

HANDOUT 5: Sample Essay

Write For Your Life (Or At Least A Perfect 12)

Prompt: People's reactions to different events can depend on their initial expectations. High expectations can represent ambition and increase the chances of success, but reality may frequently prove disappointing. On the other hand, setting low expectations ensures greater satisfaction, but at the risk of sacrificing excellence.

Assignment: Is it better to expect too much and be perpetually disappointed, or to expect too little and consistently exceed your expectations? Using what you know from the books you have read, your studies at school, your own observations, or your personal experience, plan and write an essay that explains your perspective on this issue. Your position should be supported with logical reasoning and concrete examples.

Sample essay response:

Finding a productive balance between expectations that may be difficult to meet and those that may be too easily accomplished requires a certain degree of realistic adjustment. Few people will argue that we should consistently set low goals for the sole purpose of experiencing the gratification of achievement; however, equally few will be satisfied with the disheartening effects of underachievement. Instead, establishing realistic expectations requires a thorough understanding of the situation and its stakes, as we can see from the examples of the American civil rights movement and J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*.

In the 1950s, the questions of fairness and equality that had been simmering for decades finally culminated in an organized and forceful civil rights movement. Although progress had been made, objectively, since the end of the Civil War, African Americans still lived with the fundamental injustices of institutionalized discrimination. For civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., landmark decisions such as school desegregation only served as steps to a larger goal. As King said in his famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial, "And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." Despite the obstacles the movement faced and the potential for disappointment, expectations like King's helped the country move toward full equality for all Americans.

Yet high expectations must be tempered with an understanding of what can be realistically achieved. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, has become a symbol of disaffected youth over the last half-century precisely because of his inability to reconcile his expectations with the realities of impending adulthood. Holden's continual judgment of the adults around him as "phonies"—once they fail to live up to his idealized image of them, as in the case of his former high school teacher—demonstrates the difficulty of living with unrealistic expectations. His disappointment eventually leads to a complete breakdown, and the ending of Salinger's novel leaves ambiguous the question of Holden's ability to survive in a society unlikely to change to meet his expectations.

These examples from history and literature signal the importance of striking a productive balance between high and low expectations. While high expectations were necessary to drive the increasing momentum of the civil rights movement, unattainable ideals led to Holden Caulfield's emotional disintegration in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The more we strive to set high—yet realistic—expectations, the better we can achieve a more tenable state of satisfaction.

Important elements:

- Using appropriate reasons and examples
- Making sense. Sounds basic, but you would be surprised.
- Logically transitioning from one idea to another
- Using language like a language ninja—that is, skillfully
- Changing up the sentence structure
- Staying focused and organized
- Developing the main idea in a way that is effective and insightful, or basically, being deep