Student Model Essay  

A Way with Words

Since I was very young, I have had a strong passion and fascination with words, an interest that was especially encouraged by family and developed through a variety of mediums. Like most babies, my first word was rather simple: “Da-dee” (“Daddy”). When learning my alphabet and numbers, my mom would play popular kid shows of the time, including “Sesame Street” and “Arthur,” on television and on audio tapes in the car. In addition, I enjoyed singing along with various Disney tapes and childhood favorites, such as Barney, Raffi, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. “I suppose you could say I was the ‘gatekeeper of my children,’” Mom recollects. “Without a doubt, I preferred for them to listen to musical tapes that were both educational and fun and believe it or not, if we listened to a tape plenty of times, I would actually start to sing along, too!” she laughs. When I was able to start formulating short phrases and sentences, my parents always made it a point to correct my word usage immediately. For example, when I would say “Dad, we should have went to the store earlier,” he simply replied “Gone,” a simple, yet effective reminder.

Just as they currently encourage me to seize any challenging opportunity, my mother and father always took the opportunity to challenge me as a child. In an attempt to broaden my vocabulary and speech skills, they tried not to simplify everything and, therefore, used “baby” words as selectively as possible. For instance, when I would point out something that I wanted but for which I did not know how to properly ask, Mom and Dad would wait until I provided the appropriate “grown-up” word, for example “water” vs. “wa-wa.” Soon enough, I began reading at age four. While previously my parents, siblings, and other family members would sit and read to me, it was not long before I was reading to them because I learned quickly. In addition, I instantly enjoyed going to the library with my mom to check out new books as well as old favorites. My mom remembers a time when my sister Jourdan and I were reading together: “All of a sudden, Jourdan came running in, totally confused and shocked. ‘Mom, how many times did you read this book to her?’ she asked. ‘A couple of times, maybe. Why?’ ‘Well, she must have memorized it then.’ ‘Nope! I don’t think so. Jourdan, she can read! Get another book and you’ll see what I mean.’” Like always, Mom knows best. “You were like a little sponge,” she reflects. “No matter what we threw your way, you would soak it up.” This was just the beginning of my fascination with words.

Perhaps my strongest memory of truly exhibiting an enjoyment of words dates back to when I was five years old and first started watching my favorite game show, Wheel of Fortune. One time while watching the show, which I required of my family every night at 6:30 pm, I solved the puzzle not only before the contestants and my family, but with barely any letters on the board. The look on my family’s faces when this happened was pure shock! However, after solving the puzzle, I surprised them even more by turning to my mom and asking, “Mommy, what’s that mean?” Though they found it rather humorous, from then on, I always made sure I knew what the puzzle meant before I shouted out the solution.

Another one of my strengths with using words has always been spelling. In elementary and middle school, I had the opportunity a few times a week of attending “K.E.E.P,” “Keep Education Exciting Program,” a special enrichment class independent of my regular classes. During this time, I was assessed on demonstrating important life skills, such as problem solving, logic, and creativity, through an array of activities and projects. It was also in this class that my peers assigned me the label of “Walking, Talking Dictionary.” Whenever they would ask me to spell a word for them, I was more than capable although I could never tell whether they really did not know how to spell the word or if they were just testing me. Aside from watching too many game shows and reading, I also developed a love for words at a young age when I began to complete word searches and crossword puzzles with my dad for fun. These activities not only enhanced my spelling but also expanded my vocabulary.

My growing vocabulary ultimately evolved into my overall appreciation of writing most likely when I entered junior high school. At this point, I had already taken an interest in writing poetry, which I enjoyed composing regularly in my spare time. I still have a personal journal-like book which contains all of my poems that I have liked enough to keep and hope to add to. However, since junior high required
more reports and lengthier assignments, I had to focus on further expounding upon my ideas, rather than writing the simplistic and “compact” poetry I enjoyed. Nevertheless, as I began to write papers more often, I became more comfortable with reaching the established length requirement and developed a writing style I continue to refer to as “simplistic, yet informative.” My fondest memory of writing in junior high, and perhaps in my writing career so far, was when I composed a research paper for my 8th grade English class. Yes, seventeen pages double-spaced with over 6,000 words proved to be a rather frightening tally for my fellow classmates and teacher to comprehend. Even so, I was proud to hear from my teacher that she enjoyed reading my paper and that I was the sole reason for the next year’s maximum word count on all research papers.

Once I reached high school, I wanted to channel my passion for writing in a way that would allow me to get more involved in school. Since I enjoyed writing, I thought, “What better way to do that than with journalism!” Because I am a rather curious person with a fondness for learning from other peoples’ experiences, I felt that enrolling in a journalism class would allow me to learn how to become a better interviewer and listener by developing skills, such as curiosity, research, and creativity, essential to my potential career choice and life in general. As a result, I was taught to be frugal with the number of words used when conveying ideas to a reader, a skill that will be helpful as I continue to learn more about proper writing in college.

Now that I am a freshman at Mississippi State University, I look forward not only to further honing my writing skills but also becoming more sound with the various forms of technology and software programs that are widely used in careers associated with my intended major of Communication/Journalism. Eventually, I hope to continue employing these skills by contributing to the school’s student publication, The Reflector.

Overall, the story of how I came to thoroughly enjoy reading and writing illustrates characteristics similar to those of an actual book. Throughout my life, I have been supported by my parents (characters) who have provided me with a constructive environment (setting) conducive to learning and growing. Nevertheless, it is ultimately up to me (author) to take what I have learned from my experiences (plot) and channel this knowledge into the development of a successful career (bestseller).

Sasha Steinberg
“Hello, my name is Nada. I am from Iraq,” my student said as we went around the classroom introducing ourselves. I was a first year teacher, just beginning to learn the art of teaching at an English as Second Language Center. As I had listened to the other students introduce themselves and their countries, I had heard India, Spain, Mexico, and Nepal, but when Nada said “Iraq,” I felt my face drop and my eyes widen. I quickly went on to the next person, hoping no one would notice how uncomfortable I felt. Prior to this experience, I thought that no one in the world was more accepting of other cultures and nationalities than I was, but at this moment, I realized even I, to some extent, was prejudiced against the Middle Eastern country that my country had for years fought to rebuild. While our initial meeting was an uncomfortable situation, it was an invaluable learning experience. As I watched Nada grow as an English speaker, I saw firsthand the value of cultural exchange, and, through this experience, I found myself growing more culturally literate.

Throughout that semester, I worked with Nada and her classmates and watched as they became more proficient in their English speaking and writing skills. And I as taught them English, I let them show me the world. We talked about their homes, and they cooked the aboriginal foods of their countries that were so rich in cumin seeds and chili powder that I often sneezed before trying the first bite. But all the while, I paid special attention to Nada. I could not help the urge to consider what about our two cultures divided us in ways that our governments must resort to war. In fact, it seemed as though Nada and I were more alike than we were different, as we were two women in our twenties trying to get an education, she working to learn English and I working toward a master’s degree.

One morning’s activity remains, in my mind, as a poignant example of how cultural exchange can give way to cultural literacy. As we studied the importance of writing to show a process, the students wrote recipes. When the projects were finished, we shared our recipes, and the class and I discussed the foods and ingredients. Nada had written a recipe for chicken salad, and I was amazed to find that we shared roughly the same recipe—chicken, mayonnaise, celery, and sliced, natural almonds—with only one ingredient different. She added peppers, and I added pickles. The thought of adding peppers to chicken salad almost made me sick, and when I mentioned to her that I added pickles to my recipe, she frowned. At that moment, we began to laugh at the frivolousness of our small, almost insignificant, differences. Somewhere, back in the home Nada could not get back to because of the conflict, our brothers were at war. But here, over chicken salad, Nada and I became friends.

When the class came to an end that winter, my students had progressed in their English speaking skills in small, yet meaningful ways. Even Nada, who, at first, had really struggled with writing English, greatly improved over the duration of the course. And while everyone had learned something, I felt as though I had learned more than my students. Working with them, talking with them, eating with them, I had learned the power of cultural literacy made possible through cultural exchange.

Christina Collins
English Department lecturer, former MSU student
Provide thorough and thoughtful responses to the following questions. Yes and No answers are insufficient, so comment, explain, or offer suggestions for all responses. You may also write on the draft and mark grammar and punctuation mistakes.

1. How does the title grab your interest? In what way does it suggest the essay’s content?

2. Does the introduction have a hook (opening line) that is a surprising statement, interesting fact, relevant quotation, or thought-provoking question? After reading the introduction, predict what you expect to find in the body of the essay.

3. Underline the thesis. Does it narrow the subject? Claim something specific and significant? (In narration, the thesis may be located somewhere other than the introduction).

4. What sentence appears most important to the meaning of the essay? Explain why you selected this sentence.

5. What (if anything) does the writer want to say but does not quite say?

6. What is most surprising about what the writer says or shows?
7. What part of the narrative seems most important? What, if any, elements of the story are either left out or addressed too briefly?

8. List any unnecessary explanations that would be better presented through showing rather than telling.

9. What does the theme, lesson, or insight seem to be? Does this insight seem too obvious or too general?

10. Identify any aspects of this narrative that seem irrelevant to the essay’s purpose; explain why.

11. Is the essay predominantly narrative?

12. Does the writer have appropriate transitional words, phrases, and sentences? Mark them on the draft. Note any place that needs a transition or has an inappropriate or ineffective transition.

13. Does the writer follow MLA format? Consider margins, spacing, headers, and font size.

14. Discuss the strongest and weakest aspects of this essay with the writer.
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