

# Essay Writing in Upper Secondary Class

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Writing compositions is not a haphazard exercise for either the teacher or the pupil. For both it means much planning and serious thought if it is to be profitable in any way at all. Too often the teacher is tempted to rely on the inspiration of the moment for essay titles. Such off-hand assignments, flung out as the bell rings, are an invitation to false and superficial response. The assignments must be difficult enough to make the pupil reach higher than he thought he could and stimulating enough to make him want to write. Making good ones is obviously an art, and the art has principles that can be stated. Designing them takes more time and more imagination than most teachers give to it, but if the teacher thinks of it as the heart of his teaching – in short, if he thinks that what he asks of his pupils is more important than what he tells them – he may be ready to spend almost as much time, energy and imagination on creating the assignments as on reading the efforts that result.

*A good assignment evokes the best from the writer and gives the teacher the best chance to be helpful.* It asks the pupil to do something he can almost, but not quite, do without strain. It asks for nothing that the teacher cannot, with effort, understand well enough to criticize intelligently, both in form and in content. The vacuous subject, “What I did during the holidays”, fails because the worst pupil learns little from treating it, the best finds no stretch for the mind. The recondite one, “Gamma particles under pressure”, fails because unless the teacher knows at least as much about the subject as the writer it gives him no opportunity to serve the pupils as more than a proof-reader. He may think that he can judge the essay by its success in making unknown matter clear to him, but in fact he has no way of knowing that it is clear unless he also knows that it is accurate.

*A good assignment aids learning and requires a res-*

*ponse that is the product of discovery.* The lack-lustre writer is primarily one who has not discovered anything worth saying. The writer must care. The reader must be made to care in some way if he is to make useful comments about the theme, and no reader can care if he feels the writer did not care in the first place. The assignment must therefore touch the outer edge of the pupil's knowledge and invite him to go further, and it must guarantee that going further will give him the chance of discovering something he did not know before.

To provide that invitation and guarantee that discovery, a good assignment furnishes data to start from. "Let us assume...." it begins; or "Assuming the following things to be true, write...." It may set conflicting data, such as contradictory criticism of a literary text, opposing arguments, incongruous bits of common sense ("A penny saved is a penny earned" and "Penny wise, pound foolish"). It may start from a picture or even from a cartoon, a cartoon that poses the same question as that raised by Juliet's confidence that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. For arts pupils especially, the data may be the literature they are studying, an endless source for good subjects which has the merit of providing its own data.

*A good assignment may take the form of, or be construable into, a proposition.* The conversion of a theme "topic" into a proposition is helpful because it gives pupils something definite to work against. "The view from my window" has the virtue of inviting invention but the serious fault of giving the writer nothing to control his attention. Translated to propositional form: "That the view from my window makes me dread (or welcome) getting up in the morning", the same topic suggests a focus and even a tone for the writer to exploit. The literary essay benefits no less from a propositional starting point: "That Hamlet is mad," "That Macbeth is a responsible agent". Obviously, it is not necessary that the pupils be taught to see that, however it is presented, it contains a central proposition, or more than one and that propositions require more than sentiment from him. The provision of a predicate immediately puts the writer into a posture of defence or attack and calls for the summoning and ordering of evidence or arguments. Instead of a circle circumscribing undefined matter, the proposition supplies an arrow pointing out a clear direction of movement.

*A good assignment limits either form or content or both.* By limitation the teacher reduces the choices that a writer must make. He stakes out the limits within which the writer may exercise his freedom and thus makes it possible for him to compare results; for, though

no two good themes will be alike, they must have similarities if the teacher is to practise on them, for the benefit of the class, that most useful of critical procedure — comparison. It is for the same reason that he furnishes certain data, certain givens. He wants not only to stimulate good writing but to make use of it after it is written. When he reads the essays he will, to be sure, consider not only the satisfactoriness with which the limited element is managed but the ingenuity the pupil has shown in managing what was left free. And when he uses the essays for class discussion he will do no less.

*Assignments should vary in kind.* No apology is tendered for such a truism. It is surprising how easily the chalk-dust declouds the obvious. There is no sacred pattern of progression, from description through narration to argument, for instance, nor any from matters of daily living to outpourings of the heart or ruminations of the spirit. The précis, the summary, the parody, the imitation of a master are all valuable exercises. The mere process of trying to write poems or stories sharpens the pupil's appreciation of the poetry and fiction he is studying and leaves him respectfully aware of the masterly technique required to make a poem or story sound so effortless that you think what it tells must just have happened that way. At this level (i.e. upper secondary) the expository essay should be the staple of the course. It allows the best definition of problems and permits the most helpful exercise of informed criticism by the teacher; it provides the best classroom exercise because its discipline is the best understood; and it is, in however corrupted condition, the most common form of human discourse.

A teacher of English composition should take essay assignment seriously and by the care with which it is planned and the deliberateness, clarity, and imagination with which it is presented he should make clear to the class that if they will take the assignment seriously, the teacher and the rest of the audience — the class — will take their essays seriously. Composition teachers who think of an assignment as simply a way of getting a piece of writing to correct defeat their own purposes for how can pupils take substance seriously if they suspect the teacher doesn't? It is not just a matter of setting hard topics. It is rather a matter of not doing anything in a course in English that is trivial or simply routine. Not that every assignment should come wrapped in owlish solemnity. No one, least of all the English teacher, wants to take the joy out of creation or the smile out of the human condition. The plea here is only that pupils should talk and write about subjects which matter to them and should not be brought up on a diet of arid irrelevant exercises.