

ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. By writing about Jim Oakland and his experience with the Lottery, Rooney uses just one extended example to illustrate his stand on a controversial issue and to persuade readers to agree with him. Write your own essay in which you take a position on an important issue. Perhaps, for example, you think that high schools should (or should not) require students to wear uniforms, that schools should replace grades with written evaluations, that the sale of tobacco should be made illegal, that junk food should be banned from school cafeterias, that young people should not date until they are 18, or that parents should never spank disobedient children. Focus your essay with a thesis statement similar to one of the following:

- For several reasons, spanking a disobedient child probably does more harm than good.
- High schools should require students to wear uniforms for several reasons.

As Rooney does, defend your position by describing in detail the experiences of one person. Be sure to make it clear how that person's experience illustrates the point you are making. If you prefer, you may use the experiences of two or more people.

2. Jim is a person who is sort of drifting through life, hoping that a stroke of luck will give him everything he wants. As the title of the piece suggests, he is headed nowhere. Do you know someone who is, in your opinion, similarly headed nowhere? Perhaps it is a student who rarely does homework and doesn't seem to think about his or her future. Maybe it's an adult who skips from job to job and is often unemployed. Write an essay about this person and his or her "path to nowhere." Provide plenty of examples of the person's choices and behavior, and make it clear how you think those individual choices or behavior are part of a larger pattern.

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An Electronic Fog Has Settled Over America

Pete Hamill

Preview

What would you do if your children—once bright and lively and high achievers in school—became dull and passive and began failing their courses? One father's observation of his family's downhill slide is reported here by columnist Pete Hamill. The man's search for a culprit turns up some alarming facts and leads, finally, to his own living room.

Words to Watch

deteriorate (1): worsen in quality
erratic (3): irregular
hustling (3): hurrying
staggered (7): shocked
accumulated (12): gathered
compromise (13): to settle differences by giving something up
projected (14): given an impression of
dominated (14): controlled
voluntary (16): done willingly, without being forced
disconsolate (18): unhappy

The year his son turned fourteen, Maguire noticed that the boy was getting dumber. This was a kid who had learned to talk at fourteen months, could read when he was four, was an A student for his first six

years in school. The boy was bright, active, and imaginative. And then, slowly, the boy's brain began to deteriorate¹.

"He started to slur words," Maguire told me. "He couldn't finish sentences. He usually didn't hear me when I talked to him and couldn't answer me clearly when he did. In school, the A's became B's, and the B's became C's. I thought maybe it was something physical, and I had a doctor check him out. He was perfectly normal. Then the C's started to become D's. Finally, he started failing everything. Worse, the two younger kids were repeating the pattern. From bright to dumb in a few short years."

Maguire was then an account executive in a major advertising agency; his hours were erratic², and the pace of his business life was often frantic. But when he would get home at night and talk to his wife about the kids, she would shake her head in a baffled way and explain that she was doing her best. Hustling³ from the office of one account to another, Maguire pondered the creeping stupidity of his children. Then he took an afternoon off from work and visited his oldest-boy's school.

"They told me he just wasn't doing much work," Maguire said. "He owed them four book reports. He never said a word in social studies. His mind wandered, he was distracted, he asked to leave the room a lot. But the teacher told me he wasn't much different from all the other kids. In some ways, he was better. He at least did some work. Most of them, she told me, didn't do any work at all."

Maguire asked the teacher if she had any theories about why the kids behaved this way.

"Of course," she said. "Television."

Television? Maguire was staggered⁴. He made his living off television. Often, he would sit with the kids in the TV room and point out the commercials he had helped to create. Television had paid for his house in the suburbs, for his two cars, his clothes, his food, the pictures on the walls. It even paid for the kids' schools.

"What do you mean, television?" he said.

"Television rots minds," the teacher said flatly. "But most of us figure there's nothing to be done about it anymore."

At work the next day, Maguire told his secretary to do some special research for him. Within a week, he had some scary numbers on his desk. The Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) showed that the reading scores of all American high-school students had fallen in every year since 1950, the year of television's great national triumph. The mathematics scores were even worse. The average American kid spent four to six hours a day watching television and by age sixteen had witnessed eleven thousand homicides on the tube.

"I came home that night, and the kids were watching television with my wife," he said. "I looked at them, glued to the set. They nodded hello

to me. And suddenly I got scared. I imagined these four people, their brains rotted out, suddenly adding me to the evening's homicide count because I wanted them to talk to me. I went to the bedroom, and for the first time since college, I took down *Moby-Dick* and started to read."

In the following week, Maguire accumulated⁵ more and more ideas about the impact of television on the lives of Americans. All classes and colors had been affected intellectually; reading requires the decoding of symbols, the transforming of a word like *car* into a cat that lives in the imagination. Television shows the cat. No active thought is required. Television even supplies a laugh track and music to trigger the emotions the imagination will not create or release.

"I read somewhere that the worst danger to kids who become TV addicts is that while they are watching TV, they're not doing anything else," Maguire said. "They're not down in the schoolyard playing ball, or falling in love, or getting into fights, or learning to compromise." They're alone, with a box that doesn't hear them if they want to talk back. They don't have to think, because everything is done for them. They don't have to question, because what's the point if you can't challenge the guy on the set?"

Television had also changed politics; Maguire's kids had political opinions based on the way candidates looked and how they projected themselves theatrically. Politics, which should be based on the structure of analysis and thought, had become dominated⁶ by the structures of drama, that is to say, by conflict.

"I knew Reagan would win in a landslide," Maguire said. "As an actor, he fit right into the mass culture formed by thirty years of television."

Maguire tried to do something. He called a family conference after dinner one night, explained his discoveries, and suggested a voluntary⁷ limiting of television watching or its complete elimination for three months.

"I said we could start a reading program together," he told me. "All read the same book and discuss it at night. I told them we'd come closer together, that I'd even change my job so I could be home more and not work on television commercials anymore."

After ten minutes, the kids began to squirm and yawn, as if expecting a commercial. Maguire's wife dazed out, her disconsolate⁸ face an unblinking mask. He gave up. Now, when he goes home, Maguire says hello, eats dinner, and retreats to his bedroom. He is reading his way through *Balzac**

Beyond the bedroom door, bathed in the cold light of the television set, are the real people of his life. Their dumbness grows, filling up the room, moving out into the quiet suburban town, joining the great gray fog that has enveloped America.

*A nineteenth-century French author who wrote nearly one hundred novels.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Free-write for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. How much television did you watch as you were growing up? How much television do you watch now? Do you think watching TV has affected you in any way? Explain.
3. Would you put any restrictions on your children's TV watching? Explain.

VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *pondered* means
 - a. ignored.
 - b. thought carefully about.
 - c. slowed.
 - d. tried to remember.

"Hustling from the office of one account to another, Maguire pondered the creeping stupidity of his children." (Paragraph 3)

2. In the sentences below, the word *distracted* means
 - a. hard-working.
 - b. staying in one place.
 - c. not paying attention.
 - d. talkative.

"He never said a word in social studies. His mind wandered, he was distracted, he asked to leave the room a lot." (Paragraph 4)

3. In the sentence below, the word *trigger* means
 - a. shoot.
 - b. set off.
 - c. hold back.
 - d. prevent.

"Television even supplies a laugh track and music to trigger the emotions the imagination will not create or release." (Paragraph 12)

4. In the sentence below, the word *enveloped* means
 - a. mailed.
 - b. left.
 - c. wrapped around.
 - d. escaped from.

"Their dumbness grows . . . moving out into the quiet suburban town, joining the great gray fog that has enveloped America." (Paragraph 19)

B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from "Words to Watch."

5. Because their marriage seemed to be *deteriorating*, the couple
 - a. started seeing a marriage counselor.
 - b. celebrated with a second honeymoon.
 - c. felt relieved that it was getting better.
6. When the doctor realized that Dad had an *erratic* heartbeat, the doctor
 - a. congratulated Dad on his good health.
 - b. ordered Dad to the hospital for some tests.
 - c. was not concerned.

7. Naturally, I was *staggered* when
 - a. the postman put a letter intended for my neighbor in my mailbox.
 - b. I saw that the cost of gasoline had gone up five cents a gallon.
 - c. I met my identical twin, who I never knew existed, in the dentist's office.

8. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara *accumulated* boyfriends. She obviously
 - a. made fun of men.
 - b. was shocked by men.
 - c. was attractive to men.

READING CHECK

Central Point and Main Ideas

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
 - a. Maguire's son became stupid because he watched so much TV.
 - b. Declining SAT scores seem to be linked to increased TV watching.
 - c. Ironically, the industry that Maguire made his living from was harming his family.
 - d. The influence of television has produced a generation of people who cannot think for themselves.
2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 2?
 - a. Like their older brother, Maguire's youngest children began doing poorly in school.
 - b. Maguire's children were becoming less bright, and there was no obvious explanation why.
 - c. Maguire suspected that his son had a physical problem that was affecting his intelligence.
 - d. Maguire's son couldn't speak clearly, hear well, or keep up with his studies.
3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 10?
 - a. Maguire asked his secretary to research the effects of television on children.
 - b. The reading and math SAT scores of American kids have fallen every year since 1950.
 - c. The research done by Maguire's secretary revealed some surprising and frightening facts about television's effects on children.
 - d. The average American kid watches four to six hours of TV a day and witnesses thousands of TV homicides.

Key Supporting Details

4. Maguire was certain that Reagan would be elected president of the United States because Reagan
 - a. had pledged to raise America's SAT scores.
 - b. had once worked as a television advertising executive.
 - c. had been an actor who still appealed to mass-media tastes.
 - d. ran a campaign based on the structure of analysis and thought.

5. When Maguire came home and found his family watching TV, ignoring him except to nod hello, he suddenly felt
 - a. terribly sad.
 - b. furious.
 - c. frightened.
 - d. loving.

6. _____ TRUE OR FALSE? According to the article, the average American child spends two to four hours a day watching television.

Inferences

7. The article implies that
 - a. Maguire was very pleased that President Reagan was elected.
 - b. Maguire's two younger children had never done well in school.
 - c. Maguire's children would have been better students if Maguire had been home more.
 - d. Maguire's children would have been better students if there were no TV set in the house.
8. From the way the article ends, we can reasonably conclude that
 - a. Maguire's wife and children will eventually join him in his reading program.
 - b. Maguire's children will soon be doing better in school.
 - c. Maguire will quit his job in the advertising agency.
 - d. the Maguires' problem exists in many households in the United States.
9. We can conclude the author would agree that the worst effect of TV is that it
 - a. makes kids violent.
 - b. lowers kids' SAT scores, thus making them less able to attend good colleges.
 - c. makes people passive observers in life, rather than active participants.
 - d. discourages people from reading.

The Writer's Craft

10. The phrase "electronic fog" in Hamill's title refers to
 - a. the spread of television programming across the country.
 - b. the television-caused stupidity that has crept across America.
 - c. the violent content of many television programs.
 - d. students' SAT scores, which have fallen every year since 1950.