

**THE ULTIMATE QUESTIONS OF LIFE**  
**And How to Help Students Think About Them, so They Can Write More Clearly**

- I. **As teachers of writing, the most valuable gift we can give our students is to teach them HOW to think.**

*Sir Francis Bacon proclaimed, "Reading maketh the full man, discussion the ready man, and writing the exact man."*

- A. This session will demonstrate
1. How to identify and analyze the Ultimate Questions as you discover them in literature.
  2. How to compose a paragraph using the Claim/Quote/Explanation method to discuss the ultimate questions.
- B. The Ultimate Questions and the Claim/Quote/Explanation method of writing can be used in all subjects and in testing. You'll develop some ideas on how it can be used to make writing more exact in your classes.

II. **Identify the ideas in conflict:**

How Christians view the world **should conflict** with how current American culture views the world and acts. The following two quotes illustrate two examples of the worldview conflict:

*"The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be" - Carl Sagan*

*"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." - Saint Augustine (Confessions)*

- A. What are the three **ultimate subjects** involved in the above quotations that all writers discuss to some degree, even if it is implied but not explicitly stated?
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- B. What is Carl Sagan saying about those three ultimate subjects (stated or implied)?

- C. What does Augustine say about the three ultimate subjects?
- D. How do the ideas of the two men contrast? Which is true?
- E. What is the value of writing if it does not seek to explain and expound upon Truth?
- F. The second set of questions that almost all authors discuss deal with the ultimate subject of **Man**. Some of these questions do overlap one another.
1. Who is man (his nature and character)?
  2. What is man's purpose?
  3. Where is man going?
  4. What is the problem?
  5. What is the solution?

**EXERCISE:** *Read the poem on the right. In his short 36 word poem, how does Stephen Crane answer the ultimate questions concerning man? (It helps to place a #1, #2, etc. next to the lines that address those questions.)*

**I Saw a Man Pursuing the Horizon**

*By Stephen Crane (1871-1900)*

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;  
Round and round they sped.  
I was disturbed at this;  
I accosted the man.  
"It is futile," I said,  
"You can never -"  
  
"You lie," he cried,

- G. By having students focus on the ultimate questions, it helps students clarify what the author is saying.

### III. Claim/Quote/Explanation (CQE)

The CQE provides a thought unit of writing, a way to think about what evidence the writer is providing and why that evidence is significant support for the overall argument.

A. Whole C-Q-E Unit: Provides solid evidence alone or in support of a Topic Sentence (TS)

1. C (Claim): Provides a specific statement that expounds on the TS  
Example from Crane's poem above:

2. Q (Quote): Provides a direct **quotation** or **example** as evidence of the claim  
Example:

3. E (Explanation): Provides reasons why Quote is evidence of Claim and supports the Topic Sentence.  
Example:

**EXERCISE:** *Now put the whole CQE into one continuous thought unit.*

B. The CQE offers several benefits.

1. Forces students to support their ideas with concrete evidence from the text (Quotes and Examples) and then analytically explain why their evidence is relevant. It teaches thinking!
2. Provides an easy grading structure for the teacher.
3. Teaches and reinforces the correct and seamless use of direct quotations in academic writing.
4. Teaches students to write longer and more developed paragraphs.

5. Forces students to be **careful readers** because they are always looking for good quote support for daily and paper assignments. It also teaches them to **examine the evidence** presented by other writers.
6. By adding dress-ups, openers, decorations and triple requirements, the CQE can become both thoughtful and delightful.
7. Accomplished students (see the high school sample) will soon discover how to say much in little space as they combine their CQE sentences.

#### IV. What a CQE paragraph would look like

A CQE paragraph can either stand alone or can provide a supporting point for a longer paper. It can be lengthened or shortened by adding or eliminating CQEs. Since the Q can also be an example, the modified CQE paragraph works well for writing prompts. Each line represents a sentence, but accomplished students (see high school writing sample) will integrate parts.

##### I. Topic Sentence (TS) (Ties to Thesis if part of a longer paper)

1. Claim
2. Quote
3. Explanation
4. Claim
5. Quote
6. Explanation
7. Claim
8. Quote
9. Explanation
10. Concluding Sentence (Ties to Topic Sentence (and Thesis if part of paper))

**STUDENT EXAMPLE of both the ultimate questions and the CQE paragraph:** The following paragraph is extracted from a larger essay where the student is supporting his thesis. The writer, John, is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student.

**Thesis:** *In John Steinbeck's famous novel The Pearl, his distinct personal views of Fate, God, Man, and Nature are clear, and resemble those of the Realistic Era.*

**2<sup>nd</sup> body paragraph:** *Another emphasized view in The Pearl is that man as a species can easily become an animal. Steinbeck develops Kino as an example of a man becoming an*

*animal because he did not start as one. In one of the first pages, Kino wakes up one ordinary day, "a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings," showing his content life with no animalistic traits yet (3). Then, in the last part of the book, Steinbeck proclaims it. When Kino and Juana try to escape town by using their canoe, they find that a huge hole had been broken in it, and promptly Steinbeck writes, "There was sorrow in Kino's rage... He was an animal now, for hiding, for attacking, and he lived only to preserve himself and his family" (62). Kino becomes an animal because of his rage and discontent from his misfortune. After this point, Steinbeck associates generous animal-like imagery with Kino. A good example resides when Kino climbs "up the brush cliff beside the water, clawing and tearing at the ferns and wild grapes as he went" (81). Initially appearing insignificant, Steinbeck liberally repeats details associated with animal imagery throughout the last part of the book, which creates a subtle reinforcement of Kino's dire state as just living by his instincts. Prominently, the view of man being animalistic is not exclusive to John Steinbeck; the Modern era has this belief also.*

## **V. Ultimate Subject and Ultimate Question Exercise**

- A. Actively read the following extract from the Declaration of Independence and mark the ultimate questions and subjects as you see them. You can use numbers for the ultimate questions and "G" for God and "N" for Nature.

*When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. --Such has been the patient sufferance of these colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former systems of government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.*

- B. **Assignment:** Compose the thesis for a 5 paragraph essay that discusses how the founding fathers' viewed of the Ultimate Subjects of life as evidenced in introduction to *The Declaration of Independence*.

Thesis:

- C. **Assignment:** Key Word Outline and then compose one body paragraph with three CQEs to support your thesis.

I. Topic Sentence (TS) (Ties to Thesis if part of paper)

1. Claim
2. Quote
3. Explanation
4. Claim
5. Quote
6. Explanation
7. Claim
8. Quote
9. Explanation
10. Concluding Sentence (Ties to Topic Sentence (and Thesis if part of paper))

## VI. How Can you use the Ultimate Subjects/Questions in your Classroom

- A. Provide a framework for thinking about the world and studies.
- B. CQE provides a framework for evaluating completeness of ideas in tests.
- C. Integrate with *Institute of Excellence in Writing* checklists to add dress-ups, openers, Decorations, and Triples.
- D. Use to deepen reading understanding and to qualify reading journal entries.
- E. Other uses?

## Examples of Student Work

### ESSAY WRITING ON LITERATURE

**The Assignment:** Compose a 5 paragraph essay that examines the worldview of John Steinbeck in his novel *The Pearl*. Every author has a worldview, the way he sees the ultimate subjects of life: nature, man, and God. From his beliefs he writes and tests new ideas placing characters into different situations and testing the truth of the author's belief system. Steinbeck is no different. The purpose of this paper is for you to examine Steinbeck's belief system based on what he wrote in *The Pearl*. Although we discuss the "truth" of Steinbeck's ideas as compared to biblical Truth during class, your job in this essay is simply to determine what Steinbeck is saying about the ultimate subjects of life, not necessarily to compare it to biblical truth. As you write, consider the consequences of ideas and beliefs on the character's actions.

#### *Disintegrating Dreams*

*By Rowan (Dec 2010, 7<sup>th</sup> Grade)*

*Will Kino's son endure the pain of the scorpion sting? In The Pearl, by John Steinbeck, which is a realist novel, Steinbeck talks about a main character, Kino, becoming a slovenly "animal," Social Injustice, and Fate. Reflecting on such issues as human nature and the extent to which man feels controlled by forces outside himself (e.g., environment and heredity) Steinbeck examines man, his place in the world, and his survival in the face of fate.*

*Portraying Kino continually becoming more and more like an animal throughout The Pearl, Steinbeck presents a grim realist worldview. In the beginning of the story Kino is not depicted as an animal, since he is capable of higher feelings. For example, the narrator utters, "...and then his eyes went up to a flight of wild doves twinkling inland to the hills" (5). This quote subtly illustrates simple serenity and gentleness residing inside Kino. Interestingly, only some people in the story are portrayed like animals, which is unremarkable since true to life some people are rather animalistic and others not. For example, the character Juana is not portrayed as an atrocious animal as she sits, Kino "down on his sleeping mat and she [wipes] the thickening blood from his face with her skirt" (73). This contrasts with Kino who becomes more and more like an animal because of the way the pearl exerts increasing control over his heart. In fact, Juana is calm and quiet and humane. Kino, however, is anything but humane. Towards the end of the story, Steinbeck presents Kino as a wild animal; for example, he "hisses like a snake," and scares Juana (76). Although man is not portrayed as an animal throughout the entire novel, these quotes show that man becomes more and more animal-like as the story progresses, which reflects a dominant realism worldview.*

*In this compelling story John Steinbeck examines the common realism theme of social injustice. Most of the people outside Kino's lowly clan treat his people unjustly. Predictably, the priest from the "city of plaster and stone," labels Kino's people "children" (36). Applying such a label to Kino and his people is cruel and unjust because it is quite undeserved. While the priest unjustly labels Kino and his people "children," another person who is socially unjust is the doctor, who mistreats Kino's young son. Sadly, he says, "I am a doctor, not a veterinary" (14). This shows that the doctor is treating Coyotito as if he were an animal, differently than he would treat someone from his own city. Even more socially unjust are the pearl buyers. One of the pearl buyers offers Kino only one thousand pesos, but the pearl was worth much more. Thieves they*

were! Therefore, readers can observe that the people outside of Kino's clan are socially unjust, which reflects a criticism common of authors in the American Realism period.

Fate as a controlling force occurs frequently throughout this story and realist literature. Of particular interest is the fateful scorpion sting. Signaling to the reader its deadliness, John Steinbeck says, "... but it fell past his fingers, fell on the baby's shoulder, landed and struck" (7). Obviously, this is an example of fate because if Kino would have acted one second earlier, Coyotito would have been saved, whereas his delay has horrible consequences. While the last example was rather obvious, another less obvious example of fate occurs when the moon shines on Kino, which is right when he's about to pounce. Steinbeck notes, "He was too late...the silver edge of the moon slipped above the eastern horizon, and Kino sank back behind his bush" (112). This was surprising! The moon's rising above the horizon is another example of fate because he only had one chance to jump, but the moon came out spoiling that one chance. Finally, in another instance, Kino was in mid air when the dark figure of the tracker aimlessly shot his rifle into the cave, fatefully hitting Coyotito. Steinbeck says, "Kino was in mid-leap when the gun crashed and the barrel-flash made a picture on his eyes" (113). The gun's flashing barrel shows a bad end of Kino's dreams, Coyotito's life, and Juana's motherhood, all that they had tried to preserve, which fate takes in an instant. Fate proves a dominate element that Steinbeck discusses in The Pearl, which supports a realist view of the world.

The Pearl, by John Steinbeck is a realist novel that describes man as an animal, social injustice, and fate. In The Pearl Social injustice was the most important theme, because it demonstrates how Kino's people were separated from all the city people, which leads to the fall of Kino. Shockingly, in the end Kino disintegrates into a nerve-racking, inhumane, ravenous beast to protect his family in the face of his indiscriminately disintegrating dreams.

## PROMPT WRITING

As a variation of the CQE paragraph, the following paragraph essay was given as an in class prompt to check reading and develop thinking. Students were told before reading the intent of the prompt, but did not see it until class. This paragraph was outlined and written in 30 minutes. It follows the modified form TS, CQQE, CQQE, CS.

**Assignment:** A few days ago, we read a BreakPoint article titled "The Countersign: God's Servant in Haiti." The article described the actions of Pastor Rick Frechette who offers "'countersigns' of grace – that is, to do something right for someone when everything is going wrong" (Early 1) or when the action is counter-cultural. In chapters 40-42 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, describe two characters that Stowe uses as "Countersigns of grace" to oppose the cruelty of slavery. Make sure you name each character and show his/her actions that you consider to be "countersigns." Thoroughly explain the results of those actions as countersigns.

### Passing on the Countersign By John (March 2010, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade)

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, she stresses the importance of "countersigns of grace," which means showing kindness even when you get none back.

Stowe's main character, Tom, is loving, caring, and helping others in the midst of chaos, becoming the ultimate countersign. Speaking to his master who threatened to kill him, Tom proclaims, "Mas'r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I'd give ye my heart's blood" (349). Even after they helped try to kill him, Tom tells Sambo and Quimbo, "I forgive ye, with all my heart" (350). Acting quite differently most people, Tom shows love to his own murderer. Because Sambo and Quimbo saw this love, they eventually started showing it back. After they realized what they helped do, Sambo and Quimbo tried to heal Tom. According to Stowe, they "washed his wounds, -- they provided a rude bed" (350). Since Tom showed love to them, Sambo and Quimbo couldn't help but show it back. Creating a cycle, the countersign passes on thanks to those who continuously show it in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

### CQE JOURNAL WRITING

**Assignment:** Instead of completing reading comprehension questions, students were asked to keep a reading journal and make two significant observations (one old and one new) from each reading assignment (usually 20 pages) and then to write two CQEs, one for each observation. They were required to use a full set of dress-ups and openers, 1 decoration and 1 triple for the two CQEs. This allowed me to check reading and practice good writing without adding more writing assignments. It also forced students to make hard decisions about what was most significant about their reading.

#### *Uncle Tom's Cabin (Ch 10-11)* *By Jenn (Feb 2010, Grade 7)*

**NEW IDEA:** According to a tobacco-chewing man in a Kentucky tavern, who opposes harsh treatment of slave and speaks for Harriet Beecher Stowe, masters who beat their slaves deserve it if the slaves escape. He announces, "Any man who owns a man like that, and can't find any better way o' treating him, deserves to lose him" (90). Happily of his slaves, he practices what he preaches; he has free papers for the slaves and promises not to hunt them down if they run away.

**OLD IDEA:** Sadly, Stowe show that the slave trader, Mr. Haley, lives for love of money and doesn't particularly care what happens to the slave as long as he obtains a good profit. When speaking to a blacksmith, he remarks, "they dies so as to keep the market up pretty brisk" (85). Haley knows that when a slave dies, he can make money, and Stowe uses Haley to show the downright heartless nature of the American slave trade.

## POETRY ANALYSIS ESSAY

**Assignment:** In a 5 paragraph essay, discuss how Oliver Wendell Holmes uses the poetic elements in his poem “*Lexington*.” This student uses the Ultimate Subject – Nature with her poetic elements. (This sample presents only the thesis and the first body paragraph of the essay.)

***Leaving Everything***  
**By Kate (April 2010, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)**

*Thesis: In his poem “Lexington,” Oliver Wendell Holmes displays the feeling of freedom that our patriotic fathers felt so long ago.*

*Holmes uses personification and hyperbole to heighten the drama of “Lexington.” He personifies nature. In lines 41-42 when he writes, “wind...raving/ rocks...wail” (41-42). When men fight because of their hatred, nature itself becomes disorderly and damaged. Using both personification and hyperbole, Holmes heightens the lasting impact of a battle that started a six year war in the thirteen colonies. The battle of Lexington occurred mainly in the east, yet Holmes writes that it “woke all the mighty land” (49, emphasis added). Holmes’ personification and hyperbole strengthen the ideas of the battles’ effect on America and the reader.*

## HIGH SCHOOL ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY

**Assignment:** Write an argumentative essay exploring whether Oscar Wilde’s views (you select which view or views) in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are biblically true. Is the author correct, uninformed, misinformed, illogical, or analytically incomplete? Incorporate how Wilde employs the literary elements to convey his point of view. (This sample represents only the thesis and 1<sup>st</sup> body paragraph of the essay.)

***Wilde Despair***  
**By Joseph (Nov 2005, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)**

*Thesis: Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray portrays the near truth of sin degrading man’s entire being as Wilde incompletely illustrates life.*

*Dorain Gray’s changing character contrasts the innocent youth with the passion-longing adult. At the beginning, Wilde focuses on purity by saying Dorian “was certainly wonderfully handsome...all the candor of youth was there...one felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world” (Wilde 11-12). Here one discovers Wilde’s view of the ideal person, a person untouched by darkness. In the middle of the story, the author depicts the struggle of one trying to escape the vice of immorality when Dorian says, “I want to be good. I can’t bear the idea of my soul being hideous” (Wilde 71). And yet he possesses not the ability to overcome his evil, and in turn gets fully immersed in the hideousness of his ways. When sin is fully conceived it brings forth death and upon entering the upstairs room, “Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (Wilde 165). All the wicked passions of Dorian, when fully revealed, produce a being opposite of the original ideal of Wilde. The extreme juxtaposition of Dorian accurately manifests the appalling effect of unrighteousness.*