



Advanced | Exemplar Essay

The Tell-Tale Heart

The Vulture Eye



Plot and Ideas

An engaging, plausible context is provided (“I waited until he was a certain age before thinking he was ready for this story”) that establishes and supports the plot. Purposeful description builds smoothly toward an unexpected resolution (“I winked at him with my vulture eye”). The plot addresses the demands of the task.



Development and Elaboration

The narrative maintains a clear setting. Characters advance the story (“Joshua was leaning forward in his chair in his eagerness to learn what had happened that night”) and reveal the theme through meaningful description and reflection (“Finally I caught a hint of what had caught Ben’s attention earlier”). The reader is carefully cued for significant turning points (“My cops instinct never lets me down”).



Organization and Sequencing

The narrative utilizes a clear sequence of events (“I took a call,” “We knocked and waited” and “Finally I caught a hint”) to establish a beginning, middle, and end of the story. The narrative uses effective transitions (“Slowly, I began to speak again” and “And so I continued”) to signal shifts in time. The resolution reflects an unexpected turn of events.



Language and Style

The narrative uses sensory language to create vivid imagery and clearly convey setting (“deep gloom”), characters, and feelings (“I shuddered, then glanced slyly”). Writing is interesting and varied in order to build the voice of the narrator. The point of view is established and consistently maintained. The narrative employs language throughout to create suspense (“This wasn’t going to be another ordinary night...”)



Using Exemplars in Your Lessons

Exemplar essays are tools to take abstract descriptions and make them more concrete for students. One way to use them is to print the clean copies of the essays and allow students to use the rubric to make notes or even find examples of important elements of an essay - thesis statements, introductions, evidence, conclusions, transitions, etc. Teachers can also use exemplars to illustrate what each score point within a trait ‘looks like’ in an authentic student essay. For additional ideas, please see “25 Ways to Use Exemplar Essays” by visiting the Curriculum Resources page in Help.

The Tell-Tale Heart



The Vulture Eye

Every night before bed I told my young grandson a tale from my days in the police department. Mostly they were true, but I waited until he was a certain age before thinking he was ready for this story. He was considering becoming a police officer, and I wanted him to know exactly what that might mean before signing up for a long stretch.

“As it often happens, Joshua, my story starts on what seemed like the most normal of days. Or what passes for normal in a police station anyway. The worst of society passed through those doors on a daily basis: thieves and swindlers and grave robbers and, worst of all, murderers. On the positive side, I liked to think that the best of society passed through those doors daily too.”

“Police officers have a very different job than most people think,” I continued. “Oftentimes we are called to the scene of a so-called crime and there’s absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Still, it’s the job to check out everything. A neighbor hears a noise and it could be a raccoon in the trash can, but we have to go to make an absolute determination that a crime is being committed, or not.”

Telling this story was more difficult than I could have imagined. I knew I had to tell the story, and I believed that I should so with a deep sigh, I looked out of the window and gathered up my courage. Slowly, I began to speak again.

“It’s funny, son, how you just don’t see these horrific things coming. My partner Ben—may he rest in peace—,” and I crossed myself hastily, “and I took a call. A neighbor heard a scream in the dead of night. It was cold and windy and an hour or so after midnight. We walked around the perimeter

of the house and saw nothing strange. There was maybe a single light on, but it was so hard to tell in the deep gloom of the early, early morning.”

“After much discussion between us of the ‘should we?’ or ‘shouldn’t we?’ variety, old Ben and I decided that we couldn’t possibly just do nothing so we knocked on the door. The sound echoed through the large, seemingly empty house, but the neighbor had been so emphatic, so sure that something horrific had happened that we had no choice but to investigate further.” At this point, Joshua was leaning forward in his chair in his eagerness to learn what had happened that night. I still wasn’t sure he was ready to hear the strange midnight tale I had to tell, but he insisted and he looked so enthusiastic so who was I to disappoint him?

And so I continued, “We knocked and waited. We knocked again and continued to wait. We waited so long that we nearly turned away, yet something made us try one more time. Was it a muffled thud we heard? Unable to be sure, we pounded on the door until we heard slow footsteps approach us. The door creaked open and a slightly-built man stood before us expectantly. He seemed perfectly at ease with greeting two of the city’s finest in the wee hours of the morning. Certain now that we’d wasted the department’s gas by coming out here, we agreed reluctantly to accept his invitation to come inside. It was cold and windy that night and we were a bit disappointed not to be able to go home, but he was seemingly so excited to have company that we didn’t want to dash his hopes.”

“He was the ultimate host. He carefully explained that the old man who owned the mansion was out of town and the shriek the neighbor heard was himself, crying out from a nightmare. It made sense and I was ready to leave, but Ben gave me that look and I knew he wanted to stay. To this day I don’t know what caught his attention, but something surely did and I knew better than to try to persuade Ben to give up on something he considered important.”

“And so we looked around. I admit, I just wanted to go back to the station

house and drink some coffee, but Ben had that excited look that meant he had caught the scent of something so we followed the caretaker around. The house was nicely furnished but dark so I gave brief looks within each of the rooms, but not Ben. He could barely contain his curiosity and I feared he would tip off the caretaker that he hadn't believed the nightmare story. We moved easily through the rooms and chatted quietly about the old man's travels."

"Finally the caretaker grew tired of showing us the mansion and insisted on getting us some chairs to sit in. There was a perfectly good sitting area in the front part of the house, but he insisted on fetching chairs so we could sit in the dull, nearly empty bedroom. Finally I caught a hint of what had caught Ben's attention earlier. This wasn't going to be another ordinary night, I was sure of it."

"My cops instinct never lets me down. The man became increasingly agitated. Looking wildly around, turning his head from side to side as if he'd heard something. There had been no other screams, obviously. We would have heard them too. But as Ben's apparently innocent questioning continued, he was interrupted by the young man who started shrieking, 'VILLAINS! DISSEMBLE NO MORE--I ADMIT THE DEED! TEAR UP THE PLANKS--HERE HERE! IT IS THE BEATING OF HIS HIDEOUS HEART!'"

"Well, Josh, you can imagine our shock when we tore up the planks and there was a bloodied corpse lying amongst the floorboards. The old man was holding his heart in his own hands." I shuddered, then glanced slyly at my young grandson.

He thought he was ready to hear the truth, but he wasn't after all. I slowly turned to look at him and he stared openmouthed with horror as I winked at him with my vulture eye.