

Sample Prompts for a Variety of Types of Analytical/Expository Essays

Comparison/Contrast Essay

Prompt: A Comparison and Contrast of Mariana and Miss Havisham

After carefully analyzing Tennyson's poem "Mariana" and Dickens' portrayal of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, compare and contrast the way the two women respond to their adverse circumstances. How is the response of Mariana and Miss Havisham to being abandoned/rejected similar? In what ways do the two women differ? Refer to specific images and symbols in the setting of both works that Tennyson and Dickens use to reveal the state of mind of their characters. Consider how each author uses tone to influence the reader's response to the characters. What is your attitude toward the two characters (are you more sympathetic to one than the other?) and what have you learned from them?

Your paper should be written in analytical/ expository form: introduction, main body, and conclusion with ample transitions and supporting evidence from the text. Use descriptive language to enrich your interpretation and follow the conventions of written English, including quoting from the text accurately.

Interpretive Essay

Prompt: Character and Culture in Amy Tan's "The Moon Lady"

In the opening of Amy Tan's short story "The Moon Lady," Ying-ying says that she wants to tell her daughter that they are both lost. She goes on to say, "I did not lose myself all at once." However, a memory which she says she has kept hidden for many years--a childhood memory of becoming lost at the Moon Festival-- now comes back to her. This marks the place in her life when she first became lost, both literally and symbolically. In fact, although her parents did find Ying-ying eventually, she never believed her family "found the same girl."

In a well organized essay, describe how the incident at the Moon Festival affects Ying-ying.

- How and why did she change?
- How did Ying-ying's culture contribute to her transformation?
- How did she allow herself to become lost symbolically?

The best papers will move beyond a factual account of the story to a true analysis of Ying-ying's character, the change in the way she perceives herself, and the way her culture perceives her role in society. Refer to specific images and symbols in the text to support your character analysis. Use direct quotes when applicable. Your paper should be written in standard expository form (introduction, main body, and conclusion). Be sure to use precise, apt, descriptive, figurative language to show and not just tell about how the incident in Ying-ying's life affected her character. In other words, make your writing as vivid as possible for your reader. Your paper should also correctly follow the conventions of written English, including following the rules for accurately quoting from a text.

Controversial Issue Essay

Prompt: *How Guilty is Macbeth?*

What do you think would happen if Macbeth were arrested and tried for the murder of Duncan in twentieth century America? Would he be given the death penalty? Life in prison? Could a skillful attorney plead to a lesser charge because of mitigating circumstances or get him off with an insanity plea? To what degree, if any, might his wealth and status influence the outcome of a trial?

Closely analyze Macbeth's actions in the play and decide to what extent you believe he is responsible for and should or should not be punished for the murder of Duncan. Then, write an essay justifying your decision.

Your essay should:

- Begin with a brief synopsis of his crime to create a context for your argument.
- Decide whether Macbeth is guilty of first degree murder. If he is not guilty of first degree murder, then how would you classify the crime: second degree murder, voluntary manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, or not guilty by reason of insanity?
- Cite ample evidence from the text about Macbeth's motivation and his actions to support your classification of murder (or insanity), including direct quotations, where appropriate. (Note: You may refer to Macbeth's actions later in the play as part of your argument but your focus must be on how this evidence supports your assessment of how Macbeth should be charged for the murder of Duncan.)
- Acknowledge opposing points of view and overcome those points of view with logical reasons.
- Close by stating what type of sentence Macbeth should receive based on the charge you have determined and explain why that sentence is appropriate.

Your paper should be written in standard expository form. Follow the conventions of standard written English, including correct paragraphing,

punctuation, grammar, and spelling throughout, as well as quoting from the text accurately.

Speculation on Causes and Effects Essay

Prompt: Speculating About Master Harold

In Athol Fugard's play *Master Harold..and the boys*, Hally has lots of problems that cause him great frustration. We've looked at his problems and how he has dealt with them. We've seen that he has had Sam to guide him -- to teach him as well as to learn from him. When Hally becomes so frustrated by his father that he has to strike out, he strikes at this guide. Brutally, he insults Sam and turns on him.

In one sense, Hally has broken his ties with Sam and now is alone. Even though Sam has forgiven him, Hally walks out.

Why do you suppose he does this? Why can't he make up with Sam? Do you think he will want, or be able, to reestablish his relationship with Sam? What do you predict he will do? What do you know about him thus far that helps you make this prediction?

Write an essay in which you speculate about Hally's relationship with Sam after the curtain falls. Do you think he will be able to repair their friendship? Explain your prediction clearly and support it with a strong analysis of Hally and his past relationships (both to Sam and to his father), as well as his motivations for making the decisions he makes.

Approach writing speculation as you would any expository essay of argumentation. Begin your essay by stating your prediction and defining the context or situation from which your speculative claim arises. Your interpretation of Hally's character must be based on logical inferences about his motivations. The body of your essay must offer your analysis of your prediction. Any situations in the plot that might appear to work against your claim must be considered and explained. The tone of your speculation should be authoritative, convincing the reader that you have thought through the subject thoroughly.

Convince your readers that your ideas are plausible, and that you have seriously considered the question of Hally's potential for reconciliation with Sam. Write in analytical/expository form (introduction, main body, conclusion) and follow the conventions of standard written English.

(Simpson, 1996, p. 25)

Evaluation/Persuasive Essay

Prompt: Who is a Tragic Hero? Tragedy and the Common Man

Using Arthur Miller's concept of tragedy and definition of the tragic hero in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" as a point of reference, write an evaluative and persuasive essay in which you establish a case either for or against the character of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* as a tragic hero. If you feel that there are convincing arguments for both perspectives, you may present both pros and cons; but you must, ultimately, side with one position or the other.

In developing your argument, be sure to explain Miller's criteria for the tragic hero and assess Willy Loman against that criteria. You may want to consider these questions:

- What is the essence of Willy's dream? What is he searching for?
- Who or what is responsible for Willy's present state of mind?
- In what ways do Willy's sons reflect his values, his deficiencies, his frustrations, and his dreams?

Be sure to document your main points with evidence from the play. Refer to specific scenes, quote from the text, consider relevant symbols, image patterns, stage directions, etc. Your job is to persuade your reader that your evaluation of Willy as meeting or failing to meet Miller's criteria for a tragic hero is valid. Your essay should be in standard essay format: introduction, main body, conclusion with ample transitions and logical development. Follow the conventions for standard written English including the rules for accurately quoting from the text.

Reflective Essay

Prompt: We Are Many

We have been talking and thinking about how and why people have many selves. You have explored your own experience and studied the experience of the poet Pablo Neruda as described in his poem "We Are Many." You have also created images to help look at what these experiences might symbolize in the world. Combine all of these experiences and your thinking into a reflective essay about people and their many selves.

Remember, reflective writing often begins with a specific event and then moves into an abstract reflection about it. One in-depth personal experience or several brief, yet specific, experiences may stimulate the writer to reflect. Reflective writing is personal, often informal,

exploratory, perhaps inconclusive. In it you ponder, wonder, and move toward a fresh awareness of a truth about human nature.

Write an essay in which you reflect on people and their many selves. You may want to begin by writing about your own experiences-- either literally or in terms of the image you created to represent them-- and how they compare to the ideas Neruda wrote about in his poem "We Are Many." Then, explore whatever ideas occur to you as you think about what these kinds of experiences tell us about how people behave and what we can learn about human nature in general from them as examples. Be sure to show the process of your wonderings and ponderings.

(Simpson, 1996, p. 398)

References

- Simpson, J. (1992). Justifying a decision. In C.B. Olson (Ed.), *Thinking/writing: Fostering critical thinking through writing* (pp. 365-378). New York: Harper Collins. Reprinted with permission of the author.
- Simpson, J. (1996). Reflecting about our many selves. In C.B. Olson (Ed.), *Reading, thinking and writing about multicultural literature* (pp. 388-411). Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. Reprinted with permission of the author.