

WRITING LESSON

SEEING THE UNSEEN



The YES! online article, **“What Can Change When We Learn to See Each Other,”** by **Akaya Windwood**, is a story about what it might feel like to live in a world where people don’t acknowledge your existence.

Students will use Akaya Windwood’s story to write about the risks and rewards of acknowledging people we don’t usually treat as important, or people we fear.

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What Can Change When We Learn to See Each Other

Here's my invitation to you: Let's take a month and intentionally notice those we would normally not see. Let's interrupt old patterns of not looking into the eyes of "those people"—whoever they are to you.



Photo by Ahmed Sinan

By Akaya Windwood

Reprinted from YES! online, August 1, 2012

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO A COLLEAGUE AND I WERE WALKING ALONG THE CROWDED WATERFRONT IN SAN FRANCISCO, AND COMING TOWARD US WAS a trio of young African-American men who were joking and playing. When we passed I greeted them, and just as the last of them walked by I heard him say, "Thanks for seeing us."

It took a minute for that to register.

My companion said, "Did you hear what I heard?" and it took me a moment before I could respond with, "Yes." My heart was breaking.

How could it be that I would be thanked for merely seeing someone? It took all of my self-control not to run back to those young men, gather them in my arms and apologize for every person who had ever overlooked

them, averted their eyes, or turned away. What must it be like to move through a world that refuses to meet one's eyes, that refuses to acknowledge one's very existence?

I could make an analysis and write this piece solely about the kind of pervasive racism which creates a very specific and limiting box in which African-American men are expected to live (and why they might feel invisible). Yet as I scan the

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world with those young men still in my heart, I notice that many kinds of people are often overlooked. The bag clerk at the grocery market, the person at the front desk, the folks who carry our mail or clean our streets or who are considered too old, or too young, or too...

What could happen if every day we were to greet each human as though they wereworthy of notice and respect? What could happen if every day you were greeted as though you were worthy of notice and respect? What could change?

There is a certain cult of personality even among those of us whose lives are committed to social transformation. A lot of jockeying goes on around who gets noticed for acclaim, who gets the big dollars, who gets the media attention. Many of our social movements are less effective than they could be because of this competition for limelight or resources.

The reality is that most folks working for change do so because they care about their community or issue, not because they are looking for recognition or awards. Nonetheless, their work is crucial and necessary and is

deserving of respect even if it goes unheralded. They may be unsung, but they are certainly heroes.

I've said for years that everyone takes leadership in some way every day. Everyone. Most acts of leadership go unnoticed or unacknowledged, and that's a shame. The cultural pattern of noticing only some types of leadership and ignoring others contributes to the erasure of large groups of folks—women, poor and working-class people, and, yes, young African-American men.

If we can find ways to see each other, to honor the existence of every being who co-inhabits this wonderful earth with us, if no young person ever has need to thank a stranger for merely seeing them, then we will have done a fine thing.

Here's my invitation to you: let's take a month and intentionally notice those we would normally not see. Let's interrupt old patterns of not looking into the eyes of "those people" (whoever they are to you). Let's greet and acknowledge the folks we generally walk by or around and watch what happens.

So let's say "Hey" to someone new tomorrow. I'll bet we have conversations that surprise us. I'll bet we learn something new.

From my heart to yours.

Akaya Windwood is President of the Rockwood Leadership Institute, where this article originally appeared.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Imagine you accept Akaya Windwood’s invitation to intentionally notice people you would normally ignore. Who would you notice? What would change for you and for that person?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/seeing-the-unseen

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

The Smile That Brought Hope

By Sumaiyah Mustaphalli, Grade 6

It was that time of the week again, grocery day. As my mom, my brother, and I stood in line, I tried to strategize a way to get Mom to buy me Mentos, Tic-Tacs, or even a Snickers bar. Before I knew it, our grocery bags were full and neatly packed in our cart. As we made our way towards the Red Box by the door, I pleaded with Mom to rent us a movie, but she rejected my request as she hurried toward the parking lot. Mom said that she needed to talk with our family about something the perinatologist said.

“Perinatologist?” I asked.

“A specialist for high-risk pregnancy.” she explained. Her gaze began to drift off in the conversation. She fidgeted nervously with the clasp on her purse.

As my brother and I shuffled into the house, we saw the expression on my mom’s face. We slowly started to pack away the groceries. We began to worry. When we finished, my parents were waiting for us in the living room. We could tell Mom was fighting the urge to cry because tears welled up in her eyes. Finally, she began to explain what was worrying her. The doctor said that her test results showed an unusually high possibility of the baby having Down syndrome. I was confused. The words seemed foreign to me.

“What is Down syndrome?” I asked, quietly.

I had a vague memory of hearing the term. My parents sat down and explained some of the details of Down syndrome and how it could affect the baby. I scanned the room and saw my father’s face. He looked so sad. Suddenly, he cleared his throat and began to speak. He reassured us that whatever happened to the baby, we would always love and raise him or her. Dad told us to pray that the baby would turn out healthy, and to accept the baby no matter what.

“Have we ever met anyone with Down syndrome?” I wondered aloud.

“Yes, a relative of your father has Down syndrome and quite a few people in our community, too,” said Mom.

“Really? In our community?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

“Of course, like the young man at Publix who bags our groceries.” Mom replied.

Up until that point, I never thought about how the groceries got into the bags because I was always on a mission to get my parents to buy me candy from the bins by the cash register. Like Akaya Windwood’s experience in her YES! Magazine article, “What Can Change When We Learn To See Each Other,” I suddenly realized how many people, like the young man at Publix, I never really thought to acknowledge.

I found myself in the grocery line at Publix a few days later, but I wasn’t concerned about the candy anymore. I was focused on the grocery bagger this time. How could I have missed the big bright smiles and cheerful hellos that he always gives to everyone?

When he finished packing the last bag, I said, “Thank you for always doing such a good job bagging the groceries.”

I smiled the biggest, brightest smile I could manage. My smile came right from my heart since his smiles were always so genuine. Looking at him and how he tries to brighten everyone’s day, I began to feel much more hopeful about the baby who was soon to arrive.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Finally Seen

By Reyna Flores, Grade 7

Inspired by the story written by Akaya Windwood about people who normally are not noticed. She shows extreme emotional strength in her writing and motivated me to write this poem.

The dirt cakes her shoes.
Like white flour
sticking to freshly made bread.
She can see a huge,
looming house in the distance.
Ivy snaking
its way around the bricks and
brightly colored leaves,
sprinkling
the ground.
She hurries up the steps
and stands before the big oak door.
Pondering.
Afraid.
A flash of courage sparks her and she
stands on tiptoes
to reach.
Her tiny fingers grip the brass lion's head.
She lifts and drops it twice,
making two loud thuds.
Echoing through the house.
A shudder rises
up her spine,
settling itself into her **neck**
which prickles with goose bumps
Footsteps pound.

Louder,
Louder,
Until they reach the door that swings open,
on rusty hinges.
But only a crack.
She stands taller, now. Facing the woman
at the door.
Standing in front
of the face that squints down at her
with beady eyes.
Intimidating.
But respected.
She looks stern, but something lurks
Behind her sternness.
Something that the child cannot
place.
And that is why she is here.
To find whatever it may be
that the woman
is hiding.
Underneath her surface,
that is **unnoticed**.
But she is not even sure
that this something
exists.
Like an invisible force
that can be felt, but is just out of reach of
reality.

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Reyna Flores poem continued)

She speaks quietly.
Barely audible.
About small things at first like
how she loves the
woman's garden and what a beautiful autumn
day it is.
But the scrunched up face stays
as sullen and pale as ever
before.
The girl loses her courage.
Her hope.
Her dream.
She speaks more quietly and tells the woman that
she has bothered her too long
and that she will be going home now.
The woman looks like
she agrees,
keeping her nose
turned up.
But as the girl,
her spirits dampened,
walks disappointedly down the pathway,
something changes.
The air is
No longer thick and bordered with
sadness.
She is still standing silently,
but there is a wet drop in the corner of one eye.
A dewdrop of feeling.
She feels for the child and is reminded
of **someone**.

Her own children.
The ones who left her.
Alone.
Waiting for her to
die.
To gain her money.
But this girl does not leave her alone.
She thinks not of her
money
her wealth
not of her mansion
her land
her food
her treasures
her riches.
No, this little girl
Who has close to nothing for herself,
cares for the old woman.
Because her heart
can leave no one alone.
She knows pain and sorrow.
Anger and humiliation.
Struggle and hunger.
But, yet, she is still willing
to give her love
away.
To a mean, rich woman
who has none.
The woman, in her fine,
flowered dress.
With her pearl necklace.

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Reyna Flores poem continued)

With her wealth and pale skin.
She calls the little girl
in the tattered, plain dress.
With her bare neck.
With her poorness and her dark skin.
Back to the porch.
And the child turns her head hopefully,
toward the old woman.
She walks with anticipation in her
footsteps and puzzlement in her eyes.
The woman speaks one word
and the girl
enters her luxurious house.
They sit.
At the lavish table, decked in a white tablecloth.
At first they are silent.
But it lifts, like a fog.
Lifting to reveal the sun.
They eat and eventually talk and
share stories like friends.
The two,
although so utterly different,
find themselves
keeping each other company.
The old woman
is glad of finally having someone
to talk to and laugh with.
To share stories
and memories with.
Who will listen to what she has to say.
Who will respect her opinion.

Not because she is rich.
But because, underneath, she is kind.
And the girl feels as though she has
finally met someone
who respects her opinion
and **most** of all, **does** not care what color her skin
is.
Even though
the old woman is rich with money,
the thing she is not rich with and still needs
is someone to **notice** her
for who she is.
And she feels better after someone does.
Like a great weight has been lifted
From her shoulders.
This, my friends, is how everyone should feel.

All of the bold words spell a message together.

Taking That Extra Step

By Nizhone Hickman, Grade 9

Akaya Windwood’s YES! Magazine article, “What Can Change When We Learn to See Each Other,” got me thinking about how I see people. To be honest, I frequently find myself attempting to look away from many types of people—although I don’t intend to be mean. If I don’t acknowledge someone, it is either to save both of us from being uncomfortable or it’s for my own personal safety. Also, I never intentionally ignore someone’s presence, but occasionally I’m oblivious because I haven’t really seen them yet.

Once when my mom and I drove out of the Albertsons parking lot, there was a homeless person outside a nearby Circle K. He was holding a sign that said, “Money for food, anything helps,” and we decided to give him nearly half of the food we bought. My mom was reluctant at first, but I finally convinced her to hand over some of our groceries. I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive that homeless man for what he did after that.

As we were driving off, I looked back at the homeless man. He walked to the garbage can and threw the food away. Then, he continued to ask for money from people who walked by him; I assume this was so he could purchase cigarettes or beer at the Circle K.

After that eye-opening experience, I don’t make visual contact with homeless people very often because I hate to give them the false hope that I’ll offer them something. Still, I will occasionally give a couple of bucks to a homeless person only if they are outside a supermarket or a place where you can’t buy cigarettes, alcohol, or anything else like that.

In addition to homeless people, I will pretend not to notice people who I don’t feel safe around—like people who look like they’re in a gang. I remember when my friend Alex and I were playing video games at Peter Piper

Pizza. We saw a person who certainly seemed like he was part of a gang; he was wearing a tank top and had lots of tattoos on his arms, including some teardrop tattoos on his face under his eyes. I didn’t feel safe. Alex and I still stayed at the Peter Piper because we were with our friends and we felt safer with them than by ourselves. Now that I think about it, it wouldn’t have been bad to say hi to him because he probably was just there with his family and friends like my friends and I were.

Another incident when I did not feel safe was when my brother, father, and I were on our way home and stopped by Sam’s Club to get gas. As we started to fill the tank, a car pulled up to the pump next to us. When a man opened the car door I could see a pistol on his hip; it looked like a semi-automatic gun. After that first glance, I tried my best to look in the other direction. At first I was afraid because I knew that guns are used for only one thing, and that is for harming other people. The fact that he wasn’t dressed as a cop did not help with my fear.

Before Akaya Windwood’s invitation, I honestly hadn’t thought about what might happen if I noticed everyone that I wouldn’t normally acknowledge. When I thought about everyone, I was thinking more about the people who might take advantage of me or who struck me as a potentially dangerous. That seemed like an unreasonable request. I wasn’t thinking of people who would be ignored for other reasons—someone like a handicapped person or kids at school who aren’t popular.

If I were to challenge myself, in most cases, I would smile at people—even at the people I might not normally acknowledge at all. I know that people might take certain greetings differently, but I imagine that a smile could only be viewed as a good thing. With others whom

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Nizhone Hickman essay continued)

I would feel more comfortable around, I would attempt to do more and say “hi.” I might even try to start a conversation with people I know. I would prefer not to start talking with people I don’t know because they might feel like I’m invading their personal space.

After taking that extra step to acknowledge people, I think I would feel happier for having made someone else happier. When people are noticed, they feel valued—and that makes me happy. I know that you can’t be too open to every person because not all people have good intentions. It is not clear which people can be trusted (or not), and that’s why it’s a person’s personal decision to decide whom they acknowledge. If everyone were able to acknowledge each other, the world would be a far better place, perhaps without war and violence, and people as a whole would be happy and open with each other. Maybe this is a dream, but we have to try—one day, one person at a time.

The Humbled Lawyer

By Adam Dale, Mercyhurst University

I've always felt that the nine-to-five lifestyle was mundane and unrewarding. Head to work and put in hours just to pay bills and keep a roof over your head. After reading Akaya Windwood's story, "What Can Change When We Learn to See Each Other," I felt compelled to write about the perceptions we label each other with and how we as a society should look past these indifferences.

Many parents teach their children to "never judge a book by its cover." Even with these morals, we still make the mistake of judging individuals we don't know. We may never completely change, but with constant reminders and new light shed on these situations we can be more accepting of all people.

* * * * *

Another day of existence stuck in my mediocre job with terrible bosses. My wife constantly complains to me about overdue bills and the lack of money to pay our mortgage. I've often thought of ending it. Today, however, would give me a reason to live once again.

I set off for work like any other day in the Big Apple. All the hustlers and bustlers moving without regard past each other, shoving and swearing their way through the hordes of people. No "hi" or "excuse me, I need to pass." How did I ever think this would be my life? A city built by financial kings on the backs of the poor, breeding sorrow and anger. It nurtures itself by feeding off of its people's innocence. All of us different, yet we're all the same but still judging each other by stature and social acceptance.

As I make my way through the sidewalk's calamity, I see a beggar around my age panhandling, like you often see around here. For some reason, this man seems so desperate

to me, and I have to help. I reach into my pocket to pull out some change; all I have is a five dollar bill. With regret I hand over the cash. The vagrant replies "Thank you sir, and God bless." I feel mad at the amount I gave him, but rejoice in the numerous karma points that will come back to me for my kind deed.

I continue on my walk to my local subway station, pondering the tasks ahead and the gripes I would receive for not submitting the Johnson case to Mr. Weber. I glance around at my surroundings and see the usual suspects that fill this depressing arena. You can find every class of citizen trapped in this dark downtown subway station. I make my way to the platform and watch more and more people filter through their commuting customs.

A bell dings, and the intercom announces the connector pulling into the station. I glance down the line and see it coming. Just then a gust of wind captures my coat, and I begin to sway. I look down and notice I'm standing in a zone marked "No Standing." I lose my balance and fall to the tracks below. I'm shaken by the fall and the thought of imminent danger rushes through me. I must stand up and get off these tracks. I quickly turn to see the homeless man standing on the platform above with his hand stretched outward. As I reach for the man's hand the train's horn grows louder and the distance between the train and me closes in. My feeble-looking savior hastily pulls me up as if I weigh nothing. Will I make it back to the platform? Will I lose limbs? Will I live?

I roll onto the man and the train gushes behind with fiercely strong winds that whip at my coat. Overwhelmed with gratitude, I hug the man. I cannot control my emotions; my heart is racing, I thank him over and over. As we stand up, the commuters begin to clap and cheer for the man's brave reaction to help. Over the

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Adam Dale essay continued)

sound of the uproarious crowd he yells “Thank you sir. I now have money to eat. We both have saved one another.” I continue to cry and the man calmly walks away into the sea of cheering people. Did this just happen? If I did not notice this man earlier, would I still be alive? I fall to my knees knowing I may never see that man again.

Months go by and I still think about the man who saved my life. How is he doing and has he made his way off the streets? It’s not often you meet a person who will change your outlook on life from a bleak, unfulfilling existence to a humbled respect for life and gratitude. I hope to see my hero again so I can invite him out for coffee or maybe dinner—to ask how he got in the position he’s in or just to ask his story. From that day forward I always carry an extra five dollars for those “just in case” situations; you never know when someone may return the favor.
