

# LESSON 5

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT WRITING AND APPEARANCE

Essay Question No. 1: Write about a significant moment in your life and what you learned from it.

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Prospective Class: 2005

When I was sixteen, I decided to shave my head. It wasn't a rebellion thing, and it wasn't a fashion thing. I was just tired of it, to tell you the truth. I was tired of having to push it out of my face all the time. I was tired of brushing it, and I was tired of all the shampoo I went through each month and the way I always seemed to leave a handful of it in the shower drain. I was tired of it looking all girly and windswept in photos. I thought to myself, I am not the kind of girl who should have long hair.

Problem is, I'm also not the kind of girl who should have a shaved head. All of a sudden, my ears stuck out in strange angles, and my eyebrows—which had always been hidden under a curtain of hair—seemed like huge caterpillars stretching out across my forehead. Also, I never realized it before, but there is a small, potato-shaped dent in the back of my head. Over dinner, my twin brothers took turns aiming at it with pieces of broccoli.

My father hated it. I suppose any red-blooded American father would hate to see their little princess come home with a shaved head, but my dad really took the cake. I thought he was going to cry when he saw my bald, nubby head. But then he started screaming, and I lost all sympathy for him after that. He told me I looked like a bum, instead of a young lady who had grown up with a perfectly nice family in a perfectly nice suburb of a perfectly nice city. I screamed right back and told him he had a totally outdated view on women. When we visited my grandmother a few weeks later, he made me wear a San Francisco Giants hat the whole time. My grandmother wanted to know when I had gotten into football. I lied and told her I was considering a career in sports management.

My dad only loosened up when it started growing back; wispy and spiky at first, then finally into a short pageboy cut that curled over my ears. The six months in between, though, were rough. People sniggered at me in homeroom when they thought I wasn't listening. Little kids pointed at me in the mall and asked their parents what had happened to my hair. I felt really self-righteous when I was bald. Despite all this, though, I was glad when it grew back. I was tired of always having to explain it, or justify it, or fight about it. People are much nicer to me now, but whenever I look in the mirror I think about the time when I had no hair. People can be awfully rude when you don't look, act, or think they way they want you to.

And that's what I learned when I shaved my head.

### WORDS ABOUT WRITING

I thought about beginning my essay with the line, "It was a dark and stormy night," but then I thought that sounded too **hackneyed**.

**hackneyed** )))): stale, overused

### RELATED WORDS

The following words all have to do with bad, unimaginative writing.

The sample essay my teacher gave me to read was a total nightmare. It was so **banal** and **prosaic**, it sounded like a six-year-old had written it. I mean, really had this person ever had an original thought in her life? It was all about how volunteering at an animal shelter changed the way she thought about animals' rights. Well, duh! What a **facile** conclusion. And to make things worse, she kept peppering her essay with **trite** metaphors like "my heart sang like a bird," Yech.

**banal** (*adj*): boring, ordinary

**prosaic** (*adj*): simplistic, unsubtle, and unimaginative

**facile** (*adj*): made without real thought or feeling, and therefore of little value. *Facile* can also mean "requiring little effort:

**trite** (*adj*): overused, unoriginal

The first draft of my essay was too long and **amorphous**, so I decided to rewrite the whole thing from scratch in order to tighten it up.

**amorphous** (*adj*): shapeless

My tendency to **digress** meant that my essay was **diffuse** and

**nebulous**: it became hard to see the point of it all. My writing was taking a **circuitous** path to its conclusion—telling stories about vacations, about our pets, and anything else that popped in my mind—and that meant that the final essay was too **convoluted** for anyone to follow.

**digress** (*v*): to move away from the current topic

**diffuse** (*adj*): spread out

**nebulous** (*adj*): shapeless, indistinct

**circuitous** (*adj*): lengthy and indirect

**convoluted** (*adj*): too complicated to understand easily

In my first draft, I began my essay with a story about the first haircut I ever gave myself, which seemed like a **germane** way to start things off.

**germane** (*adj*): appropriately related, on-topic

Okay, including a photograph of my bald head with the essay might have been a bit **superfluous**.

**superfluous** (*adj*): extra, unnecessary

Talking about the first haircut I ever gave my dog was, I admit, a bit **tangential**, but it was a really funny story.

**tangential** (*adj*): only somewhat relevant to the topic at hand

After all my editing, though, my final draft was tight and **succinct**. Every word had its place, and it didn't waste any time.

**succinct** (*adj*): clear, to the point

I had to **abridge** the part about my brothers' reaction to my haircut and curtail the discussion of my family's hair history in order to get my essay under the required word limit.

**abridge** (*v*): to shorten something by cutting certain parts out

**curtail** (*v*): to cut short

In order to really **elucidate** my dad's reaction, I have to tell you how he went bald at twenty-three and was very sensitive about it

**elucidate** (*v*): to clarify, to explain

My writing teacher suggested I write an essay about a small, domestic incident, rather than a **pretentious** essay about how I was going to save the world or write the next great American novel.

**pretentious** (*adj*): having an unrealistically high self-image

The story of my haircut was such a **saga** – the arguments lasted for weeks.

**saga** (*n*): a long, dramatic tale

At first I was going to write an essay about what I learned from my after-school job, but then that seemed too boring and **derivative**. Doesn't everyone write that essay?

**derivative** (*adj*): taking ideas from somewhere else, unoriginal

Janet was away on vacation when Head Shaving '03 happened. For a while I thought about writing my essay in an **epistolary** form, and using our emails to tell the story.

**epistolary** (*adj*): a text written in the form of letters or correspondence

## WORDS ABOUT FIGHTING

My fashion choices have always **perturbed** my dad, who's pretty conservative.

**perturb** (*v*): to trouble or worry someone

## RELATED WORDS

I remember he got really **agitated** when I bought my first pair of big, leather boots. I only **exacerbated** that situation by getting my nose pierced a week later.

**agitate** (*v*): to make someone feel anxious or disturbed

**exacerbate** (*v*): to make a bad situation worse

The head-shaving incident caused **discord** in my house: My father kept yelling and then refused to talk to me.

**discord** (*n*): disagreement and strife; or, what results when harsh sounds clash with one another, making an unpleasant noise

My dad has always claimed to be a free thinker and really easygoing, which meant that his off-the-wall behavior that *day* was quite

## **dissonant.**

**dissonant** (*n*): inconsistent, incompatible. In musical terms, it means making a harsh, unpleasant sound by combining particular notes.

My dad **castigated** me by grounding me for two weeks.

**castigate** (*v*): to criticize or punish someone severely

I can't believe it- my brothers break a family heirloom vase and only get **reprimanded**. I shave *my* head – my own head, thank you! – and I get two weeks with no TV, no phone, and no social life.

**reprimand** (*v*): to rebuke someone; less harsh than *castigate*

I told *my* dad he would **acclimate** to *my* new hair, but he seemed really doubtful.

**acclimate** (*v*): to get used to

He was **adamant** that I buy a wig for the upcoming class pictures.

**adamant** (*v*): firm, unyielding

He **scoffed** when I told him that plenty of famous models had shaved heads now.

**scoff** (*v*): to mock or scam

The whole situation got us both really **disgruntled**.

**disgruntled** (*adj*): upset

He tried to **dissuade** me from keeping it bald until prom.

**dissuade** (*v*): to persuade someone not to do something

The event was quite **divisive** in *my* house. My brothers felt torn, because they didn't know whom to side with.

**divisive** (*adj*): causing disagreement and hostility

## WORDS ABOUT THE APPEARANCE

I liked my new rebel haircut. I practiced an angry, punk-rock **countenance** to go along with it.

**countenance** (*n*): facial expression

My dad thought a shaved head wasn't **seemly** for a young lady.

**seemly** (*adj*): proper, pleasant-looking

## RELATED WORDS

I told him I wasn't interested in being that kind of **decorous**, proper gin.

**decorous** (*adj*): well-mannered, dignified

My father still **adheres** to some old-fashioned, antiquated sense of appropriateness.

**adhere** (*v*): to stick to something firmly

My dad is really **fastidious** about his own appearance. Every morning, he spends fifteen minutes making sure his sideburns, moustache, and nose hairs are all perfectly trimmed.

**fastidious** (*adj*): fussy, concerned with details, very clean

I told him he was being **superficial** – shouldn't he be more concerned with the fact that I am a good person?

**superficial** (*adj*): overly concerned with appearances and surfaces, shallow

I think that, in parent-child relations, looks should be **inconsequential**. What if I had been born really ugly?

**inconsequential** (*adj*): not important

Janet told me my new 'do **accentuated** *my* eyes.

**accentuate** (*v*): to emphasize or draw attention to a particular

feature

I told my dad that I liked being **eccentric**. Who wants to look like everyone else? Or worse-like a fashion spread in *Seventeen*?

**eccentric** (*adj*): unconventional

My dad said there was a difference between being eccentric and being **aberrant**.

**aberrant** (*adj*): abnormal, deviant. It's a much stronger word than *eccentric*.

It wasn't like someone had **defaced** his property. It's my head, and besides – I liked the way it looked.

**deface** (*v*): to ruin the appearance of something

He acted as if I had been **defiled**. Good lord, Dad, it's just a haircut! I'm still the same girl I was yesterday.

**defile** (*v*): to dirty something

He thought it made me look like a girl of **disrepute** (in other words, a girl who wouldn't get into an Ivy League school).

**disrepute** (*n*): a bad reputation

He said I looked like a **wastrel** and a punk. I told him he looked like he had a stick shoved up his backside, but he wasn't going to hear me complaining.

**wastrel** (*n*): an offensive term for someone who is lazy and wasteful

Personally, I think I have great **sartorial** taste.

**sartorial** (*adj*): relating to clothing