Section 2 Materials

Question 3: Introducing an Analytical Argument

- **Please read the explanation and introductions below and then answer the questions posed in Question 3 on the placement exam page.**

Most Expository Writing assignments ask students to practice and develop fundamental elements of academic argument. Central to most essays is the *thesis* the writer argues for, along with a clear sense of what makes that thesis necessary–the *analytical question or problem* the thesis responds to. For many first-year students, the level of complexity required in a college-level argument can be new, and students learn how to engage with that level of complexity both by writing their own drafts and revisions and by reading sample essays by other writers. (Please note that a sample essay in an Expos class is not offered as a perfect example, but rather as one that students can both learn from and question.)

As a way of helping students learn these fundamental elements of argument, the Writing Program offers the following definitions:

- **Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable; be limited enough in scope to be argued with available evidence; and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early and it should govern the whole essay.

- **Question, Problem, or What's at Stake:** the context or situation that you establish for your argument at the start of your essay, making clear why someone might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued (why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other theses might be less persuasive). In the introduction, it's the moment where you establish "what's at stake" in the essay, setting up a genuine problem, question, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma, or violated expectation that an intelligent reader would really have.

Below are two sample introductions from Expos student essays, both focusing on the same sources.

Introduction #1:

What's So Different About Service?: The Theory of Alienation in a New Era

We are now witnessing a new labor revolution in the United States. Manufacturing jobs are being replaced with service jobs, which are based less on manual labor and more on interpersonal interaction. The transition from industrial production to an extensive service sector has been even faster than the earlier transition from craft production to manufacturing. The advent of that first transition led Karl Marx (1844) and Harry Braverman (1975) to create theories of alienation to make predictions about the effects of industrial production on workers, and those theories are complementary despite the 130 years between them. The advent of the second transition makes it necessary for us to re-examine that theory of alienation to see if it is applicable to the newest mode of employment.

To evaluate the theory of alienation in the modern world, I have chosen Robin Leidner's ethnographic description of work in a McDonald's restaurant, from *Fast Food, Fast Talk*. Behind the counter fast-food service is one the most common service jobs in today's economy. It provides employment for a similar demographic as industrial labor did in Marx's time. Most importantly, when we compare the conditions that Marx and Braverman describe in their theories of alienation as sufficient for alienation to the conditions of work at McDonald's, we see that they match very closely. Thus, by a simple estimate, McDonald's employees should be very alienated from their work. However, when we compare the predictions that Marx and Braverman make about the results of alienation, the correlation breaks down. Some McDonald's workers fit alienation theory's predictions, and others do not. This variation casts a doubt on the ability of the alienation theory to accurately evaluate modern service work. Indeed, theory of alienation is no longer sufficient for predicting alienation in today's world. These workers are not alienated according to Marx and Braverman's model because of the ways employees interact with customers; this element of human interaction prevents Marx and Braverman's conditions from alienating most workers.

Introduction #2:

Alienation and Fast Food Work

Working in fast food restaurants is now a form of employment that many people have experienced. Particularly for high school students, this kind of work may be their introduction to the workforce, a job they can achieve before they have more significant skills developed. From working in the kitchen, with most of their time focused on preparing food, to waiting on customers behind the counter, fast food employees perform the same tasks in an unvarying routine. Robin Leidner's book *Fast Food, Fast Talk* offers an in-depth portrait of this kind of work. She interviews many individuals employed in the fast-food service industry, and her analysis explains the challenges and characteristics that are common for this kind of labor.

Work that is very routine can be unsatisfying for a number of reasons, and authors Karl Marx and Harry Braverman, who wrote in 1877 and 1975 respectively, outline some of those reasons. While they helped explain an earlier revolution in labor into the manufacturing era, fast food work demonstrates a more contemporary shift into service work. Their ideas about workers being alienated from their work have been influential for a long time. Similarly, Leidner describes a basic dissatisfaction among the fast food workers, who are locked in their routine. Thus both Leidner as well as Marx and Braverman depict a crucial alienation in the varying kinds of work they describe.

Question 4: Analysis

- **Please read the excerpt on the next pages and then answer the questions posed in Question 4 on the placement exam page.**

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF LAW AND EQUALITY | ISSUE 1 | 2021

Excerpted From: **HOW MERITOCRACY FUELS INEQUALITY—PART I *The Tyranny of Merit*: An Overview**

Michael J. Sandel*

https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle_a_00024

Author: *Michael J. Sandel teaches political philosophy at Harvard University, where he is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government. His most recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, is the subject of this symposium. Sandel replies to his critics in Part II at the end of this symposium, https://doi.org/10.1162 /ajle_a_00025.

It is tempting to see meritocracy as a friend to equality. In hereditary aristocracies and caste societies, people's fates are fixed by birth. In meritocracies, by contrast, people can rise; they can compete for desirable jobs and social roles based on their own merits. Meritocratic selection also seems egalitarian when compared with other familiar alternatives: bribery, nepotism, prejudice, discrimination. Hiring people based on their talents rather than their connections treats them, it would seem, as equals. Of course, identifying talent is not always easy, especially when some people have greater opportunities to develop and demonstrate their talents than others. But this does not mean that meritocracy and equality are at odds. It simply means that a true meritocracy requires that everyone has a truly equal opportunity to develop their talents.

In *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*,[1] I argue that meritocracy is not the friend of equality that it appears to be. To the contrary, meritocracy today functions less as an alternative to inequality than as its primary justification.

I. WINNERS AND LOSERS

My case against meritocracy is partly philosophical, partly political. The philosophical argument is about merit as a principle of moral desert: If everyone starts out with an equal chance, then those who succeed deserve the rewards their talents bring. This principle, plausible though it seems, is open to three objections. First, having the talents that enable me to get ahead is not my doing; it is my good fortune. If everyone begins the race at the same starting point, and if everyone has had equal access to good coaches, training facilities, running shoes, healthy diets, and so on, the most gifted runners are most likely to win. But being gifted is a matter of luck. So it is hard to see how the winners can claim that they morally deserve the rewards society bestows on them.

Second, that I live in a society that happens to prize the talents I happen to have is also a matter of luck. LeBron James is a great basketball player and reaps enormous rewards for leading his teams to the NBA Finals. But those rewards reflect the fact that he lives in a society, and at a time, when basketball is hugely popular. Had LeBron lived during the Renaissance, his earnings (and fame) would likely have been less. People weren't that interested in basketball then; they cared more about fresco painters. The billionaire investor Warren Buffett has made a similar observation about the luck and contingency that made his fortune possible.[2]

These two points—about the contingencies of talent and the moral arbitrariness of market demand for this or that talent—led thinkers as ideologically disparate as Friedrich Hayek and John Rawls to reject meritocracy. Both rejected the idea that market rewards reflect what people merit or deserve.[3]

To these two objections, I add a third—about the attitudes toward success that meritocratic societies promote. Those who land on top come to believe that their success is their own doing, the measure of their merit, and that those who lose out must deserve their fate as well. This way of thinking brings out the dark side of meritocracy. It leads to what I call "meritocratic hubris"—the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success and to look down on those less successful than themselves. Such hubris is not only morally unattractive; it also deepens the divide between winners and losers and is corrosive of the common good.

One way to address this divide is to try to level the playing field, so that everyone has a truly equal chance to become a winner. But this cannot heal the inequalities of esteem that meritocracies produce. For even if everyone had an equal chance to succeed, the divide between winners and losers would persist. The real problem lies in the image of social life as a competitive race—a race in which the successful believe, and have reason to believe, that they have earned their success and the benefits that flow from it. Paradoxically, the closer we come to achieving true equality of opportunity, the more plausible it seems—to those who succeed and to those who struggle—that the winners have earned their success and deserve its rewards.

Footnotes

1 MICHAEL J. SANDEL, THE TYRANNY OF MERIT: WHAT'S BECOME OF THE COMMON GOOD? (2020).

2 For Warren Buffett on the role of luck, see Emmie Martin, *Here's Why Warren Buffett Says That He and Charlie Munger Are Successful,* CNBC (May 4, 2018), https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/04/warren-buffett-says-the-key-to -his-success-is-luck.html.

3 See SANDEL, *supra* note 1, at 125-50.

[End of excerpt]

Question 5: Expos Assignment Prompt

- **Below is a prompt for a typical Expos assignment. Please read the prompt and then answer the questions about writing process posed in Question 5 on the placement exam page.**

In an Expos course, you might receive an assignment like this one:

> In this assignment, you will write a comparative analysis, putting two sources alongside each other in order to argue what the relationship between them reveals. In some comparative essays, including those you might be used to writing in your education before Harvard, you will simply look at two things (literary texts, arguments, sets of data, etc.) side by side and determine something important about their relationship. In other comparative assignments, like this one, *one source typically helps you say something new or unexpected about the other*.
>
> This essay asks you to examine two sources offering varying arguments about what makes a profession meaningful. Matthew Crawford's book *Shop Class as Soulcraft* provides the theory we work with as our starting point. You can think of a theoretical source as one that gives you important *concepts*, a certain *way of thinking* about something, or useful *key terms* that you will use in your argument. You will also read a section of Karen Ho's book *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*, in which she provides an analysis of working in investment banking, based on her extensive interviews and observations. As you compare the sources, you will work towards an analysis that reveals something unexpected about the ethnography, or that raises questions or unexpected insights about the theory.
>
> Your essay should have clearly established stakes and an arguable analytical thesis, and your argument should acknowledge different possible analyses or interpretations. Many close-

reading assignments will ask you to examine use of language or tone. For this assignment, however, your focus should not be on literary style or choice of words, but rather on ideas and arguments. The essay should be about 8 pages long, and should use MLA citation style. Your deadline is two weeks from today.