

Mysteries of the Universe **An Essay Assignment**

Topic. Write an essay in which you explore a mystery, a topic that causes you and your readers to wonder about its authenticity, origin, or cause.

Audience and Purpose. We live in a universe fraught with mystery and spend our unguarded time wondering about the unknown and the unknowable. We sometimes walk a tightrope between reality and illusion, living with the tension and the excitement of that which puzzles. Writing about a topic that mystifies can help us and our readers solve the mystery or at least appreciate its dimensions more. Target a group of readers who have wondered about the same phenomenon that you explore in your essay; write to them for the purpose of suggesting a possible explanation for the mystery. If you choose a funny topic, at least part of your purpose will be to entertain readers.

Development Strategy. To develop this kind of personal essay, use a combination of narration/description and cause/effect reasoning. Begin the writing process by brainstorming a list of topics that readers will find puzzling and that you know from firsthand experience or through careful observation. Choose one of these that you can develop specifically. To test drive the topic, do some free writing for five or ten minutes to see what you have to say about this mystery. If this exercise results in some interesting material, try some focused free writing in which you narrate/describe the circumstances in which this mystery manifests itself and some possible causes that might produce the effect that mystifies you. This will help readers visualize it and explain the mystery for themselves. If this focused free writing results in a clear picture of the oddity and some interesting theories as to what causes it, try writing a thesis (main idea sentence) that will help you shape the first draft into a purposeful, coherent essay. If this works, share your first draft with a preliminary audience before writing a final draft. Develop your topic with specific supporting material from personal experiences and people or things that you have observed.

Sample Topics

- Why does classical music have a soothing effect on animals and people?
- What causes the Gurdon lights?
- Why do we sometimes have a sense of recognition when we know we have never before experienced a person, place, or thing (*déjà vu*)?
- Why does a certain song's melody get stuck in our mind so that we hum it all day?
- Why do the most attractive women sometimes fall in love with the most obnoxious men?
- Why do women wear high heels?
- Why do people eat hot peppers?
- Why are some places apparently haunted?
- Why do people react so strongly to brand names?
- Why do individuals have a favorite color?
- Why do we see "stars" when we take a rap on the head or cough too hard?
- Why do some people like to eavesdrop on complete strangers?
- Why are young people more idealistic than their elders?
- Why do people sometimes lie when it is actually to their advantage to tell the truth?
- Why do animals sometimes adopt the young of other species?

Note: Some of these topics have generated scientific inquiries with subsequent explanations of cause/effect relationships, but this essay assignment is not a research paper that relies on experts. Instead, you should develop your essay from personal observations, experience, and speculation.

Sample Thesis Statements

1. People get tattoos because they are afraid of losing their identity.
2. Parents don't have eyes in the back of their heads; they just remember what it was like to be sixteen.
3. Men are reluctant to do anything in the company of women, such as asking for directions, that might make them look weak (and, therefore, less attractive or dominant).
4. Superstitions develop when people try to see cause/effect relationships where there are none.
5. Dogs sometimes bark in groups when they are trying to establish who's boss.

Sample Essay

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Why Do Dogs Bark?

My neighbor works at a local plant and usually leaves the house at about 3:45 in the afternoon for his 4:00-to-midnight shift. I'm usually home from school by that time and settling into a comfortable chair in the den with a Sprite and some salted peanuts. I wouldn't even notice his departure for work if it weren't for a strange phenomenon that happens shortly after his 1995 GMC pickup leaves the driveway. The pen of deer dogs in his backyard erupts into a brief round of barking, yelping, and whining. Though brief, this noise is almost deafening. Within a few minutes, these six or eight dogs lapse into silence until their master comes out to feed them the next morning when they greet him with welcome home barks.

For a long time, I wondered why Jim's dogs bark after he has left the property. I used to think that they were complaining that their master had left them alone to fend for themselves or that they were fussing at one of the gray squirrels that jump from one oak tree to another in the branches above their heads. These dogs hate those squirrels, or they at least resent the squirrels' freedom. However, none of these explanations really made sense of the sounds I had been hearing shortly after 3:45 each afternoon.

As Jim sped off toward the plant, the canine concert that he never got to hear always started out with full participation from all of the dogs in the pen and then dwindled down to a few final barks from one dog. It was this gradual decline in participation from many voices to a solo that really mystified me. When a stranger drives up, Jim's dogs bark in unison; and when he goes out to feed and water them, they also bark together. So this noise that disturbed the afternoon peace in the neighborhood was different from the normal barking that they did.

One day it occurred to me that the last dog left barking really sounded dominant. I mean he barked with a fierce authority that seemed to say, "I'm in charge now." Then my amateur psychology training from all of those Animal Planet shows suggested that maybe Jim's dogs were arguing—like a pack of wolves or dingoes—over which beast was to be Top Dog in the absence of their Master. That would explain why their barking sounded like an argument—more like a barroom brawl—at the beginning and then gradually lost its intensity until one dog was left yapping its dominance. My theory would also explain what sounded like yelps of pain during the cacophony. Perhaps some of the dogs may have been bitten by the second in command while he was subduing them. This barking is a daily phenomenon because when Jim returns home he automatically becomes Top Dog again.

I don't know if this really explains the noise I hear each day at 3:45, but it makes sense to me. As an amateur canine behaviorist, I offer this not-so-scientific theory for your consideration: Dogs sometimes bark in groups when they are trying to establish who's boss.

Essay Reminders. Don't forget: 1) a good essay consists of three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion; 2) the main idea is stated clearly in one sentence called the thesis; 3) the topic is narrow and well developed; 4) the author writes about the topic from personal experience for an audience of readers who will benefit in some way from reading it; 5) the material is divided into paragraphs logically to make reading the essay easy; and 6) the topic is developed specifically, using one or more of the following development strategies: analogy, definition, description, cause/effect, comparison/ contrast, division/classification, examples, narration, and process analysis.