

For purposes of simple comparison, I am showing you two short student essays in response to a prompt about heroic characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The color-matching comments on the right explain important points about the text on the left. You'll notice that sample A is a perfect essay from a mechanical standpoint, but the writing is weak and dull. This essay would earn a C in a ninth grade English class.

Sample Essay A

Many characters in To Kill a Mockingbird go against the norms of society to stand up for what they believe in. Two characters that do this are Atticus Finch and Dolphus Raymond.

Atticus is a lawyer in Maycomb County, Alabama. This is a very racist community. He is chosen to defend a black man named Tom Robinson. Atticus knows that in Maycomb a black man cannot win a case against a white man. He does his best anyway, even when he knows that the white people of Maycomb will dislike him for it. This is how he goes against society to stand up for what he believes in.

Dolphus Raymond also goes against society to stand up for what he believes in. He decided a long time ago that he preferred the company of black people. He knew that the white people of Maycomb would look down upon this so he pretended to be a drunk. He would go around drinking out of a bottle in a paper bag to make people think that he was a drunk. It was really only Coca-Cola but people didn't know that so they left him alone thinking that he was a drunk.

Atticus and Dolphus Raymond both go against society to stand up for what they believe in. Atticus defends a black man in court and Dolphus lives with black people even though he is white.

First, "many" is a vague term, it tells the reader nothing. Second, this is not a hook. Nothing about this opening sentence makes me want to read on. The thesis is very clear, but overly simplistic.

This is just summary. Anybody who has read the book already knows this information. This writer is wasting his or her reader's time. Also, the sentences are too choppy. Short sentences are fine, but not if they're all about the same. This writer should combine sentences to vary the rhythm. Finally, the point. But notice how only the tiniest part of this paragraph actually tells us what the writer thinks.

"Also" is a transition word, but it's not particularly interesting or original. Again, this paragraph just summarizes the story. I know what's in the book; I want to know *what the writer has to say* about how this makes Mr. Raymond a heroic character.

This is nothing more than a repeat of what this writer has already said. I know this; I just read it.

This student focuses on the same concepts, but in a much more sophisticated way. This would earn an A in a ninth grade English class.

Sample Essay B

It is never easy to act in a way that defies the expectations of one's community. To do so for the sake of deeply held beliefs is to exhibit a strong sense of conviction in one's morality. In Harper Lee's novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, both Atticus Finch and Dolphus Raymond make choices that define their beliefs in opposition to societal norms.

For Atticus Finch, the fact that he accepts the Tom Robinson case and fights so vigorously to get him acquitted is a testament to his strong belief in the cause for racial equality. As readers, we know that this is not merely another case for him because he makes a point of saying that at one time or another all lawyers are tested in this way. Furthermore, by telling his children that they must not fight back even when others ridicule them for the choice he has made, Atticus reinforces the morality of his position in spite of the fact that he and his family will be scorned.

Dolphus Raymond's stand against the prejudiced views of his community is not as courageous as Atticus', but establishes him as a man with strong moral convictions nonetheless. While his façade of being a drunkard in an attempt to reduce people's contempt reveals a degree of weakness in his willingness to defend his beliefs, we must give him credit for his initial decision to live among blacks despite the views of a deeply racist community.

This isn't earth-shattering, but it is interesting. It's a statement that has a sense of universal truth so as a reader, I relate to it. Also, the diction (word choice) and syntax (sentence construction) are fairly sophisticated. The writer includes the *author*, *title*, and *genre* in the thesis, which is sophisticated, yet simple and clear.

Notice how the writer *refers* to facts from the book in order to make his or her point, but the focus is on his or her point, *NOT* summary.

Here, the writer further explains his or her point using references to the novel. Again, the both the diction and the syntax are clear and simple, yet sophisticated. Nowhere does this writer waste our time by summarizing events from the novel that we've already read.

This is a contextual transition; the writer is connecting what he or she said about Atticus in the last paragraph with what he or she is about to tell us about Mr. Raymond in this paragraph.

As in the last paragraph, the writer here is expanding on his or her assertion by referring to evidence from the text, always focusing on his or her point, *NOT* summary of the story.

It can be difficult to know what makes one person good and another person bad. I suppose that these are vague terms and as we grow we learn that people are rarely completely one or the other. What seems consistent, however, is that good people are often willing to make difficult decisions, caring more for what is right than what is easy.

The writer is preparing to connect the concepts discussed in this essay to our lives in general. The words “I suppose” aren’t necessary but in this sentence add a sense of voice to the writing. Read this sentence and then re-read the first sentence in the essay. You should notice how this writer brings the essay full-circle by connecting his or her theme.

You should notice how this second essay is much better than the first one yet it is about the same length. This is a testament to the notion that the quality of the writing has little to do with the quantity of the writing. Also, while sample B is somewhat sophisticated, nothing about it is beyond the ability of the typical high school writer.