

Chapter 6

The ATS-W ESSAY:

Now that we know some of the rules about the Constructivist approach, let's take a look at how to write the essay. There is a good resource online at the Long Island University Writing Center. This site breaks down the essay bit by bit. However they use a format that is older. Also the practice prompts are geared towards the Secondary ATS-W so keep that in mind.

In the past, when I have posted links to this site, I have found that the links don't work. I believe the pages might be cached on an old link. The easiest way to find the pages is to go to Google first, then type in "LIU ATS-W Essay" and search. It should be the first link that pops up. Once you are there you can move through the site easily.

Here are two paragraphs shown on the site that demonstrate the Wrong and Right way to write the essay.

Let's take a look:

(source: http://www2.brooklyn.liu.edu/bbut07/writingc/wc_atsw_decode.html)

GOAL:

How can I provide students who have disabilities with effective learning experiences in an inclusive regular education classroom?

*Writer 1: **WRONG***

It is important that a disabled student get as much help as possible in a regular education class because he/she has a disability that makes it harder to do things that are easy for other students to do. One way that I can help such a student is by making up special homework assignments for the student tailored to his/her needs. Other ways that I could help the student can include partnering the student up with a buddy who can also help and making sure that the student has a special seat in front of the blackboard. These things would ensure that the student had the support needed to succeed in my classroom. Before the student came to my classroom, I would also teach all of the students in my class about children with disabilities. In this way, the rest of my students would empathize with the new student rather than feel alienated from him/her. This would mean that my students would feel more inclined to help the student rather than make fun of him/her.

What is wrong with this essay?

First of all the entire essay is teacher centered. Everything that is written discusses how the teacher sees the situation and what she feels about it. Additionally she uses many of the Trap Words to Avoid. Go back and read again to see how many you can find.

- Special assignments, special seat
- Partnering the student with a buddy
- Making assumptions about the disability before meeting the student. (*makes it harder to do things that are easy for other students to do.*)
- Teach, “**my** classroom” “**my** class”
- The SANTA CLAUS EFFECT!

What is the Santa Claus effect?

The Santa Claus effect is a term I use when teachers behave like mothers who have an unrealistic vision of taking their child to see Santa. We are all familiar with this idea through media and television and sometimes personal experience. Like the teacher in the essay the mother is making all sorts of plans. She gets the child dressed up in a special outfit and then heads down to see Santa Claus. She has decided that her child will love to see Santa Claus and plans to get a picture of the child on Santa’s lap.

But what happens? Sometimes small children are terrified of Santa Claus. They don’t want to sit on his lap and they start crying and screaming and trying to wiggle off. But Mom still tries to take the picture. She’s made a plan and she is sticking to it.

What does this have to do with the essay? As we can see in the essay, the teacher picks a plan that she intends to use with the students. She makes statements about how the students are going to react. She says, “*In this way, the rest of my students would empathize with the new student rather than feel alienated from him/her. This would mean that my students would feel more inclined to help the student rather than make fun of him/her.*” How does she know this? These kinds of statements are wrong on the essay. You should not write your ideas about how a student will respond to a strategy. You have no idea if it is true or not. Consider the statements below:

I plan to take the students to the Natural History Museum to see Dinosaurs. Students will enjoy this trip because children are fascinated by dinosaurs.

(Except for the child who was terrified when he saw the movie Jurassic Park. Except for the child that doesn’t like large crowds and big spaces. Except for the child who hates walking.)

One of the strategies that I will use in the class is having the students work on the computer. This is a good strategy because students enjoy working on computers.

(Says who? What about the child who can't deal with the fluorescent lighting in the computer screen. What about the child who has a hard time with finger dexterity. What about the child who is stressed out about the computer because his brother always fights with him at home when he is using it.)

The justification in the above examples and the previous essay paragraph are wrong. You should not make these kinds of statements in your essay. All that it shows is that you are teacher determined to do the assignment the way you want to, not flexible and not willing to make modifications as needed. Granted in real life you would not be this way, but this is what it looks like on the essay. **The writer does not sound professional.** Because of all these errors, the essay doesn't sound like a professional DOE Educator. Instead it sounds like an unprofessional teacher who has no idea about the rules of the DOE. Let's take a look at a better example:

GOAL:

How can I provide students who have disabilities with effective learning experiences in an inclusive regular education classroom?

Writer 2:

As a second strategy, I would familiarize myself with the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and use it as an important resource for planning instruction. An IEP is created especially for each child with disabilities and is the basis for all decisions made about the child's education. As a classroom teacher, I must be prepared to use IEPs as I will be one of the people responsible for implementing my student's plans. The IEP provides information and guidelines for helping a student with disabilities learn in the regular classroom. It will give me useful information about the student (e.g., reading comprehension level, learning style) and identify general strategies for adapting the student's instruction. By defining specific learning goals and objectives that are appropriate for the student, the IEP can also let me know if learning is not proceeding as expected. If the student is not achieving the goals and objectives in the IEP, it may indicate that I need to change my approach and perhaps consult other professionals for assistance.

This essay paragraph is much better. I still take issue with the teacher centered terminology in the excerpt; I would hope that the teacher is less so in the rest of the essay. However, the teacher sounds professional. The goals and objectives are based on the needs of the student. The use of the IEP is clearly understood. And most especially the teacher shows she is flexible and willing to make modifications if the plan is not working. This is what the DOE wants.

ATS-W Elementary Essay Format

Make sure you always mention the grade and the subject. You don't need to write a sophisticated sentence for this. Simply write at the top of your essay:

I am prepared to teach [grade] [subject]

Choose wisely. Make the subject easy on yourself by choosing the subject that most closely relates to the essay question. Choose the grade by thinking of Piaget's developmental stages. Elementary educators should keep in mind a distinction between the Pre-Operational Stage and the Concrete Operations Stage. I recommend choosing 1st Grade or 4th Grade for the Elementary exam. I would not recommend choosing 2nd Grade. This Grade is right on the edge of both stages and is tricky to discuss.

Discuss the Goal. The question on the essay asks you to explain WHY the goal is important. **DO NOT FORGET TO DO THIS.** Many teachers think they are answering that question when in reality they are simply repeating it. Let's look at an example:

Goal: Encouraging Students to take Ownership in the Learning Process.

Wrong Answer: It is very important for students to take ownership in the learning process.

The writer doesn't explain why. He simply repeats the goal and says it is important. He doesn't say why it is important.

Right Answer: It is important to encourage students to take ownership in the learning process because it fosters a sense of independence and responsibility in learning. Students who are encouraged to take ownership in learning tend to do better in subjects because they are personally invested in learning. In addition it creates an expectation in the class that facilitates learning in an active and collaborative manner. Students who learn these skills early in their education tend to be learners for life.

Please remember to think of why. The essay is not asking you to discuss a goal it is asking you to explain why this goal is important in a student's education. Always keep it student focused and answer why. If you get stuck, think of how this goal would help a student learn. Then explain how it helps the class to learn. Then discuss why it is important for the student's future learning.

As you continue to write your practice essays you will realize that they start to sound like you are repeating yourself. This is good. The terminologies that were listed in the beginning of this book are very helpful in guiding you towards writing the way the DOE wants. After a while it does sound extremely repetitive. Don't worry if you begin to notice this. It means you are on the right track.

Your essay should be four to five paragraphs of about six sentences each. Do not write more than this. You will not pass the essay.

I am prepared to teach GRADE and SUBJECT

- Paragraph 1: Discuss the goal. Why is it important to the student? Why is it important in the learning process? Why is it important to the class? How will it help students in the future?
- Paragraph 2: Choose a strategy. Explain the strategy in one sentence. Explain why this is a good strategy to use in the next two sentences. Explain how the strategy will support the goal in the last sentence.
- Paragraph 3: Choose another Strategy. Explain the strategy in the next three sentences. Make sure you explain a few details. Explain why this is a good strategy in the next two sentences. You can write more than 6 sentences here if you need to in order to clearly explain your strategy.
- Paragraph 4: Discuss the goal again in a sentence. Explain the expectations and goals of the strategies as it relates to the goal. Conclude.

Next we will discuss strategy. At the end of each suggested strategy I will list some of the phrases that the DOE wants you to use. You want to use phrases that are active and sound supportive of the student in the learning process. You do not want to use words that sound controlling, strict or inflexible.

Strategy:

What is a strategy? Many teachers get confused by this question. The term “strategies” sounds like an important terminology that you don’t remember from your college days. A strategy is simply something you would do in the classroom. It can be very simple or very complicated. It can be something you do once or something you do throughout the school year. Below is a list of simple strategies you can use:

- **Collaborative learning/Cooperative Grouping:** Make sure you mention that it you will be using Mixed Ability groups. This is the **number one** strategy promoted by the DOE. Use the following phrases to explain WHY it is important:
 - ✓ Engages the students as knowers.
 - ✓ Fosters an appreciation of diversity and different perspectives.
 - ✓ Encourages active learning and discussion.
 - ✓ Promotes ownership and self directed learning.

- **Portfolio:** a folder that keeps track of a work or tests a student has completed over a period of time. The purpose of a portfolio is so that a student can evaluate their progress and identify his strengths and weaknesses. The teacher can also use the portfolio to guide and encourage the student in his learning.
- **Journal:** a notebook where students write feedback and ideas about topics they are learning in class. Most Journals are used as a response to reading. Students can use the journal to document their emotional and intellectual response to the reading. They can use the journal to make predictions and analyze the text. They can also use the journal to try writing in a style similar to the works and genres they might be covering in class. This is a useful tool for the students because they can track progress and use the journal for self reflection.
- **Field Trip:** a field trip is a good strategy to use because students are relating what they are learning in the classroom to real life experiences. A field trip with specific goals can help students honor different learning styles and engage in active learning. This is an excellent strategy for students in the Pre Operational Stage.
- **Online Newsletter:** For the purposes of writing the essay this is a good strategy because you can make the topic of the newsletter relate to the goal very specifically. For example if the goal is about Jobs, it can be a World of Work Newsletter. Other examples can include: Maps and Geography Newsletter, Math Newsletter, Community Newsletter, Sports Newsletter, Healthy Newsletter, Poetry Newsletter etc. This is also a good strategy because it is active and hands on. It encourages the use of technology. Fosters an appreciation of different learning styles and perspectives. Encourages active involvement with the publication of the news letter. Promotes ownership and self directed learning.

More Strategies:

Anecdotal Records - Anecdotal records are a form of ongoing assessment of observations of student(s) in the classroom. These jot-notes provide the teacher with information as to how the student is processing information, collaborating with students as well as general observations on learning styles, attitudes and behaviour. These records are a valuable form on ongoing assessment.

Literature Circles - Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book.

Peer Assessment - Assessment in which one learner, groups of learners or the whole class gives written or verbal feedback to another learner. Peers can use checklists, rubrics or give a written response to peer work.

Portfolios - A portfolio is a representative collection of an individual student's work. A student portfolio is generally composed of best work to date and a few "works in progress" that demonstrate the process. Students show their knowledge, skills and abilities in a variety of different ways that are not dependent upon traditional media such as exams and essays.

Reflective Journals - Journals can be used to allow students to reflect on their own learning. They can be open-ended or the teacher can provide guiding, reflective questions for the students to respond to. These provide insight on how the students are synthesizing their learning but it also helps the students to make connections and better understand how they learn.

Rubrics - A rubric is "a road map, telling students and teachers where to begin, where they're going, and how to get there." Dr. Kay Burke. Rubrics are scoring guides or sets of expectations used to assess student level of understanding and allow students to know the expectations and what they need to do in order to be learning at a higher level.

Self-assessment - Assessment in which a learner reflects on their own learning and evaluates specific criteria in order to assess their learning. Teachers may provide checklists, rubrics or provide open-ended questions to guide the student in their self-assessment.

Let's take a look at a sample essay:

This essay was written by a student of mine who has been in the United States from Egypt for less than a year. She received a 250 on the essay and a 250 on the ATS-W.

Prompt:

It is important for teachers to be able foster an awareness of different cultural groups in their students. Imagine that the educational goal below, formulated by a joint committee of teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians, has been established for your school.

GOALS FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Goal: Students will develop an appreciation of the positive contributions of cultures from around the world. Students will explore the social, cultural and creative contributions of different countries.

Examples of Teaching Objectives:

- Students will acknowledge the richness of their language, background, and culture, as well as those of their peers.
- Students will develop mutual respect and acceptance of cultural differences through appropriate work/play experiences.
- Students will use the family and community as ongoing, important resources for extending their understanding of languages and cultures.

In an essay written for a group of New York State educators, frame your response by identifying a grade level/subject area for which you are prepared to teach, then:

1. Explain the importance of helping students develop this goal;
2. Describe two strategies you would use to achieve this educational goal; and
3. Explain why the strategies you describe would be effective in achieving this educational goal.

Be sure to specify a grade level/subject area in your essay, and frame your ideas so that an educator certified at your level (i.e. elementary or secondary) will be able to understand the basis for your response.

Sample Essay Response:

I plan to teach 5th Grade Social studies

It is important to provide students with an understanding of the world in which they live and how it got that way because it fosters a sense of understanding of diversity and responsibility. Students who develop an understanding of the society in which they live develop confidence and tend to do better in subjects because they are personally invested in learning. In addition it creates an expectation in the class that facilitates learning in an active and collaborative manner. A student who understands the social world early in their education tends to be learners for life.

The first strategy I will use will be cooperative mixed ability groups. Students work collaboratively in mixed ability groups. This is a good strategy to use because it fosters an appreciation for diversity and different learning styles. It also develops communication skills and the ability to share ideas about the history the community and the whole world. This strategy will promote leadership and team building skills. It will help students to understand the social world.

The second strategy I will use will be an Online Social Studies Newsletter. This is a good strategy to use because it develops computer skills. It also promotes students as knowers. Publication is a good tool for encouraging ownership. A students will learn to self assess strengths and weaknesses in their contributions. Students will strive for excellence in this form of publication. Students will choose a piece of history or literature to examine from a list of meaningful choices about a topic to be discussed in class. By using the internet students will be exposed to the online connectedness of the world which will further develop an appreciation of diversity. This strategy will also encourage students to collect relevant information about history, sequence of events, social issues, education issue and basic human institutions.

Educators, family members and the community are important resources for students as he or she learns. It is important that students receive support in their efforts to take ownership in their learning. The goal of honoring the contributions of different cultures from around the world will be reflected in the collaboration and appreciation of the contributions of students working on an Online Social Studies Newsletter.

When you write your essay you want to use phrases like the ones below:

Fosters an appreciation of different perspectives

Encourages active engagement in learning

Honors students as knows and engages schema

Promotes an appreciation of diversity and different learning styles.

Encourages a sense of ownership and self directed learning

Encourages mastery through self analysis and evaluation

Promotes leadership and team building skills.

Facilitates hands on active learning.

There are more phrases like these in the section called Terms to Look For. You want to pepper these phrases throughout your essay as you explain why each strategy you have chosen would be a good strategy to use. Keep in mind to always write the essay from a student centered perspective. By using these terms it becomes easier to stay in that voice.