

Narrative Sample Essay 2: Underneath the Surface, Into the Whole

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)
-2005

NOTE: You should see colored comment boxes on the side of the essay. If these do not appear, go to the **toolbar**, click **view** and then **comment**.

The best way to read commentary on essays is to begin at the end, because the last comment seeks to sum up the most important strengths and weaknesses of the paper. It gives you a perspective from which to read the more specific comments in the margins.

Underneath the Surface, Into the Whole

My identity is a product of my father's differences from the world. Constructed of jumbled memories and intrinsic truths, who I am cannot escape the fact that I am my father's daughter. Through his attention to a broken loom, my father gifted me with a holistic view of a broken world. Thus, his story has become my own.

The right pedal of the loom was broken. When you tried to push it, it would yield, but never came back up like it was supposed to. The result was a mass of tangled threads, so that the colored thread could no longer weave between the skeletal structure of the strings.

For many years, the loom stood in a room at my dad's senior center, where women and men with soft hair and thin lips went on Wednesday mornings. My dad taught the class, though he didn't know how to weave. Some of the seniors pushed the pedals and slid the spool through the template strings, changing hands in an odd dance, as if they had been born with this intricate knowledge. Kind eyes understood the delicacy of the machine, and the loom's ability to bring them joy. Others couldn't remember the right order to press the pedals in, so that the pattern was never the same. My dad said he

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: This claim seems the core of your thesis, and it raises interest right away—how will his attention to a broken loom translate into a holistic view of the world? It makes me want to read more. Now—why bury your thesis in the middle of the introduction, and follow it up with a rather more general and tamer tag-on?

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: This paragraph describes well, and the description definitely belongs in the paper. Do you think it really belongs here? How does this paragraph relate to your thesis, other than stating the fact that the loom was broken? It might work better combined with paragraph 4, where you're also describing the loom.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Is your dad in the senior center? Does he own it? In what sense is it his?

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: What class?

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: I love that image!

couldn't distinguish the difference between the good and the bad, his seniors just wanted to weave, and to him, they did it beautifully.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: This paragraph effectively builds the significance of the loom by giving it deeply human associations.

As months went on, the class size dwindled. Looms that had once been active were now worn and unused. Constant pressing had shaped their pedals with shallow but detectable dips into the wood, and tapestries lay half-finished on their scarred frames.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: This paragraph feels out of place on its own, and its ideas seem not quite finished. Why did the class size dwindle? Was the equipment a reason? Why have you switched from discussing the one significant loom to several looms? I like the clear and particular image I can focus on when we're dealing with your dad's special loom. Are the other looms important?

When my dad learned that the looms were going to be thrown away, he bought one and packed it piece by piece into our green mini van. In the coolness of my grandparent's basement, my father and his father reassembled the loom. For the pedals, they substituted new wood, and for the scratches they rubbed sandpaper and furniture polish across the broad surfaces until only faint marks remained. My grandfather checked weaving books out of the library, and showed me how to make a checkerboard pattern with white and dark blue thread. I spent hours at the loom, delighted by the rhythm of the machine and my own hands. It didn't matter that I could still see the scars, to me, the loom was new.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Great point! The two sentences together make a good bridge for several aspects of the paper; they bring *you* into the paper and signal a shift from narrative mode to analytical reflection.

Underneath the lemon-scented furniture polish, the loom was deeply wounded. We live in a world where it is logical to throw broken things away. When the looms got a little beat up, no one thought twice about getting rid of them. As people began to lose interest in the weaving class, there was no reason to keep these cumbersome machines around.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Again, you're a good descriptive writer, but don't rely too heavily on description and leave out ideas about the things you're describing. The paragraph isn't just about the loom's wounds. Maybe combine the first sentence and the second?

My dad, however, has always thought differently than most people. Physically, the loom was broken, but what my father saw was different. His eyes perceived the happiness that the looms had brought to so many people. Rather than the obvious flaws, my dad saw wholeness. Both my father and grandfather put in tremendous amounts of

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: I'd like to know more... tell me how this makes the loom deeply wounded?

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Great transition!

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Hm. You like two-sentence topic sentences, don't you? Using two instead of one *can* be an effective way to emphasize your main point, but you might be sparing in your use of the strategy. *Any* rhetorical strategy becomes less effective when it's used very frequently.

time to repair the loom. They sanded and polished the loom for no other reason than to restore it to its original purpose. In the end, the loom came full circle, from youth to old age and back again.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Good development and explanation of meaning in this paragraph. Do this more!

Most people would not have stuck with the loom long enough to see it regain some of its former glory. So it is with many of the people I have encountered. In the entity of the loom, I see the boy who has no friends, the man who devours warm food because he cannot say when he will eat again, and the young girl with a debilitating illness. These are the people society rejects, the ones who are deemed not “good enough.” Yet, they are no less acceptable than anyone else. We are all broken, and we all have a created purpose to fulfill. It has become my habit, as is my father’s, to see the good, the wholeness of people, even in their flaws. This habit allows me to be gentle with myself, understanding that I, like a worn out piece of furniture, can be repaired, and that even if I’m not, it does not negate my value.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Another good pair of topic sentences. Would they work even more effectively, do you think, if you used the first at the end of the previous paragraph—to wrap it up—and the second as the topic sentence of this paragraph?

What the world places value on, and what my family places value on is sometimes entirely different. Long before the loom had stopped serving a purpose at the senior center, my dad cherished it. Thus, I tend to reject conventions, that newer is better, that physical attractiveness means everything, and replace them with my own mantras. Found items are infinitely more interesting than bought, scars build character, and anything, no matter how broken, can be repaired. Still, reparation is in no way equivalent to perfection.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: You’re making important points here. You’d make even more forceful points if you could tighten up a bit on the words you use—cut empty words, and make sure you mean the words you’ve chosen. (For instance, what does “acceptable” mean here?)

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Might be good to include this idea in your topic sentence because it seems pretty key to the paragraph.

People have lied to me when they told me I could achieve perfection. At times, I believe they were right. I expect myself to be perfect, to avoid mistakes at all costs. It is the way of our society to mask the scars, and to live in ignorance. At heart, we are people

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Good analysis—ties the metaphor of the furniture with your own life. This kind of deliberate connection and extension of ideas is something to do throughout the essay

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Comment: Why just restate a point you’ve already made more than once? Repetition is justified if you mean to add a new point/angle or to expand an idea further.

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Is this really the word you want? (And, in the next sentence, is “reparation” really the word which best suits what you mean?)

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Well, maybe this goes a bit far . . . I can think of a few things I’ve repaired many times over but finally had to quit on.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM
Comment: Nice, neat transition from reparation to perfection.

afraid of knowing ourselves. Thus, we remove all items that remind us that we are not perfect, and all people as well.

In the loom, I found little reason for destroying signs of brokenness. When I ran my fingers through the threads of that loom, I was creating something. I was receiving a precious gift, becoming the author of my own inconsistencies. In a tapestry, I could point to the places where I had pushed a wrong pedal, or gotten the threads caught up in each other. It wasn't pretty, but it was mine, and sometimes I did get it right. Scars, I learned, were what built character, what allowed our true selves to shine through, what made us different from everyone else. As many times as I didn't get it completely right, that was how much I had to get back up, to try again, to broaden my view and embrace more than my flaws.

The world may see the breaks, the tears, the scars of life, and merely walk away, but I look at them and see them in the context of an inherently broken world and resilient people. Just as I saw the beauty in a broken loom, I see the beauty in people who are still living, scars and all.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: A powerful point, yes, but where or how does it fit into your thesis? How do you go from being lied to about achieving perfection to being afraid of knowing yourself? Since it's an important insight you don't want to lose, can you adjust your thesis to make space for it?

cmartin 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Can you make this a bit clearer? Didn't your dad and granddad "destroy signs of brokenness" by repairing it? You're building the climax of your essay, here, so you want it to be crystal-clear, or the momentum the rest of the essay is building will slow down.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: Hmm... this idea of scars building character comes out a lot – could you use the image to focus your essay more specifically? That might help to make everything else a bit clearer.

rekstrand 6/28/09 2:09 PM

Comment: You've chosen a great metaphor in the broken loom, and you develop your ideas with rich detail and thoughtfulness. This paper was a pleasure to read.

You could tighten up a little the match between your thesis and what you actually write about—maybe by adjusting the thesis so that it reflects a bit more of the richness of your ideas. Or you could more clearly integrate a tangent or two into the mainstream of your thinking.

Just a comment on your topic sentences: In an essay, they function to clue the reader into your main point, and they usually come at the beginning of a paragraph so that readers see your point faster. They sometimes work well at the end of their paragraph (as when you ended the paragraph on the loom's restoration with your own delight in the hours you spent working on it.) But it's a good idea to use *any* devices or strategies with restraint, or they lose their effectiveness. The same goes for your inclination to write two-sentence topic sentences; try to be conscious of the reasons for the exceptions you make to a norm.

