

One Amazing Thing
Academic First Year Experiences Book Group
Sample Skeleton Syllabus: Stretch Composition, Semester A

Progression I

Read pages: 1-65 in *One Amazing Thing*

What this covers: what happens before the story-telling begins.

Themes: travel; judgements/assumptions about people; relationships/infidelity

Progression One, Exercise #1: Rhetorical Summaries. Length: 300-350 words.

After reading and classroom discussion of this section of the book, write a rhetorical summary. A rhetorical summary is not a recap of the story. Rather, begin your rhetorical summary with the author and title of the work. Then think about what Divakaruni is trying to claim in this section of the book. That is: by telling a fictional story, what themes or ideas (you may use the ones I mentioned above or come up with your own) from our daily lives is she commenting on? Think about her intended audience and her purpose in writing this book. This assignment should demonstrate that you are exploring the larger implications of the ideas she's bringing up in this fictional text. For example, what does this section have to say that others may not be aware of?

In writing a rhetorical summary, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the author's intended purpose in writing this text?
- Who is the author's audience? Why is she considering this particular audience?
- Who is the author of this text? Do her beliefs show in this text?
- What is the background of this text? What was going on (socially, politically, etc.) at the time this text was being written (or the time of the text's setting)?
- What kinds of rhetorical appeal or appeals is this text making? Remember: ethos, pathos, and logos.
- What kinds of language does the author use? Does the author use sarcasm? Humor?

(Based on Summaries from: *Writing: A Guide for College and Beyond* by Lester Faigley.)

Progression One, Exercise #2: Letter to the Author. Length: 500-600 words.

For this exercise, you will write a letter to Divakaruni. The letter should bring up questions of how she presents ideas and how the meaning of these ideas is supported/presented in this section of the book. Please refrain from saying whether you like or dislike this book. Rather, analyze the story rhetorically and respond to the ideas. While writing this letter, make sure you use a tone that is appropriate for this particular audience. We will be looking at a sample of a letter to an author as an example.

For writing the letter, consider the following tips:

- What are the important points in this selected reading? Why do you consider these important to mention?

- Look for how the author chooses to support her claims. Since this is a fictional text, the examples would be the actual events. However, think about them rhetorically. Why does the author mention them the way she does?
- Why do you think the author wrote this book?
- Did the author make assumptions and broad generalizations? You might want to bring these up.

Progression One, Exercise #3: Letter to Friend or Family Member. Length: 500-700 words.

Select one of the articles provided that shares a common theme you're interested in so far from the book. Using this common idea/theme, write a letter to a friend or family member explaining the connection between the ideas Divakaruni presents and those in the essay. Use examples to explain to your reader how the two texts are related and what similarities or differences exist as they address similar issues. This letter should assume a different tone from the "letter to the author" assignment because the audience has changed. And in this letter, you will need to give a brief summary of the selection from the book and the article because your friends/family have most likely not read them. So first, provide a summary (not more than 5-8 lines) of the main points from both. Then discuss common themes and the ways in which the authors support their main points. Again, make sure you're looking at the texts rhetorically, not merely mentioning what you liked or disliked in the texts.

Progression II:

Read pages: 65-160 in *One Amazing Thing*

Themes: memory, story-telling, language, marriage/love, individualism, Muslim-American life

Progression Two, Exercise #1: The Word-Picture. Length: 100-120 words.

For this first exercise, you will create a **word-picture** of a visual object so that readers can see the object through your words. Select a visual object such as a painting, advertisement, or a photograph related to the ideas in this section of reading from the book. Pick an idea that interests you or triggers a strong response within you (choose carefully – you will be working with this art object for the next month). After you have chosen your visual object, do the following: Describe only what you perceive so that others who do not have access to the object can see it too; that is, do not mention names and historical dates. Basically, try to paint a picture in the reader's mind using only your words.

Progression Two, Exercise #2: The Scene. Length: 700 words.

Your second exercise in this progression is to make use of your visual object in a **scene**, a scene that puts you and the object in relationship with one another. It may shed light on your attitude toward the object. Write a **scene** that will help your readers begin to understand what **idea** your visual object has sparked in you. Remember that a scene is dramatic and constructed so that readers experience the action. You can use personal experience, or you can create the scene around your picture—it's up to you. The scene doesn't need to focus on your visual object as long as the object plays some part in the scene.

Progression Two, Exercise #3: The Ethnography. Length: 750 words.

Your third exercise asks that you produce *ethnography*. Ethnography is a genre of writing that uses fieldwork to provide a descriptive study of human societies. In this instance, your ethnography will help you *see* your idea in a real-world setting. For this exercise, you will do the following:

Choose a setting related to your word picture and scene where people go and where you can sit and observe uninterrupted for at least an hour; pick a place that not only triggers a strong response in you, but is meaningful to you in some way. For example, consider the kinds of places the story-tellers in *One Amazing Thing* are talking about (beauty parlor for Malathi, college campus for Tariq, authentic places to eat that Farah describes to Tariq, etc.). Write down your observations. Try to be objective as you look for manifestations of the idea with which you've been working. Then, write an analysis informed by the texts we've read thus far. Be sure to bring a notepad and take notes. After your observations, you will write the ethnography report.

Progression III:

Read pages: 161-220 in *One Amazing Thing*

Themes: economic mobility, politics, power, marriage, abortion, college education, career/life choices

One thing we all come to understand over the course of this semester is that important ideas are rarely formed in the mind of a single individual (think of entering the conversation); rather, they are formed by many thinkers engaging in conversations with each other about their thoughts, theories, and discoveries. Sometimes scholars create ideas by engaging each other directly (through verbal exchanges, email messages, or memos), but they often exchange ideas in more indirect ways. A scholar can respond to a published text that has been in circulation in an academic community for years, perhaps even decades or centuries. Because written texts can span miles and millennia, a philosopher of this decade can, for example, "listen to" (read) and "speak to" (write about) Plato in the form of an essay or an article. Of course, Plato will not be able to listen to the modern thinker's reply, but other living scholars can, and they too can begin to make contributions to on-going conversations about topics, ideas, and questions that remain matters for investigation or debate.

Progression Three, Exercise #1: Argument and Analysis. Length: 250 words each.

The purpose of this first exercise is to encourage you to practice an open-minded but academic way of engaging with the claims of other scholars. For this exercise, you will turn a curious yet skeptical gaze onto *three* of the essays that you have read on themes relating to this progression. In analyzing these articles, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can you explain the argument in your own words?
- What is the author's position? Or, what side is he/she taking?
- What evidence does the author offer for this position?

Next play devil's advocate:

- Which aspects of the essay sound wrong to you?

- Does the evidence persuade you?
- Which assumptions or conclusions strike you as problematic or unreasonable?

Progression Three, Exercise #2: The Dialogue. Length: 600-700 words.

The purpose of this exercise is to remind you that you are forming an argument within the context of an ongoing conversation about a given topic. Within this conversation, participants will inevitably touch upon certain common ideas, and very possibly they will develop claims that directly contrast with those of other participants. For this exercise, you will create a fictional dialogue. You may choose one of the following:

- A dialogue between Divakaruni and the author of one of the articles we read for this progression
- A dialogue between you and Divakaruni

NOTE: Since these “characters” will most likely be academics, they will have a habit of quoting texts, especially their own. Be sure to give each claim equal support and development.

Progression Three, Exercise #3: Argumentative Proposal. Length: 500 words.

For this assignment, you will think about how you plan on constructing your own argument. Since your audience is an academic one, your planning document should follow an accepted academic structure for presenting your claims and your evidence.

In your proposal, consider answering the following questions:

- What is one important claim going on in the conversation?
- What is one opposing claim to the one from the first question?
- Do you think there are any problems with these claims?
- What is your claim?
- How do you plan on presenting this in your paper?
- What kinds of research will you do in order to support your claim? (this can change later).