

English Learning Activity: Writing your opinion

You will read an article and view a video about the issue of high-speed police chases. Then, we will discuss the issue in class and you will write your thoughts down.

Why are we doing this?

- ◆ You are going to practice organizing your thoughts and writing them down clearly.
- ◆ This activity will give your teacher an idea of your writing so you can be taught more effectively.

When you're finished, you will:

- ◆ Be able to speak more intelligently about the issue of police force.
- ◆ Be a little better at organizing and writing down your thoughts.

What you will do:

1. Discuss the issue of fatal police chases in general.
2. Read the enclosed article about a fatal police chase.
3. Watch a short video where people are put in danger by a police chase.
4. Have a class discussion about several important aspects of this issue.
5. Write your thoughts down in a well-organized essay.

Writing your opinion about an issue

One of the most common reasons why people write is to express their opinion about an issue. You've heard the expression "the voice of the people", and that really means what people have written.

When you express how you feel in writing, and you make sure the right people read what you wrote, you have the power to get bad laws repealed, to get better laws enacted, to punish companies for lying to you and making bad products, to reward companies for making good products and being concerned for you, to get wrongs righted.

vocabulary: **NOUN**

issue

Something that people talk about because not everyone agrees on it.
Examples: political issues, the issue of police force, the abortion issue, race issues, parenting issues, the issue of film censorship, etc.

LEARNING PLAN

Writing gets you noticed. Writing gives you power. Writing can get you what you want.

Writing is very much alive and powerful today, just as much it was when your grandmother was in diapers.

Do you think that writing a short love letter to your honey is so old-fashioned? What's the difference between a short love note written in 1908 and a short text you send to your boyfriend or girlfriend? Heard of the Internet? Of blogs? Of Facebook? Twitter? People are writing just as much as before, and this writing is changing the world you live in, just like the Declaration of Independence did hundreds of years ago.

You have more in common with your grandfather than you think you do.

So, you're going to get better at writing your opinion. There's an old expression, "The pen is mightier than the sword". It's true. It's time to better arm yourself.

Be good

Keep in mind something very important: What you write will be read by others. People can copy your writing and send it to anyone in a few seconds. What you write is stored in computers forever and can be searched and read at any time all over the world. Your parents might read it. Your children might read it someday, and so might your boss.

So, when you write, be good. Say things that actually help people out. Make people feel welcome. Remember that the person whose writing you're reading might be a different race than you. They might have very different religious beliefs than you. They might look very different than you. They might need a wheelchair to get around. They might have a brother who was just killed. Think before you write. Don't write something that makes you look like you have oatmeal between your ears.

Don't do these things

When you write, please don't do these things. They will immediately make anyone with any sort of education or intelligence lose complete respect for you:

- ◆ Do not insult a race, religion, ethnic background, country of birth, disability, age, or sexual orientation.
- ◆ Don't attack another person's opinion by calling them names. If you disagree with someone's opinion, say that you disagree and then say why you disagree.
- ◆ Never say anything about anyone that isn't true. Writing lies about someone is a very effective way to get sued. It's called "libel".
- ◆ Don't curse or use vulgar language. Keep your writing clean and get respect.

But you'd never do those things, so let's move on.

How to write about an issue

First, think about it. What's your opinion about it? You might not be sure, which is fine. If you're not sure about an issue, and you can see it from several sides, congratulations: it means you're a thinking person.

Remember, issues such as welfare, teenage pregnancy, abortion, war, health care, and others *are* issues because lots of different people have lots of different opinions about them. If you're not sure how you feel, it doesn't mean you're stupid — it means you understand that the issue is complex and that you need to learn more about it!

Second, write down some thoughts, whatever they are. Don't think about whether they're good or not, just write them down. Don't worry about grammar and spelling, just write them down. Don't worry about whether they make sense or not, just write them down.

You can try just writing them down as you think of them. Or, you can try making a "T" chart, like this, and writing down your thoughts "pro and con", in other words, "for it and against it":

Issue: credit card late fees	They're good	They're bad
	Punish irresponsible people	Late fees are too high
	Keeps interest rates down for people that pay on time	Banks already have enough money
	teaches responsibility	Punishes the people who can least afford the fees

Third, put your thoughts together into sentences. To make it effective, do it like this:

First, say what you're writing about and your opinion about it. Give a reason why you feel the way you do. Here, the writer told you what he thinks about the topic and gives a reason why he feels the way he does.

Show people you understand the issue by talking a little bit about the other point of view.

If you express your opinion, you need to support it with reasons. Here, the writer gives a clear reason why he's against credit card late fees, with a suggestion for a better system.

Here's another clear reason why the writer feels the way he does. Again, he gives suggestions for improvement.

Credit card late fees are too expensive and are charged to too many people who cannot afford them.

It's true that there are people out there who don't have enough discipline and never pay their credit card bills on time. This costs the bank money because the bank has already paid for whatever the late-paying customer is enjoying. So, it's acceptable for banks to charge late fees to these irresponsible people.

However, the banks have gone too far in their pursuit of every last nickel and dime from the public. Many people have busy lives and sometimes simply forget to make the payment on time. Sometimes the mail doesn't deliver the person's statement and that makes them forget. A simple reminder, like a phone call or letter from the bank, will get these people to pay on time. If someone only does this every once in a while, they shouldn't be punished.

Also, late fees are too expensive. A person with a limited income cannot afford a \$39.00 late fee. This will make it even harder for the person to make next month's payment on time. The banks should make the first late fee less, like \$5.00 to start, then \$20 the next time, then \$40, and so on.

It would also be a good idea for the banks to use technology to help people remember. For example, if a payment is late, why not send a text message to the customer to remind them to pay? This would cost almost nothing and would make the bank look good in the customer's eyes. Plus, the bank would get their money faster than if they sent a reminder letter in the mail.

Yet another suggestion for improvement, showing the advantage for the banks.

Credit card late fees shouldn't be eliminated altogether. Irresponsible, non-paying customers should be punished for their behavior. But everyone would be happier if the banks were a little more lenient and a little more helpful to their customers regarding this issue. Such a change would probably increase the amount of money the banks were paid, too, which would keep interest rates down for everyone.

Your conclusion should summarize what you said without restating it word for word.

How to improve your writing: WRITE

This process of writing an essay takes practice. Getting better at it will take time and work. But, it will happen. Here's the secret: You get better at writing by writing. We'll do this over and over again in class, and eventually apply it to real-world examples that will actually help you in real life. Imagine that.

Now, let's apply what you learned so far to the exercise you did a few days ago: the issue of police chases.

Read and think

Reading is an active process, like finding the best deals on a new phone. It's not a passive process, like watching grass grow.

When you read, you have to think about what you're reading.

Does the stuff you're reading make sense? Does it make you laugh? Make you angry? Why? Does it make you think of something that happened to you? Someone you know? Do you think the people acted wrong or right? Why? What would you have done if you were there? How could it have been made better? Can you picture what's happening in your mind?

Here's a news article from Minneapolis. Read it carefully and think about what you're reading. Don't think about what's happening after school, or whether your shoes are stylish enough for your friends, or the fine looking girl in the other class. Concentrate on what you're reading and think.

Use this blank space to make any notes, like we talked about before:

What am I reading?

This newspaper article appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune on August 14, 2008.

To avoid copyright infringement, I can't include the original article from the StarTribune in this document. To get it, type these words exactly into a Google search:

questions remain after fatal police chase in minneapolis

if for some reason that doesn't work, try this search phrase:

As Hanna Abukar was laid to rest Monday

Video

Watch the short video in class that shows a tragic end to a high-speed police chase.

First step: write down notes

This step in writing is very important, not only for writing essays in English class, but for writing to your landlord, to your insurance company, and other real-world examples.

First, here's the question (or you could say "here's the issue"):

Should police officers engage in high-speed chases? Always, sometimes, or never? If "sometimes", when?

Now it's time for you to think. Keep in mind what you read and what you saw in the video.

As you think, write down your thoughts here and on the other side.



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STUDENT WORK

A series of horizontal lines for writing student work.