

Lesson 15

Timed Writings on Prose Passages

Objective

- To provide students with practice in timed writings responding to nonfictional passages

Notes to the Teacher

The ability to complete well-written, impromptu, timed essays is the key to successful completion of the Advanced Placement Examination. Practicing timed writings develops several skills to students: rapid assessment of the meaning, logic, and style of a selection; relating a specific question to the selection; producing a well-written and perceptive essay response. The impromptu essay challenges the students' ability to "think on their feet"!

This lesson is accompanied by four handouts, each of which requires a complete class period. You may want to select among them or use all of them either consecutively or occasionally.

Procedure

1. Tell students that this lesson will provide practice in the skill of impromptu composition. Point out that they will receive copies of an essay question, and that they will have thirty-five minutes to complete the essay.
2. Distribute **Handout 23, 24, 25, or 26** and direct students to begin work. Make a note of the starting time.
3. Exactly thirty-five minutes later tell students to stop work, and collect the essays.
4. Essay evaluation may take place in several ways. Traditional grading helps provide an objective and authoritative viewpoint. Self-grading minimizes threat and enables students to discover and correct their own weaknesses. Peer-grading stimulates development of new perspective and enables students to benefit from the critical advice of a variety of readers. **Handout 27** may be helpful to both you and your students in completing evaluations.

Timed-Writing Practice

The following commentary by newscaster Eric Sevareid, written in 1958, reflects the modern era's concern with the relationship between technological advance and human development. Read the selection carefully. Then write an essay in which you deal with the same topic from the point of view of the 1990s, and show how your viewpoint agrees with and/or contradicts Sevareid's. Include specific references to his ideas, diction, and use of detail.

The Dark of the Moon

Eric Sevareid

This, thank goodness, is the first warm and balmy night of the year in these parts; the first frogs are singing. Altogether this is hardly the night for whispering sweet sentiments about the reciprocal trade act, the extension thereof. But since we are confined, by tradition, to the contemplation of public themes and issues, let us contemplate the moon. The lovely and luminous moon has become a public issue. For quite a few thousand years it was a private issue; it figured in purely bilateral negotiations between lovers, in the incantations of jungle witch doctors and Indian corn planters. Poets from attic windows issued the statements about the moon, and they made better reading than the Mimeographed handouts now being issued by assistant secretaries of defense.

The moon was always measured in terms of hope and reassurance and the heart pangs of youth on such a night as this; it is now measured in terms of mileage and foot-pounds of rocket thrust. Children sent sharp, sweet wishes to the moon; now they dream of blunt-nosed missiles.

There must come a time, in every generation, when those who are older secretly get off the train of progress, willing to walk back to where they came from, if they can find the way. We're afraid we're getting off now. Cheer, if you wish, the first general or Ph.D. who splatters something on the kindly face of the moon. We shall grieve for him, for ourself, for the young lovers and poets and dreams to come, because the ancient moon will never be the same again. There, we suspect, the heart of man will never be the same.

We find it very easy to wait for the first photographs of the other side of the moon, for we have not yet seen the other side of Lake Louise or the Blue Ridge peak that shows through the cabin window.

We find ourself quite undisturbed about the front-page talk of "controlling the earth from the moon," because we do not believe it. If neither men nor gadgets nor both combined can control the earth from the earth, we fail to see how they will do so from the moon.

It is exciting talk, indeed, the talk of man's advance toward space. But one little step in man's advance toward man—that, we think, would be truly exciting. Let those who wish try to discover the composition of a lunar crater; we would settle for discovering the true mind of a Russian commissar or the inner heart of a delinquent child.

There is, after all, another side—a dark side—to the human spirit, too. Men have hardly begun to explore these regions; and it is going to be a very great pity if we advance upon the bright side of the moon with the dark side of ourselves, if the cargo in the first rockets to reach there consists of fear and chauvinism and suspicion. Surely we ought to have our credentials in order, our hands very clean and perhaps a prayer for forgiveness on our lips as we prepare to open the ancient vault of the shining moon.¹

1958

¹Eric Sevareid, "The Dark of the Moon," *America: 20th Century Exposition Man and the Social Machine* (New York: Don Congdon Associates, Inc., 1973).

Timed-Writing Practice

Read the following passage carefully. In a well-organized essay analyze the author's use and explanation of a paradox. Expand the author's explanation with examples and clarifications of your own.

Section III

Another contrast is equally essential for the understanding of ideals—the contrast between order as the condition for excellence, and order as stifling the freshness of living. This contrast is met with in the theory of education. The condition for excellence is a thorough training in technique. Sheer skill must pass out of the sphere of conscious exercise, and must have assumed the character of unconscious habit. The first, the second, and the third condition for high achievement is scholarship, in that enlarged sense including knowledge and acquired instinct controlling action.

The paradox which wrecks so many promising theories of education is that the training which produces skill is so very apt to stifle imaginative zest. Skill demands repetition, and imaginative zest is tinged with impulse. Up to a certain point each gain in skill opens new paths for the imagination. But in each individual, formal training has its limit of usefulness. Beyond that limit there is degeneration: 'The lilies of the field toil not, neither do they spin.'

The social history of mankind exhibits great organizations in their alternating functions of conditions for progress, and of contrivances for stunting humanity. The history of the Mediterranean lands, and of western Europe, is the history of the blessing and the curse, of political organizations, of religious organizations, of schemes of thought, of social agencies for large purposes. The moment of dominance, prayed for, worked for, sacrificed for, by generations of the noblest spirits, marks the turning point where the blessing passes into the curse. Some new principle of refreshment is required. The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order. Life refuses to be embalmed alive. The more prolonged the halt in some unrelieved system of order, the greater the crash of the dead society.²

²Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), 338–339.

Timed-Writing Practice

In an 1833 letter to John Stuart Mill, Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle included the following description of thirty-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson, Your Presentee, rolled up hither, one still Sunday afternoon while we sat at dinner. A most gentle, recommendable, amiable, whole-hearted man; whom we thank for one of the pleasantest interruptions to our solitude. He staid with us four-and-twenty hours; and was thro' the whole Encyclopedia with us in that time. A good "Socinian" understanding, the clearest heart; above all, what I loved in the man was his health, his unity with himself; all people and all things seemed to find their quite peaceable adjustment with him, not a proud domineering one, as after doubtful contest, but a spontaneous-looking, peaceable, even humble one I should henceforth learn to see, or see better, that Unitarians are not hollow men, but at worst limited men, and otherwise of the fairest conditions. Their very need of a religion, strongly evinced by that creed of theirs, should recommend them. One seems to believe almost all that they believe; and when they stop short and call it Religion, and you pass on, and call it only a reminiscence of one should you not part with the kiss of peace?

Fourteen years later, following another visit by Emerson, Carlyle wrote a letter to a Mrs. Baring, including this excerpt about Emerson.

I was torn to pieces, talking with him; for his sad Yankee rule seemed to be, that talk should go on incessantly except when sleep interrupted it; a frightful rule. The man, as you have heard is not above a bargain; nor, if one will be candid, is he fairly much below it. A pure-minded elevated man; elevated but without breadth, as a willow is, as a reed is; no fruit at all to be gathered from him. A delicate, but thin pinched triangular face, no jaws nor lips, lean-hooked nose; face of a cock; by none such was the Thames ever burnt! A proud man too; a certain sensitive fastidious stickishness, which reminded me of a miniature Washington's, very exotic tho' Anglo-Saxon enough; rather curious to think of. No getting into any intimacy with him, talk as you will. You have my leave to fall in love with him if you can! And so he plays his part: gone to lecture in Lancashire; to return hither he knows not when; it is privately hoped he may go to Rome! I wish him honestly well, do as I am bound respect him honestly; but *Friends*, it is clear, we can never in this world, to any real purpose, be.

In a well-organized essay, compare and contrast the two views of Emerson. Consider point of view, audience, and use of language in both passages.

Evaluation Checklist

Response to Eric Sevareid

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
1. Direct recognition of Sevareid's emphasis on human development, lest technological advancement become destructive					
2. Direct statement of student's view of relationship between technological development and human development					
3. Citation of specific points of agreement/disagreement					
4. Logical development of personal view					
5. Correct grammar and usage					
6. Effective word choice, phrasing, and personal style					
7. Unity and coherence					

Name _____

Date _____

Evaluation Checklist

Dealing with Mark Twain

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
1. Direct recognition of Twain's use of satire					
2. Recognition of Twain's self-confidence and wit					
3. Recognition of Twain's humorous mocking at No. 1365					
4. Correct grammar and usage					
5. Effective word choice, phrasing, and personal style					
6. Unity and coherence					
7. Use of specific language references					

Evaluation Checklist

The Paradox of Order

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
1. Identification of the paradox that order both cultivates excellence and oppresses it					
2. Recognition of application to education					
3. Recognition of application to history and change					
4. Recognition of synthesis of order and change					
5. Inclusion of original examples and clarifications					
6. Use of thesis and topic sentences					
7. Correct grammar and usage					
8. Effective word choice, phrasing, and personal style					
9. Unity and coherence					

Name _____

Date _____

Evaluation Checklist

Carlyle and Emerson

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
1. Identification of specific similarities in descriptions					
2. Identification of specific differences					
3. Recognition of changes in Carlyle himself					
4. Recognition of possible effects of different audiences					
5. Inclusion of specific language references					
6. Clear thesis statement					
7. Logical development					
8. Correct grammar and usage					
9. Effective word choice, phrasing, and personal style					
10. Unity and coherence					