Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 1 of 7: Picking a Topic and Deciding on a Mode

The Prompt: Describe how someone you know sets a good example of caring for others.

From the language of the prompt, it isn't obvious which mode I should choose. And it probably doesn't matter. I think I could write a good essay with a narrative or expository approach. And, if I picked an unusual person, one you normally wouldn't think of as caring, I could possibly even pull off a persuasive essay. But I'm looking for the easiest approach here. And I think that's going to be expository. That means I'll be using the What-Why-How strategy for my initial pre-write. Now I just have to pick a person to write about. I'll want to pick someone I know very well. So I think I'll pick my wife Margot.

STEP 1

Develop a strong thesis or main idea for the essay and put it in the "What" column. The "what" in the "What" column stands for "What do you think?" This is my opinion or, in the case of a formal essay, my thesis or main idea. I start with the simplest complete sentence I can think of. I know that I'll probably improve on it later when I develop my opening paragraph so I'm not worried about sounding very eloquent right now.

What	Why	How
My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known.		

STEP 2

Come up with reasons for the "Why" column that support the main idea in the "What" column. The "why" in the "Why" column stands for "Why do you think this?" These are the reasons why I think my wife is a caring person. Again, I'm going to write down very simple ideas here. In this case, I've stated them as complete sentences, but they don't have to be complete sentences as long as I can understand what they mean.

> ***Tip:*** *How many reasons should you have? I came up with four here. I think I could have come up with one or two more. Four is usually plenty. Three will work. And, if they're really good, and you have a lot of support in the "How" column, you can probably get by with two. I suggest, however, that you try to come up with at least four. That way, if one doesn't work out, you still have three left.*

What	Why	How
My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known.	She always has time to help her friends when they need it.	
	She does a lot of volunteer work in our community.	
	She always remembers people's birthdays and is very generous with cards and gifts.	
	She's wonderful with older people who are sick and need special care.	

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 2 of 7: Support, Support, Suppport

The Prompt: Describe how someone you know sets a good example of caring for others.

If the three rules of real estate are "location, location, location," the three rules of expository writing are "support, support, support." Anyone can come up with an opinion. And most people can come up with a few good reasons why they think they're right. But supporting those reasons with examples, explanations, and evidence is what makes the difference between an effective essay and one that just doesn't add up. When we're using the What-Why-How strategy, it all comes down to the "how." The "what" and "why" are really just the logical skeleton of the piece. It's the details in the "How" column that put meat on the bones.

STEP 3

Fill in the "How" column with strong supporting details. The "how" in the "How" column stands for "How do you know?" Or "How do you know for sure?" There's an emphasis here on proving that what you think you know really is the case. And proving it to yourself is not enough. After all, how do I know my wife is a caring person? Well, I live with her. But you don't. So my saying that isn't going to be very effective.

What	Why	How
My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known.	She always has time to help her friends when they need it.	• Duncan with his writing • Helps her interns find work • All of her friends with their relationships
	She does a lot of volunteer work in our community.	• The Women's Center • Leadership Triangle • WCOM • She won an Art Share Angel Award for her work in Los Angeles
	She always remembers people's birthdays and is very generous with cards and gifts.	• Keeps track of all the dates even for people in my family • She's always thinking about how other people feel
	She's wonderful with older people who are sick and need special care.	• Helps her mom • Great with my dad • She was so good to my Aunt Leona when we went to visit her at the hospital.

The Three E's of Strong Support

There are three basic strategies we can use to come up with good support: examples, explanations, and evidence.

(1) Examples. In an expository essay, examples feel like little stories we use to make a point. In my essay, I've got many examples: examples of my wife's volunteer work, times she's helped friends, etc. In fact, almost every detail I have in the "How" column is an example. This is the easiest kind of support to come up with. It's also very common in prompted essays on tests because you can't get up to go to the library or search the Internet. You have to work entirely from memory.

(2) Explanations. Explanations usually don't refer to a specific event or situation. They just explain more about what you mean. In my essay, saying that my wife is always thinking about how other people feel is an explanation. I like to think of an explanation as "a why for a why." It takes something in the "Why" column and tells you why it's true.

(3) Evidence. You can think of evidence in an essay just like we think of evidence in a court of law. It has to be something tangible you could bring in to show a jury, something you could attribute to a source other than yourself. In my essay, the award Margot received for her volunteer work in Los Angeles would be an example of evidence.

Tip: *Try to come up with at least one or two pieces of support for each of the three types. I actually haven't done a very good job of that here. In these kinds of essays, where you don't pick the topic yourself and you can't do any real research, it can be very hard to come up with evidence. You may also find yourself lacking in explanations, like I did. This is not a big deal on a prompted state test. But when you're writing an expository piece in the real world, readers generally like to see more evidence and several good explanations in addition to appropriate examples.*

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 3 of 7: Taking the Easy Way Out

The Prompt: Describe how someone you know sets a good example of caring for others.

Sometimes, the way we want to act during a test is the opposite of the way we want to act in real life. In life, especially when we're trying to learn something new, we want to take risks, stretch out, push our abilities to the limit. But on tests, we want to play it safe. We don't need to write the best essay ever; we just need to pass. So we look for the easiest way to come up with something that will be good enough to get a passing score.

STEP 4

Combine the "What" and the "Why" columns to create an opening paragraph. This is a piece of cake. And while it isn't actually the best way to begin, it'll get you by if you can't come up with anything else.

My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known. She always has time to help her friends when they need it. She does a ton of volunteer work in our community. She's great at remembering people's birthdays. And she's wonderful with older people who are sick and need special care.

STEP 5

Base each paragraph of the body on the details in the "How" column. This is easy, too. I only have to watch out for two things: making sure my sentences don't sound like items in a list and making sure my paragraphs flow smoothly one to the next.

What	Why	How
My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known.	She always has time to help her friends when they need it.	• Duncan with his writing • Helps her interns find work • All of her friends with their relationships
	She does a lot of volunteer work in our community.	• The Women's Center • Leadership Triangle • WCOM • She won an Art Share Angel Award for her work in Los Angeles
	She always remembers people's birthdays and is very generous with cards and gifts.	• Keeps track of all the dates even for people in my family • She's always thinking about how other people feel
	She's wonderful with older people who are sick and need special care.	• Helps her mom • Great with my dad • She was so good to my Aunt Leona when we went to visit her at the hospital.

Margot's friends know she's there when they need her. A while back, her friend Duncan was struggling with an article he was writing for a famous magazine. He was freaked out because he only had a week to finish it and had written 60,000 words for a 5,000 word piece. He couldn't cut it down. Margot gave him some tips and the confidence he needed to get the job done. She's always helping people like this. She helps her college interns figure out what they want to do with their lives. And she's particularly good at helping her friends sort out the challenges in their relationships.

But Margot's caring extends beyond friendship to the community. She volunteers for many local organizations like the Orange County Women's Center, our new community radio station, and a group called Leadership Triangle which focuses on improving the quality of life for people in the seven-county region where we live. A few years ago, when she was living in Los Angeles, she even won an award for her volunteer work with Art Share, a local arts organization.

She's also great with all the little things like birthdays and thank yous. She's always getting presents for people, sending cards, and jotting off e-mails. She even reminds me when people in my family have important events coming up.

Perhaps the best example of her caring personality is in the way she treats older people, especially older people who aren't feeling well. She always takes her mom to the doctor, stays right by her side if she has to stay in the hospital, and helps her with medicines at home. She's wonderful when we go to visit my dad even though she doesn't know him very well. But I was really impressed when we went to visit my Aunt Leona just before she died. Margot got her things she needed, made sure she was comfortable, and took care of me, too, because I was so sad.

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 4 of 7: Let's Bring This to a Close, Shall We?

The Prompt: Describe how someone you know sets a good example of caring for others.

Hey, wanna know a secret? I probably don't even need to write an ending to this piece in order to pass the test. It's true. Even though my last paragraph just runs out at the point where I ran out of details, I may be able to get away with ending the piece right there. Now, I'm not going to officially recommend that anyone do this. But, as someone who has scored thousands of these essays in the past, I can tell you that as long as the rest of your essay is logical and well organized, you won't lose too many points if you simply end at the end of your last point. You see, in a simplistic expository essay like this one, each part of the argument is independent of all the others. It's not like a narrative where the parts depend on each other to make sense. I could probably even change the order of my body paragraphs and still have the piece make sense. All I'd have to do is fix transition problems between paragraphs and I'd be all set.

But since I haven't had to work too hard on this essay so far, I might as well put some effort into a real ending. If I can come up with something good, I might be able to raise my score. Remember, the ending is the last thing people read, so it's likely to be the main thing they remember.

STEP 6

Figure out the "So what?" OK, my wife is a caring person, so what? What I have to do here in my ending is come up with a compelling reason that makes the reader care about my piece. This is hard! Normally, my inspiration for an ending would come from my purpose. I could just ask myself, "Why did I write this?" and the answer would be my ending. But the only reason I'm writing this is because somebody told me to. So, I'll have to pretend that I'm writing this to a real audience somewhere for some real reason. Hmmm... (minutes passing by). Got it! What if Margot was getting an award for setting a good example of being a caring person and I was supposed to write her award citation. That's weird, but I think it might work.

The best thing that Margot, and people like her, do for the world is set an example for how the rest of us should act. But more than just an example, Margot is an inspiration. The more time I spend with her, the more I find myself thinking beyond my own immediate needs and considering the needs of others. These days, I'm not always so focused on work. I take more time for the people in my life. And I'm more concerned about what goes on in my community. When I was younger, I would have thought that I didn't have time to do things like this, that I would be wiped out if I added anything more to my busy schedule. But the truth is I've never felt more energized and alive. So maybe there's a lesson here: caring for others is a great way to care for ourselves.

STEP 7

Add a title. I'm having an interesting experience right now. I've just finished this piece. Admittedly, I kind of tossed it off by simply following the What-Why-How chart very literally. And now that I'm looking for a title, I can't come up with anything interesting. ("A Caring Person", "An Example for Others to Follow", etc. YUCK!) This might be a clue that my essay isn't very interesting. Or that I'm not very interested in it. This happens on tests all the time. So I'm just going to give into my lack of enthusiasm and put down a boring title for now.

My Wife Margot: An Example of Caring

What do you think? Pretty corny, huh? I know Margot would hate it. But I'm gonna stick with it for now and think about fixing it later.

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 5 of 7: Let's Put it Together and See What We Got

The Prompt: Write about a caring thing you, or someone you know, has done for someone else.

Again, not the most amazing piece of writing the world has ever seen. But probably good enough to pass a test. But is it good enough for me? The truth is I really do care about my wife, and I care about this topic, too. I really do think it's important that we all do a better job of caring for others. And I wish now that I'd been able to tap into these feelings while I was writing this piece.

This is another thing that often happens on tests. We get all the way to the end of the activity and realize that what we've done isn't what we wanted to do. For whatever reason, we just don't feel good about it. So what do you do about that? Starting over just isn't practical. You're probably out of time anyway. Or at least out of patience. So you've got two options: either let it stand the way it is or think of one or two things you might do to make it a little better.

My Wife Margot: An Example of Caring

My wife Margot is one of the most caring people I have ever known. She always has time to help her friends when they need it. She does a ton of volunteer work in our community. She's great at remembering people's birthdays. And she's wonderful with older people who are sick and need special care.

Margot's friends know she's there when they need her. A while back, her friend Duncan was struggling with an article he was writing for a famous magazine. He was freaked out because he only had a week to finish it and had written 60,000 words for a 5,000 word piece. He couldn't cut it down. Margot gave him some tips and the confidence he needed to get the job done. She's always helping people like this. She helps her college interns figure out what they want to do with their lives. And she's particularly good at helping her friends sort out the challenges in their relationships.

But Margot's caring extends beyond friendship to the community. She volunteers for many local organizations like the Orange County Women's Center, our new community radio station, and a group called Leadership Triangle which focuses on improving the quality of life for people in the seven-county region where we live. A few years ago, when she was living in Los Angeles, she even won an award for her volunteer work with Art Share, a local arts organization.

She's also great with all the little things like birthdays and thank yous. She's always getting presents for people, sending cards, and jotting off e-mails. She even reminds me when people in my family have important events coming up.

Perhaps the best example of her caring personality is in the way she treats older people, especially older people who aren't feeling well. She always takes her mom to the doctor, stays right by her side if she has to stay in the hospital, and helps her with medicines at home. She's wonderful when we go to visit my dad even though she doesn't know him very well. But I was really impressed when we went to visit my Aunt Leona just before she died. Margot got her things she needed, made sure she was comfortable, and took care of me, too, because I was so sad.

The best thing that Margot, and people like her, do for the world is set an example for how the rest of us should act. But more than just an example, Margot is an inspiration. The more time I spend with her, the more I find myself thinking beyond my own immediate needs and considering the needs of others. These days, I'm not always so focused on work. I take more time for the people in my life. And I'm more concerned about what goes on in my community. When I was younger, I would have thought that I didn't have time to do things like this, that I would be wiped out if I added anything more to my busy schedule. But the truth is I've never felt more energized and alive. So maybe there's a lesson here: caring for others is a great way to care for ourselves.

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 6 of 7: Two Great Revision Strategies

The Prompt: Describe how someone you know sets a good example of caring for others.

So here I am with a finished essay that I really don't like. I'm pretty sure it'll pass the test, and I know that's what I'm here for today. But that doesn't change the fact that I feel bad about not having done my best work. Again, this is a very common feeling. And within the context of the test itself, there isn't much we can do about it. When the time runs out, we just have to turn our papers in and hope for the best. Fortunately, real life isn't like this. In real life, I can take this piece out again and try to make it better. And that's what I think I'm going to do here.

There are two techniques I'm familiar with that usually improve thematic expository essays like this one. The first technique involves starting out with a little story that exemplifies my thesis. That's called using an anecdote. The other technique is a little harder to describe. It's called a "governing metaphor." In addition to being hard to describe, it's also hard to execute. So I'm going to be taking a risk here just to see what happens. But that's what writing in the real world is all about. Taking risks is the only way we learn new things. Tests have nothing to do with learning, so we tend to be more cautious in those situations. But after the test is over, we can get back to what school is really all about.

REVISION 1

Start with a detailed anecdote. One of the best ways to start an expository essay is with a narrative. Sound confusing? Well, it's not. In fact, you see it all the time in the newspaper, in magazines, and especially on radio and TV news. The idea is to find an example that supports your thesis and then tell a little story about it. This technique is called an "anecdote." Or, as one fourth grader termed it, an "exposistory," a story used to make a point in an expository essay.

Looking over the examples in my What-Why-How chart, I remembered the day Margot and I went to visit my aunt in the hospital. She was very sick, essentially dying. And I figured this would be the last time I'd see her. I was full of all kinds of feelings. I knew I wanted to see her but I was also afraid. I don't think I could have made it if Margot hadn't been there to get me through.

Walking down the stale-smelling hallway, I felt my heart race. All I kept thinking was how much I hate these places. Margot could tell how nervous I was and she squeezed my hand to let me know she was there to take care of me. When we got to my aunt's room, it was obvious she wasn't doing well. She was sleeping. That was pretty much all she did at this point. Part of me was hoping she'd just stay that way; at least she wasn't in any pain. But part of me was hoping she'd wake up, just for a minute or two, so I could say my last good-bye.

A few minutes later she did wake up. But she seemed so uncomfortable. I got nervous again. I didn't know what to say or what to do for her. But Margot did. She got her a pillow and helped her sit up. Got her some water and helped her drink it. Wiped her brow. Told her everything was going to be fine. And following Margot's example, I was able to pull myself together and talk a bit to my dying aunt.

I think I'll start my essay with this anecdote.

And then I'll put in this paragraph, which is really the introductory paragraph to the essay.

REVISION 2

Find a governing metaphor. This is tough. But it's really cool if you can pull it off. Actually, at this point, I'm not sure I can. But it just occurred to me so I'm gonna give it a shot.

A governing metaphor in an expository essay is a whole other concept you bring in to express the theme in an unusual way. In this case, I'm taking the theme of "caring" and I'm expressing it by saying that my wife is big-hearted, that she has big as the state she grew up in.

I like to say that my wife Margot has a heart as big as Carolina. Born and raised in Chapel Hill, she grew up in the 1960s and 1970s with a mother and father who were committed to the best values and highest aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement and The Great Society. She learned early on what it meant to advocate for fairness on behalf of people who didn't have the advantages she did. And she has taken that spirit of caring into her adult life in the way she makes people like my Aunt Leona, a very sick old woman she didn't even know, feel like they're the most important thing in the world.

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Prompted Essay, Example #2: Expository (WWH)

Part 7 of 7: Finally! Something I Feel Good About

The Prompt: Write about a caring thing you, or someone you know, has done for someone else.

I don't know about you, but I like this version a lot more than the other one. It's got heart. Literally. It sounds more like me, more like my voice. And it's certainly truer to the way I feel about my wife. Now, would I have taken the time and effort to redo the entire essay if I were taking a test? Probably not. I might not even have had enough time. Nor is it very likely that I would have come up with this new and improved version until I'd gone through the process of writing the other one. Writing is a process. And sometimes that process is complicated and messy, full of blind alleys and false starts. And this is exactly what gets lost when we have to write for a test.

A Heart as Big as Carolina

Walking down the stale-smelling hallway, I felt my heart race. All I kept thinking was how much I hate these places. Margot could tell how nervous I was and she squeezed my hand to let me know she was there to take care of me. When we got to my aunt's room, it was obvious she wasn't doing well. She was sleeping. That was pretty much all she did at this point. Part of me was hoping she'd just stay that way; at least she wasn't in pain. But part of me was hoping she'd wake up, just for a minute, so I could say my last good-bye.

A few minutes later she did wake up. But she seemed so uncomfortable. I got nervous again. I didn't know what to say or what to do for her. But Margot did. She got her a pillow and helped her sit up. Got her some water and helped her drink it. Wiped her brow. Told her everything was going to be fine. And following Margot's example, I was able to pull myself together and talk a bit to my dying aunt.

I like to say that my wife Margot has a heart as big as Carolina. Born and raised in Chapel Hill, she grew up in the 1960s and 1970s with a mother and father who were committed to the best values and highest aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement and The Great Society. She learned early on what it meant to advocate for fairness on behalf of people who didn't have the advantages she did. And she has taken that spirit of caring into her adult life in the way she makes people like my Aunt Leona, a very sick woman she didn't even know, feel like they're the most important thing in the world.

And doesn't everyone want to feel that way? Especially when they're having a tough time and they really need some help? That's when Margot is at her best. No matter what she's doing, she's ready to drop it if one of her friends calls with a problem. When her friend Duncan called up in a panic because he was way behind on a big article for a famous magazine, she talked him off the ledge, gave him some tips for solving his problem, and, most importantly, gave him the confidence he needed to get the job done. When one of her college interns called up wondering if she should go to grad school, Margot helped her work out a better plan that included pursuing a degree in a subject she really cared about instead of the degree she felt she needed just so she could go on and do something else.

But it's not just the big things in life that she helps people with. She's good at the little things, too, like remembering other people's birthdays, getting our dog to the vet every month for his special shots, and keeping our household running well when I'm too busy to pay as much attention to it as I should.

Sometimes I tell her that she gives too much of herself to things. She volunteers for community organizations all the time, sits on several boards, helps our local political party, and even finds time somehow to return the occasional stray dog to his owner.

I don't know how she does it. I don't know how she has all that room in her heart for so many different things. You might think it would be hard for me living with someone who gives so much of herself to others. You might think I'd get a little jealous every once in a while. But I don't. Because even though she gives a lot to others, I know her heart's as big as Carolina. And I know there's always room in there for me.

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