

PANNING FOR GOLD: FINDING THE BEST ESSAY TOPICS

"Waste is a necessary part of the American way of life."

A great many teachers, thinking of the roles that planned obsolescence and attractive packaging have played in our economy, would consider this quotation a satisfactory stimulus for a writing assignment. They would be in good company, for the Committee of Examiners (experienced English teachers all) responsible for the College Board's English Composition Achievement Test approved a topic based on this quotation for pretesting (trial testing).

As familiar as they were with creating topics for a nationally administered examination and as unsurprised as they might be at the ways in which students can find ambiguities and problems in what seem to be clearly written topics, no member of the committee expected the interpretation that showed up regularly in the 300 papers written during the pretesting. "Waste," these papers said, "is produced by all animals. Americans have bodily wastes to dispose of, too. Of course, waste is necessary to American life." The wording of the topic was changed, and eventually students taking the English Composition Test were asked to write on a topic that began with the words, "Wastefulness is part of the American way of life."

The essential lesson learned from years of writing, revising, discussing, trying out, and using essay topics is that the creation of essay topics must be approached with humility. The writer of the essay question is at the mercy not only of the vagaries of student thinking (often better described as reasonableness, imagination, and inability to read teachers' minds), but also of the diversity of experiences, cultures, and environments represented in a large testing population. In addition, newspaper headlines can sometimes make or break a topic.

Between the time an essay question is readied for printing and the time it is administered, any number of things can happen to affect the quality and variety of responses readers must score. A question, for example, that asked students to discuss a community problem would have produced very different results before the events at Three Mile Island than it would have afterward.

Even so, evaluation of essay topics before they are actually used to measure the writing abilities of test-takers is a crucial step in developing an essay test that is very often overlooked. It is one way — albeit inexact — of determining whether an essay topic is flawed enough to interfere with the students' ability to demonstrate how well they can write. As a matter of fact, at ETS, even after years of experience, even after the combined efforts of the qualified teachers who create and approve the topics, only one topic in ten, on the average, passes the trials of pretesting.

A few of the comments gleaned from the evaluations of pretest topics point out some of the difficulties found in various topics once considered appropriate. Topic A began with this stimulus:

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

The evaluation reads:

This question spelled doom from the start, for in the majority of papers we found every sort of platitude and the full range of pious responses. It was debated whether rephrasing the writing assignment would help, and consensus was that if the proverb is retained, there would be no point in rewriting, since the students clearly did not read beyond the proverb.

Topic B:

"Nothing in America stands still for very long, including the people."

The evaluation reads:

The candidates isolated "standing still" for definition — out of context. They documented the statement instead of agreeing or disagreeing with it; they did not focus on the question posed. They did not deal with the idea of progress. The topic invites Fourth of July oratory. As it stands, the topic does not contain the germ of argument. A possible revision might ask the candidates to draw a line between what is simply hectic movement, busyness, haste.

Among evaluations of other topics are the following comments:

Topic C:

"A little learning is a dangerous thing."

This is a fake topic for this age group. The candidates had difficulty finding examples and illustrations. Their responses were empty. The candidates missed the point of the topic; they did not understand the statement and therefore did not know what to do with it.

Topic D:

"We are often told that we should set a good example for those younger than we are. As some interpret this advice, a parent should do nothing which he would not allow his child to do. Nor should an older boy or girl do anything he would not want a younger brother or sister to do. Is such an interpretation of the advice wise?"

The time for this question, after readers had read through a dozen essays, was judged as best reduced to 20 minutes. After a few more essays were read, we questioned just how much preaching we could invite the students to do, and then for doing just that! Case closed.

Topic E:

"Though it may be shocking to have our customs criticized or our accepted values challenged, it is sometimes useful to be shown a familiar thing in an unfamiliar light."

The quotation is confused and therefore confusing. What is the candidate to concentrate on? It was hard for the readers to set standards because the papers were very general and vague. The topic is too broad.

Topic F:

"Wastefulness is a necessary part of the American way of life."

Although the first glance at this question produced some grunts and groans, most readers after the first reading expressed strong approval of the question; it not only allows the students to take a number of directions, but also encourages them to give more than a superficial treatment to the topic.

The moral? Not even experienced essay question writers and experienced scorers can always tell the good topic at first glance. A little empirical evidence helps enormously.

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