

active file

Kept by MRS. LUCILLE DUGGAN
Richfield Senior High School

To consider all of the assignments that are made throughout the land on any one day would be as staggering and as useless a task as to contemplate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. A more profitable pursuit has been to distinguish the essential elements of successful assignments. Teachers are aware of these. For instance, a good assignment must have value for the students. The teacher must believe that it can bring about desired learning. It may build upon former learnings and will lead on to others. The teacher plans carefully, trying to anticipate problems students may encounter as they work. He presents the assignment clearly. He evaluates its success. Hopefully, somewhere in this process his imagination sparks, he creates, and the assignment becomes an interesting or challenging one he can present with enthusiasm. Through study and experience teachers come to know many elements of a good assignment, yet the creation of such an assignment can be difficult and frustrating.

A report of an interesting, imaginative assignment has been received by the editors of M E J. This was tried at the Institute of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota in a multi-section course in English composition under the direction of Ray Lynn Anderson (Ph.D., University of Minnesota, 1968), now Assistant Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Pittsburgh. The purpose of the course was to improve student writing through knowledge and use of rhetorical principles.

The first assignment of the course stressed the selection of a thesis statement and the development and organization of a paragraph. The student was given the following one-page statement of the assignment.

You are to write a one-paragraph (200 to 300 word) letter to the editor. The letter may be designed to register public protest (e.g., "The exit from Interstate 94 onto 12th St. in St. Paul is poorly designed") or refute previous letters (e.g., "I am disappointed in the report of a young man's senseless destruction of 165 harmless, beneficial garter snakes"), etc.

Your letter should develop only one persuasive thesis. The thesis statement should be specific (e.g., "I agree 100 percent with those who wrote regarding the half-time 'concert' given by the University of Minnesota marching band").

This assignment assumes that persuasion is cumulative; that is, it develops through what might be called a process of addition. Typically, the writer introduces a topic (persuasive thesis) and then adds comments about it, which extend

throughout the manuscript. The comments about the thesis should develop and prove it to be true. Hence, care in paragraph development is the key to writing an effective letter to the editor. If the topic sentence is stated at the start of the paragraph, persuasion (and paragraph) develops by moving outward from the thesis. If the topic sentence is withheld until the end of the paragraph, development of the persuasion moves toward it.

Proof for the thesis statement may be of any type. You may wish to develop by comparison, exemplification, narration, etc. Although this assignment does not emphasize supporting materials (proof), your instructor will insist that the comments in support of the thesis are relevant and consistent.

No detail of the form used in an effective letter to the editor is sacred, but here are two suggestions to keep in mind:

- 1) The letter to the editor should be relatively short. A newspaper editor normally anticipates short and terse comments from his readers and selects letters to be printed partly on these grounds.
- 2) The salutation and ending of the letter should be as follows.

salutation (in italics): *To the Editor:*

ending (also in italics): *Mr. John J. John, Slaton, Minn.*

The letters-to-the-editor assignment was evaluated in several ways and considered a successful learning experience. Paragraphs were generally unified and well organized. Thesis statements were specific. This was considered an outcome not only of specific directions but of the student writers' sense of a particular audience. More than a third of the letters were subsequently printed in newspapers. Thus, another judgment of the writing was obtained, and perhaps more important, the students gained a new awareness of a news medium which was receptive to their ideas. The practical result of this assignment was an important factor in its success. Each student wrote knowing his letter might be published. He polished his work. He took his position seriously and exercised his right as a citizen to express his opinion. The assignment focused upon the learning experience of the students, and as such is certainly one that they won't forget.

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This column welcomes contributions that involve the exchange of ideas. Such an exchange is particularly necessary now, as we abandon old scripts to take up new ones that call for teachers to move back out of the lights coming up on students busy learning down front and center.