The Importance of Being Yourself

Introduction, Questions, Assignments, and Sample Papers by Andrew Gottlieb

Published Texts:  *Superman and Me* By Sherman Alexie
*Only Daughter* By Sandra Cisneros
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Introduction

The Theme of the Readings:

The importance of being yourself cannot be overstated. The two readings in this handout along with the three writing assignments and three sample papers all focus on the challenge of maintaining identity and integrity in the face of the limiting and oppressive stereotypes fostered by prejudice. In *Superman and Me*, Sherman Alexie recounts her experience as a student in a school in the Spokane Indian Reservation. In *Only Daughter*, Sandra Cisneros writes about her relationship with her father. Both Alexie and Cisneros successfully overcome the limitations imposed upon them and go on to become valuable members of their communities. Their courage and integrity serves as an example from which we can all learn. Sometimes, we need to challenge or defy the cultural norms we were raised to believe in order to become a valuable member of our community. Education in its truest sense is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It entails the ability to question and challenge what we are given to believe and in the end to arrive at our own personal sense of history and of ourselves.

Requirements for English 101 (For further details, see the syllabus.):

In English 101, students are required to write **four papers, each 3 double-space pages** and take a **final departmental exam**. Three of the four assignments students will be given for this course are in this handout. Specification and formatting requirements for the papers in English 101 are on pages 2-4.

The Final Exam:

The two readings will be used on the final exam. It is the last of the three assignments in this handout, the one requiring student to discuss both readings, which will be most relevant as preparation for the final exam. On the exam, students will be given several questions and will be asked to select one. The **composition on the final exam** must be at least **500 words** to receive a passing grade. It will be given by instructor teaching the class in the usual classroom during the usual class time on a date to be assigned by the department later this semester. The exams will be graded by the instructor but will then be given to a committee for further evaluation. In the committee, there will be a second and possibly a third reader in the event there is a significant difference between the grade given by the instructor and grade given by the first reader.
Specifications

PAPERS MUST SATISFY ALL OF THE SPECIFICATIONS TO RECEIVE CREDIT.

1. Each essay must be 3 double-space pages.

2. Each essay must be typed.

3. Font size must be 12.

4. Font style must be *Times New Roman*.

5. The name of the student, professor, course, and date must be flush left with a double-space between each. See example on page 9.

6. Each essay must be double-spaced.

7. For citations more than one sentences, use the following specifications. See example on page 9.
   a. single-space
   b. font size 10
   c. left indent at 1  right indent at 5.5.

8. Each paragraph must be indented.

9. There must be no more than one double-space between paragraphs.

10. Each page of each essay must be numbered in the upper right-hand corner.

11. Each essay must be stapled in the upper left-hand corner.

12. Documentation must include a “Works Cited” page and be done according to MLA formats. See example on page 9.
Formatting Requirements

First Page
This is an example of the top of the first page of a paper.
Use double-spaces. The title must be a double-space below the date and centered.

John Smith
Professor Abraham
English 201
May 7, 2009
Greek Tragedy

Internal Punctuation

When citing a source in the text do as follows: “Oedipus in the play is a free agent” (Fagles, 149).

Long Quotations
This is an example of how to do a citation longer than one sentence.

“In the very first year of our century Sigmund Freud in his Interpretation of Dreams offered a famous and influential interpretation of Oedipus the King:

Oedipus Rex is what is known as a tragedy of destiny. Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them. The lesson which, it is said, the deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence.

(Trans. James Strachey)

This passage is of course a landmark in the history of modern thought, and it is fascinating to observe that this idea, which, valid or not, has had enormous influence, stems from an attempt to answer a literary problem – why does the play have this overpowering effect on modern audiences?”
Entries are in **alphabetical order** with second lines of each entry indented (*hanging indentation*). See *MLA Handbook* - Seventh Edition. 131.

The Works Cited page must be on a **separate page**.

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**Works Cited**


Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays – Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*.

Superman and Me
By Sherman Alexie

The following essay appeared as part of a series, "The Joy of Reading and Writing." This essay is also printed in The Most Wonderful Books: Writers on Discovering the Pleasures of Reading.

I learned to read with a Superman comic book. Simple enough, I suppose. I cannot recall which particular Superman comic book I read, nor can I remember which villain he fought in that issue. I cannot remember the plot, nor the means by which I obtained the comic book. What I can remember is this: I was 3 years old, a Spokane Indian boy living with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state. We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middleclass by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear and government surplus food.

My father, who is one of the few Indians who went to Catholic school on purpose, was an avid reader of westerns, spy thrillers, murder mysteries, gangster epics, basketball player biographies and anything else he could find. He bought his books by the pound at Dutch's Pawn Shop, Goodwill, Salvation Army and Value Village. When he had extra money, he bought new novels at supermarkets, convenience stores and hospital gift shops. Our house was filled with books. They were stacked in crazy piles in the bathroom, bedrooms and living room. In a fit of unemployment-inspired creative energy, my father built a set of bookshelves and soon filled them with a random assortment of books about the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, the Vietnam War and the entire 23-book series of the Apache westerns. My father loved books, and since I loved my father with an aching devotion, I decided to love books as well.

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our south and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased sister, my younger twin sisters and our adopted little brother.

At the same time I was seeing the world in paragraphs, I also picked up that Superman comic book. Each panel, complete with picture, dialogue and narrative was a three-dimensional paragraph. In one panel, Superman breaks through a door. His suit is red, blue and yellow. The brown door shatters into many pieces. I look at the narrative above the picture. I cannot read the words, but I assume it tells me that "Superman is breaking down the door." Aloud, I pretend to read the words and say, "Superman is breaking down the door." Words, dialogue, also float out of Superman's mouth. Because he is breaking down the door, I assume he says, "I am breaking down the door." Once again, I pretend to read the words and say aloud, "I am breaking down the
door.” In this way, I learned to read.

This might be an interesting story all by itself. A little Indian boy teaches himself to read at an early age and advances quickly. He reads "Grapes of Wrath" in kindergarten when other children are struggling through "Dick and Jane." If he’d been anything but an Indian boy living on the reservation, he might have been called a prodigy. But he is an Indian boy living on the reservation and is simply an oddity. He grows into a man who often speaks of his childhood in the third person, as if it will somehow dull the pain and make him sound more modest about his talents.

A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike. I fought with my classmates on a daily basis. They wanted me to stay quiet when the non-Indian teacher asked for answers, for volunteers, for help. We were Indian children who were expected to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations inside the classroom but subverted them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was 10 years older. As Indian children, we were expected to fail in the non-Indian world. Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitied by non-Indians.

I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky. I read books late into the night, until I could barely keep my eyes open. I read books at recess, then during lunch, and in the few minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments. I read books in the car when my family traveled to powwows or basketball games. In shopping malls, I ran to the bookstores and read bits and pieces of as many books as I could. I read the books my father brought home from the pawnshops and secondhand. I read the books I borrowed from the library. I read the backs of cereal boxes. I read the newspaper. I read the bulletins posted on the walls of the school, the clinic, the tribal offices, the post office. I read junk mail. I read auto-repair manuals. I read magazines. I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life.

Despite all the books I read, I am still surprised I became a writer. I was going to be a pediatrician. These days, I write novels, short stories, and poems. I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation. There must have been visiting teachers. Who were they? Where are they now? Do they exist? I visit the schools as often as possible. The Indian kids crowd the classroom. Many are writing their own poems, short stories and novels. They have read my books. They have read many other books. They look at me with bright eyes and arrogant wonder. They are trying to save their lives. Then there are the sullen and already defeated Indian kids who sit in the back rows and ignore me with theatrical precision. The pages of their notebooks are empty. They carry neither pencil nor pen. They stare out the window. They refuse and resist. "Books," I say to them. "Books," I say. I throw my weight against their locked doors. The door holds. I am smart. I am arrogant. I am lucky. I am trying to save our lives.
Conversation Question for Alexie Sherman’s *Superman and Me*:

1. What is the significance of the title, *Superman and Me*? What does Alexie’s life have to do with Superman?

2. “If he'd been anything but an Indian boy living on the reservation, he might have been called a prodigy” (Alexie, 2).

   What does this comment imply about how Indians are perceived and treated?

3. “A smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike” (Alexie, 2).

   What does this statement imply about how people, including Indians, see and treat Indians?
4. “We were Indian children who were expected to be stupid. Most lived up to those expectations inside the classroom but subverted them on the outside. They struggled with basic reading in school but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table. They submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult but would slug it out with the Indian bully who was 10 years older. As Indian children, we were expected to fail in the non-Indian world. Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitied by non-Indians” (Alexie, 2).

How did most of the Indian children adapted to their environment?

5. “I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky” (Alexie, 2)

How was Alexie different from most of the other Indian children?

6. “I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life” (Alexie, 2).

What does this mean? How could the love of books save a person’s life? How could loving books save Alexie’s life?
7. “I visit schools and teach creative writing to Indian kids. In all my years in the reservation school system, I was never taught how to write poetry, short stories or novels. I was certainly never taught that Indians wrote poetry, short stories and novels. Writing was something beyond Indians” (Alexie, 2).

a. What does this say about Alexie’s perception of Indians and their life on the reservation?

b. How was Alexie able to make a contribution to his community? What do think enabled him to do this?

8. “I am trying to save our lives.”

Whose lives was Alexie trying to save and how?
Writing Assignment One - Alexie Sherman’s *Superman and Me*:

How people think of us can affect the way we think about ourselves. We can choose to be influenced by what they think and act accordingly or we can choose to retain our own sense of who we are and live according to what we believe about ourselves. **Write about how people respond to the way others think about them. Use examples from Alexie Sherman’s *Superman and Me*.**

The essay must each be **3 double-space pages** and fulfill the Specifications and Formatting Requirements on pages 2-4 of this handout to receive credit.

See the **sample paper** for this assignment on the following page.

**Outline for Sample Paper for Assignment One**

Introduction:
Thesis: The significance self knowledge is thus crucial not only for the individual but for society as well since the people who are most capable and most likely to make contributions to their community are those who have the courage of their convictions.

Body – Part 1: Alexie’s Background

Body – Part 2: The Challenge Faced by Alexie

Body – Part 3: How Alexie Met the Challenge

Conclusion: Alexie’s unwillingness to conform, his resistance to the toxic and oppressive stereotype imposed upon him by his peers and his teachers that enabled him to become a productive member of his community.
Alexie’s Path

Introduction:

Throughout our lives, people tell us what they think about us. They talk about our clothes, our bodies, our face, our job, our performance in school, our manners, our behavior, our way of talking, and about the way we think and what we believe. Some of the things they say may be true, but other things are false. If we believe everything people say about us, we will never have our own sense of who we are, and without knowing who we are, we will never have the integrity to live according to principle. The significance self-knowledge is thus crucial not only for the individual but for society as well since the people who are most capable and most likely to make contributions to their community are those who have the courage of their convictions. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how one young man found his path in spite of the obstacles that stood in his way. The young man is Sherman Alexie. The essay in which he articulates his struggle is entitled Superman and Me.

Body – Part 1: Alexie’s Background

Alexie is a Spokane Indian who grew upon on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington State. Partially because of the influence of his father, Alexie was able to teach himself how to read and he did so by reading comic books, one of which was Superman. There were in a sense two supermen in Alexie’s life, the one in the comic book, the other, his father.
For the young Indian boy, both of these were heroes and it was in large part because of his admiration of them that he later became a success. But there was something else that enabled Alexie to succeed. Alexie had a mind of his own. He did not allow others to sway him from his true path. He was not a follower. He was an outsider, a person who did not conform. It was because of this that Alexie was able to become an asset to his community.

**Body – Part 2: The Challenge Faced by Alexie**

So what was the challenge that Alexie faced? What was he up against? In a word: prejudice. From his description of the situation on the Spokane Reservation, it is clear that the Indian children were seen and treated as inferior to the non-Indian children. This attitude impacted negatively on the development of most of them. The stereotype they learned to model was one designed to undermine their chances for success. According to Alexie, Indian children were “expected to be stupid.” This expectation came apparently from the teachers. Sadly, people, children in particular, react to other people’s expectations by living up or down to them. A teacher who expects a student to fail will, either consciously or unconsciously, do things that help to precipitate failure and if he sees and treats the student as having inferior intelligent, he will make the student feel inferior. A person who feels inferior, or feels that others thinks he is inferior, is likely to have low self-esteem and, as a result of such a feeling, is less likely to feel motivated to succeed than someone who is led to believe that he is capable and intelligent. This is exactly what happened to the majority of the Indian children who attended the school on the Spokane reservation. Rather than show what they were capable of, most of them played the role of the failure. In spite of the fact that they were capable of telling “complicated jokes at the dinner table,” they were “monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers” (Alexie, 2). And even though they were capable of standing up to an Indian bully who was bigger than them,
they “submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult” (Alexie, 2).
Possibly even worse was that fact that “those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians” (Alexie, 2).

This kind of behavior can only be expected to reinforce whatever feelings of inadequacy the Indian children may have had and help to perpetuate the vicious cycle of low self-esteem and defeatism. The more we see ourselves as a failure, the less we feel motivated to succeed and the more likely we are to fail. The result is failure which serves to reinforce the idea that we are failures which only help to perpetuate the tendency to fail. This is the toxic psychological pattern, a vicious cycle, which becomes prevalent among groups who are habitually oppressed by the dominant members of their society. The dominance of the ruling class depends on the submissiveness of the oppressed. This explains why, as Alexie explains, “a smart Indian is a dangerous person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike” (Alexie, 2). Those who know themselves and who are consequently capable of independent thought are a threat to any oppressive regime the survival of which depends on mindless obedience.

**Body – Part 3: How Alexie Met the Challenge**

What we learn about Alexie from his essay is that he was a free thinker and a fighter as well. His Indian peers wanted him to stay quiet, to follow herd, to play dumb, but Alexie continued to speak up “when the non-Indian teachers asked for answers, for volunteers, for help,” and so ended up fighting with his classmates “on a daily basis” (Alexie, 2).

He “refused to fail,” (Alexie, 2). By his own account, Alexie was arrogant, but it was his arrogance, or rather his pride, or better still, his integrity, that enable him to succeed. A flaw in the eyes of the oppressor may well be a virtue in the eyes of the oppressed, for without at least some degree of pride, integrity is hard to maintain. We need to have a little fire in our hearts to
stand up to the bullies who seek to keep us down. Courage is not born out of passivity or conformism. Alexie was courageous because he was proud and would not bend to the will of his oppressors.

Conclusion:

In the long run, it was Alexie’s unwillingness to conform, his resistance the toxic and oppressive stereotype imposed upon him by his peers and his teachers that enabled him to become a productive member of his community. As a young man Alexie saw his love of books as way of saving his life. As an adult he visited schools and taught creative writing to Indian children. None of his teachers had ever done this for him or for any of the other Indian children in school. “Writing,” explains Alexie, “was something beyond Indians” (Alexie, 2). So, as an adult, Alexie did for Indian children what he did for himself. In his own words, he, like his comic strip hero Superman, was “throwing his weight against their locked doors.” Alexie concludes his essay by telling us, “I am trying to save our lives” (Alexie, 2). We may conclude by saying that it is not enough to go to school and be a “good student,” to listen to your teachers and do as you’re told. Had Alexie done this he would never have been able to help himself or others as he did. What this world needs is people who not only willing to learn from their teachers but who are willing to face the challenge of teaching themselves and of holding fast to the principle that they can overcome whatever obstacles stand in their way.
Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor’s note for an anthology I was part of. I wrote: “I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. That explains everything.”

Well, I’ve thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader’s sake I should have written: “I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons.” Or even: “I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother.” Or: “I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine.” All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

I was/am the only daughter and only a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a girl in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.

Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone’s wife. That’s what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, “Que bueno, mi’ha, that’s good.” That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn’t realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

(anthology: collection of stories and other literature in a book.)
In retrospect, I’m lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn’t matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I’d find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering, my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a “What’s that you’re writing?”

But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as “My only daughter, the writer.” Not as “This is only my daughter. She teaches.” Es maestra—teacher. Not even profesora.

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can’t read English words, even though my father’s only reading includes the brown-ink Estosports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody ¡Alarma! magazines that feature yet another sighting of La Virgen de Guadalupe on a tortilla or a wife’s revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a molcajete (a kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the fotonovelas, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters’ mouths in bubbles.

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is disinterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of nostalgia. Then we’d have to let go of our flat, store the furniture with mother’s relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches and head south. To Mexico City.

We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school.

2 retrospect: thinking about things in the past  
3 embroidering: adding details to  
4 mortar: a very hard bowl in which things are ground into a fine powder  
5 woo: attract, interest  
6 bouts of nostalgia: short periods of time with homesickness  
7 flat: apartment
Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: “I have seven sons.”

He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as “sons.” “I have seven sons.” To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. “I have seven sons.” As if he deserved a medal from the state.

My papa. He didn’t mean anything by that mistranslation, I’m sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I’d tug my father’s sleeve and whisper: “Not seven sons. Six! and one daughter.”

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father’s dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father’s hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. “Use this,” my father said, tapping his head, “and not this,” showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

Wasn’t college an investment? And hadn’t I spent all those years in college? And if I didn’t marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.

Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

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8 *tuition break*: a decrease in the cost of going to a private school
9 *twines and coils*: strings and loops
10 *financial rewards*: money
At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always: hot tamales and sweet tamales hissing in my mother’s pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time. Like in a Fellini film, because that’s just how we are. I went upstairs to my father’s room.

One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano writing and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that’s how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante movie on Galavisión and eating rice pudding.

There was a glass filled with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn’t want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.

I’m not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac, the colonia my father was raised in and the house he grew up in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: “Is this So-and-so?” “Yes,” I said. He kept reading.

When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: “Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?”

Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful.

11 throbbing: beating
12 Fellini: an Italian movie director
13 Chicano: Mexican-American
14 horizontally: laying down
Conversation Question for Sandra Cisneros’ *Only Daughter:*

1. “I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as “My only daughter, the writer.” Not as “This is only my daughter” (Cisneros, 1).

   How does Cisneros want her father to think of her?
   Does she think her father understands her feelings?

2. “Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: “I have seven sons.” He meant *siete hijos,* seven children, but he translated it as “sons.” “I have seven sons.” To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. “I have seven sons.” As if he deserved a medal from the state” (Cisneros, 2).

   What does this imply about Cisneros’ attitude toward his daughter and toward women in general?
3. “What I didn’t realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education” (Cisneros, 1).

“Wasn’t college an investment? And hadn’t I spent all those years in college? And if I didn’t marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor” (Cisneros, 2).

What does this imply about Cisneros view of women?

4. “Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful” (Cisneros, 2).

What is Cisneros referring to? What is the most wonderful thing that happened last year? What does this tell you about how she values her father’s opinion?
Writing Assignment Two - Sandra Cisneros’ *Only Daughter*:

The relationship between a parent and a child is a very special one several ways. One of these has to do with the degree of influence a parent has on the development of a child’s identity. Who we are and who we think we are has a lot to do with what our parents teach us about life and what they tell us about ourselves. Sometimes, what they tell us may help us grow; sometimes what they tell may stand in the way of our growth. Write about how parents shape the way their children think about themselves and how children relate to what their parents have told them. **Make reference to Sandra Cisneros’s *Only Daughter* to support your view.**

The essay must each be **3 double-space pages** and fulfill the Specifications and Formatting Requirements on pages 2-4 of this handout to receive credit.

See the **sample paper** for this assignment on the following page.

Outline for Assignment Two

**Introduction:**
Thesis: Success, either material or personal, depends in large part on one’s ability to be true to herself.

**Body – Part 1:** Cisneros’s Father’s View of Women

**Body – Part 2:** Cisneros’s Conquest

**Conclusion:** Cisneros overcame the stereotypical mindset of her father and the limitations imposed on women by the culture which had shaped her thinking.
A Father’s Love

Introduction:

We tend to think of love as good thing. But it is often the case that the people who hurt us the most are the ones who love us. It is with our daughters, ours son, our parents, our siblings, our closest friends that we are most vulnerable. This is especially true for a child whose vision of the world and of herself depends in large part on her parents. Sometimes, even though they may love us, our parents may say and do things that are not in our best interest. It has been the case in certain cultures that sons were more valued than daughters and that the daughters were taught either on purpose or inadvertently to believe in certain stereotypes about women, about themselves. Accepting these stereotypes was limiting and oppressive. Yet, some woman had the courage to rise above the norms imposed upon them. Such was the case with one brave young woman named Sandra Cisneros, the author of Only Daughter, a very interesting essay demonstrating the principle that success, either material or personal, depends in large part on one’s ability to be true to herself.

Body – Part 1: Cisneros’s Father’s View of Women

Cisneros’s father has six sons and one daughter, his only daughter. Being an only daughter might have its advantages. Could the special one, the one treated as the little princess, loved and protected by her father and brothers? Possibly, but it really depends on the culture in which she is raised. It is also possible that even if a little girl or young lady is offered all the love
and protection in the world that she may not be given the respect she merits. This apparently is what was going on in the Cisneros household.

Although Cisneros’ father cared about his daughter, he did not seem to be proud of her and so, without any intention of keeping her down, did not treat her as an equal to her brothers. His view of women is evident from two things he did. The first of these has to with a peculiar omission. Whenever he wanted boast about his children, he would say that he had seven sons. The truth is that he had six sons and one daughter. Senior Cisneros’ expression of pride left his daughter out in the cold. This would suggest that in his worldview, his culture, women took a backseat to men, that they were second-class citizens. And this, we may believe is what he had taught, either intentionally or inadvertently, his only daughter to believe.

Cisneros’ view of women is evident as well in his pronouncements about his daughter’s education. It seems that as far as he was concerned the purpose for sending his daughter to college was to help her find a husband. “After four years in college,” writes Alexie, “and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education” (Cisneros, 1). For Cisneros father his investment in her education was a kind of insurance policy relying on her ability to find a provider. Apparently, he had little if any faith in his daughter to be a bread winner. One may infer that the idea of a self sufficient woman was not part of Senior Cisneros’ worldview.

**Body – Part 2: Cisneros’ Conquest**

Many people who talk about third world countries talk about imperialist domination of the underclass. Domination is not always a matter relating to nations; it has historically been based on gender. Until recently women were by and large treated as the underclass and men were, for all intents and purposes, imperialists ruling over them. Even in ancient Greece where
we have so often been reminded that democracy was born, women were not allowed to participate in government. They were not even allowed to go to dramatic festivals. Women were then and for centuries to come second class citizens. This doesn’t mean that men did not love women nor does it imply that they did not respect them in every sense. What it means is that their respect, if so it can be called, was unequal. Eventually, women could stand this no longer and fought to gain the same rights as men. This was a conquest, a victory over male domination, male imperialism if you will.

Conclusion:

In her own way Cisneros was victorious. She overcame the stereotypical mindset of her father and the limitations imposed on women by the culture which had shaped his thinking. Rather than succumb to the notion that a woman’s identity and financial well being depended on finding a husband, Cisneros went on to win two fellowships from the National Endowment for the arts and became a guest professor at the University of California, Berkeley. She also succeeded in publishing a book which she was able to sell to a major New York publishing house. Interestingly, however, the accomplishment which gave her the greatest satisfaction was not among these. Among her accomplishments the most satisfying was one of a more personal nature. While reading one of her stories, Cisneros’ father “laughed in all the right places and read lines he liked out loud.” “When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: “Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?” Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year,” writes Cisneros, “that was the most wonderful” (Cisneros, 2). For Cisneros, her greatest victory was her father’s recognition of her ability and the knowledge that now he was proud not only of having six sons but of having a daughter as well.
Works Cited

Conversation Questions Relating to Both *Superman and Me* and *Only Daughter*:

1. What do Alexie and Cisneros have in common? How are their situations similar? How are their situations different?

2. How were Alexie and Cisneros different from other children they were growing up with?

3. In what ways are Alexie and Cisneros outsiders? How did being outsiders help them?

4. In what ways are both Alexie and Cisneros subject to prejudice?

5. What is the most compelling issue or idea common to both *Superman and Me* and *Only Daughter*?
Writing Assignment Three – Alexie and Cisneros:

We often see others through the veil of our predispositions. Rather than judging them by the content of their character, we judge them according to certain stereotypes related to age, race, gender, or religion. Write about stereotypes and how people deal with them. Use examples from Alexie Sherman’s Superman and Me and Sandra Cisneros’ Only Daughter to support your view.

The essay must each be 3 double-space pages and fulfill the Specifications and Formatting Requirements on pages 2-4 of this handout to receive credit.

See the sample paper for this assignment on the following page.

Outline for the Sample Paper for Assignment Three

Introduction:
Thesis: The people most likely to inspire change and growth within their communities are those who have the courage and integrity to retain their beliefs and principles in the face of opposition, ridicule, and rejection.

Body – Part 1: Superman and Me

Body – Part 2: Only Daughter

Conclusion: People like Alexie and Cisneros are important, for by maintaining their own identity in the face of limiting and oppressive influences, they helped pave the way for spiritual and intellectual growth, not only for themselves, but for others who have been facing similar challenges.
The Importance of Being Yourself

**Introduction:**

We often see others through the veil of our predispositions. We expect them to conform to certain stereotypes and to play certain roles. These roles may have to do with age, race, gender, or religion. When confronted with this imposition, some people respond submissively. Rather than challenge other peoples’ expectations, they become what people expect of them. The man who belongs to a group that is considered likely to be lazy, becomes lazy. The woman who lives in a culture that expects women to be helpless and dependent, becomes helpless and dependent. Most people tend to do what enables them to gain acceptance by their community rather than risk rejection by asserting themselves. They act like sheep and follow the herd. They do not take chances. What then can they do for others? **The people most likely to inspire change and growth within their communities are those who have the courage and integrity to retain their beliefs and principles in the face of opposition, ridicule, and rejection.** Two essays which exemplify this principle are Sherman Alexie’s *Superman and Me* and Sandra Cisneros’ *Only Daughter.*

**Body – Part 1: Superman and Me:**

*Superman and Me* is an essay about a little Indian boy who teaches himself to read, first by reading Superman comic books, hence the title. The essay, however, is not about comic books or about Superman. It is about the challenge of learning and succeeding in the face of
prejudice. In a sense Alexie is a bit of Superman in that he faces this challenge with more
courage than his peers. According to his account a “smart Indian” was seen as “a dangerous
person, widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike.” And so, most of
the Indian children learned to pretend to be less than they were. Those who had the ability
to memorize “a few dozen powwow songs,”…. “struggled with basic reading in school”
(Alexie, 2). Those who were unafraid to defend themselves against the “Indian bully was
10 years older…submissively ducked their heads when confronted by a non-Indian adult”
(Alexie, 2). Indian children were “expected to fail in the non-Indian world” (Alexie, 2).
Ironically, failure in school was the basis for acceptance by the Indian community.

Unlike the other children who succumbed to the pressure to act in accordance with the
stereotypes imposed upon his peers, Alexie boldly refused to give in. He “refused to fail,”
refused to play dumb, and was proud of his intelligence even to the point, by his own account,
of being arrogant. Pride and arrogance are generally regarded as character flaws, but a flaw can
turn into a virtue. The unwillingness to follow others, to conform to social or cultural norms, a
tendency which may in the eyes of one’s community be seen as sheer stubbornness, can become
the basis for courageous and constructive action. Such apparently was the case with Alexie who
not only struggled save himself from the destructive need to gain approval of his community by
failing, but proceeded as an adult to do for other Indians what he had done for himself. Alexie
visited schools and taught creative writing, a subject that apparently was never taught to Indian
students. In his own words, Alexie was “trying to save lives.” If he had been a follower of the
herd, if he had succumbed to what had so sadly become a toxic cultural norm, Alexie would not
have become a person capable of making such a contribution. It was his ability to stand proudly
on his own two feet, to think for himself and not let others do his thinking for him that made him a valuable member of his community.

**Body – Part 2: Only Daughter:**

Sandra Cisneros’ experience with prejudice is different from that of Alexie’s. The focal point of her experience is not a school or a group in particular, although it would not be unreasonable to assume that the culture in which she lives is a contributing factor. The focal point of Cisneros’ essay is her father It is pretty clear that he cares about his daughter. Yet, because she is a woman, he marginalizes her. Her father, she writes,

> “would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: “I have seven sons.” He meant *siete hijos,* seven children, but he translated it as “sons.” “I have seven sons.” To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. “I have seven sons.” As if he deserved a medal from the state” (Cisneros, 2).

Cisneros maintains that even though she knew he meant no offense she could feel herself “being erased” (Cisneros, 2). She would tug at her father’s sleeve and whisper: “Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*” (Cisneros, 2).

Cisneros’ father’s stereotypical view of women is evident in his characterization of the purpose of his daughter’s education.

> “What I didn’t realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education” (Cisneros, 1).

> “Wasn’t college an investment? And hadn’t I spent all those years in college? And if I didn’t marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor” (Cisneros, 2).

It is apparent from this that Cisneros’ father, though he encourages his daughter to go college,
has no confidence in her ability to use her college education as the basis for finding a career. Apparently, he sees women as people incapable of self reliance and it is this stereotypical image that he has most likely been imposing on his daughter all her life.

What is admirable about Cisneros is that, like Alexie, she is not swayed by such characterizations. She does not fall into the trap of allowing her self image to be the product of other people beliefs and prejudices. Like Alexie she goes on to make a success of her life. She is able to make some money as writer and wins two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and goes on to become a guest professor at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, she sells her book to “a major New York publishing house” (Cisneros, 2). Evidently, the negative and potentially crippling stereotyping to which she had been exposed was like water off a duck’s back. What is interesting is that her greatest satisfaction comes from the pleasure her father takes in reading her story. After taking considerable time to read and respond to it, he asks where to get copies of it to share with the relative. “Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year,” writes Cisneros, “that was the most wonderful.” Apparently, the greatest victory for her was not the making of money, the winning of awards, or the accomplishment of being published. It was in making her father proud and possibly reversing his image of her as a woman incapable of taking care of herself.

Conclusion:

Both Alexie and Cisneros were confronted with the challenge of overcoming the tendency to allow others to define their identity. They both chose to create their own identity and to build their lives around it. It is arguable that the people who have historically made the greatest contributions to society have done the same. Three such individuals are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. Each of these challenged conventional
wisdom by disobeying and leading others to disobey laws they deemed unjust, laws based on prejudice. King dreamed of a world in which people would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the “content of their character.” Prejudice is built upon the habit of judging people by their appearance or by the stereotypes that have been assigned to the group to which they belong rather than by their word, actions, or accomplishments. It is, as such a kind of blindness that has had a crippling effect, not only on those who are on the receiving end of it, but also on the evolution of society. This is why people like Alexie and Cisneros are important, for by maintaining their own identity in the face of limiting and oppressive influences, they helped pave the way for spiritual and intellectual growth, not only for themselves, but for others who have been facing similar challenges.
Works Cited

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Stereotypes: A Big Problem in Our Modern Society

By Jorge Robles in Collection of Essays Published May 15, 2013

I personally hate stereotypes. I dislike the fact that people think I should act one way because of my sex, personality, or nationality. I hate that people think I should like sports because I am a man. I hate that people think I should be priest because of my personality. I hate all of this because people are creating a concept of me based in what they see, but not in who I really am. Stereotypes are a big problem in our society. It puts labels about how a person should act or live according to their sex, race, personality, and other facts. This could affect individuals who perhaps like different things or do different activities, but feel ashamed of doing so because of stereotypes. Stereotypes like all men like sports or women are not as strong as men, are among the most common in our society. Stereotypes have created a distortion of how every individual should be. We as part of the generation Y should know how these stereotypes could affect us as individuals. We should learn not to judge and prejudge about people because of what we think they should be like, and should change our point of view about the stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our society.

The negatives effects that stereotyping causes in people are many. Some of the negatives effects are harm, poor performance in different activities, and even health problems. According to the article “Long-term Effects of Stereotyping” published in psychcentral.com, Rick Nauert argues how people can be affected by stereotypes even after being exposed to them. Nauert based his arguments based on a study of the University of Toronto that shows how people get hurt because of stereotypes, and how it could affect their performance in different task. “People are more likely to be aggressive after they’ve faced prejudice in a given situation. They are more likely to exhibit a lack of self-control. They have trouble making good, rational decisions. And they are more likely to over-indulge on unhealthy foods” says Michael Inzlicht, who led the research. This demonstrates how individuals are affected in a negative way because of negative stereotypes.

But not only bad stereotypes cause negative effects in individuals. Good stereotypes can also be harmful and cause new problems. They are even worse because people are not aware they are causing harm. In the article “Why stereotypes are bad even when they’re ‘good’”, published in the website guardian.co.uk, Oliver Burkeman explain how good stereotypes could create another problems such as sexism and racism. This can be harmful to many individuals. Burkeman argument is based in a study by the Duke University that discovered that positive stereotypes can be harmful in different situations without people realizing they are doing so. In this study the participants were exposed to fake articles related to black people. The first article was positive and showed that black people are better at sports. In this first article the participants didn’t realize this was a stereotype. Next the participants were exposed to a negative article about that black people are more prone to violence. “When asked to estimate the probability that a hypothetical series of people with typically African-American names might commit a crime, people exposed to the positive stereotype rated that possibility as higher than did those exposed to a negative one. The positive stereotype (“good at athletics”) apparently led to stronger negative beliefs about black people than the negative one (“prone to violence”)” (Burkeman).
This demonstrates how good and bad stereotypes are equally bad because it causes prejudgment and leads to bigger problems.

Stereotypes create a misconception of how people are and how they live in other cultures, religions, or countries. This misconception could cause problems such as discrimination. This is a big problem in our multicultural society. In the talk “The danger of a single story”, published in TED.com, Chimamanda Adichie argues that knowing a single story of a person or a country can cause misunderstanding and create stereotypes. She uses the example of when she first came to the US to study. She says that a woman felt sorry about her because she came from Africa, and even ask her if she could listen her tribal music. Chimamanda tells us how she felt struck by this because she is member of a middle class family in Nigeria and she doesn’t listen to tribal music. This demonstrates how people are influenced by a single story of a country or a person, and are no aware of many other stories that could change the perception of them. “Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Fumi Onda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers. What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband’s consent before renewing their passports? “(Adichie). What if we see in other countries, cultures, or religions not only what we belief, but also other stories that could change our perception. It is important to learn from each other to understand and avoid stereotypes that could be harmful.

Stereotypes are creating problems in kids. These problems can affect children in many ways. We can see the negatives effects in many areas such as the academic area. In the article “Awareness of racial stereotypes happens at an early age, has consequences”, published in berkeley.edu, Carol Hyman show us how stereotypes could cause problems in people from early ages. He support his claim based on a study of the University of Berkeley that shows how racial stereotypes make the children perform poorly in school. He mentions how we could solve these problems. Hyman says that school should “Change the way tests are described”, “Eliminate stereotypes and prejudice”, and “Adopt classroom practices to reduce competition”. If we want new generations to be successful we need to do something to change it. This problem is creating confusion in kids because they are growing up thinking that they should be one way because society thinks that’s the ideal. Stereotypes also are creating a false idea of how they interact with other individuals. Many of the stereotypes the children receive are through media. We can’t change this because is the way our society works, but we can teach our children to value other people for what they are, not what they appear to be. It is also important to teach our children to respect each other regardless of sex, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion, personality and more. It is important to teach them these values because they are the future of our society.

We as the new generation should do something to avoid this problem. We can start changing our perception of stereotypes. We should be aware that all stereotypes are bad regardless if they are good or bad because it causes prejudgment. We should learn to respect and understand other cultures, religions, and countries. This could avoid many problems such as discrimination. And
more importantly we should teach newer generations to respect each other regardless of their differences. With all of this we can change our perception of the stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our society and make of this a better society.

By Jorge Robles
Published May 15, 2013
In Collection of Essays
Stereotypes: Do They Affect You?
By Kamal A., Aurora, CO

If you don’t already know, a stereotype is a generalization that is usually exaggerated or oversimplified and is often offensive to distinguish a group.

Imagine this: A middle aged man who is a hard worker and finished college with a degree in management. He applies for a job as a gas station manager for a major gas station company. He is the most qualified out of all the other applicants yet does not get the job. You may ask why he doesn’t get the job. I’ll tell you why. This is because he’s Arab and comes from a country that America is at war with.

This situation is only one of the many stereotypes that occurs everyday. Just because someone is of a certain ethnicity or religion, that doesn’t mean you can stereotype into groups.

Stereotypes are hurtful and most of the time untrue. Here are some examples of stereotypes:

- Every Arab is a terrorist
- Every Hispanic person is Mexican
- Every white American is rich
- Every white Southerner is racist
- All Blondes are stupid
- Every Hispanic person in America is an illegal immigrant
- Every German is a Nazi
- Every British person has messed up yellow teeth

These are only a few of the harmful stereotypes that are out there in the world.

If you’ve ever been the victim of a stereotype, which is a good probability, you know that they can cause you to do unnecessary things. They could make you lash out in rage or even confront that person face to face.

The chances are that if you stereotype someone more than once and mean it that could push them to do something irrational. America was built on the whole idea of “freedom” and “freedom of religion”. Yet, no one really accepts that and there is still segregation everywhere, whether it’s religious or ethnicity wise.
I have pretty light skin and no one would ever guess that I’m a Muslim or even Arab. My dad has pretty dark skin has been a Muslim all his life. I was also born a Muslim. My mom has light skin and that’s where I get my green eyes, my red hair, and my light skin from. If you saw me in the streets and I told my background, you’d probably think I’m lying. People always ask me if I’m a terrorist or if I know any when I first meet them. I always say no but they never believe me. The word terrorist means someone who causes terror or frightens others. The truth is, stereotypes give us ideas and push us to believe things that aren’t true.

Most people are affected by stereotypes and really don’t know it. There is really no person in this whole world that isn’t affected by stereotypes. Because of stereotypes, we don’t have quality of life. And without quality of life we can’t enjoy life. This is one of the main reasons people do not get along with each other and why people are separated by what they look like or by ethnic background. If we abolish all stereotypes we will finally be able to enjoy life without hate and without conflict. So, I ask you, can we do it?