Prescription for a Good Essay

Just as martial arts students study the moves of Bruce Lee, composition students should examine good writing to see how it delivers a resounding rhetorical punch. “SAT” by Danielle Ofri is a good essay for ENGL 1301 students to study. It shows them how to present dialogue, how to describe vividly, how to use strong verbs, and how to develop effective comparisons.

Understanding the conventions of presenting dialogue will be easier with Ofri’s essay as a model. “SAT” begins with conversation as Dr. Ofri calls for Nemesio Rios in the waiting room and interviews him about his family and medical history. In the first two pages, the student will see the application of this convention: new speaker equals new paragraph. Some of the responses are short, such as “Yeah, in this hospital.” Still, that response is a paragraph by itself. Students will see that the interjection “Yeah” is set off by a comma, an application of rule P1g from A Writer's Reference. Students will also notice that the period is placed inside the quotation marks as required by rule P6f. They will also see that the citation is usually placed after the quotation, unless it is obvious who is speaking, in which case the citation is omitted.

Ofri uses sensory details perfectly to describe people and places. ENGL 1301 students will see how Ofri paints a vivid picture of Nemesio in words. He is “a teenaged boy in baggy jeans with a ski hat pulled low over his brow. . . .” Before long, she adds “his oversized sweatshirt reaching nearly to his knees.” The dead boy is also described vividly. Appearing to be no more than twelve, “he is wearing new Nikes” and a “bright red basketball jersey.” He has a “smooth brown chest” with a “tiny bullet hole.” Using the whole range of sensory details, Ofri presents a chilling description of the morgue. The morgue has a “raw concrete floor.” It is illuminated by “low-wattage fluorescent lights” that cast a “ghastly green” glow on “nine naked corpses.” The environment is “icy and silent.” The morgue smells of Freon, “vaguely sweet” but “magnified by the rigid and bleak soundlessness of the room.”

Ofri uses non-essential verbal phrases to amplify the action in her sentences. She uses the present participle (verb + ing) eighteen times to add non-essential phrases to main clauses. Sometimes she uses a single verbal tag as in this sentence: “He stared at me, waiting for me to continue.” The tag extends the sentence, emphasizing the passage of time. In a more elaborate example, Ofri uses several verbal phrases to describe busy residents working in the autopsy room: “Residents were handling organs—weighing hearts, measuring kidneys, taking samples from livers—then replacing them in the open corpses.” Three non-essential verbal phrases, perfectly parallel and set within dashes, amplify the meaning of the main clause, which is stated in two essential verbal phrases, “handling organs . . . then replacing them . . .”

Ofri develops a powerful comparison to convey her realization. She connects Nemesio with the twelve-year-old boy she saw in the morgue when she was in medical school. Even though Nemesio is twenty years old, he looks younger, like “a teenaged boy in baggy jeans.” Both boys are dressed similarly in informal sports attire. Both boys are beautiful. The dead boy “was just a beautiful boy sleeping.” When the doctor looks at Nemesio, she sees “his beautiful body adrift in the uncertainty of adolescence.” Both boys haunt her. Both were born into a dangerous world. She wishes that she could “rewind the tape” and move the younger boy a few inches out of the way of the bullet. Unable to do that, she acts on her impulse to save Nemesio by moving him a few steps closer to entering college, hoping that she can preserve his health, his prospects, and even his life.

“SAT” by Danielle Ofri is an ideal essay to include in ENGL 1301. Future students will see how she correctly observes all the conventions of presenting dialogue. They will see how she uses sensory details to describe people and places. They will see how she uses non-essential verbal phrases to add interest to main clauses. Finally, they will understand the powerful effect that comparisons can have in consolidating a realization.

Works Cited

