Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest

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The Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest is owned and operated by the Rotary Districts Character Education Program, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes.
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“The Laws of Life Contest makes young people think about their life’s values and articulate them in a way that is meaningful to them. It is not just another contest on creativity and essay-writing capabilities. Writing a Laws of Life essay challenges me and makes me realize things about myself that I might never know otherwise.

Thank you, Laws of Life!”

–Maylene Kie, Parkview High School student, 2006-20
What is the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest?

The Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest is a statewide writing and character education program for students in grades 9–12. Students are asked to select a maxim or “Law of Life” (such as “Honesty is the best policy” or “Kindness is the highest form of wisdom”) and to write an essay explaining how the maxim applies to the students’ lives.

The essay contest gives students an opportunity to reflect on important life lessons while working on critical writing skills. The contest which fits easily into Core Curriculum Standards and allows schools to easily implement their state-mandated character education requirements.

- Last year, 45,233 students wrote essays for the Georgia Laws of Life contest.
- The contest presented more than $20,000 in student and teacher cash awards in the 2015-2016 school year.
- The Georgia Laws of Life contest is the largest essay contest of any kind in North America.

Does the Laws of Life contest meet the state mandated character education requirement?

Yes. In 1999, House Bill 605 created an unfunded mandate that all Georgia schools provide character education. The Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest is a free, easy-to-implement way for high schools to both meet the mandate and support the school’s language arts curriculum.

What makes the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest different from other essay contests?

The Laws of Life Essay Contest rewards students of all achievement levels. The essays are judged primarily on the degree to which the essay writer shows that he or she has earnestly reflected on a law of life and applied it to his or her life.
How does the Laws of Life contest fit in with Core Curriculum standards?

The contest is operated through a school's English or Language Arts department. The essay assignment works well with Core Curriculum and other writing standards, including:

- **RC 3** - Acquires new vocabulary in each content area and uses it correctly.
- **W 1** - Establishes appropriate organizational structure, sets a context and engages the reader, maintains a coherent focus throughout, and signals closure.
- **W 4** - Practices both timed and process writing and, when applicable, uses the writing process to develop, revise, and evaluate writing.
- **C 1** - Demonstrates understanding and control of the rules of the English language, realizing that usage involves the appropriate application of conventions and grammar in both written and spoken formats.
- **C 2** - Demonstrates understanding of manuscript form, realizing that different forms of writing require different formats.

Please see the Appendix for sample lesson plans and rubrics indicating additional standards that relate to the Laws of Life essay assignment.

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**Georgia Laws of Life Timeline**

- **February 15, 2017** - Essays due
- **Mid-March, 2017** - School Winners are announced
- **Mid-April, 2017** - State Winners are announced
- **Late April, 2017** - Student award checks and teacher honoraria are mailed

***The contest is approved by the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Humanities Council, and is endorsed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.***
CONTEST AWARDS

The Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest has significant statewide student awards, school-level student awards, and teacher awards. For 2016-2017, the awards are as follows:

Statewide Student Awards

$1,000 - First place State Contest winner
$1,000 - George A. Stewart, Jr., Character in Action Award*
$750 - Second place winner
$500 - Third place winner
$300 - Fourth place winner

* The criteria for selecting the First Place State Contest Winner and the George A. Stewart Award are identical. Both carry a $1,000 cash award. Different judges select the two winners.

School Level Student Awards

The number of school level student awards depends on the number of students who write a Laws of Life essay. A school that generates a minimum of 100 essays per grade level (9-12) will have four (4) cash winners: a $100 School Winner and three $50 Grade Winners. For schools that generate fewer than 400 essays, the award levels are detailed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Size (Total Enrollment)</th>
<th>Eligible for State Awards?</th>
<th>Guaranteed $100 school level award?</th>
<th>Guaranteed $50 cash award per grade level?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>400+ students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, if at least 200 essays are generated.</td>
<td>Yes, if at least 100 essays per grade level are generated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 – 399 students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, if at least 150 essays are generated.</td>
<td>Yes, if essays are generated from at least 80 percent of the grade's total enrollment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small school category: 100-199 students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Small schools that generate last least 100 essays total will be pooled with other small schools for one $100 cash award.</td>
<td>Small schools that generate last least 100 essays total will be pooled with other small schools for three $50 cash awards (one per grade level).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher Awards and Honoraria.

- **$100 award** to the English teacher of the State First-Place Student Winner.

- **$100 honorarium** to each Contest Chair who generates essays from at least 25 percent of a school's total enrollment (or a minimum of 250 essays, if the school enrollment is less than 1,000 students).
CONTEST CHAIR RESPONSIBILITIES

The Contest Chair is the liaison between the Georgia Laws of Life contest and the school. Contest Chairs should:

- Promote the contest within the English / Language Arts department, and to the school administration.

- Make current contest materials (Teaching Tips, Student Pointers, etc.) available to everyone, as needed.
  - Do not use materials from prior years’ essay contests and do not use sample forms downloaded from the national website.

- Distribute student bookmarks supplied by the Georgia Laws of Life contest.

- Submit 8 to 12 essays per participating grade level, for a maximum of 48 essays per school, to Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest by February 15, 2017 (or a few weeks earlier if possible!)

- Keep track of the total number of essays written from each grade level and record that information on the School Tally Sheet. Submit the School Tally Form along with the essays.
  - Tip: Have each English teacher count the number of essays written in his/her classes, then tally these numbers for the total.

Even though you will be submitting a maximum of 12 essays per grade, the total number of Laws of Life essays written by your school is a key factor in the continued success of the contest. Please encourage as wide a participation in the contest as possible.

- NEW! In addition to the $100 honorarium mentioned on page 2, Contest Chairs who generate essays from 80 percent or more of a school’s total enrollment will be named as a “2016-2017 Georgia Laws of Life Teacher of Distinction.” Those teachers may list the honorary title on their resumé, email signature block, etc.
ESSAY REQUIREMENTS

When writing a *Law of Life* essay, students should be original and should “write from the heart.”

- **Essays should be 500 to 700 words in length, typed and double-spaced.** Students should include a word count, if possible.

- **Essays should be based on a student’s personal experience or observations.** The essay should show how a *Law of Life* applies to a student’s life. Essays that focus on a historical character or that read like a book review are not winning essays.

- **Essays should contain a “law of life” expressed as a maxim, saying, or quote.** (“Honesty is the best policy” is a *Law of Life*; the word “honesty” is not. Essays that do not contain a saying or quote are not eligible to win prizes.)

SUBMITTING ESSAYS TO THE GEORGIA LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST

Each school should submit a maximum of 48 essays (8 to 12 per grade level). Do not send all the essays written.

Please count the essays written per grade and report the numbers on the School Tally Sheet. Schools that do not indicate the number of essays written per grade on the School Tally Sheet will not be eligible to receive cash prizes.

**Essays, accompanied by the School Tally Form, are due February 15, 2017.** Please ship to:

Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest  
71 Paces West Court  
Atlanta, GA 30327

NOTE ADDRESS CHANGE FROM LAST YEAR!
NOMINATING YOUR SCHOOL’S TOP ESSAYS

Schools should submit 8 to 12 of the best essays from each participating grade level, for a maximum of 48 essays per school. In selecting their top essays, some schools rely on teacher decisions, some schools use peer input from students, and other schools ask retired teachers or other “outside” sources to read and select the essays.

GUIDELINES

Give your students the best chance to win awards by following these guidelines.

• State winning essays are published in our essay brochure, and school level winning essays sometimes appear in local newspapers. Therefore, essays that are potentially libelous, or which reflect negatively on other named or easily identifiable individuals, will not be selected as contest winners by the Laws of Life program. We cannot print unproven accusations or negative comments against people in your community.

• Do not necessarily submit essays only from your most academically advanced students. Students of all academic abilities and levels are eligible to win. Laws of Life judges primarily look at content and the application of a law of life. Coherence and basic writing skills are important, but perfect grammar and perfect spelling are not the judges’ top criteria.

• Avoid the temptation to have all of your submitted essays about tragedies. The Law of Life Essay Contest seeks to showcase a variety of essays, so variety in your submissions is encouraged.

CHECK LIST

In addition to the above, check to make sure that the essays submitted meet the following requirements:

___ Is the essay within the 500 to 700 word count?

___ Does the essay clearly state a Law of Life, expressed as a saying or quote?

___ Does the essay relate to the student’s life experiences or personal observations? (Essays that focus exclusively on a historical figure, for example, are not potential winners.)

___ Does the essay have a 2016-2017 Student Entry form attached (stapled, not paper-clipped)?

___ Is the student entry form signed by the student, and – if the student is under 18 years of age – by a parent or guardian?
WRITING A GEORGIA LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY

Student Tips

• A Law of Life is a wise saying or quote that contains words of truth, lasting meaning, or inspiration. Examples of Laws of Life include:

  o “An attitude of gratitude creates blessings.”
  o “You are only as good as your word.”
  o “To have a friend, be one.”
  o “Honesty is the best policy.”
  o “When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”
  o “Smile and the world smiles with you.”

• Think about a true personal experience that has taught you about a Law of Life. The experience may have been a major event in your life, or it may have been a small, private moment when you came to understand something profound about life. Perhaps the experience was something traumatic, such as when you or family members were in a car wreck. Or perhaps the experience was something that makes you smile every time you think of it – the time your grandmother taught you how to bake a blueberry pie, or the time that you and a friend discovered that laughter was the best medicine.

• Write an essay that relates your experience to a Law of Life. Be sure to clearly state the Law of Life in your essay!

  o Remember that the best essays include lots of details. These details make the reader feel as though he or she was right there with you when the event occurred. Let the reader know exactly how you felt, and why.

• Your essay should be between 500 and 700 words. Essays that are shorter or longer than this will be disqualified from the contest. Placing the essay’s word count at the beginning or end of the essay is helpful, but it is not required.

• Complete the Student Entry Form and staple it to the top of your essay.

• Make a copy of your essay to keep; the copy that is sent to the Laws of Life Essay Contest will not be returned to you.

"Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.” -William Wordsworth
GEORGIA LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST

Teaching Tips

• Explain to students that the essay is an opportunity to write and reflect on their own life and values, and an opportunity to win cash prizes.

STATE WINNERS – All students are eligible
Two $1,000 state awards, plus three runner-up awards ranging from $300 to $750.

STUDENT SCHOOL WINNERS
$100 per School Winner
for schools that generate the required minimum of essays per school size (see page 5).

STUDENT GRADE WINNERS
Three $50 Grade Winner Awards (in addition to the School Winner Award) for schools that generate the required a minimum of 100 essays per grade level (see page 5).

TEACHER AWARDS -- Two $100 Awards
$100 each to the teacher of the First place State Contest winner and to the teacher of the George A. Stewart, Jr., Character in Action Award.

• Remind students that many prize-winning essays have been written by students who first thought they had nothing to write about. Stress that prize-winning essays come from students of all abilities and grades.

• Clearly explain the meaning behind the phrase Laws of Life.

A Law of Life is a wise saying or quote that contains words of truth, lasting meaning, or inspiration. Examples of Laws of Life include:

• “An attitude of gratitude creates blessings.”
• “You are only as good as your word.”
• “To have a friend, be one”
• “Honesty is the best policy.”
• “When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”
• “Smile and the world smiles with you.”

• Consider handing out copies of The Georgia Laws of Life Sample Maxims sheet, or brainstorm with your student to create a list of maxims.
• You may want to jumpstart your discussion by asking students several of the following questions:
  
  - What three qualities do you value in a friend, a teacher, or a parent?
  - Describe an incident or an event from which you leaned a lesson “the hard way.”
  - Describe an event in which you went out of your way to help someone.
  - Describe a situation in which someone went out of their way to help you.
  - Do you have a parent, grandparent or teacher who often says a quote such as “A penny saved is a penny earned?” or “Anything worth doing is worth doing well?” What does that saying mean?
  - When you become a parent, what are the three most important values that you hope your children will have?

• Remind students that the *Laws of Life* essay should be about a personal experience or personal observation. It might be about something traumatic or serious (a car wreck, a parents’ divorce, a move from another state or country), or an ordinary event which gave a student a special insight into the meaning of life (an afternoon football game, a ride on a bus, or a heart-to-heart talk with a friend).

• If your students have written a *Laws of Life* essay in the past, encourage them to look at this year’s essay in a new light: If a student wrote about a sad and difficult life experience for last year’s essay, he or she may want to write about something more light-hearted this year. Or if last year’s essay was about an event that still has a repercussion in his or her life, ask the student to “dig deeper” and revisit the experience again – the student may be surprised by new insights and new meanings.

• Remember that each Law of Life Essay should:
  1) include a Law of Life or maxim
  2) relate to a student’s personal experience
  3) be 500 to 700 words (approximately 1 ½ too 2 pages typed doubles-spaced)
  4) have a completed Student Entry Form stapled on top of the essay

• The student’s name should not be written on the essay itself.

• **IMPORTANT**: Count the number of essays written by your students, and keep a record of the total number, by grade level. Your Contest Chair will need this information to submit to the Georgia *Laws of Life* Contest.

• The essays will not be returned, so have students keep a personal copy of the essay in their files or make a copy for your files.

• For more information, visit the Georgia *Laws of Life* website (www.georgialawsoflife.org) to read last year’s winning essays.

• See appendix for handouts, sample lesson plans, and sample rubrics.

*Adapted in part from the Teachers Guide developed by The John Templeton Foundation.*
GEORGIA LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST
2016-2017 Student Entry Form

PLEASE PRINT LEGIBLY - Attach with a staple to the top of your essay.
DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THE ESSAY ITSELF

High School: ________________________________

GRADE: __________

Law of Life (This is the maxim or quote that you have written about, and it should appear in your essay):

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Your Name: ________________________________________________

Home Address: _____________________________________________

City: ___________________________ Zip Code: ________________

E-mail __________________________________________

Parent’s or Guardian’s Name(s): ______________________________

Have you won this contest as a finalist before? ___________________

First & Last Name of Your English Teacher:

__________________________________________________________

By signing this document, you and your legal guardian hereby give the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest the right to use this information, your essay, and your photograph and/or video image at its discretion and without limitation to publicize and promote the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest and/or its sponsors. By signing, you are also certifying that the essay is your own original work and truthfully reflects your personal life experiences.

Signatures: Essayist: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Parent or Guardian: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Students 18 years of age and older do not require a parent’s or guardian’s signature. If you are 18 or older, please check here: ______
GEORGIA LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST
SCHOOL TALLY FORM
2016-2017

1. Name of School: ________________________________________

2. Name of Contest Chair: __________________________________

   Email address of Contest Chair: _____________________________

3. Total School Enrollment: ______________

4. Total Number of Essays written by students from your school: ____________

5. Percentage of student participation _________________
   (# of essays written divided by total school enrollment)

6. Total number of essays submitted to Laws of Life for judging purposes: ______
   (Note: Please submit 8 to 12 essays per grade, no more, no less! (Exception:
   schools with total enrollments of 100 to 199 students should submit 2 to 4 essays per
   grade.)

7. Number of essays written by grade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Total number of essays written</th>
<th>Total grade enrollment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total # of essays submitted for judging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>_______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature:

By signing below, you are verifying that the numbers stated above are correct, to the
best of your knowledge.

Contest Chair: ____________________________ Date: __________

*** THIS FORM MUST BE SUBMITTED WITH THE ESSAYS***
*** THE ESSAY DEADLINE IS FEBRUARY 15, 2017***
*** Mail to: Georgia Laws of Life, 71 Paces West Court, Atlanta, GA 30327 ***

lawsoflife@georgialawsoflife.org
Sample Maxims

Quotations from frequently assigned books in ELA high school studies

Sample Lesson Plan – Personal Narrative #1

Sample Lesson Plan – Personal Narrative #2

Sample Rubric #1: Rubric for W.11-12.12: Writing: Text Types and Purposes: Explanatory/Informative Writing

Sample Rubric #2
A “Law of Life” or maxim can be a quotation from a famous person, or a simple saying that you have heard. A “law of life” should be short and easy to remember.

1. “The highest form of wisdom is kindness.” - The Talmud
2. “What is success? To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson
3. “Strength is a matter of a made-up mind.” – John Beecher
4. “Slow and steady wins the race.” – Anonymous
5. “Loving someone deeply gives you strength, while being deeply loved gives you courage.” – Lao-tzu
6. “Share a smile with other people and a smile will return to you.” – Anonymous
7. “Fall seven times; stand up eight.” – Japanese proverb
8. “Love is patient, love is kind.” – I Corinthians 13:4
9. “Beauty is a light in the heart.” – Kahil Gibran
10. “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” – William Hickson
12. “Failure is not falling down but refusing to get up.” – Anonymous
13. “No one knows what he can do until he tries.” – Publilius Syrus
14. “Mistakes are doorways to discovery.” – Anonymous
15. “To listen, when nobody else wants to listen, is a very beautiful thing.” – Mother Teresa
16. “The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what you are for what you could become.” – DuBois
17. “One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore.” – Andre Gide
18. “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll eat forever.” – Chinese Proverb
19. “Good example is the best sermon.” - Benjamin Franklin
20. “Stop and smell the roses.” – Anonymous
21. “Strangers are just friends waiting to happen.” – Anonymous
22. “Bloom where you're planted.” – Anonymous
23. “Courage is not the absence of fear; it is the conquest of it.” - William Danforth
The quotations below from authors Maya Angelou, Jane Austen, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Paulo Coelho, Harper Lee, William Golding, Alice Walker, William Shakespeare, Christina Baker Kline and Bram Stoker call could be used as a basis for a Law of Life Essay.

**Teaching Tip:** Challenge your students to find a quotation from one of their assigned reading books.

“Instead, pursue the things you love doing, and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you.” — Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

“Life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait.” — Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

“It's such a happiness when good people get together.” — Jane Austen, *Emma*

“Success supposes endeavour.” — Jane Austen, *Emma*

“There are few things, - whether in the outward world, or to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought, - few things hidden from the man who devotes himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery.” — Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

“It is the peculiar nature of the world to go on spinning no matter what sort of heartbreak is happening.” — Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

“It's . . . your time to live. Don't mess it up.”— Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

“The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters.” — Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*

“The thing is - fear can't hurt you any more than a dream.” — William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

“Time moves slowly, but passes quickly.” — Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

“It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting.” — Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

“The simple things are also the most extraordinary things, and only the wise can see them.” — Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

“When each day is the same as the next, it's because people fail to recognize the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises.” — Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.” — Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

“It is good to test your limits now and then, learn what the body is capable of, what you can endure.” — Christina Baker Kline, *Orphan Train*

“No man knows till he has suffered from the night how sweet and dear to his heart and eye the morning can be.” — Bram Stoker, *Dracula*
SAMPLE LESSON PLAN: Personal Narrative #1

Note: There are many different ways to incorporate the Georgia Laws of Life Essay assignment into the classroom. Each school or each teacher should use the approach that best suits his or her students’ learning needs. The sample plan provided below may be used or not, and its adoption will not affect the chances of your students winning a Laws of Life award.

Provided by Sonya Trepp Fuller

Time: For 90 Minutes classes: one week; for 55 Minutes classes: 8-9 classes

CCGPS: ELACC9-10RI 2, ELACC9-10RI 3, ELACC9-10RI 6; ELACC9-10W 3, ELACC9-10W 4, ELACC9-10W 5; ELACC9-10SL 3; ELACC9-10L 3

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to:
1. Analyze various informational texts on personal narratives and writing well
2. Analyze the importance of personal narratives
3. Apply specific strategies for writing narratives
4. Demonstrate effective use of the writing steps: pre-writing, draft, revising, editing, and final draft
5. Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of using sensory details, similes, and metaphors in a personal narrative

Students will learn:
• To read and analyze Frank Bures’ article on personal narratives for their own use (see below)
• The importance of personal narratives and how to improve their personal voice
• Use the writing steps: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, final draft to practice good writing habits

Methodology:
1. Brainstorm reasons for writing personal narratives as a class
2. Read Frank Bures’ article The Secret Lives of Stories: Rewriting Our Personal Narrative
3. Discuss the importance and reasons for writing personal narratives based on the Bures’ text
4. Introduce students to the 3 Methods to Improve Your Personal Narrative
5. After each Method students should complete the step (staggering for mastery)
6. Provide Template for Personal Narrative as a guide for students when starting to write a personal narrative
7. Students start writing first draft. Have them check for similes, metaphors, and sensory details by assigning colors for each one. The students should read their essay and code it accordingly. This process will show them how many of each they have used and how they could improve their writing
8. Peer-revision and editing: students should read and revise/edit at least two peer essays
9. Teacher-Students conferences: continuous activity while students are writing
Materials:

1. *The Secret Lives of Stories: Rewriting Our Personal Narrative* by Frank Bures (see below, or find online at:
   http://www.pw.org/content/the_secret_lives_of_stories_rewriting_our_personal_narratives?cmnt_all=1

2. *Three Methods to Improve Your Personal Narrative* by Justin Johnson, Teresa, Carolyn Barratt, Litlemissmaria et al. (Reprinted below.)

3. *Template for Personal Narratives* by wikihow.com (See below, or follow link:
   http://www.wikihow.com/Sample/Template-for-Personal-Narrative ) (Reprinted below)

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The Secret Lives of Stories: Rewriting Our Personal Narratives

by Frank Bures

http://www.pw.org/content/the_secret_lives_of_stories_rewriting_our_personal_narratives?cmnt_all=1

Feature January/February 2013

Around the time our daughter turned four, she started making what seemed like odd requests. “Tell me about the sad parts of your life,” she would say at the dinner table. Or, “Tell me about the scary parts of your life.”

This phase went on for a while. I played along, telling her about my appendectomy in Africa, the time I almost fell off a cliff, the time I got a fishhook through my finger. We talked about deaths in the family, and she would sit with her eyes wide, not saying a word, listening as if her life depended on it.

It wasn’t until I’d gone through a whole list of broken bones and broken hearts that I realized what she was really asking: How can I deal with sadness? What should happen when I’m afraid? She was looking for scenarios out of which to build her own. She was looking for directions about which way to turn when she reached those crossroads herself.

After thinking about this for some time, it occurred to me that I had done a similar thing. It was in college, when I discovered that I loved to write. I wondered if I could do it. I wondered, “How do you do it?”

In search of answers, like many beginners, I approached other writers and bombarded them with questions to learn their secrets and to find out how they got where they were. As it happened, there was just such a writer in the town where I went to college, south of Minneapolis. His name was Paul Gruchow, and one day he came to speak to one of my classes.
Gruchow owned a small bookstore in town, occasionally taught writing courses at our school, and had written several books of essays, one of which we’d read in our class. It was called *The Necessity of Empty Places* (St. Martin’s Press, 1988), and I loved it for both the writing and the sentiment. I had no idea at the time that he had studied under poet John Berryman, or that for years he worked at newspapers and radio stations across the state before the University of Minnesota Press published his first book, *Journal of a Prairie Year*, in 1985 (it was reissued in 2009 by Milkweed Editions). All I knew was that his thoughtful, eloquent style had earned him comparisons to Thoreau and that somehow he had arrived at a place much like the one where I wanted to be.

After the class, I asked Gruchow if I could talk to him about writing. A few days later, he welcomed me into his home, told me to sit down, and offered me a cup of coffee. He was bald and portly and kind. His beard made him seem like the professor he sometimes was. He had a quick laugh and a look in his eye like his mind was always elsewhere.

We sat, and I started asking him how he’d done it, how it all went, what had been his first big break, and on and on. Patiently he told me about his work at the *Worthington Daily Globe*, about his first book, and about his many struggles along the way.

When I asked for advice, he tried to wave me off. He warned me that the writing life was full of hardship and disappointment and that there were seven times as many people who wanted to be writers as could be.

“Don’t do it,” he said, “unless there’s nothing else you can do.”

We sat for a long while, and I listened as he talked about his own writing life, hearing mostly the parts that I needed to hear. By the time I got up to leave, much of what he’d said had lodged itself deep into my mind. Before he’d even finished telling me his stories, I’d already begun to imagine my own.

I did not grow up in a storytelling family. My father tells what he likes to think are stories, but are more like sequential chains of loosely connected factual events. My mother keeps a three-line diary in which she catalogues the day’s events, which is more like the raw material from which stories are made.

My wife’s family, however, are easy raconteurs who tell stories loosely based on things that happened, but with deep feelings at their core. Her father, for example, likes to tell a story about how my wife’s first car was a huge Lincoln Continental that was so big she could barely see over the dashboard—he could only see her little head in it. He got her that car, he says, because he wanted to make sure she was surrounded by as much steel as possible.

Except that wasn’t it exactly. The Lincoln was just one of several cars her family owned and that she drove. Another was a tiny Datsun that would have been smashed like a tin can if it had hit another vehicle. Her first car was actually a crappy Ford Tempo.

For a long time I puzzled over this discrepancy. It took me years to finally understand that this wasn’t really a story about her first car. It was a story about how much he loved his daughter and wanted her to be protected from the world. All that steel was love.
Why do we misremember things in certain ways? It’s a fascinating question. Looking back, we do not recall a steady, seamless flow of events in time. Instead our mind breaks the flow of time into related chunks and stores them as scenes and anecdotes and episodes.

These episodes are the currency of our past and the storyboards we arrange to make sense of the things that have happened to us. We line them up like dominoes that lead to where we stand now. That we do this imperfectly has been written about many times. But I am more interested in the invisible threads running from one episode to the next, the forces that hold our stories together. Some have names, like love, or courage, or fear. Others are harder to pin down.

According to psychologist Dan McAdams, the episodes in our memory are not only the material for anecdotes to amuse our friends. They are also the building blocks of our “life story”—our own version of how we came to be the person we are.

Unless we write a memoir, or visit a therapist, we may never even tell anyone this life story, but that doesn’t make it any less important. McAdams and others argue that the ability to see one’s life as a story is at the heart of identity. In fact, our ability to “narrate” our life’s events may even be the defining mark of consciousness.

Building a life story is a process that begins around the time we turn two years old. That’s when we develop what McAdams calls a “primitive autobiographical self.” As we move into adolescence, we start to emphasize different memories we feel were important—events in which we learned something or changed. Then, during our late teens we start to develop a more complicated “personal fable,” in which we dream of the people we could become, like astronauts and presidents. McAdams calls this a “first draft” of our identity. We choose episodes based not only on who we think we are, but also on who we hope we can become.

As we move into young adulthood (between seventeen and twenty-five), things become a little more urgent as we try to compose a “full life story” that explains not only how we got wherever we are, but also what we believe, and who we will in fact be.

But our own past is not the only place from which our life story comes. The memories are our own, but what they mean and how we put them together come from the lives we see around us, from the stories we read and hear, and from whatever possibilities we can imagine.

For most of us, that full life story is never really finished, and is always subject to revision. Even so, it determines much of how our life unfolds. It’s like a road map through the chaos, with arrows pointing one way or another at turning points like failure and success, death and birth, love and loss. That is what our daughter was really asking: How do you live in a world with sadness and fear? And how should I?

After the door closed behind me at Paul Gruchow’s house, I went back to campus. I graduated and my career went slowly on. Yet even as I wrote story after story—hundreds of them—and even as I became a better writer, I still didn’t quite know what a story was, not exactly. Instead I wrote by feel. A story was something I knew if I saw or felt it, but when I tried to put a definition into words, the meaning would slip through my fingers.

You can find this same problem running through much of the discussion about stories, or narrative, these days—and there’s more of it than ever. Narrative neuroscience and narrative
psychology are both growing fields. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, a part of the U.S. Department of Defense, is even researching the use of narrative for defense purposes. Evolutionary biologist and author E. O. Wilson has repeatedly called us the storytelling species, and last April Houghton Mifflin Harcourt published a book by Jonathan Gottschall titled The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human. But like other authors who have tackled the subject, Gottschall never quite articulates what he means when he talks about a story, and the book remains a disappointing collection of platitudes.

So what makes stories so important? What makes them stories at all? I finally stumbled across a kind of answer in a field about as far from the English department as you can get: artificial intelligence.

It turns out one of the biggest problems with making a computer intelligent is getting it to do something that we do naturally, something called “commonsense causal reasoning,” which means understanding instantly when one thing causes another to happen.

“It’s very simple things,” says Andrew Gordon, a researcher at the University of Southern California’s Institute for Creative Technologies. “Like if you tell the computer you dropped an egg, you want the computer to know that it broke, not bounced.”

Gordon and his fellow researchers have been working on this problem for some time. They tried to instill this ability into a computer program by collecting millions of stories from blogs and using them to teach it how to deduce that A causes B.

After they had collected these stories, they designed a test in which they asked the computer a question, such as: “The man lost his balance on the ladder. What happened as a result? 1: He fell off the ladder. 2: He climbed up the ladder.” Or this one: “The man fell unconscious. What was the cause of this? 1: The assailant struck the man in the head. 2: The assailant took the man’s wallet.”

“Computers are horrible at this test,” says Gordon. Humans get the answer right 99 percent of the time—more or less perfectly. The best result they could get from the computer was 65 percent correct, or just 15 percent better than chance.

The computer, in other words, could not understand what we call causality. It couldn’t see how the ripples spreading from one event caused another to occur. It couldn’t see the forces that were secretly at work in our stories, but which we never name. For a computer, a Lincoln Continental is just a car—steel is just steel.

“Storytelling is a human universal,” Gordon says. “There’s not a culture that doesn’t tell stories. It’s something embedded in our genes that makes us good storytellers. It’s a huge survival advantage, because you can encapsulate important information from one person to another and share it within a group. So there’s a good reason to be good storytellers.”

But the utility of storytelling has to do with causality, the ability to determine what causes what. Causality is the thing that helps you plan. Causality helps you decide what must be done to get what you need, or want, or want to avoid. You might know how the world is, but if you want to know how it got that way, you have to understand causality. If you want to know how to change it in order to effect your goals, or if you want to know what to expect in the future, you have to
understand causality. When you tell a story, you’re trying to bring what Gordon calls “causal coherence” to events that are ordered in time.

Whether computers will ever be able to understand not only what happens in a story, but also why it happened and why it matters, remains uncertain. At the moment, they are very far from that point.

We, on the other hand, are already there. We see causality constantly, incessantly, and effortlessly: when we read the news, when we gossip about neighbors, when we watch a movie or read a book. Much of our life is the search for the causal links between events, for the forces at work not only in the physical world, but also in the hearts and minds of the people we know. We are constantly cataloguing the story lines around us in an effort to sort out our own. What causes greatness? What causes failure? What causes happiness? What causes goodness or evil? What causes sadness and fear?

Radio journalist Ira Glass has said that his mentor, Keith Talbot of National Public Radio, once advised, “Every story is an answer to the question: How should I live my life?”

Or, as the poet Muriel Rukeyser once wrote, “The universe is made of stories, not atoms.”

The headline came as a shock: “Author Paul Gruchow, who chronicled the prairie, dies at 56.” In late February of 2004, Gruchow took his own life with a drug overdose.

There were few details. Obviously, he had been deeply depressed. According to one article, when asked several months before his death how he wanted to be remembered, Gruchow replied, “Tell them I got up and said a few words.” According to another, when an old friend wrote to ask if he could do a story about him, Gruchow wrote back: “Last year I earned $62.85 in royalties and gave one public talk, in Duluth, that drew a dozen listeners…. Two or three times the phone rings. Usually I don’t answer it. There isn’t a story.”

There was a story, but perhaps not one he wanted to tell. It almost certainly wasn’t the one he’d imagined when he dreamed of becoming a writer. Maybe it was the story he’d been trying to tell me all those years ago when I sat across from him.

But it wasn’t the story I heard. What I heard was that it was not going to be easy, that it would take time and effort, and that I would have to endure hardships. Those were warnings that have served me well.

Looking back now, his words seem to take on another meaning, another kind of caution, one that has little to do with writing, and everything to do with life: Down there in our stories, the ones we tell ourselves, the ones we tell others, the ones we hope are true, the ones we fear might be, are forces at work that we can only ever halfway understand. Knowing how causalities hold our past together doesn’t mean we can always see what those causalities are.

What I heard from Gruchow was this: Writing, creating something so beautiful that it may outlast you, is so important that you must be prepared to suffer for it, and then keep going on. That has always been a part of my story, and that is one of the reasons I am still writing nearly twenty years later.
That may also be why the news of Gruchow’s death, so many years after we met, filled me with a deep and unexpected sadness. It was a sadness born of the realization that while I thought he and I had been reading from the same script, perhaps we weren’t. It drove home the understanding that at each of life’s crossroads, what you believe deep down determines which way you turn.

Be mindful, in other words, of the stories you believe, the stories you love, and the stories you choose to tell. Because in the end they may become your own.

Frank Bures is a contributing editor of Poets & Writers Magazine.
Method 1: Finding your focus

1. **Pick your event.** A personal narrative outlines one event in your life. It could be a failure, a change in your life, a realization, a childhood memory...anything. If it would be interesting to write about, it would probably be interesting to read. Think about a circumstance in your life that led to some result, consequence, or lesson learned.

   • It doesn't necessarily have to be huge or significant. Sometimes, the simplest of thoughts or circumstances can lead to a kind of poetic eloquence. If you emerge from your narrative thinking, "Yep, that's what it was like to be with my dad," then you have succeeded. There is nothing too small if it effectively communicates your message.

2. **Determine your narrator and their knowledge.** In this assignment, it is best to use 1st person, with and this 1st person being you.

3. **Think about the flow.** It may seem like going from A to Z is the only correct path, but it may not be. Though starting at the beginning definitely works, you may want to experiment with other chronologies for your story.

   • Flashback sequences are a fairly common and effective writing tool. You may also consider reflection, where you establish present day and then the narrator revisits a specific time in the past.

4. **Jot down the events.** Having a basic outline will help you organize your thoughts, see what details you need to include, and pick your writing methods. Only be concerned with the main points now.

   • This will set up the tone of your narrative, giving you an overall feel for your work. Look over the Law of Life or maxim you have selected and think of what you are trying to get across. How do you want your audience to feel when they finish your piece?

Method 2: Writing your first draft

1. **Start your story strong.** Your lead is the most important part of the entire passage; it's what will draw your reader in and keep them interested in your story.
2. **Have a beginning, middle and end.** In short, a narrative is a story -- and a good story has a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Your story should be in the body and it should adequately wrap up at the end.

   • At the end of your story, your reader should feel like they have left with something. This should either be a moral or an understanding of a person or thought process. Summarize this in your conclusion.

3. **Use dialogue in your story.** It’s amazing how much we learn about people from what they say. One way to achieve this is through carefully constructed dialogue. Work to create dialogue that allows the characters’ personalities and voices to emerge through unique word selection, and the use of active rather than passive voice. [2]

   • Don’t fabricate details. If someone didn’t say something, don’t put it in your story. Make your narrative as true to life as possible.

4. **Give sensory details.** Cover all senses such as taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound. If something is normally seen, talk about how it tasted. If it’s just heard, mention how it is imagined.

   • Expand your vocabulary. Instead of "pretty," use "glorious"; instead of "smelled," use "inhaled"; instead of "burn," use "scorched." Vivid words create more vivid pictures.

5. **Use similes and metaphors.** Relate objects or events to other objects or events by using "like" or "as." These are two of the most common writing tools used and allow the reader to see the words you're relaying.

   • For example: Instead of using "I cut my arm," consider, "I gashed my arm and blood seemed to spew out like water out of a garden hose." Doing this will allow you to paint a picture in your reader's mind.

6. **Put it all together.** You probably have in front of you a retelling of events that's fun, emotional, dynamic, and grabbing. As you go over it, piece it in order, adding emphasis where emphasis is due and removing the details from the tangents you may have inadvertently started. Can you see it becoming cohesive?

   • This is just your first draft. Some writers use third, fourth, fifth, and sixth drafts before they're happy with their work. Nitpick as you see fit, adding imagery here, a bit of dialogue there, and possibly even moving pieces around. When it clicks, you'll be able to breathe a sigh of satisfaction.
Title of Your Narrative

I. Set the scene
   a. Include a hook of some sort to pull readers into your narrative.
   b. Set the scene for your story. Avoid giving too many details, as you want your audience to keep reading.

II. Describe the problem or event
    a. Provide baseline information for your narrative, give details about the other characters in your story, or describe the feelings you were having while the events were happening.

III. Go into detail
    a. Help the reader connect with your narrative by describing the events and providing details about what was happening and how you were feeling.

IV. Talk about what you learned
    a. Share what you got from the experience, how it helped you, or why it was significant.
SAMPLE LESSON PLAN: Personal Narrative #2

Note: There are many different ways to incorporate the Georgia Laws of Life Essay assignment into the classroom. Each school or each teacher should use the approach that best suits his or her students’ learning needs. The sample plan provided below may be used or not, and its adoption will not affect the chances of your students winning a Laws of Life award.

Provided by Summer Shurling, Lamar County School System

Topic: Narrative Writing

Essential Question: How can I describe or explain a situation?

Standard(s):
W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
  • W 3a: Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
  • W 3b: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
  • W 3c: Use a variety of techniques to sequence experiences that build on each other to create a coherent whole.
  • W 3d: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
  • W3e: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative

W5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Skills: The student will be able to:
W3a: Narrative
  a. Describe or explain a problem, situation, or observation.
  b. Establish 1+ point(s) of view.
  c. Introduce narrator and/or characters.
  d. Use transitions to create smooth progression of experiences/events.

W3e: Narrative
  a. Reflect on what is experienced, observed, or resolved within the narrative.
  b. Write a conclusion that incorporates the reflection.

Writing 5
  a. Determine the purpose of a writing assignment.
  b. Identify the intended audience for an assignment.
  c. Create a new/unique approach.
Plan, write, edit, and rewrite the writing to match the audience and purpose.

Vocabulary Essential to this Lesson: intended audience, aphorism, maxim
Day 1: Warm-Up: Daily Grammar Practice- Conventions
• Review standards and vocabulary
• Activating Strategy: Introduce students to the Laws of Life essay contest.
• Students choose a maxim and begin brainstorming-three reason or examples that support their point.

Day 2: Warm-Up: Daily Grammar Practice- Conventions
• Review standards and writing task.
• Model thesis writing for students.
• Have students write their own statements that reflect the main idea of their essay.
• Students begin the rough draft of the introduction in class.

Day 3: Warm-Up: Daily Grammar Practice- Conventions
• Review writing task and monitor that students are on task with their writing.
• Review intended audience with students.
• Students will continue their rough drafts of the body and conclusion in class.

Day 4: Warm-Up: Daily Grammar Practice- Conventions
• Review writing task and monitor that students are on task with their writing.
• Have students read through their rough drafts and begin the editing process.
• Have students swap essays with a peer. Students will need to provide two peer reviews.

Day 5: Warm-Up: Daily Grammar Practice- Conventions
• Students will complete first drafts and submit for teacher review.
# Georgia Laws of Life Sample Rubric for W.11-12.12: Writing: Text Types and Purposes: Explanatory/Informative Writing

A Laws of Life essay can be a narrative essay or an explanatory/informative essay. This rubric is for explanatory/informative writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing: Text Types and Purposes: Explanatory/Informative Writing</th>
<th>Exceeds</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>Does not meet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction (W.11-12.2a)</strong></td>
<td>A full and strong command of the component. <em>Engages reader with a maxim and cites its source.</em></td>
<td>A consistent and moderately strong of the component. <em>Includes a maxim and gives its source.</em></td>
<td>A sufficient and average control of the component. <em>Includes a maxim.</em></td>
<td>A minimal and moderately weak control of the component. Does not include a maxim.</td>
<td>Weak control or no control of the component. Does not include a maxim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Develop Topic (W.11-12.2b)</strong></td>
<td>A full and strong command of the component. <em>Fully explains why the maxim is important and how it pertains to or has influenced the student.</em></td>
<td>A consistent and moderately strong command of the component. <em>Explains why the maxim is important and how it pertains to the student.</em></td>
<td>A sufficient and average control of the component. <em>Gives an adequate explanation of the maxim and why the student selected it.</em></td>
<td>A minimal and moderately weak control of the component. <em>Explanation of the maxim is cursory.</em></td>
<td>Weak control or no control of the component. Does not explain the maxim.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transitions/Links (W.11-12.2c)</strong></td>
<td>A full and strong command of the component. <em>All sections are very well linked and links are varied.</em></td>
<td>A consistent and moderately strong control of the component. <em>Most sections are linked and links are varied.</em></td>
<td>A sufficient and average control of the component. <em>Explanation of the component. Only a few sections are linked.</em></td>
<td>A minimal and moderately weak control of the component. <em>No sections are linked.</em></td>
<td>Weak control or no control of the component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Precise Language &amp; Jargon (W.11-12.2d)</strong></td>
<td>A full and strong command of the component. <em>Includes one or more appropriate metaphor, simile or analogy, plus precise language.</em></td>
<td>A consistent and moderately strong control of the component. <em>Includes a metaphor, simile or analogy, and precise language.</em></td>
<td>A sufficient and average control of the component. <em>Includes a poorly-chosen metaphor, simile or analogy.</em></td>
<td>A minimal and moderately weak control of the component. <em>Does not include a metaphor, simile or analogy.</em></td>
<td>Weak control or no control of the component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion (W.11-12.2f)</strong></td>
<td>A full and strong command of the component. <em>Conclusion refers to the selected maxim and provides a strong finish.</em></td>
<td>A consistent and moderately strong control of the component. <em>Conclusion refers to the selected maxim and provides a defined ending.</em></td>
<td>A sufficient and average control of the component. <em>Conclusion creates a discernable ending to the essay.</em></td>
<td>A minimal and moderately weak control of the component. <em>The essay has a weak ending.</em></td>
<td>Weak control or no control of the component. The essay ends abruptly with no conclusion or summary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Georgia Laws of Life Sample Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Meets the Standard</th>
<th>Needs Some Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Law of Life and Introduction</strong> (A ‘law of life’ is maxim, saying or quotation that summarizes an ideal, a character value, or a principle about life. If followed by everyone, the Law of Life would make the world a better place.)</td>
<td>You have clearly stated a Law of Life in a captivating introduction. The Law of Life is short and pithy and can be easily remembered and repeated.</td>
<td>You have clearly stated a Law of Life in an interesting introduction.</td>
<td>You have a Law of Life, but the Law of Life is excessively long or wordy, and the introduction lacks sparkle or authority.</td>
<td>You did not include a maxim or law of life, or your law of life is vaguely implied but not stated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Relevance of your selected Law of Life</strong></td>
<td>You convincingly and fully explain how the maxim pertains to or has influenced your life.</td>
<td>You fully explain how the maxim pertains to or has influenced your life.</td>
<td>You adequately explain how the maxim relates to your life.</td>
<td>Your essay is vague and does not relate to your life or experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization and Development of Essay</strong></td>
<td>Your essay flows very smoothly from beginning to end, with excellent transitions and a strong conclusion. It includes well-chosen facts and relevant details.</td>
<td>Your essay flows from beginning to end, with transitions and a conclusion. Significant facts and details are included.</td>
<td>Your essay has a beginning and an end, and a middle section that ties the two together. Facts and details are included, but could be better explained.</td>
<td>The essay does not have an obvious beginning or end. The reader cannot easily follow your narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Precise Language</strong></td>
<td>Word choices are precise and varied. You used one or more imaginative metaphor, simile or analogy. Your essay is a pleasure to read.</td>
<td>Word choices are precise and varied. You used at least one metaphor, simile or analogy.</td>
<td>Word choices are adequate but not inspired. You used a metaphor, simile or analogy, but it could have been more original.</td>
<td>Word choices seem hurried and awkward, and you did not use a metaphor, simile, or analogy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meets specified essay requirements:</strong> 500 to 700 words, with word count; typed and double-spaced; completed student entry form.</td>
<td>Yes to all.</td>
<td>Yes to all.</td>
<td>Yes to all.</td>
<td>No to one or more of the requirements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>