

Illustration and Example

One of the most commonly used patterns of expository writing is the development of a thesis, idea, or statement by means of illustration/example or exemplification. If, for example, you wish to tell your audience that, in your opinion, Marvin is not the best choice for the position of Chief Cashier at Citibank, you might proceed to illustrate your opinion with examples of Marvin's behavior. You might provide three examples to illustrate your assertion: (1) Marvin is a chain smoker and lights his cigarettes with \$10 bills. (2) Although his salary is now only \$100 a week and his parents live in a one-room apartment, Marvin drives a new Lexus and goes on vacations in Bora Bora. (3) Two months ago Marvin returned after another kind of vacation where he was serving 10 to 20 years for embezzling two hundred thousand dollars from the Second Interstate Bank. Each of these examples serves to show your reader why you do not think highly of Marvin as a bank employee. You have made a statement (Don't make Marv Chief Cashier) and illustrated your statement with three effective examples of his behavior that should disqualify him from the job. In the exemplification essay, you make a statement and then provide examples to clarify your statement for the audience. The examples should be clear, concrete, appropriate, interesting, and supportive of the thesis statement.

Strategy

Effective examples have a number of common characteristics: they are clear, concrete, appropriate, vivid, interesting, and supportive of your thesis statement.

Good Examples are Clear.

Since the purpose of using examples is to make your general idea clearer to your audience, it should be obvious that the examples must be carefully chosen for their clarity. How clear the example is will depend to some extent on who the readers of the essay are likely to be. If you want to illustrate the economic principle of Supply and Demand, for instance, you would choose different examples for a professor of business administration than you would for a 9th-grade history textbook. The professor will understand references to Gross Domestic Product, and a good example for her might be a fairly complicated graph showing annual consumption of fuel oil per capita. The 9th-grader, however, would probably not find these examples helpful because they would not be clear to him. He would probably benefit more from an illustration based on a sporting goods store and the different price of baseball caps at various time of the year. When you show him that ball caps cost more in January than in July because there were fewer caps available in January, he will begin to see what you mean by "Supply and Demand." Whenever you choose an example, therefore, you should be sure that it will be clear to your intended audience and that it will make your general statement or thesis clearer to them.

Good Examples are Concrete.

This characteristic is closely allied to clarity since most examples are clearer when they are most concrete. Because of the way most of us think, readers are attracted to and benefit most

from particular, specific, detailed examples. In the example already suggested—the illustration of Supply and Demand by a reference to the price of baseball caps in January—the example will be more effective if you specify “baseball cap” than if you use a more abstract term like “wearing apparel.” By referring to specific months, like January and July, to explain why production is lowest, too, will probably be more effective than talking about felicitous and infelicitous manufacturing periods. To illustrate your point, you might even decide to write a short narrative in which Coach Neander complains in a rage to Mr. Strapp, the manager of the sporting goods store (frightening him and causing him to knock down an 8-foot replica of a Dallas Cowboy linebacker display he was putting up), that the caps the coach wants for this team cost \$20. The idea is to make the example specific, particular, and concrete because then the thesis will be easier for your audience to understand.

Good Examples are Appropriate.

In order to be effective, to do a good job of illustrating your point, an example should be appropriate; it should be suitable to the idea it illustrates (valid, reasonable) and also to the intended audience (appropriate for their experience, background, and knowledge of the subject). If you wanted to choose an appropriate example of how advertising can sway the consumer and force him to buy something he does not really want or need, you probably would not use the Ford Motor Company’s greatest flop, the Edsel, as your example. Such an example would be neither valid nor reasonable since it suggests the opposite of what you want to demonstrate. The Edsel was heavily advertised, but it looked so awful that people refused to buy it. By the same token, you do not want to choose an example that is so outlandish or exaggerated that it fails to convince your readers because it is not representative. Such an example to demonstrate how advertising can influence the consumer might be “subliminal” advertising. Some years ago there were allegations that advertising messages like “Buy a Coke” were inserted on single frames of motion pictures. The message would flash on the screen for only a fraction of a second, and the movie patrons would not even be aware they had seen it. They supposedly got thirsty, and Coke sales in the lobby went up. Now this example might illustrate the power of advertising, and it can be made clear and concrete enough, but it probably is not a good example because it is not appropriate. It is too exceptional and, therefore, unlikely to convince your audience. The charges were never proven, few theaters would have been involved anyway, and it is unlikely that your audience would feel such tactics applicable to them. The example, therefore, is not appropriate for your thesis. A more appropriate example could be the number of poor people who can barely afford to feed their families, but who buy the so-called “miracle drugs” advertised on television and in the newspapers. The drugs are often worthless, but clever advertising succeeds in selling them anyway.

Good Examples are Vivid and Interesting.

No example is very useful if the reader does not read it because it is boring. Some of the characteristics already discussed are relevant to interesting examples since an interesting example will probably be clear, appropriate, and (especially) concrete. While some examples are vivid and interesting because of the material presented, almost all examples will gain by presentation in very specific and descriptive terms.

If for some reason you had to write an essay about “The Best Teacher I have Known,” you would write a more effective and interesting essay if, instead of talking about the “vast knowledge” and “truly wonderful personality” of the teacher, you illustrated your essay with a vividly described example of the time the teacher taught you about propulsion and Newton’s laws of motion by

having the class build and launch a 29” rocket. If you want to write a propaganda leaflet about the awful food in your school cafeteria, don’t talk vaguely about inedible food and slime in the ice machine. Instead, describe in sickening detail the barbecued cockroach nestled in your friend’s cheeseburger or the ability of the coffee to etch glass and dissolve your spoon in 18 seconds. Make your reader participate in the essay to get your point across more quickly and thoroughly than you could with any amount of general verbiage about the teacher’s “immense contribution to learning” or the cafeteria’s wretched cuisine. Vivid examples can make an essay interesting, exciting, and effective. Dull, generalized examples will put your reader to sleep faster than ether, a rubber hammer, or an interview with Britney Spears.

Organization

The purpose of developing an essay or a paragraph through illustration and example is to make clear the thesis, idea, or subject that you are trying to get across to your readers. You give your audience an illustration in order to explain a more general statement. The examples are samples of the general thesis, giving your readers more specific and concrete illustrations of the idea. The example thus acts as a kind of bridge from you to the readers, making the idea or subject clearer. Suppose you want to convey to your history professor your idea that the bombings of Afghanistan and war in Iraq did a great deal to heighten the American spirit. This is a general, broad idea, but your audience would like (1) to have it made clearer and more specific for them and easier to understand, and (2) they might like you to give some evidence for your assertion or at least offer them some reasons to believe that what you say about the incidents and America is true. You can give them both of these things by providing them with good examples.

You could, for instance, include in your essay either a single extended example or several examples that will show that what you say is true. In order to demonstrate that the events did enliven the American spirit, you might choose the following examples:

1. Historical documents of public polls indicate that over 70% of the Americans surveyed felt that the bombings in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq were justifiable.
2. Americans generally rallied in support of a military retaliation for the September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. (flag sales, yellow ribbons, fundraisers for victims’ families).
3. The threat of “weapons of mass destruction” unified the American spirit and a desire to eliminate forces that put national security in peril (military reserve forces called up, billions of dollars appropriated for the war effort, a new cabinet post created).

Your method is thus to illustrate your general statement (that the wars solidified the American spirit) with three examples that make clear to the audience precisely what you mean. You could also have chosen only one of the examples and presented an extended discussion of even greater detail to illustrate your point. Whether an essay is formally called exemplification or not, every composition needs concrete, detailed examples. In either case the examples clarify your basic point.

These characteristics obviously apply to essays that use illustration and examples as the structural principle, but it is important to note that we use examples in all of our rhetorical patterns, in every kind of expository and persuasive writing. Examine almost any good piece of writing, and you will find examples that are vivid, concrete, clear, interesting, and appropriate. Essays developed by definition, classification, comparison and contrast, process analysis, causal analysis, argumentation, and critical analysis depend on examples to help get their ideas across to their audience. The

difference is that an essay developed by illustration uses examples as the structural principle on which it is organized. Review the general principles of composition and the checklist discussed in Chapter Two of this text. The general method of development in that chapter is based on the structure of illustration/example.

CHECKLIST FOR ILLUSTRATION / EXAMPLE ESSAY

1. Does your thesis have a narrowed subject and restricted focus?
2. Did you use three or four examples, or did you use a simple extended example?
3. Are your primary examples adequately developed?
4. Did you provide appropriate transition between your paragraphs?
5. Did you provide a sufficient number of specific details to support your general observations?
6. Did you provide an effective conclusion?
7. Did you include an interesting title for the essay?
8. Did you edit your paper carefully, checking for major grammatical and spelling errors?

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