Exercise for ENGL 2120:

*Problem Statements in Pieces*

This Category 2 exercise focuses on the structure of academic problems, and how good writers raise those problems in their readers’ minds by skillfully constructing their essays’ introductions. It uses the terms that Joseph Williams, Greg Colomb, and Wayne Booth have used in *The Craft of Argument* and *The Craft of Research*. Your terms may differ, but you will certainly recognize the moves.

This exercise is intended for practice, after the students have already been introduced to the concept of the problem statement. Here’s what you do:

1. Use either an essay you’ve found that addresses your class’s topic, or (as I have, below) an introduction that you have written yourself, in response to an essay the students have already read and discussed. Either way, the intro should demonstrate the Problem Statement principles clearly and explicitly, and the topic should be familiar. The students should know the readership to whom the essay is addressed.

2. Break the introduction into its constituent parts: Common Ground, Disrupting Problem, Question and Consequences, and Solution.

3. Put each of the four parts on its own sheet of paper.

4. In class, divide the students into four groups. Give each group *only one part* of the introduction.

5. The group’s task is to write the rest of the introduction, reasoning logically from the single part they have been given.

6. Bring the class back together and, using the document camera, read over each group’s version.

7. Compare these versions to the complete original introduction. How did each group share (and not share) assumptions about their readers?

In his article “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America,” Don Peck quotes Ron Alsop, author of *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*:

Common Ground Position

[Alsop says that] a combination of entitlement and highly structured childhood has resulted in a lack of independence and entrepreneurialism in many 20-somethings. They’re used to checklists, he says, and “don’t excel at leadership or independent problem solving.” Alsop interviewed dozens of employers for his book, and concluded that unlike previous generations, Millennials, as a group, “need almost constant direction” in the workplace. “Many flounder without precise guidelines but thrive in structured situations that provide clearly defined rules.”

However, there’s a problem with Alsop’s theory: he looks only at a small population of so-called “trophy kids,” the children of the highly educated and ambitious upper-middle classes in major metropolitan areas. These children, indeed, may have had “a combination of entitlement and highly structured childhood,” with private schools and summer enrichment programs. But that’s not true of the majority of young people now entering the workplace. For average and struggling American families, the last twenty years have seen *less* entitlement, and *less* structured environments for children, not more. Most kids from less privileged backgrounds have been looking after themselves, and struggling to make their own way, for most of their lives.

Disrupting Problem

So, if we consider *the full population* of young people today, is Peck really right when he says that young Americans, compared with previous generations, are less independent and less able to compete for themselves? If we answer this question, we’ll know whether to change our educational and child-rearing practices to make our kids more competitive; we’ll also know whether to allocate money and resources to help today’s young people compete.

Question

And

Consequences

Though Peck may be right about some privileged young Americans, he’s wrong about the majority. Most young people today, more than any recent generation, know that nothing is going to be given to them, and they’re ready to work. They know how to come up with solutions, without anybody holding their hands. In a way, the economic ups and downs of the last twenty years, along with the instability in many family structures, has been a good thing for middle- and working-class kids: they have learned how to adapt to changing circumstances.

Solution