

Profiles and Memoirs

PROFILES

Profiles are used in many different academic and professional arenas. We most commonly expect to see them in celebrity magazines and Sunday newspapers or frequently in video or audio interviews with famous or otherwise noteworthy people; however, nearly all good writing includes the use of profiles. From describing the qualifications of an author you quote in your paper to full-blown stand-alone biographies, profiles play a tremendous role in our literate lives. Essentially the story of a person from an objective point of view, the profile is arguably the best narrative venue for personifying an idea, argument, or situation.

A profile is often a detailed story of a person. Depending on the purpose for the profile, the person may or may not be famous. Profiles use similar details for good descriptive and narrative writing, such as comparisons, physical details, exposition, and dialogue.

The structure of a profile is generally less rigid and formal than other academic writing. Whether or not the writer chooses to include herself as a character in the profile, audiences tend to appreciate profiles that feel like the result of a conversation. The questions may have been planned well ahead of time, but in the final draft most profiles tend toward an organic development and a deepening of conversation instead of a more traditional structure of plot or argument development.

Part of the reason profiles are so popular is that readers love feeling as though they've gained access to an otherwise restricted world. Most good profiles are intimate and sympathetic toward their subject. The object of a profile is not judgment but understanding.

Strategy

Different modes of profile writing have somewhat different demands. If your goal is to write a stand-alone profile for, say, publication in the school newspaper or a local magazine, your audience is accordingly different than if you are using profile writing to enhance the strength of your research in a literature essay or in a case study for a psychology paper. The principles are more or less the same, however, so we'll look first at the writing of a stand-alone profile.

Occasion

In monthly periodicals, daily newspapers, as well as on TV and radio shows, profiles are generally produced about a figure reaching a certain prominence in her field. Whether it's a quarterback achieving a milestone number of receptions, a dancer having performed in her hundredth *Nutcracker*, or a politician having made the same election reform promise more than anyone before him, we usually seek out profiles about individuals who have recently found a way to distinguish themselves in the public eye. The purpose of a profile of these people is not so much to introduce them to the public as to shed more focused light on someone with whom we are already familiar. To interview a person of this stature, the writer is usually already a professional journalist.

Less common, but at least as compelling, are profiles of people known (or even unknown) to the writer but not the public at large. The purpose of interviewing folks such as a local alderman fighting to build a new leash-free dog park or an ice cream truck owner/proprietor who is finally retiring at age 94 is less immediately evident. Chances are there is an occasion known only to a few that has put these people briefly in the spotlight, and the purpose of the profile is to widen that light just a bit so that we the readers can identify with this lifelong neighbor in a new and more enriched way.

Perhaps the most prevalent form of the profile you'll encounter as a student is that of the case study. The profile will be used inside a larger rhetorical structure—probably an ethnographic essay—which is driven not so much by characterization and empathy but rather by thesis and argument. In this case the person profiled will likely be someone who personally is affected by or otherwise bears out a claim you seek to support. Bear in mind this is at once a very effective strategy but also one which is almost entirely based on the emotional appeal. In other words, a single person can't represent a whole group of people for very long. To better understand this, make a list of the qualities that categorize you. To what extent would you want to represent all female, Korean students, psychology majors, drivers of Yugoslavian cars and so on? Part of what makes profiles most compelling is also what makes them inherently flawed: we love learning about what makes people unique.

Stance

Depending on the goals you have established for your profile, you need to situate yourself to your subject. If you're coming at your profile from the point of view of a scientist, you'll need to maintain an objective detachment from your subject. Similarly, you'll need to document all aspects of your profile, especially the conversation and other research methods used to get the material for the interview.

Hard scientific evidence, however, is not always the goal in research. If your profile goals are to elicit a more personal and subjective interview, it won't do to treat your subject with clinical precision. Most subjects appreciate someone who is genuinely interested in their story and asks honest if sometimes challenging questions. Digital recorders can make otherwise chatty people clam up, so some subjects might do better if you use a simple pad and pencil to document the highlights of your conversation.

Depending on which approach you choose, you'll need also to figure out for yourself where your point of view is situated in your essay. If you want absolute scientific anonymity, you will likely omit the use of the first person point of view entirely. If you seek to write a warm, moving, more pathos-based profile, you might allow yourself to enter into the conversation from time to time through the use of your personal impressions of the subject, the feel of the room, the direction of the day, and your own hopes and goals for the interview.

Goals

A prepared interviewer is likely to be a successful one. However, sometimes success is found where it cannot be made. You should plan on the interview going in one direction, but not so much so that if it takes off in another, or if your line of inquiry is met with indifference or outrage on the part of the subject, you can change direction and salvage the interview. Similarly, even though you pick your subject, try to inject as few of your own specific expectations as possible. Remember that your job is to ask good questions, not ask questions that are thinly veiled comments.

Organization

When preparing to write your profile, you should research your subject and make yourself as informed as possible. Subjects can be put off by interviewers who know nothing of their area. However, you will rarely encounter a subject who enjoys looking down his nose at his interviewer. More often than not, your interview will go well in proportion to your interest and preparedness. And no matter how purportedly obscure you might think your subject's area of expertise, bear in mind that he has likely spent a great portion of his days and nights doing that very thing, whether it's working on carburetors or beekeeping. If you're interviewing a typewriter repairman and don't even know that IBM was once the king of typewriters or that the gun maker Remington also once made typewriters and sewing machines, you're not likely to earn your subject's trust and confidence.

Make your contact with your subject friendly but also clear and easy to read so that nothing gets in the way of a good interview. Be on time and be prepared to do the interview; and even if you plan to use a digital recorder, an intrepid journalist will always have a back up machine and spare batteries and will still take notes during the interview. This kind of triple redundancy may initially seem tedious and unnecessary, but when it comes time to write your profile you will find that the notes you take help organize themes or significant parts of the interview you might choose to use as directly quoted matter.

If you record your interview, you will find it useful (if not immensely time consuming) to make a transcript of your recording. It will make writing your profile much easier to work with even though it will take a good bit of time.

As we mentioned in the Strategy section, when you write your profile for a broad or general audience, you should appeal to most readers' fondness for good stories. Begin with the scene: describe the day, the place, the time . . . all the physical details that only someone present that day would notice.

Finally, bring an open and eager mind to your interview. Expect to be wrong about some of your assumptions on the subject and welcome the unusual or unexpected when it comes up. Part of what makes profiles one of the most compelling modes of writing is that even the most unwilling subject will usually spill his guts if you're interested and patient enough.

MEMOIRS

Blessed and cursed as the go-to genre of the "me generation," memoir is a dynamic, popular and contentious form. Once upon a time it was thought that only captains of industry, assassins of presidents, and presidents themselves were significant enough to record the stories of their lives into the history of nations because, well, they already had. Despite the fact that memoirs have been written in every form from sketches on cave walls to diaries to eleven volume, shelf-breaking tomes, as a genre it has very much come into its own in the last twenty years. The academic application of memoir seems slight, but actually when a writer is able to intertwine her emotional and intellectual lives by committing them to an autobiographical essay she has begun a practice of thoughtful, reflective, and conscientious living and thinking that will benefit her for the rest of her life.

Distinguishing Features

There are almost more words to describe various kinds of memoir than there are kinds of memoirists. The word *memoir* comes from the French via the Latin word for *memory*. The

novelist and memoirist Gore Vidal described the difference between autobiography and memoir as a distinction of degree, rather than kind: “a memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked.” A memoir might be cast therefore as the personal story of one’s life whereas an autobiography is more the public record. Many people disagree with this, however, and so it’s useful to expect an argument depending on what you want to call your work.

For the most part, you will be writing your memoirs via the essay. That form, too, has an interesting etymology. It also comes from the French, as a verb or a noun (*essai*, a try, an attempt, to endeavor.) In English, especially in high school, we all too frequently think of essays as trials rather than adventures. Historically, however, the form goes back thousands of years to the so-called “pillow books” of those educated and well-off enough not only to learn to read and write but to be able to afford paper and writing utensils. Suffice it to say that the essay is the classic academic and intellectual opportunity to test one’s emotional limits, brave one’s candor, and seek knowledge that one does not already possess.

One of the hallmarks of the essay in general and the memoir in particular is its opportunity to wander and wonder. Digressions, tangents, philosophical musings, anecdotes, portraits—just about anything you can think of to include in a memoir can find a way to matter in the overarching narrative. Art has been argued to be the amalgamation of disparate elements. With the right treatment and sensibility, no two elements can be so different as not to be connected through a vivid memoir.

The best memoirs are often those that follow in the tradition of the 16th-century writer Michel de Montaigne, who demanded that “we must remove the mask.” In other words, a common assumption and expectation for readers of memoir is that no matter whether the writer is a war criminal or a saint, a philanthropist, or Gene Simmons, when we read their memoirs we expect full backstage access. A memoir should not merely be the parade of one’s successes but rather the story of one’s ups and downs, strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately the balance will tip in the favor of one or the other, but the best memoirs seek to tell their stories at any cost. No matter what, be honest with your story, your readers, and yourself, and you’re bound to succeed.

Strategy

Because the house of memoir and autobiography is technically about half of any given bookstore, it’s important to clarify your reasons for writing early in the process. Even if your urge or prompt is as broad as “Write a memoir,” you’ll want to begin thinking about a central event or events so you have a dramatic focus around which to construct your essay. Trying to tell your life story from beginning to middle to end will be, to say the least, a daunting work and one that won’t be finished until, well, you know. Much better, especially for the purposes of an essay to be written for a class, is to focus your creative and intellectual powers on something specific and concrete that you experienced that has stayed with you for some time. Try to think of something distant enough in time that you can still feel shadowed by it but mostly out from under it. If you’re still in the throes of some challenge or difficulty, trying to write about it is going to be a great way to work your way through it, but not in an academic setting. Save that for your journal or for later. The great American short story writer Flannery O’Connor said that “anyone who has survived childhood has enough information to last him the rest of his days.” Go back a few years and mine your past for the wonders and mysteries it offers.

Prompts

In his great philosophical memoir, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig describes how, when one is faced with the daunting task of writing about one's life, she becomes hopelessly hobbled. When given the opportunity, however, to write about not just one's home town, or its main street, or a favorite building but rather just one brick from that building she will virtually never run out of things to say. In other words, choke up on your subject so that you can better hit it out of the park. The playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith used a linguist's technique to do first-hand research when writing some of her finest work, such as *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a performance about the aftermath of the Rodney King trial. Here are her questions:

1. Have you ever come close to death?
2. Do you know the circumstances of your birth?
3. Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do?

Those ought to keep you going for years if not at least a solid essay or two.

After having begun an essay and gotten caught, try the novelist and short-story writer Melanie Rae Thon's fantastic exercise. The ideal circumstances would be when you have written the bare bones of a scene from your memory but aren't satisfied with its depth or sophistication. Do this: make two lists, one titled "I Remember," the other "I Don't Remember." With your sticking point in mind, make twenty entries in each list. Allow yourself to go back and forth. "I remember," for example, "the feel of my father's stubble when he tucked me in and kissed me goodnight, but I don't remember ever seeing him at the dinner table." It might seem silly to include these in a memoir, a bunch of things that you don't remember. But think about it as the negative image of a photo or all the white space around any given black letter on your paper. Negative space gives shape to our thoughts and hearts, whether or not the thing we long for was ever there in the first place.

Goals

If you're writing a memoir simply to trot out that which you already know and have just been waiting for the right occasion to write, you'll be in crowded company with all the celebrity tell-alls that choke the bestsellers lists. If, however, you seek a more challenging story to tell—a story from your life that hasn't yet completely resolved itself—something that happened that you think about as you fall asleep—something that you did or didn't do that you can neither undo nor forget—if you choose that road it'll doubtless take you to higher, more rarified elevations where the writing will be more difficult but also more rewarding. Embrace the memoir for what it is: an opportunity for memory to tell its own story.

Organization

Organizing a memoir is often a practice that comes better in revision than in pre-drafting or early draft stages. When we come to memoirs or otherwise personal essays, we don't expect a lot in the way of contrivances or superstructures the way we sometimes do with other formal, academic, or highly stylized modes of writing. Rather, we expect the memoir essay to reflect the writer's subject dealing with life as it happened, not life as we would like to reconstruct it so as to tidily shoehorn it into a story. There will be narrative cul-de-sacs and plot dead ends. We expect that you will not have thought of the perfect retort to that bully's comment or made precisely the smoothest move when trying to woo that childhood sweetheart. In other words, don't try to force your essay. Let it

tell you what it wants to say and then try to strike up a conversation with it. As you revise, there will be plenty of opportunities to go back and reconfigure sections that are entirely unnecessary or otherwise superfluous, and the feedback from your peers and other readers will help you continue to maximize the form of the essay until it has best suited its content.

Allow yourself plenty of time, however, to work through various drafts. Because a reader cannot know what else you might include or discover through future drafts, she will likely make hypothetical suggestions (*Was there more to this conversation? I'd really like to hear what your mother said in response to that tow-truck driver.*) which may or may not be useful. Nonetheless, you need to take all responses to your work as constructive and helpful, whether they literally are or are not. If someone asks, for example, *Did that really happen? Man, I wouldn't know what to say if a guy mugged me for my socks!*, your job is not to shrug that reader off as incredulous, but rather to hear her disbelief as something that needs to work itself into your own narrative by registering a reader's potential disbelief. *If I had fallen asleep and woken up in a reed basket floating on the Nile I wouldn't have been as surprised as I was when the mugger prodded me with his .38 and said, "Your socks or your life, Sparky."*

Use exercises, journaling, and even research to enhance your work where it might have hit a dry spot. Though memory might be the predominant source for material, don't limit yourself to a static body of remembrances. Re-interview the significant players in your story. Track down relevant newspaper articles or your own journals or diary entries. Find out precisely what kind of station wagon that might have been or exactly how your mother made that brisket so amazingly smoky despite your brother's severe hickory allergy.

If, on the other hand, your writing seems to show a "hot spot" where it doesn't need to—if your writing gets really lively and vivid at some point despite the fact that you're lost somewhere in what you thought was a tangent—you should listen to that excitement. If you don't, you would hope your readers will and will tell you where it got really compelling even though maybe it took away from the supposed story at hand. Like a miner panning for gold who keeps coming up with these huge pesky chunks of silver, you may have struck upon something that you didn't go looking for but nonetheless found. Go with it for a few paragraphs and see where it takes you. You may just strike it rich.

Lastly, don't leave yourself alone in the past to deal with your past self. Whenever we write essays about our former selves, we often feel obliged to deny our present selves have any communication with them. Rather, interrogate your past self from the safety of your present desk. Let yourself wonder how the smart, talented and savvy you-of-the-present could possibly be related to that stubborn, foolish and ham-hearted you-of-the-past. Don't forget: it won't be all that long when the next you-of-the-present is asking the same question. That's why we'll always have something to write about.

Process and Analysis

We use process analysis all the time. When we read and follow the directions on a pay telephone or a self-service gas pump, we are using process. Process is a habit of mind involving ideas in logical sequences. There is an orderly and efficient way to do almost everything, although nearly everyone thinks his or her way is best. Basically there are two kinds of processes: directional and informational. The directional process explains how to do something so that the reader can duplicate the action suggested while the informational process explains how a more complicated process is done but not with the intent of duplication. You do not have to be a miner to understand how strip mining works, nor are you expected to run right out and create a strip mine in your back yard if you read about how the process is done.

Process analyses are used in almost anything that requires a step-by-step explanation. When you explain the steps of a chemistry experiment, you are presenting a directional process. You use informational processes every time you explain how the Native Indians were disenfranchised, how a bill becomes law, or how the writing process works. Chapter Two in this book specifically discusses the writing process, for instance.

Strategy

When you explain a process, particularly a directional one, you should take several things into consideration.

1. Provide an overview of general principles. Give your reader an understanding of the way you intend to develop your plan.
2. Provide complete details. All the techniques you use in describing anything will, of course, be applicable to describing how to do a process or how a particular process is done.
3. Define any technical terms. Keep your audience in mind and try to make your explanation clear enough to communicate effectively.
4. Provide reasons for the steps you include. You should tell why it is important to include certain elements of the process as well as how to do them.
5. Include negative directions as well as the reasons for doing things a certain way in a certain order. You must warn the reader in key places about what not to do. Since cyanide is difficult to remove from all kinds of surfaces, including glass, it is probably better not to mix Kool-Aid for the neighborhood kids in a beaker you usually use for cyanide experiments.
6. Illustrate your process using descriptive techniques. Normally, you will not have diagrams or other visual aids in your writing; therefore, you need to create images to make your process clear.
7. You will have noticed in the course of this discussion that its point of view violates the rules you may have been told about using second person and shifting points of view.

Since this book is designed as a set of directions or instructions for the reader, it often uses second person. The purpose and audience determine the point of view you will use in your writing. Sometimes your instructor will insist that you use third person (“one,” “he,” “she”) in order to practice appealing to certain audiences of the type you will write for in many academic settings. One way to implement the consistent use of third person in a process is to introduce an actor—someone who is logically involved in the process—early in your discussion. If you are describing how to bake bread, the person involved in the process is the baker. When you refer to the baker as the actor in the process, you refer to him or her in the third person. Sometimes you may be asked to use the imperative: a command or request whose implied subject is “you.” An old Paul Simon song advises the audience about “fifty ways to leave a lover” and uses the imperative: “Get on the bus, Gus” “Make a new plan, Stan;” “No need to be coy, Roy.” Likewise, the directions on the service station gas pump are consistently imperative:

1. Select octane grade;
2. Lift handle;
3. Insert nozzle and pump.

No matter what the assignment requires, you must maintain a consistent point of view. Do not shift from “I” to “you” to “he” and back again. Keep your audience firmly in mind.

Organization

In writing process papers, the same general steps that apply to all writing situations are also important. As you outline, you should group steps logically. You will not put each step in a single short paragraph. The reader should be aware that you have a plan, an outline, but it should not be intrusive. Your outline is the skeleton of your essay; the essay should flesh out that skeleton. Be sure you choose a process which is a suitable length for the paper required, and organize logically, usually chronologically. The thesis statement should indicate the specific groups of steps you will discuss, corresponding to the paragraphs you develop. Throughout the paper, keep your reader firmly in mind: the audience and the purpose will determine your tone, your techniques, and your direction. Do not condescend to or patronize your audience; explain clearly. In a directional process you may want to use personal narrative, especially in the introduction to indicate how you became familiar with the process or why you think knowing about this process is important or worthwhile. Transitions are particularly important in process, usually indicating that the steps are chronological for a reason. Generally you will use transitions like “first,” “next,” “then,” “additionally,” and “finally” in addition to any devices you need to make your ideas clearly logical for your reader. You may want to include phrases like “Be sure to ___ before you try to ___” or “Under no circumstance should you do ___ before doing ___.” In your conclusion, you should indicate the results of the procedure—a fluffy soufflé, a law, a well-written essay, an embalmed corpse—and their significance.

CHECKLIST FOR PROCESS ESSAY

1. Did you list all the necessary steps?
2. Is each step explained thoroughly, offering specific, vivid details?
3. Did you define any terms that might be unfamiliar to your audience?
4. Did you provide clear connective words to indicate the sequential nature of the process described?
5. Did you vary your sentences enough to avoid monotony?
6. Is your purpose clear, either to inform and entertain or to help someone duplicate a step-by-step process?
7. Did you edit your paper carefully, checking for major grammatical and spelling errors?

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

Illustration and Example

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?