized as a viable part of the larger culture. The gay community, facing social and political struggles of intense magnitude, deserves a literature that respects the dynamic nature of its identity.

Perhaps the most significant change in the gay and lesbian community since the publication of this novel is the onset of the AIDS virus. Identified in the mid-seventies, the first reported case of AIDS in the United States was not until 1981 ("Milestones" 1). By the end of the century, over forty-seven million people had contracted the virus, and of that number, fourteen million had died ("Global" 1). Today the virus is considered almost unstoppable, and has reached epidemic proportions throughout the world. Its impact on the gay community has been dramatic, shifting lifestyles, attitudes, and priorities. In

*Loving Someone Gay*, Dr. Don Clark describes the transformation that occurred after the onset of AIDS: When the AIDS crisis struck, we showed the world a remarkable ability to rally together quickly and effectively. In that brief twenty-five years, we made enormous gains in understanding ourselves as a group and as individuals, continuing tirelessly to demand our full civil rights in diverse communities and nations around the world. (58)

As Clark explains, the onset of AIDS changed the face of homosexuality forever in this nation, almost forcing the development of a politically motivated subculture. Yet the character of Molly Bolt makes life decisions in an era free from this ravaging epidemic.

Her character feels free to have indiscriminate sex with males and females with no regard for consequences or personal accountability, exhibiting open disdain for people unaccepting of her lifestyle. Brown creates a character whose only motivation is self-expression; she is free from the constraints, concerns, and dangers faced by contemporary gay culture. While Molly's motivation for independence and acceptance is certainly a universal one, her path to achieving these goals is a damaging representation of a bygone era. She is simply no longer a character who accurately represents a lesbian lifestyle in this country.

While Molly Bolt struggles in a world where lesbianism is essentially unknown, contemporary culture includes the lesbian community in its number of powerful political forces. From the introduction of the idea of political correctness in 1984 (Langer 2) to the successful election of gay candidates to state and national legislatures, the gay culture has come a long way in both visibility and societal impact. Far from ousting students from college because of their sexual identities, gay and lesbian alliances are flourishing on college campuses throughout the United States. Beginning in the late seventies, hundreds of gay rights organizations have been created to help in the fight for civil rights and legal reform (Bondi 336). Had *Rubyfruit Jungle* been set in a more modern, contemporary timeframe, not only would the character of Molly Bolt have been spared the humiliation of psychological evaluation and expulsion from college, but she would have had substantial legal recourse as a response had these actions occurred. The shock of lesbian sex, so prominent in the storyline created by Rita Mae Brown, has been replaced by contemporary concerns of adoption rights, same-sex marriage, and "gay gene" research (Zacks 1). *Rubyfruit Jungle*, while certainly an earnest examination of a young lesbian's identity crisis, fails to present a contemporary context for lesbianism in America. Such an antiquated view of lesbian culture promotes an inaccurate portrayal of a significant minority group and its values.

As an overview to *Redefining American Literary History*, Harold H. Kolb, Jr. describes a world that is becoming increasingly disinterested in the reading of literature. Kolb cites evidence of the declining number of literature majors in our nation's colleges and universities, and reveals the dominance of composition over literature courses in those same schools. He adds the disturbing fact that after high school graduation, over half of all graduating seniors simply stop reading books for pleasure (Ruoff 39). In the midst of such a decline, it is perhaps more important than ever before to select carefully those works which are to be included in a study of contemporary American literature. If students of secondary and post-secondary education are likely to embrace literature for only a short period of time in their lives, then they must be provided with a canon that has been carefully and thoughtfully constructed. Works included in such a study should capture the heart and mind of the individual reader, while effectively representing its intended audiences. These pieces must be evaluated and valued not solely by their commercial success, but instead by literary merit and cultural relevance. Thus, when a particular piece of literature attempts to speak for a well-defined subculture or minority, it must be accurate and hopeful in that attempt. As author Dorothy Allison in her essay, "Every Novel Is a Lesbian Novel," so simply and eloquently insists: "Books are still where some of us get our notions of how the world is, and how it might be" (qtd. in Miller 10). Contemporary literature has a responsibility to its readership, and that responsibility cannot be ignored. Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* is not only a misrepresentation

of the contemporary lesbian community, but it is a dangerous representation of a cultural stereotype that must be overturned. As Eleanor Randolph reasons in an article published in the *Art Journal* entitled “Feminism”:

Surely we better understand such representations when we examine contemporary views and practices of lesbianism; besides, merely to dismiss, ignore, or deride these perceptions is to ensure that lesbianism only appears through innuendoes of perversity, which are often deployed to discourage women from pooling their resources toward female empowerment. (3)

To express the search for lesbian identity through the uninhibited sexual antics of one young woman, as does Brown, is to undermine the cultural, political, and social power that this minority has fought so hard to establish. While it is unfair to demand a canon of contemporary American literature that views all factions of our culture through rose-colored glasses, it is both fair and justified to demand works that are honest representations of the voices they attempt to share.

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*Let Be*

As Hamlet approaches a waiting Ophelia, he begins one of the most famous soliloquies in all of literature with the immortal line: “To be or not to be—that is the question” (III. i. 64). Yet this obvious reference to suicide only scratches the surface of the heart-rendering conflict felt by the young Dane. Hamlet’s impetuous desire to take his own life is only an impassioned reaction to the heavy burden of revenge that his father’s murder has placed upon him. His greater struggle, and the focus of *Hamlet* itself, involves the questioning of the purpose and meaning of a life well-lived. The character of Hamlet pursues this knowledge through his manipulation of reality, his search for the courage necessary to fulfill his quest, and his eventual acceptance of his true responsibility.

Soon after the death of his father, Hamlet discovers the deceptive nature of appearances. When the queen questions why he is so distracted by the appearance of those mourning, he replies by describing the facades of others:

These indeed “seem,”  
 For they are actions that a man might play;  
 But I have that within which passes show,  
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I. ii. 86-89)

Hamlet knows that his grief is genuine, and he is angered by what he believes are the superficial responses of others. Yet that anger soon turns to introspection as he considers the power of such role-playing. As he banters with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they feebly attempt to discover the source of his bizarre behavior, Hamlet tells them that “there is / nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it / so” (II. ii. 268-270). He has quickly learned that appearances can be altered and actions feigned to produce a desired response in others. Perception is key, and thus Hamlet decides to use his concocted madness to distract anyone and everyone from learning of his plot for revenge. He becomes so proficient at manipulating the actions of others that it becomes difficult for him to clearly communicate his fears and concerns. After confronting his mother with all he knows about the murder of his father, Gertrude dismisses this information as the rantings of a madman. In a desperate attempt to be believed, Hamlet pleads, “My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time/And makes as healthful music. It is not madness/That I have uttered” (III. iv. 161-163). In his struggle to confront both his feelings and his responsibilities in this difficult situation, Hamlet first strives to understand the fine line that separates reality from illusion. Gaining control of that understanding of reality is a critical first step for Hamlet in his journey toward self-knowledge.

As Hamlet strives to understand the illusory nature of his world, he also learns just how much courage is required to cope with extreme adversity. As the play opens, Hamlet is despondent over the loss of his father. He claims, if only to himself, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” (I. ii. 137-138). Not only does he lack the energy to cope with his situation, but he lacks the simple courage to choose a course of action. Even as Hamlet conceives his plan to reveal Claudius’ treachery through the play, he still questions his ability to follow through with his scheme. “Am I a coward?” (II. ii. 598) he asks of himself. He has never had to find this type of determination within himself before, and fears that his anger and frustration will overshadow the purpose of his strategy. Yet later in the play, when Hamlet encounters Fortinbras and his army, he begins to understand the nature of true courage. At first he fails to understand why Fortinbras would sacrifice so much time, money, and manpower to conquer such a tiny, worthless portion of Poland. However, as the Captain describes the conviction of purpose and loyalty to his king felt by Fortinbras, Hamlet begins to recognize his own need of courage. Alone on stage he asks, “What is a man / If his chief good and market of his

time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more” (IV. iv. 35-37). Although he is still unsure of himself and the possible repercussions of his actions, he has finally gained a strong sense of personal conviction in the idea that he must do *something*. Not to take action would be to deny the man that he is. Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play challenge the audience to find the courage to follow personal conviction, regardless of all else.

However, this newfound sense of courage and conviction is just not enough to give Hamlet a full understanding of himself and his responsibility as a man. He still needs a fuller sense of the meaning of man’s existence, and he finds this in the final act of the play. While wandering with his friend, Horatio, Hamlet encounters a gravedigger and another preparing a new gravesite. Hamlet is somewhat offended by the cavalier manner in which the gravedigger discards the skulls and bones of former occupants. After bantering with the man about the former identities of these relics, Hamlet turns to Horatio and remarks, “To what base uses we may return, Horatio!” (V. i. 209). For the first time, Hamlet gains a sense of the power of death to equalize. He understands that rich or poor, great or common, all men meet the same end. As this insight develops, Hamlet becomes convinced that he must make his own life meaningful. One of the great strengths of *Hamlet* as a play is that even though the audience finally observes Hamlet comprehending what matters most in life, the same profound truth has already been shared by other characters in the play. When Claudius becomes overwhelmed by his own guilt, he attempts to pray and ask forgiveness for his actions. Yet he cannot do this. As he realizes, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below; / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (III. iv. 102-103). Intent cannot replace action, and action is meaningless without heartfelt intent. Man cannot live as a hypocrite, as Hamlet eventually discovers for himself. Similarly, and quite ironically, Polonius reveals a prophetic truth to his son, Laertes, in the very first act of the play. He cautions him, “This above all: to thine own self be true,” (I. iii. 84). His words, just as those uttered by Claudius, are astute and powerful, yet they are quickly overshadowed by perverse action. It is not until Hamlet, the tragic hero of the play, learns who he is and what he must do to live as a righteous man, that the play truly touches the hearts of its audience.

In the final act of the play, Osric is sent by the king to challenge Hamlet to a sword fight with Laertes. Although Hamlet is immediately tempted, he also has some misgivings as to the real purpose of the duel. Upon sensing this, Hamlet’s friend, Horatio, urges him to decline. However, after greater introspection, Hamlet tells his friend:

If it be  
now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be  
now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The  
readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves  
knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be. (V. ii. 234-238)

In his search to better understand his own purpose in life, Hamlet has inadvertently answered the question he so profoundly posed earlier in the play. Through observing the nature of reality and man’s ability to shape it, he learned more about the nature of truth. In discovering an inner sense of courage upon which he could draw, he found the strength he needed to follow his convictions. And finally, by accepting the reality of man’s temporal existence, he came to believe that integrity of thought and action is what gives life its meaning. “To be or not to be —” (III. i. 64). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* offers a resounding answer to this enigma: if life is lived righteously and with conviction of purpose, then “Let be” (V. ii. 238).

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## REFLECTIVE LETTER—ANNA MINNIS

Dear Miami University Writing Faculty,

One thing I cannot do in this letter is lie and say I truly enjoy writing, or ever have. In all sincerity, I can say I dread nothing more than having to sit down and compose a piece of writing. It's really the stress that always seems to manifest itself when I have a writing assignment hanging over my head that has made the experience so painful for me. I always feel so much pressure to have a great paper, and inevitably fear that my next piece will not live up to my last. My English teachers have without exception been wonderful, and my parents have never pressured me about my writing, so I am just as confused as you are about why so much dread surrounds writing for me.

My writing career was nonexistent until seventh grade and Mrs. Blase came along. Throughout my first six years of grade school, I did not do any "real" writing to speak of, nor was I ever taught to write well. However, what befell me, the first week of seventh grade hit me like a ton of bricks. Mrs. Blase was determined to single-handedly teach us writing before we left her classroom for high school. For our first piece, she asked us to write an anecdote about the past summer. To be frank, mine was atrocious. I wrote one paragraph about how my friends and I were afraid of spiders at summer camp. There was no dialogue to be found, nor did I employ any semblance of good descriptive technique. However, Mrs. Blase was dramatic about her teaching, and after a few weeks of her literally standing on the desks screaming, "Show don't tell!" I began to comprehend the concept of good writing.

To this day, the highlight of my writing career was my first A+ from Mrs. Blase. She rarely ever gave A minuses, and to get an A+ was enough to keep me smiling literally for weeks. However, from that point on I felt that every paper had to surpass the previous one in every way, and writing became the stressful experience it is for me today. Mrs. Blase asked me to be on the "Power of the Pen" team, and honestly I was honored, but once again the pressure was on, at least in my head. Our team was first at districts and I was ninth overall. Any normal person would probably have learned to love, or at least like writing through that experience, but somehow I emerged unchanged.

However, I am almost optimistic to a fault, so even amidst all this negativity, I will say there are some positives. I appreciate so much the journey that writing is for me today. Upon sitting down to write a paper, I have very little idea of where I am going with what I say. Writing is an analytical process; every time I go back to proofread a piece, I am amazed by how much my original thought has developed through the writing process. This brings me to the explanatory essay entitled "The Media: Dividing our Future," that I included in this portfolio. Until I actually wrote this paper, I thought that it would strictly be about the under-representation of African Americans in the media, and could not have fathomed the connections I ended up making to history, and the ways children are shaped by the media industry. I love this piece, because I truly feel like my passion as a writer concerning the issue is hard to miss. I genuinely hope that any reader of this piece can at least walk away from it with an increased awareness of the plague with which the media is infecting our world.

My next piece, "Conversing with the Moon" is an account of a night I spent in Austria last summer. I wrote this piece in an attempt to preserve that flawless night forever on paper, and chose to include it because more than the other two works, it reveals the creative and imaginative side of me as a writer.

The final piece I have in store for you is a response to Tim O'Brien's story "In the Field" from his novel *The Things They Carried*. In this work, "Guilt and War" I explore the complex issue of death in combat and the subsequent effects it has on the comrades of the fallen soldier. Once again, the actual writing of this piece was a journey for me. I started with a summer reading journal I had written in

which I had noted that every character had charged himself with the death of Kiowa at some point, and everything you will see in the paper evolved in some way from that seemingly petty observance.

So even today, I will admit that compiling this portfolio was far from painless, yet I believe I have come to accept writing as it is for me. I know that I will likely never be the type to pour her mind out through a pen, or even keep a diary, but what I do love about writing is the unique opportunity it grants me to analyze a piece of literature, myself, or an issue I am trying to understand. Thank you for bearing with me through all this, and enjoy the writing!

*Conversing with the Moon*

The sheer white curtains billow in through the open window with the warm night air, like the sails of a ship setting off into the night. Lying in bed, I hear the buzz of a scooter whizzing through the streets, ironically followed by the rhythmic clip-clop of horseshoes meeting the cobblestone streets. It is our last night in Salzburg, Austria, and that moment embodies what makes this city appeal to me so much. Somehow, in the midst of the chaos of the twenty-first century, Salzburg has preserved many remnants of its past while still keeping up with the times in many other ways. Pondering this, I lie in bed unable to fall asleep, as two ribbons of wind flutter through the opposing windows and collide in the center of the room shredding in every direction, and blowing the hair from my face. In the mirror on the wall, the stubborn moonbeams, refusing to go out with the lights, shine and dance as they are reflected onto the wall. I blink slowly, pausing to feel my body sink deep into the down mattress. Every muscle in my body relaxes, leaving me in complete comfort, lying here alone with the perfect night. “Goodnight,” I whisper to anyone, yet my only answer is the slow deep breathing of my dad in the next bed.

Finally I sigh, draw the satin sheets up to my chin, and close my eyes. In my final drowsy thoughts before I surrender to sleep, I realize that this is probably the night of a lifetime. Seldom will I ever again experience such relaxation, such a profound sense of peace and security, safe with my family though we are far away from anything even remotely familiar. As I lie here gazing at the vaulted yellow ceiling high above my head, I find myself wishing that this night would never end. Suddenly, I felt the need to do something, anything to preserve it forever, even if only in my memory. Coaxing my body from the warmth of the bed, I slide down the silky sheets until my feet meet the polished wood floor. Silently, I tiptoe across the room to the window and lean out over the empty street. The gentle breeze brushes my hair behind my shoulders as I toy with the flowers in the flowerbox perched upon the windowsill. I look up and down the narrow street. Closing my eyes, I can picture the bustling markets that blanketed its surface only hours ago. Suddenly, I feel a compulsion to look up to the sky, and in a moment of childlike imagination, I find myself completely forgetting about my limitations and imagining I can soar up through the clouds and be among the stars. I slowly take in one breath of the night air hoping to hold it forever and dreaming of leaping up to the skies high above the world. My eyes wander from the twinkling stars to the full radiant moon, my imagination soon follows. I find myself wishing that I could jump from my star over to the watchful moon. My thoughts are interrupted as the moon is slowly overtaken by a cloud. As it begins to disappear, the moon winks at me through the deepening haze; it knows what I am dreaming. “Ok,” I whisper softly in reply, understanding exactly what I am being told. With that, I yawn, and take one last look at the night I am certain to remember forever. Carefully I step back across the wooden floorboards, slide back into the warmth of my bed, and slip into my dreams before my head can even meet the pillow.

*The Media: Dividing Our Future*

They squirmed, pencils tapping their desks anxiously; none of their papers contained more than five names. Eventually, all thirteen pairs of eyes made their way from the papers, to the faces of their friends, and eventually, they restlessly shifted over to me and stopped. “This is hard,” whined one seventh grade voice. Another chimed in, “It’s all the same, I can’t think of any more.” The question I had asked was simple: “Please list as many young African American males that you see on TV as possible.” However, the frustration that manifested itself in the room was proof that something was askew. I asked them to read what they had written. Every list was the same combination of names: Jay-Z, Trick Daddy, P. Diddy, Master P., Nelly, Ludacris, Barry Bonds, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Corey Dillon, David West, Mike Tyson, etc. With the exception of a stray Jett Jackson, every name fell under one of two categories: athlete or rapper. Prior to this question I asked something to the effect of whether TV is fair in its representation of real life and circumstances in general. Every single child agreed that yes, TV is a good representation of reality. And as I finished my paper for “Teaching Children about God” class that night, I knew that ramifications of what the seventh graders said through their answers that night were grave.

The past two hundred years have been a rough road for the African American male to travel; from slavery to segregation and racism, recent history has not been kind to him. Yet as soon as we seem to overcome one obstacle to true equality, another reappears, filling the void of discrimination before it even exists. This oppressive force began as plantation owners evolved into the government, the criminal justice system and eventually the prejudices of many white Americans. And just as the reign of these “tyrants” appears to be coming to an end, another barrier to equality is appearing on the horizon: the media.

In my experience, TV in general is doing a huge disservice to any hopes of future racial parity by its extremely unfair portrayal of the young African American male. These young men are literally only shown on TV as sports stars, in the very best cases, and unfortunately most commonly seen as jewel-adorned rappers, spewing obscenities, making offensive gestures at the camera, hustling around scantily-clad young women as if they are simply commodities, and rapping about having sex and smoking weed. Honestly, in the past few months I have yet to see a young African American male portrayed as thoughtful, analytical, poetic, artistic, or even, sadly enough, remotely intelligent or mature. This might be acceptable if the case was such, but my experience alone proves otherwise. I know plenty of young African American males who are mature beyond their years, and extremely academically inclined. However, for reasons unbeknownst to me, the media industry is either stuck on typecasting these men or deliberately choosing to represent them only as non-intellectual people. This is an outrage because inherently it does not allow young African American males to even entertain the idea that they can and should rise above the image of themselves with which they are barraged every day. By promoting these unjust representations, the media is literally creating modern day Bigger Thomases, on the road to certain failure, long before they can possibly detect that something is awry. Children in general revere their elders in their teens or early twenties as almost gods, holding them as models for their behavior, dress, and even future plans. Unfortunately, the media has chosen to represent such an unfair cross-section of the black males in this group that they are hindering any progress there might be in the areas of racism, violence in the African American community, and the higher education of African Americans.

As if the effects in the African American community are not grave enough, the problem is compounded by the ideas formed by white children, like the ones I surveyed, whose only exposure to the other race comes from the TV. They, in turn, see white role models represented as intelligent, motivated,

and educated young people, while on the other hand they are seeing their African American counterparts as sports stars, valued only for their physical abilities, or vulgar rappers blatantly condoning materialism, commodification of women, violence, and the use of alcohol and drugs. Seeing this, and only this side of the young black male, white children, perceiving it as reality begin to form unfair conclusions about the African American race as a whole. As Gary Gerard reveals in a *Time* magazine article discussing a study on television and its effect on children, “What researchers found was that children perceive more negative depictions of blacks and Hispanics than of whites and Asians [...]. This tends to explode the old TV industry argument that television is just make believe and kids understand that. It shows that kids absorb what they see and that affects the way they view the world.” The TV is literally shaping young African American males into the “thugs” they see on screen, and through the same means imbedding a stereotypical image of these young men into the minds of white children.

Ironically, today’s generation of children possesses an unparalleled technological savvy, is better educated than ever, and in so many ways is leagues ahead of their predecessors. Yet, every day, their most forgotten textbook, the television, is indoctrinating them with the unwarranted, old-fashioned stereotypes that plagued our nation decades ago. Children watching TV after school, considering what they learned about equality that day, are viewing “proof” which seems to show that this may not be the case in the “real world.” When weighing the two opposing ideas, it seems natural that any child would believe what he or she sees, over what is spoken in the classroom. Essentially, until this vicious cycle of criminalizing African American boys, upholding negative images of black males in the media, and monopolizing their already too few on-screen minutes with inaccurate portrayals stops, it is hard to imagine we will ever see an end to the racial injustices and prejudices that afflict our world.

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*Guilt and War*

In the aftermath of a comparatively minor misfortune, all parties concerned seem to be eager to direct the blame to someone or something else. It seems so easy to pin down one specific mistake that caused everything else to go wrong in an everyday situation. However, war is a vastly different story. The problem is that war is so ambiguous, such a huge intangible thing, that it cannot simply be blamed for the resulting deaths for which it is indirectly responsible. Tim O'Brien's story, "In the Field," illustrates whom the soldiers turn to with the massive burden of responsibility for a tragedy. The horrible circumstances of war transform all involved and tinge them with an absurd feeling of personal responsibility as they struggle to cope.

The death of Kiowa is the point in this story, and arguably the entire novel, where the true nature of war becomes evident. His death in any situation would have been tragic, and camping in that "shit field" alone would have been an emotionally scarring experience; however, that these events had to coincide in time only multiplies the gravity of the situation. Interestingly, every soldier has his own way of grappling with such overwhelming feelings of grief for his highly-esteemed comrade. Yet what every man has in common is that in the end he concludes that he alone is the one ultimately responsible for Kiowa's death.

Take Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, for example. Although he had no desire to be in Vietnam, not to mention be leading troops there, it is evident that he is selfless in the pursuit of the war, and genuinely concerned about the welfare of his men. Unfortunately, he is blinded by guilt to these qualities. "Looking out toward the river, he knew for a fact that he had made a mistake setting up here. The order had come from a higher power, true, but still he should've exercised some field discretion. He should have moved to higher ground for the night, should've radioed in false coordinates" (187). Hindsight is twenty-twenty and it is hard to watch Cross torment himself over a situation where, once again, he is only trying to do what is right. With the weight of the war on his back, Cross can see no reason other than his wanton lack of judgment for Kiowa's death. He attempts to cope with his overwhelming guilt by composing a letter to Kiowa's father right there in the shit field. "He would explain this to Kiowa's father. Carefully, not covering up his own guilt, he would tell how the mortar rounds made craters in the slush... My own fault, he would say" (191). In another situation, perhaps, he could think rationally and realize that he could never have fathomed what the field would become when transformed by night and merciless rain. But with the backdrop of war, to Jimmy Cross there is no other reasonable cause for the death of his man.

Similarly, the young unnamed soldier holds himself solely accountable for the death of his cherished friend. This boy exhausts himself as he tries to handle the loss by recounting his last memories of Kiowa over and over, frantically searching for the laminated picture of his girlfriend, all the while moving his lips. "Like Jimmy Cross, the boy was explaining to an absent judge. It wasn't to defend himself. The boy recognized his own guilt and wanted only to lay out the full causes" (192). In such a desperate situation, the youth and emotional immaturity of this soldier take control; the faceless enemy who fired upon his camp is not tangible enough for him to hold accountable. As we see, the fact that someone fired the rounds which killed Kiowa, completely escapes this young boy. "Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight had made it happen. Dumb and dangerous. And as a result his friend Kiowa was dead. That simple, he thought" (192). "That simple"—quite an ironic statement considering nothing related to war is remotely simple. However, it is just that which drives the unnamed soldier to attempt to simplify the whole thing by charging himself with the death of a friend.

On the other hand, unlike both Jimmy Cross and the young soldier, Azar has a much different way of handling the complexity of both war and death. Throughout this story he makes seemingly insensitive jokes, almost making light of the calamity of Kiowa's death. However, what must be understood

when hearing his comments on the irony of eating shit in a shit field is that this is his method of dealing with the loss, immature as it may be. The contrast between Azar's experience and that of the other soldiers ends when he, too, eventually feels a rather irrational responsibility for Kiowa's misfortune. In a conversation with Bowker regarding the circumstances it is obvious that the experience even got to Azar, driving the former joker to speak soberly:

"Listen," he said, "Those dumb jokes—I didn't mean anything."

"We all say things."

"Yeah but when I saw the guy it made me feel—I don't know—like he was listening."

"He wasn't."

"I guess not. But I feel sort of guilty almost, like if I'd kept my mouth shut none of it would've ever happened. Like it was my fault." (197)

Clearly, his jokes had no bearing on whether or not Kiowa would survive that fateful night, but once again, in the absence of any other concrete, liable body, he is left with only himself to blame.

Unlike Cross, the unnamed soldier, and Azar, who all find themselves culpable at the scene, both the narrator and Norman Bowker come to the same conclusion, though much later.

Somehow at the scene, Bowker masked his feelings with a front of quiet indifference and objectivity about the loss. Yet in the story "Speaking of Courage," a distraught Bowker emerges, revealing that not even he could escape from the penetrating guilt of that dreadful night. As he drives desperately around the lake that night, an imagined conversation with his father reveals his true feelings of responsibility.

"Well this one time, this one night out by the river...I wasn't very brave."

"You have seven medals."

"Sure."

"Seven. Count'em. You weren't a coward either."

"Well maybe not. But I had the chance and I blew it." (182)

How tragic it is that the power of that experience is so penetrating that years later, Bowker cannot free himself from the guilt associated with it. He is unable to consider that the mortar rounds are what probably killed Kiowa, and that the fact that he let go of his heel is inconsequential in the scheme of things. Yet again, the unique circumstances of war require a young man to inflict pain on himself, in order to make sense of the whole event.

Finally, in an offhand comment we see that even the narrator is united in the sentiments with his comrades. At the end of "Notes" and his discussion of Norman Bowker's mind-set regarding Kiowa's loss, he says, "In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own" (182). This is the final comment which so clearly drives the point home. The fact that even the narrator is unable to look dispassionately at the death of Kiowa, though he is telling the story himself, shows that this personal guilt experienced by all is not merely a phenomenon, but an unquestionable force which acts upon these young men beset by the war.

These men are transformed into guilt-laden soldiers in less than a day, as they all grapple for a way to come to terms with the pain of losing a comrade. In an isolated situation, removed from the stressors, anxieties, and uncertainties of war, perhaps they may have come to a more rational conclusion as to who is deserving of blame. But tragically, they cannot come to forgive themselves for something for which they are not even guilty. As Norman Bowker so insightfully put it prior to his unfortunate demise, war is "Nobody's fault, everybody's" (197).

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## REFLECTIVE LETTER—AFTYN WISE

Dear Miami University Writing Professors,

To explain my constant verbiage and occasionally impressive vocabulary, I should mention I scoured dictionaries when I was younger. Every Christmas, there would be a stack of books, topped by a dictionary; depending on where we were, it would be filled with either the Standard English pronunciations and spellings or the American ones. I'll admit I preferred the former; though, I'm not sure if that's because I started reading in England or if it's because I feel the need to have a connection with my heritage. The same indecision is encountered when considering that I have stacks and stacks of English literature anthologies.

I'm an American citizen, but I was born forty-five minutes west of London and raised in Italy, so I've always had this inexplicable sense that I'm out of place. When I'm in Europe, I'm the lost American; while in the United States, I have few to whom I can truly relate. That's where writing comes in, and to a lesser degree reading. Up until only recently, I wrote mainly science fiction stories, in which I could easily escape, but lately, I've taken to jotting down memories and using characters to illustrate them, which is partly how my creative writing piece, 'A Sunless Day,' came into existence. There was this charming market at the end of the street we lived in Italy, and I remember how wearisome it could be to walk to in August.

My second portfolio piece, a compare/contrast paper written for my senior English class, wasn't written with the typical high school audience in mind; if it had been, an additional ten pages would be present explaining exactly what significance Pope and Cowper have. I included this piece because I believe it assists my claim to being somewhat literary and shows that despite my attempt to imbue most of my prose with humor and emotion, I can handle objective writing.

My response to a text, "A Classic to Keep," covers the controversy of *Huckleberry Finn's* significance in classrooms, which I personally think is ridiculous, but I won't say any more than that, since you're going to have to read an entire paper on it in a few minutes. This paper was one of my larger endeavors completed this year, using the most research, so naturally it was chosen.

And, by the demand of your requirements, that's the end. I hope for your sake at least one of the following strikes your fancy; while for my sake, I hope you like them all.

*A Sunless Day*

Magdela would have preferred the year to be made up of eleven months. August was simply unnecessary—it was too hot to do anything. Unless, of course, a person’s mother ordered him or her to perform a chore in the midst of the heat like Magdela’s had, and then there was no choice but to be active.

And today, there was no cheerful sunshine to accompany the high temperature; the young Italian didn’t know if that was a good thing or not. While perhaps the sun’s absence meant a few less degrees, the ostensible lifelessness of everything around her was certainly less than uplifting. There was no blue sky above and seemingly no air to breathe. Above her head was a motionless, tyrannical, and humid drabness; the sun only a hope somewhere, a pale thumbprint, a mistake of a splotch. There wasn’t even the slightest hint that the uncomfortable, spongy atmosphere was going to spool itself up into a rain cloud or invigorating thunderstorm. There was not a whisper, not a sigh of wind. It was simply miserable...and she had to be out in it.

Perspiration couldn’t even begin to describe the downpour of sweat covering her body, acting as an adhesive between her skin and her brother’s polyester soccer shirt. As Magdela walked hurriedly down the long expanse of sidewalk, which was cracked and overtaken by weeds in places, she kept her eyes cast downward, so as not to draw the attention of anyone inside the swarm of passing cars. A few had honked their horns or shouted vulgarities from their windows, but most were too busy concentrating on getting to the beach before they roasted in their tiny European cars.

She looked up just a little to see how far she had yet to go, but as she did, Magdela caught the eye of a small group of boys a few meters ahead. They were older than she by at least a few years, probably fifteen or sixteen, and definitely stronger and taller. They regarded her with disdain and condescension, which she was used to, as she was black and female—the very worst combination in the area—but the way they whispered amongst themselves and laughed cruelly had her worried.

Planning to keep her eyes averted, ignore them, and pass by quietly, Magdela pressed on purposefully.

“What are you doing here?” the ugliest of the group sneered in Italian, reaching out for her arm, but she pulled away. “Your people don’t belong out in public!”

Unable to help herself, Magdela had to respond to the offensive remark with her own, “And *your* kind of people shouldn’t be allowed off leashes!” Even as the last syllable fell from her lips, she regretted responding. Her mother reminded her constantly not to react out of anger, as foul results usually come about, but it was hard to heed such a warning. It was hard to allow yourself to be degraded for no reason other than your color and sex. She was Italian, like they were; she was female, like their mothers and sisters; she was, unlike them, a decent human being.

The smallest boy, still taller than Magdela by a few centimeters, gave her a forceful shove toward the busy street. She caught her bearings just as her left foot landed on the cement of the curb; cars honked frantically, passengers and drivers screamed at the girl to watch herself.

Before she could even consider running, the ugly boy grabbed her by the front of the shirt, while another took her arms, and the smallest boy sifted through her pockets. As he clumsily pulled out a few lira notes, several coins adding up to another two lira dropped to the pavement.

“This is all you have?” the ugly one shouted in Italian, snatching the trivial amount from the smaller boy.

By now crying, tears dropping hopelessly from her closed eyes, Magdela nodded. She was scared, trembling and flinching at every brush of warm wind caused by a car speeding past. She endured frequent verbal attacks when venturing out of her neighborhood or at school and even occasionally *in* her neighborhood, but never had someone physically harassed her so severely.

Her eyes were closed, so she didn't see who muttered an obscenity that burned her pride; nor did she see the need to brace herself against the oncoming shove.

Magdela fell to the rough ground, scraping her lower back, arms, and thighs as she skidded to a halt. She dared not to move as the boys walked away, talking amongst themselves, and every so often looking back behind them. After watching them turn a corner, she cupped one hand over the back of her thigh, hoping to alleviate some of the burning, while she examined the elbow of her other arm. She reached toward her left foot and found that the straps of her thong sandal had broken, rendering it unusable, not a good thing when the pavement was steaming.

Once her crying settled to soft sniffles and sodden eyelashes, she inhaled deeply to stifle the sobs that threatened to crawl up her throat again. She had another good ten minutes of walking to get to the open-air market, her destination, and now she had no money and one less shoe. Unfortunately, going home empty-handed just wasn't an option. Maybe the merchants would take pity on a young girl covered in sweat and blood, out of breath, and with eyes red from crying, and perhaps give her something to take home.

If nothing else, Magdela certainly wasn't too proud to beg.

*Neo-Classicism and Pre-Romanticism*

Neo-classicist writers placed great emphasis on taking a practical approach to life and their writing, focusing often on logic, science, and technology, and preferring not to employ frivolous embellishments or reflect on the abstract. They wanted unadorned fact whereas the romantics favored a more creatively inclined form of expression (Anderson et al. 1). Before the romantics began, however, pre-romanticism edged in slowly, acting as the bridge between an era of unpolluted logic and another defined by emotion. Pre-romanticism's presence was actually felt *during* the same age as neo-classicism, as its contemporary, not its successor, yet still there is an assortment of differences despite their shared environment (Grebanier 325).

Neo-classicism was marked by the matter-of-fact views of the Puritans and often included a certain amount of sententiousness within both poetry and prose. Just as the English Protestants of the seventeenth century regarded luxury as errant and relied on a firm hierarchy, neo-classicists chose to look at the world in a sensible and conservative manner and held a social hierarchy in high esteem (Anderson et al. 690, *Literature* 571). Moderation and temperance were both fashionable, for they facilitated conformity, which was prized over individual deviation. For example, Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" criticizes the absurd overindulgences and frivolity of high society, blatantly suggesting a more practical alternative, all the while framing the satire in the classical allusions that define neo-classicism (Anderson et al. 846).

The age was one of realism and could be described as a mature period of literature, for its contributors were accepting of the truths of life, which forced them into a rigid pattern. They possessed a rational perception based on the experiences that accompanied living in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; neo-classicists recognized that people were what they were, and until *they* changed, nothing else would. Satire, in both prose and poetry form, was one of the more popular methods of expression, considering that it acted as the ideal tool for highlighting society's foibles. A particular insensitivity came along with such a barefaced documentation of life, but revealed also was an outlook that was both unambiguous and unafraid (Anderson et al. 704).

Jonathan Swift is possibly the most famous satirist, known for his searing denunciations, particularly in *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal* (Anderson et al. 811). In the former, he attacked humanity bitterly with four books documenting the adventures of Captain Lamuel Gulliver, the supposed author, who traveled through four bizarre lands. While superficially, readers might consider the piece entertaining and imaginative, those mindful of its underlying intent are aware that Swift is underlining the foolish exploits and debased logic of humanity as it stands (Anderson et al. 814). *A Modest Proposal* was written with a more specific goal of bringing the destitution of Ireland to the attention of the public (Anderson et al. 811).

With neo-classicism being the emulation of classical Greek and Latin, one might note that London was to the neoclassicists as Athens or Rome was to the classicists. Neoclassicists thought that the natural world should be tamed and dictated by humans, and consequently fancied the metropolis that was eighteenth century London. Being unable to live in London was a tragedy, and if they were forced to reside in the countryside, neoclassicists wanted it to be civilized with walkways, statues, and other signs of development. Proper etiquette, a sign of both self-restraint and cultivation, was valued over personal emotion or intuition (Grebanier 325).

Pre-romanticism was the crack that led to the mold of classical traditionalism shattering and romanticism taking shape. While the mainstay of writers during the eighteenth century was concerned with the moderation that defined neoclassicism, there were already men countering the reserved mood.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, maintained that the way to truly find, accept, and understand God was through the very emotion neoclassicists neglected. With this belief in the air, many others resisted the cold logic that had worked its way into Christianity. Religion being central to a person's life during that period (writers not excluded from that generalization), this change made a great number of converts, including William Cowper, who was the most influential pre-romantic poet in many ways (Grebanier 326, 336).

Idealism, rather than pragmatism, played a large part in the thoughts and writings of pre-romanticists, and they expended a large amount of time scrutinizing inner feelings, exploring the imagination, and beautifying the mundane. Emphasis was placed on the individual over the whole of society, which corresponds with their love of emotion, since it exists on a personal level, rather than a communal one (Literature 571).

Ignoring the boundaries of the neo-classicists, pre-romanticists delved into poetic forms other than the heroic couplet, which the former used almost exclusively, and then continued to hunt for new styles (Grebanier 327; Literature 571). Blank verse was put to use again by many poets, including Mark Akenside; the styles of Milton, Spenser, and Chaucer, all three of which were imitated by Thomas Warton, were also employed (Grebanier 345). Subjects varied, but the countryside locale was often described in detail, as well as the inhabitants therein.

When they looked to the ancient Celtic and Teutonic folklore for inspiration, instead of the classical period of Greece and Rome, pre-romanticists discovered a love of the savage and the barbaric, which explains their belief that nature should remain wild and uninhibited (Grebanier 327; Literature 571). Also, Jean Jacques Rousseau further compelled the literary revolution toward the natural when he propounded that man was inherently good, but civilization sullied that decency; suddenly, the unpretentious farmer plowing the fields could be seen as superior to the richest man in London (Grebanier 327).

Pre-romanticism stood amazed by man's immeasurable possibilities, managing to see and praise the essential beauty in all things, while neo-classicism took on a detachment from life that probably caused the need for change, as inherently emotional human beings can tolerate only so much removed rationality and self-restraint (Anderson et al. 1). After remaining preoccupied by scientific study of their surroundings and emulating the classical world of yore for years, it comes as no surprise that many were hungry for a literary style that could feel an uncontrolled delight in living, demanding the sensuous and the sensitive over the cold and the unaffected. The repression neo-classicism offered brought about its own demise in the form of literary revolutionaries.

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*A Classic to Keep*

Mark Twain published what scholars still consider one of the greatest American literary works in 1885, and in that same year it suffered its first banning (Zwick). “*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is essential to the understanding of the American soul,” Victor Doyno states on the jacket of Random House’s comprehensive edition of the novel. If *Huckleberry Finn* is so indispensable, then its having been opposed from the beginning of its life seems more than a little surprising. At first, the strife was caused by many objecting to the friendship between Huckleberry Finn, the white protagonist, and Jim, an escaped African American slave, in addition to the grammar upon which many critics of the time frowned. As our society experiences changes in priorities, taboos, and social trends, the points of concern shift, and no longer do critics grimace at an interracial friendship; instead, they attack the racism supposedly present (Chadwick).

A number of students, parents, and, on less frequent occasions, teachers claim that *Huckleberry Finn* possesses racist overtones and try to have it removed from school libraries and the curriculum. Despite the controversy, *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Twain delivers an honest depiction of the 1800’s, maintains its stance as a classic piece of literature beneficial to a student’s education (Chadwick).

The shallowest and most prevalent argument involves the repeated, some attackers say excessive, use of the word “nigger,” which appears over two hundred times (Zwick). Today, the word is unquestionably one of the most offensive expletives in use; the book, however, was not written for this decade, or even this century, and it certainly was not intended to be a written prediction of the future. *Huckleberry Finn* is a period piece. The novel was written to depict the South and, at more than fifteen years before the Civil War, the dialogue would have seemed unnatural without “nigger” scattered throughout it (Salwen). Having a character use “African American” or “black” would mitigate the candid effect the author set out to achieve.

The use of “nigger” serves to establish the racist climate of the world the novel reflects, so that the reader may understand the atmosphere in which young Huck resides. The youth has a malformed sense of reality, and one must understand that his environment, his slaveholding, racially prejudiced environment, is what twisted his conscience. With “nigger” in use, especially by Huck, the negative attitude toward African Americans is strongly sensed, and the friendship between the boy and Jim is that much more momentous.

Twain uses scathing wit when employing “nigger” at times, in order to hold society’s narrow-minded folly on display through satire and irony. His characters make use of the word to describe African Americans as if they were not human; “nigger” unconditionally divided the blacks and the whites, separating them by race as if separating them by species (Salwen).

A good example is when a secondary character, Aunt Sally, learns of an explosion involving a steamboat. “Good gracious! Anybody hurt?” she asks. The reply is negative, clarifying that only a “nigger” was killed. “Well, it’s lucky,” Aunt Sally continues, “because sometimes people do get hurt” (Twain 281).

Jim, one of the central characters in *Huckleberry Finn*, is often inaccurately deemed a stereotype by critics, which is another position taken by those eager to ban the book. “To stereotype,” according to Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, is to “give a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, affective attitude, or uncritical judgment.” Twain’s ostensibly stereotypical characterization of Jim actually works to his advantage, in that while a reader may at first pass the character off as formulaic and trite, continued reading exposes the depth behind “Mrs. Watson’s Nigger.” The slow revealing of Jim’s humanity manages to throw

shallow perceptions driven by bigotry back at readers, forcing them to take notice, just as Huck did in the story (“Blackface”).

While traveling on the river, Huck plays a trick on Jim that results in the escaped slave submitting to the boy’s assumed superiority in intelligence and reliability. When Jim realizes he has been tricked, though, he scolds the youth and exhibits very human emotions, of which many readers then believed African Americans were incapable. He feels indignant and ashamed, and guilt eventually forces Huck to apologize. On another occasion, Huck witnesses the melancholy Jim holds for the family from which he is separated and begins to understand that the man cares for them just as a white man would care for his kin. At the end of the book, when Jim is in captivity on the Phelps’s farm, Twain takes the opportunity to show that despite his return to slavery, and consequently to oppression and obedience, Jim is still human. Huck and his friend Tom Sawyer come up with a plan to free their former companion, but it results in Tom’s injury. Jim is in hiding when the doctor comes to help the boy but shows himself upon hearing that the doctor needs help, despite knowing that in stepping out he would jeopardize his freedom (Gregory).

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim is a man of bravery, decency, compassion, and dignity, who risks his life for the sake of others and for the hope of reuniting with his family. In depicting Jim, Twain did not denigrate African Americans, but, in the words of Booker T. Washington, “exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of the negro people.” At the time, African Americans were beginning to contemplate their worth and place in the social hierarchy and wanted to be seen most of all as human beings. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents African Americans, particularly Jim, as feeling, thinking humans, as well as showcasing the harmfully low opinions of them (Gregory).

The treatment of and attitude toward the slaves in the novel recurrently comes under disapproving scrutiny. Detractors say that African Americans were viewed in a paternalistic light, meaning that while they were provided for, they had no freedom or control in matters affecting themselves or others; they were purposefully sheltered and confined, presumably giving them no means to survive without their masters. The claim is true; nevertheless, the accusation is not a valid reason to challenge the book. Twain was depicting truth, not composing a literary act of racism (Chadwick).

The behavior, the conduct, the social order, and certainly the treatment of slaves in the book were meant to be truthful representations of real life at the time. If a description is offensive, then that is because the reality of the time period is offensive. The only racism in the book is the racism intentionally illustrated by Twain to accurately draw the reader into the lifestyle of the characters.

Part of the reason students can truly relate to the novel is the sincerity and frankness of Twain’s writing. The characters, the story, and the setting feel real, even in the midst of the humor or the fanciful adventures; the details of the narrative have not been diluted to satisfy refined ideals and standards. An example of his accuracy is Twain’s use of dialogue. As an author, he could have easily weakened the various dialects in order to generate easier understanding and appeal to a broader mass of people, but instead he chose to make use of several versions of the colloquial speech to remain true to his vision (Twain xix).

Huckleberry is young and Twain demonstrates his youth through his views of the world and actions laced with adolescent petulance and whimsy. Youth recognizes and appreciates youth, and while the causes of alienation may vary, students can identify with Huck’s feeling like an outsider. He fails to be accepted by the so-called civilized people because his father is a drunkard, because he does not always go to school, and because he smokes. Huck faces hardships, but he surmounts them, and students feel they are accomplishing the same in their own, more modern lives.

Also available through *Huckleberry Finn* is a modified history lesson. History books offer a rough sketch that outlines events and hints at the lives who shaped the past, but novels like *Huckleberry Finn*

provide colorful portraits. Students receive lessons that are largely objective in history class, followed by statistics that are regurgitated on tests, and then forgotten. Through the subjective accounts available in literature, which are generally more personal and sentimental, students can make a connection with characters and emotions, enabling them to commit the information to memory (Chadwick).

The literary value behind *Huckleberry Finn* might be a little harder to pinpoint initially, given that it possesses grammar that was considered appalling enough to have the book banned during its early printing, but there is more to the novel than poor syntax and crude phrasing (Zwick). Mark Twain, whether he realized it or not, has provided fodder for discussion that has lasted to the present. The chief characters of *Huckleberry Finn* and the controversy they draw forth in today's world force everyone to face and converse about subjects that no one is brave enough to approach. Race interaction, race language, interracial relations, racial profiling, and equality are all broached in *Huckleberry Finn*, though not all questions—if any—are actually answered, leaving students to make decisions for themselves (Chadwick).

Without *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a student's education in American literature would be left lacking. There is a shortage of novels that are witty, thought-provoking, historically acceptable, and endearing all at once, and *Huck Finn* manages all facets. Taken out of context, the novel could potentially be regarded as racist, but only if one interprets what was written over a century previous as a personal insult. Mark Twain sought to write with veracity and wit in order to demonstrate the foolishness of humanity during his time, but he unwittingly forced his readers to rethink the principles of humanity generations later, and hopefully in another century, his writing will continue to enlighten future students.

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## 2003 SCORING GUIDE FOR PORTFOLIOS

*A portfolio consists of four equally important pieces of prose writing. Each portfolio is read holistically by at least two English instructors; each gives a single comprehensive score on a six-point scale (“6” is high; “1” is low). What follows are two lists: one highlights characteristics of effective portfolios; the other offers a more specific scoring scale used by readers. In determining a single score, readers assess the quality of a portfolio as a whole and do not average the four pieces.*

### CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PORTFOLIOS

*The following list, in no particular order, represents some of the features of effective student writing most often mentioned as being essential or desirable qualities by the committee in charge of evaluating the 2003 incoming portfolios:*

- ▲ Develops pieces fully and substantially
- ▲ Uses language effectively and appropriately.
- ▲ Demonstrates ability to write in multiple genres.
- ▲ Shows when appropriate by creating scenes, using dialogue and interior monologue when appropriate.
- ▲ Supports assertions and generalizations with evidence, examples, and details.
- ▲ Recognizes complexities in issues and positions.
- ▲ Explores larger social or cultural aspects.
- ▲ Demonstrates an awareness of audience.
- ▲ Writes with purpose, consistency, and focus.
- ▲ Engages readers: pieces are at least occasionally moving, powerful or imaginative.
- ▲ Demonstrates awareness of global/local organization appropriate for the writing task.

## SCORING SCALE

*Your portfolio will be scored by readers using the following scale:*

### UPPER RANGE PORTFOLIOS

**6 range: Excellent** portfolios. These portfolios' many significant strengths outweigh their weaknesses. **Excellent** portfolios encompass the characteristics of **very good** (5-range) portfolios but also display other strengths. They convincingly demonstrate the writer's ability to handle multiple genres successfully, and the writing is substantially developed, often moving beyond the predictable and clichéd in approach, style, or subject matter.

**5 range: Very Good** portfolios. These portfolios' strengths clearly outweigh their weaknesses. **Very good** portfolios show an awareness of audience, and show substantial development of ideas often by integrating evidence, examples, and details to support assertions and generalizations. **Very good** portfolios successfully demonstrate the writer's ability to handle multiple genres.

### MIDDLE RANGE PORTFOLIOS

**4 range: Good** portfolios. These portfolios' strengths outweigh their weaknesses. **Good** portfolios articulate a purpose and provide moments of sustained exploration of a question through the use of evidence. Compared to **competent** portfolios (3-range), **good** portfolios (4-range) demonstrate more awareness of global/local organization appropriate for the writing task and more consistent evidence of the writer's ability to handle multiple genres.

**3 range: Competent** portfolios. These portfolios' strengths and weaknesses are about evenly balanced. **Competent** portfolios demonstrate some awareness of global/local organization appropriate for the writing task. Evidence of the writer's ability to handle multiple genres is uneven. Some pieces may be too brief, underdeveloped, general or predictable, but the language use is generally competent. **Competent** portfolios (3-range), unlike lower range portfolios, show some awareness of audience.

### LOWER RANGE PORTFOLIOS

**2 range: Fair** portfolios. These portfolios' weaknesses outweigh their strengths. There is little evidence of the writer's ability to handle multiple genres successfully. **Fair** portfolios are usually thin in substance and undistinguished in style although they may be clear and error free.

**1 range: Poor** portfolios. These portfolios' many weaknesses clearly outweigh their strengths. **Poor** portfolios may lack development and/or evidence of effective global and local organization. **Poor** portfolios may have substantial grammatical errors that impede reading. Focus may be unstated and/or unclear.

## GUIDELINES FOR USING NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE

Language not only reflects the world around us but also conditions or shapes people's thoughts and attitudes. In other words, when we write or speak, we're actually doing things to our audience—pleasing them, amusing them, informing them, or perhaps hurting them—not simply expressing our thoughts. The fact that words can harm readers demands that we, as writers, be responsible for what we say and how we say things. Realizing this, most of us have already rid our vocabularies of offensive language that labels people on the basis of race, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation—words we know are painful. But our language still contains conventions that in more subtle ways can be as hurtful as those obviously vulgar words.

This is particularly true in the area of gender, where we can do harm without even realizing it. For instance, if we use the pronouns he, his, or him to stand for both men and women, if we use man to stand for all human beings, or if we label people as mailmen or chairmen regardless of their gender, we are making an unfair and harmful distinction. By not being aware that even seemingly insignificant parts of our language like the use of pronouns have social implications, we trivialize and make irrelevant the existence and contributions of half of humanity. In an age when roles are changing rapidly, when women are becoming doctors, scientists, farmers, and athletes, and when men work as elementary school teachers, nurses, and secretaries, we need to make sure that we neither intentionally nor unintentionally exclude anyone with our language. Eliminating sexist language may not eliminate biased conduct, but it can create greater possibilities for women and men to share equally active and caring roles in our society.

Thus we consider it inappropriate to use sexist language in papers written for the composition classes. In this policy, the English Department is following the guidelines used in all Miami University publications, as well as in professional journals in most academic fields. Organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Modern Language Association have required the use of non-sexist language in their publications for more than a decade.

Here are some ways you can avoid accidentally transmitting sexually-biased messages along with the messages you mean to send.

### **I. Avoid the pronoun problem by using plurals in sentences.**

Example: Give each student his paper as soon as he asks for it.

Alternative: Give students their papers as soon as they ask for them.

Example: Anyone who wants to eat dinner should wash his hands.

Alternative: All who want to eat dinner should wash their hands.

### **II. Eliminate words which cause unnecessary gender problems.**

Example: A nurse must take care of her patients.

Alternative: A nurse must take care of patients.

Example: Every person has a right to ask his question and to voice his opinion.

Alternative: Every person has a right to ask questions and voice opinions.

### **III. Use inclusive nouns.**

Example: mankind

Alternative: people, humanity, human beings, humankind

Example: chairman presiding

Alternative: coordinator, moderator, officer, head, chair, chairperson

Examples: businessman, fireman, mailman

Alternatives: business executive, fire fighter, mail carrier

### **IV. Use alternatives to phrases which demean or stereotype women.**

Examples: lady lawyer, woman doctor, career girl, lady, authoress, poetess

Alternatives: lawyer, doctor, professional, woman, author, poet

Example: Have your mother send cookies for the field trip.

Alternative: Have your parents send cookies for the field trip.

Example: While lunch was delayed, the ladies chattered about last night's meeting.

Alternative: While lunch was delayed, the women talked about last night's meeting.

## ADVICE FROM PORTFOLIO SCORERS

Each year, portfolio readers at Miami read hundreds of portfolios. And each year at the end of the scoring sessions, we ask those readers to evaluate their responses to the portfolios they have read and to offer advice to students who are compiling portfolios in hopes of receiving credit from Miami University. What follows here is a summary of the evaluators' remarks and thoughts from the last two years.

### **Your Audience**

Evaluators this year follow previous evaluators in indicating that a clear aim and sense of audience are the two most important features of a successful portfolio. In fact, the majority of remarks from instructors this year emphasize that while students need to show mature and insightful thinking and writing, they should also present themselves naturally, not artificially. Evaluators suggest that students should not be afraid to use "I," and that "their own voice(s) and opinions should not be drowned by research." We have recommended in the past, and we continue to encourage you to "write as yourself," not as the student you think college professors want you to be. We look for evidence that you think about how you fit into the world, about how issues you write about relate to your personal situations (social, racial, gendered, economic, regional, religious, etc.).

Instructors suggest repeatedly: "Consider your audience. We're real people who can see through stereotypical and clichéd arguments. We appreciate critical thinking and self-awareness in each piece, not just description."

Raters are interested in what you think and see and how you see those things in relation to broader issues and concerns. Evaluators tell students to "think about how the pieces you write connect, and talk about them as a whole, not just as random pieces." Also, "think seriously about ambiguities, feelings, and problems. Revise, rewrite and show that you are thinking about your audience."

The readers at Miami are diverse in age, teaching experience, interests, and tastes. While readers range from experienced graduate students to tenured professors, they are all interested in students and spend quite a bit of time reading and evaluating college writing.

Before completing your portfolio, you should spend time reading your work with the scoring criteria in mind. While the portfolio committee makes changes from year to year, the major criteria remain the same, and your readers will be using them as their guide.

## SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FROM PORTFOLIO SCORERS

While you should keep audience and aim in mind as you develop your portfolio, you will benefit as well from more specific advice and suggestions our raters offer below.

- 1. The importance of the reflective letter:** The most common pieces of advice our raters suggest concern the reflective letter. This initial piece is obviously an important part of the portfolio, much more than just a basic, impersonal cover letter. Part of what we mean when we say “reflective” is that we want you to situate yourself for your readers—in terms of how you perceive your own writing, and, most importantly, why you perceive it the way you do. One rater insists, “Give much more attention to the reflective letter. It should be REFLECTIVE (many were not) and interesting,” and “go beyond simple summary of what is in the collection. Reflect on how the pieces reveal something about you as a writer and how they are connected.” The reflective letter sets the tone for the whole portfolio and creates a first and lasting impression. Think about what reflection involves—not just including details about who you are and how you write but also about how and why your background and environment have affected what you write. Many successful letters strike a balance between confidence and humility; many show awareness of strengths and limitations, as well as awareness that writing has consequences (beyond getting credit for English at Miami).
- 2. Use the full 12-page allotment:** We strongly urge you to take full advantage of the 12-page limit and develop your pieces fully. All raters notice whether or not a student’s portfolio has enough “substance.” With this in mind, we ask that students use the page limit and make it work. Portfolios that are five or six pages long are not fully developed, and do not demonstrate fully your talent as a writer. Longer portfolios offer analysis and discuss the complexity of issues. Brief portfolios rarely get a high score because they can’t fully develop, support, and sustain a writer’s position.
- 3. Develop with specific detail:** Use many details, examples, and illustrations to develop and explain your points. Instructors prefer concreteness to vagueness and showing to telling. When appropriate, use dialogue and narrative examples and scenes to help develop your work. As one rater suggests, “Look at a lot of examples in Best of Miami Portfolios and try to figure out why they are good pieces. Usually, it’s not because of the topic but because of how the writer develops the topic.”
- 4. Content and style should suit audience and aim:** Be aware of “big issue” topics and make sure you can take them on in a way that is focused and thoughtful. A reader is less likely to be enthusiastic about the 26th paper on abortion or Hamlet unless it has a fresh angle. Also, when using outside sources, work from your own viewpoint instead of simply retelling other peoples’ ideas. If you use outside sources, be sure to include a Works Cited page, so readers know that you know how to give appropriate credit to other writers when you use their ideas.
- 5. Be creative: Don’t be afraid to experiment.** Include pieces in a variety of styles if possible. Raters say, “forget formulas” emphasizing that “a good five-paragraph theme has no greater chance than a good paper with any other structure... Life is too short to cram into five paragraphs!” Several raters have mentioned that they want a writer to “take chances, use humor—show different sides of yourself! Take time to ask yourself: ‘How can I take this more interesting? More engaging?’ and then take time to revise. No one wants to be bored.” If you do decide to be creative and take some risks with your writing, it would be a good idea to explain such aspects of your writing in your cover letter.

6. **Revise your portfolio carefully:** Most professional writers see revision as going well beyond changing words and correcting grammar. Give yourself plenty of time to spend reading and re-reading your work, thinking of ways to offer fresher examples and more compelling arguments. Revising also means considering your audience: “Go over your pieces and ‘re-see’ them for this audience and situation.”
  
7. **Appearance and correctness count:** Of course content is most important, but after taking the time to do the writing, you need to spend time polishing and correcting the work. Use spell check and get a trusted person to proofread. Give pieces titles, number pages, and use a legible, plain typeface or font (we recommend Times New Roman). Full portfolios in italics or long narrow fonts are difficult to read, and anything smaller than 10 pt. is also extremely hard to read. Remember: use a readable point size: 12 pt. (depending on the font) is best. Double-spacing is standard, as are one-inch margins on all sides of the page.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Can I send one single paper that fulfills the requirements of a narrative or short story, an explanatory/exploratory/persuasive essay and a response to a text?**

Yes. Some teachers assign writing to students that is “multi-genre” and that fulfills many of the expectations we have of the separate pieces we ask you to submit. If you have such a “multi-genre” paper, it must be substantial enough to fulfill all the content requirements for the portfolio.

If you choose to submit a multi-genre paper in place of separate papers, we ask the following:

- ▲ Explain your choice in your reflective letter. Tell us what specific required genres your paper fulfills, making sure to follow the instructions for the letter (found in the brochure) asking you to reflect critically on your choices for the portfolio as well as on the purpose and audience for your multi-genre paper, as you would for any other papers you submit in your portfolio.
- ▲ Make certain to follow appropriate in-text and bibliographic procedures for all the papers you submit in your portfolio in which you use others’ ideas or refer to outside sources.
- ▲ Be sure to follow the “essential instructions” listed in the brochure for both portfolios (such as including drafts for both portfolios, removing all identifying information, staying within page number limits, etc.).

### **What exactly does the brochure instruction to “properly document” sources mean? Do bibliographic pages count in my page number limit?**

To properly document your use of someone else’s words or ideas, you must both cite your source in your paper, at the end of each quotation or paraphrase you take from a source, and provide full bibliographic documentation in a separate page at the end of each paper in which you use other sources. To be consistent in your documentation, you will need to follow one specific citation style—such as MLA, APA, or Chicago—throughout each paper. English departments typically use MLA style, but you can use other styles, as long as you do so consistently. Requirements for each of the styles listed above can be found online, or in individual style manuals or general writing manuals (such as Diana Hacker’s A Writer’s Reference) available in most retail bookstores or college textbook stores.

Bibliographic pages do NOT count in the 12-page limit for the portfolio. For example, if your portfolio ends up being 14 or 15 pages long because of your end-page documentation, but the actual text of the papers you submit totals 12 pages or less, then your portfolio falls within the maximum page limit. Do not leave out the bibliographic pages because they put your portfolio over 12 pages.

### **What’s the difference between a “traditional” reflective letter and a “creative” one?**

A “traditional” reflective letter usually takes the form of a personal letter of introduction, which is structured as a typical formal letter: it opens with a greeting; moves to a brief introduction of yourself as writer; offers reflective information about each of the works included (i.e. it provides a context for each work and explains why you included it in the portfolio); and then closes with some concluding remarks about yourself or your portfolio. For many students, the traditional reflective letter form is a good choice. However, some writers choose to open up this traditional kind of letter, to include conventions from other writing genres. For example, one writer might choose to submit a letter that includes dialogue, creates a detailed scene, or incorporates figurative language as a means of introduction or reflection. Another writer might choose to cite outside sources—like interesting quotes from plays, poems, or works

of fiction, or the writer's own writing—to fulfill the requirements for the reflective letter. That is, the genre of reflective letter writing is able to accommodate a variety of creative options that you can select from or combine. Since the letter is the first piece of writing included in the portfolio, you will do well to consider all of the options available to you—and try drafting out various ones to see how they might look to and be received by the portfolio audience—as you set out to write your reflective letter.

Whether you select the traditional or creative letter, or try a combination of both, be sure you maintain a focus on your portfolio writing.

### **How important are titles to the portfolio contents?**

Titles are often a very difficult and sometimes overlooked part of the composing process. However, the title is the first introduction to a piece of writing that readers see, and as such it is an important element of the work itself. Spend some time thinking about how you will title the three works in your portfolio that require titles (all but the reflective letter). For each title you create, ask yourself: Will this title intrigue my readers? Does it reflect what I have written in my paper? If I saw this title on a paper, would I want to read the rest of the paper based on the title alone? You could also get feedback from other people, asking them the same kinds of questions. Following this procedure can help you determine if you have chosen an interesting title that will effectively prepare the audience for reading your text.

### **Does all of the writing included in my portfolio have to be related in some way?**

Another way to put this question is, do I need a “theme” that connects all four of my works? And the answer to that question is no. You do not have to feel “locked in” to selecting or creating pieces that are all somehow “related” to each other. On the other hand, your reflective letter is meant to explain to your readers how you chose the individual pieces you included in the portfolio, and why they work well together to showcase your writing strengths and give your portfolio varied depth and balance. That is, the most successful portfolios demonstrate an ability to write effectively in different genres of writing. The portfolio readers will be looking for your ability to compose in a variety of ways: reflection on specific texts you have written; narration of a personal experience or short story writing; exploration, explanation, and/or persuasion; and response to other texts.

### **Do all 4 pieces in my portfolio have to be of equal length?**

The most important thing to remember is to use the full 12-page limit and develop your thoughts in each piece as fully as possible. You don't need to force each paper you include to be of equal length. Chances are that your reflective letter will only be 1-2 pages in length, while your explanatory/exploratory/persuasive essay or your response to a text will likely be much longer, maybe even 5 or 6 full pages. One of your pieces may be  $3\frac{1}{4}$  pages, while another may be  $4\frac{1}{2}$ ; instead of being credited in that case for 4 pages and 5 pages respectively—which might put you over the limit—we would count the fractional pages together as one page, which would either give you one more page to work with, or maybe keep you within the 12-page limit. In other words, use the 12 pages in a way that helps you produce 4 pieces that you are happy with and that, taken together, will showcase your writing abilities most effectively. Your portfolio readers will be reading and evaluating your portfolio as a whole.

## PORTFOLIO CONTENTS

A portfolio consists of a completed information form together with the following four equally important pieces of prose writing. Miami's Department of English follows the NCTE Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language, and any sources used must be properly documented with in-text and end page citation. Examples and explanation of both the use of nonsexist language and proper documentation can be found on the Miami English Department's Portfolio Website <http://www.muohio.edu/portfolio/>.

### **Reflective Letter**

The reflective letter, addressed to Miami University writing teachers, sets the tone for the portfolio by introducing both the writer and the individual pieces. Readers are not expecting a narrative of your experiences and growth as a writer but, rather, evidence of the critical reflection used in assembling and producing the portfolio. To that end, most useful letters explicitly introduce the pieces and explain the purpose and audience for each piece. Both creative and more traditional letters of introduction are acceptable.

### **Narrative or Short Story**

This piece can be based on personal experience as a non-fiction narrative or can be a short work of fiction. Its aim is to communicate the significance of an experience or event through description, dialogue, and/or narration. Put another way, successful pieces show rather than tell. The writing can be personal and informal. This narrative or short story should have a title.

### **Explanatory, Exploratory, or Persuasive Essay**

Generally speaking, essays in this category should be focused, informative treatments of specific subjects. This essay should provide much more than convincing examples of supporting data; it should examine multiple points of view and show strong evidence of critical thinking, awareness of audience, and attention to social context. If secondary sources are used, they must be documented correctly. This explanatory, exploratory, or persuasive essay should have a title. You may find that you've written an essay which fits this category for a class other than English.

### **Response to a Text**

This essay should respond to a written text (short story, novel, poem, play, or essay) or a cultural text (film, music, or visual art) produced by professionals, classmates, or yourself. The response should interpret or evaluate all or part of a text. Possible approaches include analyzing textual elements, explaining the text's significance, comparing the text to other texts, relating the text to personal experience and/or connecting it to larger social or cultural contexts. Use support from the text to develop ideas and strengthen focus without overshadowing your own response or giving extensive summaries. If secondary sources are used, they must be documented correctly. (If the print text is not common, a copy of it should be included with your portfolio.) This response to a text should have a title.

## ESSENTIAL INSTRUCTIONS

- ◆ Papers written in class or out of school, including college application essays, are acceptable. Papers may be revised after being returned by a teacher.
- ◆ Miami's Department of English follows the NCTE Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language and any sources used must be properly documented. For explanations of both nonsexist language and proper documentation, see the portfolio website at <http://www.muohio.edu/portfolio/> or The Best of Miami University's Portfolios.
- ◆ Arrange your portfolio in this order:
  - completed information form
  - reflective letter
  - narrative or short story
  - explanatory, exploratory, or persuasive essay
  - response to a text
- ◆ For any one piece of writing (not all four pieces), include and label all draft material and paperclip it to the end of the appropriate essay. Portfolios lacking draft material will not be scored. (Note cards will not be accepted.)
- ◆ Your name should not appear anywhere in your portfolio—including your reflective letter. All your writing—except your draft materials—must be free of teachers' marks, grades, and comments.
- ◆ Do not staple or bind your portfolio. Paper clips are okay.
- ◆ Your completed portfolio, not counting works cited pages and draft material, should not exceed 12 typed, double-spaced full pages (8.5"x11") using a 12-point font. Portfolios over 12 pages will not be read, but the strongest portfolios tend to be 10 to 12 pages long.
- ◆ Submissions are accepted anytime between January 1 and July 8. You will receive results by mail within three weeks. Results will not be given by phone.
- ◆ The portfolio submission fee is \$28, more if you earn credit, and you will receive a \$10 gift certificate from an Oxford area bookstore. You will be billed later so **do not send payment** with your portfolio.

**Submit anytime between January 1 and July 8, 2004:**

**PORTFOLIO WRITING PROGRAM  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
MIAMI UNIVERSITY  
OXFORD, OHIO 45056**

## PORTFOLIO INFORMATION FORM

TO THE STUDENT: Complete the first half of this form (type or print) and give it to your senior teacher to sign. Mail it together with your four-piece portfolio in a 10x13 envelope addressed to: Portfolio Writing Program, Department of English, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056. Submit anytime between January 1 and July 8, 2004. Do not send payment.

STUDENT'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_

HOME ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

HOME PHONE (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

**Will you be:** (*check one*)

- an entering first-year student
- a transfer student
- an upper-division Miami student
- other

**At what campus will you enroll:**

- Hamilton
- Middletown
- Oxford

**All the writing included in the attached portfolio is my own, and I grant Miami University permission to publish all or part of its contents.**

Signature of Student \_\_\_\_\_

TO THE TEACHER: If you believe this portfolio contains only the student's own work, please complete this form. Thank you!

SUPERVISING TEACHER'S NAME \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHER'S HOME PHONE (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

TEACHER'S HOME ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF HIGH SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

**To the best of my knowledge, the attached portfolio has been written by this student.**

SIGNATURE OF TEACHER \_\_\_\_\_

SUPERVISING TEACHERS 2003

Judith A. Adams	Glenbrook South High School	Glenview, IL
Sharon C. Alloway	Bishop Watterson High School	Columbus, OH
Barbara J. Anderson	New Trier High School	Winnetka, IL
Elaine Andrysiak	Queen of Peace High School	Burbank, IL
Lisa Azzarelli-Brown	Williamsville East High School	East Amherst, NY
Thomas A. Bancroft	Cherry Creek High School	Englewood, CO
Betsey A. Bedell	Blind Brook High School	Rye Brook, NY
James L. Berta	Anthony Wayne High School	Whitehouse, OH
Kathleen A. Berwanger	Loveland High School	Loveland, OH
Mary Bidwell		Middletown, OH
Rebecca Bleeke	Granville High School	Granville, OH
Cynthia K. Briggs	Wyoming High School	Cincinnati, OH
Darrin D. Broadway	Ottawa Hills High School	Toledo, OH
Scott Callaghan	Wadsworth High School	Wadsworth, OH
Regina M. Chambers	New Richmond High School	New Richmond, OH
Karen Christopfel	Amelia High School	Batavia, OH
David V. Clapp	St. Xavier High School	Cincinnati, OH
Janet Coakley	William H. Harrison High School	Harrison, OH
Susan Coffman	Grandview Heights High School	Columbus, OH
Valerie Combs	Archbishop McNicholas High School	Cincinnati, OH
Carol Lee Cornwell	Sycamore High School	Cincinnati, OH
Amy M. Cowin	Brighton High School	Salt Lake City, UT
David K. Cox	Potomac School	McLean, VA
Jackie Czarnota	Rocky River High School	Rocky River, OH
James C. Davis	Troy High School	Troy, OH
Donald Deems	Norwood High School	Cincinnati, OH
Michael J. Dehring	St. Xavier High School	Cincinnati, OH
Michael Deines	Maine South High School	Park Ridge, IL
Paula M. Dolloff	Lakota West High School	West Chester, OH
James W. Downie	St. Xavier High School	Cincinnati, OH
Mrs. Patricia L. Drake	Centerville High School	Centerville, OH
Margaret E. Duchelle	West Springfield High School	Springfield, VA
Donald Lee Dunstan	Greenon High School	Springfield, OH
Robert A. Dvorak	St. Francis DeSales High School	Columbus, OH
Daniel Dyer	Western Reserve Academy	Hudson, OH
Lucinda M. Eubanks	Jackson High School	Jackson, OH
Frances Kathryn Evans	Tri-County North High School	Lewisburg, OH
J. Douglas Fay	Northwest High School	Cincinnati, OH
Kathleen Finch	Lassiter High School	Marietta, GA
Teri Foltz	Highlands High School	Fort Thomas, KY
Amy C. Fowles	North Olmsted High School	North Olmsted, OH
Kurt A. Fox	Olentangy High School	Lewis Center, OH
Robert Glidden	Avon High School	Avon, IN
Steven J. Googash	Kettering Fairmont High School	Kettering, OH
Richard D. Grejtak	Gilmour Academy	Gates Mills, OH

Lisa L. Hara	LaDue Horton Watkins High School	Saint Louis, MO
Rebecca Hart	Cincinnati Northwest High School	Cincinnati, OH
John (Jack) S. Hay	Boardman High School	Youngstown, OH
James L. Hemmert	Carroll High School	Dayton, OH
Elisa Hendrey	Ward Melville High School	East Setauket, NY
Marilyn R. Herring	Ursuline Academy	Cincinnati, OH
Barbara Holden	Fruitport High School	Fruitport, MI
Nicole K. Hoog	Maine South High School	Park Ridge, IL
Megan R. Horncastle	Lakota West High School	West Chester, OH
Robert G. Howard	Memorial High School	Saint Marys, OH
Marion L. Huyck	New Trier High School	Winnetka, IL
Michelle M. Jeffries	Ballard High School	Louisville, KY
Diane C. Jennings	Sycamore High School	Cincinnati, OH
Sharon Arko Jones	Parma Senior High School	Parma, OH
Daniel J. Kaye	Clay High School	South Bend, IN
Janet Kearsley	Falmouth Academy	Falmouth, MA
Sean Keefe	J. K. Mullen High School	Denver, CO
Kenneth C. Keener	Archbishop Moeller High School	Cincinnati, OH
Barbara Kell	Herbert Henry Dow High School	Midland, MI
Ellen M. Kelly	Shaker Heights High School	Shaker Heights, OH
Kathleen C. Kenny	Gilmour Academy	Gates Mills, OH
Janet A. Kessler	Clermont-Northeastern High School	Batavia, OH
Dianne S. Klein	Bowling Green High School	Bowling Green, OH
Donald T. Klever	Maumee High School	Maumee, OH
Joseph D. Knap III	Bay High School	Bay Village, OH
Dianne Kruszynski	Brecksville-Broadview Heights HS	Broadview Heights, OH
Robert Kruzic	Glenbrook North High School	Northbrook, IL
Mr. Greg M. Kurtz	Dayton Christian High School	Dayton, OH
David A. Lackey	Strongsville High School	Strongsville, OH
Linda O. Lackey	Strongsville High School	Strongsville, OH
JoAnn LaMuth	Bexley High School	Bexley, OH
Alexander Lehmann	Stratton Mountain School	Stratton Mountain, VT
James A. Lindon	Tuscarawas Valley High School	Zoarville, OH
Ellen Jo Ljung	Glenbard West High School	Glen Ellyn, IL
Jeff Lynxwiler	West Liberty-Salem High School	West Liberty, OH
Greg Malling	Walt Whitman High School	Bethesda, MD
Shane Marshall	Stryker High School	Stryker, OH
Rebecca McFarlan	Indian Hill High School	Cincinnati, OH
Barry McRaith	Northside College Prep High School	Chicago, IL
Sean Meehan	Mercersburg Academy	Mercersburg, PA
Penni J. Meyer	Kettering Fairmont High School	Kettering, OH
Joanna Miller	Colorado Academy	Denver, CO
Jennifer L. Montani	Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy	Cincinnati, OH
Barbara J. Moore	Minster High School	Minster, OH
Linda M. Murray-Wilke	Newfield High School	Selden, NY
Diane Mastro Nard	Cardinal Mooney High School	Youngstown, OH

Mary B. Nicolini  
Ronda S. Noble  
Amy C. Nock  
Mark O'Hara  
Sheila O'Marah  
John P. O'Toole  
Cheryl M. Orebaugh  
Richard H. Orndorff  
Sherrie L. Ouellette  
W. Ray Parrish  
Denise L. Patterson  
Paula S. Patterson  
Heidi L. Perry  
Myrna Perry  
Scott Pharion  
Sandra W. Priwer  
Sharon Ramidal  
Deanna C. Rauch  
A. Regis  
Kathleen Reilly  
Christina Conklin Rode  
Dennis Rogers  
Jay Rosenberg  
Bonnie Rupe  
Cheryl A. Salzman  
Cynthia Schoenhoff  
Nicole L. Schrock  
Kyle Scudder  
Ann Shafer  
Joyce E. Shrimplin  
Sr. Mary Hope Sieron  
Annette Sims  
Carolyn S. Smith  
Clare E. Squance  
Lynn Stevenson  
Emily Straub  
Jane L. Stufft  
Patricia A. Sullivan  
Stephen Tapogna  
Thomas Teckman  
Peggy K. Thoma  
Christine Tieman  
Helen Trares  
Dave Wassink  
John Watson  
Gary P. Wegley

Penn High School  
Kenston High School  
Ursuline Academy  
Stephen T. Badin High School  
Potomac School  
Solon High School  
The Wellington School  
William Mason High School  
Lakeview High School  
Northwest Guilford High School  
Minford High School  
Crestview Local High School  
Miami East High School  
Van Wert High School  
St. Charles Preparatory School  
Westerville South High School  
Jackson High School  
Lincolnway Central High School  
Garden City High School  
Oyster Bay High School  
St. Ursula Academy  
Dublin Scioto High School  
New Trier High School  
William Mason High School  
Colerain High School  
Worthington Kilbourne High School  
Pettisville High School  
Walnut Hills High School  
Holgate High School  
Wadsworth High School  
Bishop Watterson High School  
Scott County High School  
Middletown Madison High School  
Talawanda High School  
William V. Fisher Catholic High School  
Gahanna Lincoln High School  
Kings High School  
Anderson High School  
Colerain High School  
Fort Loramie High School  
Piqua High School  
Waynesville High School  
Archbishop Hoban High School  
Kalamazoo Christian High School  
Lakota East High School  
Beavercreek High School

Mishawaka, IN  
Chagrin Falls, OH  
Cincinnati, OH  
Hamilton, OH  
McLean, VA  
Solon, OH  
Columbus, OH  
Mason, OH  
Battle Creek, MI  
Greensboro, NC  
Minford, OH  
Columbiana, OH  
Casstown, OH  
Van Wert, OH  
Columbus, OH  
Westerville, OH  
Jackson, MO  
New Lenox, IL  
Garden City, NY  
Oyster Bay, NY  
Toledo, OH  
Dublin, OH  
Winnetka, IL  
Mason, OH  
Cincinnati, OH  
Columbus, OH  
Pettisville, OH  
Cincinnati, OH  
Holgate, OH  
Wadsworth, OH  
Columbus, OH  
Georgetown, KY  
Middletown, OH  
Oxford, OH  
Lancaster, OH  
Gahanna, OH  
Kings Mills, OH  
Cincinnati, OH  
Cincinnati, OH  
Fort Loramie, OH  
Piqua, OH  
Waynesville, OH  
Akron, OH  
Kalamazoo, MI  
Middletown, OH  
Dayton, OH

Ronald J. Weisbrod  
Robin S. Whited  
Teri Wilson  
Melissa J. Wolfe-Izworski  
Jennifer Yah

St. Xavier High School  
Columbus East High School  
Parkview High School  
Sycamore High School  
Hilltop High School

Cincinnati, OH  
Columbus, IN  
Lilburn, GA  
Cincinnati, OH  
West Unity, OH

