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WRITING LESSON

SIMPLE LIVING

The YES! Magazine article **Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff** by **Simon Okelo** is a story about learning to live with less in the midst of abundance.

Students will use Simon Okelo's article to write about how they might live more simply and what it would mean if society did so too.

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Part 1: The Article

Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff

It was only after experiencing the abundance of stuff in the United States that Simon Okelo learned to value life with less, the way he grew up.

Simon Okelo plays his djembe drums. "It's really soothing for me. I used to play drums in church. They make me feel at home. I take my breaks on the drum. It makes me ease off of everything." Photo by Betty Udesen for YES! Magazine.

By Simon Okelo

Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Fall 2013 issue

I grew up by the main road through Manyatta, the slum neighborhood of Kisumu, Kenya. My mother and other women from our community struggled to put food on their own tables. But they started a feeding program in our home for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, which was rampant in Kisumu in the 1990s. The program eventually became Young Generation Centre, an orphanage that still serves the community.

My mother became a businesswoman to cover the household's expenses. She built a mud-walled building and rented rooms, dug a well to get water to sell, sold groceries, and supplied milk and bread to shopkeepers. Her many businesses ensured that we were all fed

and clothed. There were no extras, but I never felt deprived, because we were surrounded by people who had very few possessions.

The municipal water supply to our area had been disconnected during road construction years ago. Most wells had water in the rainy season but dried up completely during droughts. That's when neighbors holding jerry cans lined up to our well, one of the few local sources of drinking water. Each family was limited to a 20-liter container, but we sometimes had to close the well for hours while it refilled. When that happened, those who had secured water earlier returned to share it with people stuck in line. Seeing people waiting for a well to refill taught me patience. Seeing them carefully sipping water showed me how to enjoy basic necessities as if they were gems.

But being in a place of such abundance destroyed my ability to get satisfied. My consuming in America became propelled by the abundance of goods.

A pair of brown shorts

When I was 13, I transferred to a private school, paying for my tuition by selling milk and other goods around Manyatta. I made two cents for each packet of milk, which meant I had to sell seven crates a day to pay the $300 per term fee. I managed to sell 20 crates each morning, earning more than I needed for my own tuition, so my siblings were able to attend better schools as well.

But being in a place of such abundance destroyed my ability to get satisfied. My consuming in America became propelled by the abundance of goods.

On school assembly days, girls glowed in neat light-brown dresses, and boys stood at attention in long socks and chocolate-brown shorts. I was the only one who looked out of place, wearing the grey shorts that were the uniform of my previous school. I avoided walking in front of girls, as they giggled at the hole in the back of my shorts that displayed a sliver of my "full moon."

One day my classmate Robert handed me a pair of brown shorts, an extra pair he had. I was so eager to try them on that I ran home, dashing between pedestrians and bicyclists. Drenched in sweat and excited to show off my new clothes,

I jumped into the shorts and went to where my mom and the orphanage matron were making dinner.

"What do you think?" I asked.

They smiled, and had a close look. My mom said, "They look good on you, but if you work hard, you will get your own." She didn't want me to become reliant on charity. I walked away, disappointed and ashamed. Her words echoed in my mind that night as I lay in bed, trying to sleep.

The next day I gave the shorts back to Robert. I worked even harder selling milk, and I returned to school after the holidays with a new pair of brown shorts. I felt proud as I washed and pressed my new shorts every evening to wear the next day.

In 1994, when the World Cup was held in the United States, I was dangling on a neighbor's window frame, watching the only TV in our neighborhood—an old black-and-white model. It was the first time I had seen the wealth of the United States.The beauty and enormous size of the stadiums and the amazing variety of foods shown during the commercial breaks made me aware of what we lacked.

I took up boxing at 12 to help protect my sisters from the gangs that roamed our neighborhood. That skill earned me a college scholarship, a rare opportunity for a youth from Manyatta. At the end of my business studies in Nairobi, I returned to Kisumu to manage the orphanage, which cared for hundreds of kids by then. I organized music events and worked as a DJ on the side.

Leading projects at the orphanage led to my next job as Africa field director for an international NGO. On a trip to Liberia in 2009, I met Rebecca, a young American woman

working on a hospital project in Ghana. We spent six months evaluating the possibility of building health clinics in Liberia and Kenya. It took a little more time for us to evaluate the possibility of being together forever. We fell in love, and we were married in 2010.

An American consumer

We moved to the United States and spent our first year there in an affluent Seattle suburb, where I had to make big adjustments. I felt uncomfortable, especially when I went running at a local soccer field, which I thought was nicer than Kasarani, the home stadium of Kenya's national soccer team. Most of the other people using the running track did not smile or wave when I greeted them.

I got a green card and a job as an over-the-phone medical interpreter. Rebecca and I bought a house. I was officially an American consumer.

> **Where my neighbors in Manyatta had to wait long hours for water, I could choose between whole, 2-percent, skim, soy, and rice milk.**

Suddenly, I was earning what seemed to me a vast amount of money and living in a country where everything was abundant and accessible. On weekends I went to Costco to stock up on food and clothes. Anything that was on sale was irresistible. Even if I needed only one gallon of milk, I had to buy two, because Costco packed them in pairs. Where my neighbors in Manyatta had to wait long hours for water, I could choose between whole, 2-percent, skim, soy, and rice milk. But being in a place of such abundance destroyed my ability to get satisfied. My consuming in America became propelled by the abundance of goods. I soon felt I was drowning in options.

The brown shorts I bought with the money I earned at 13 gave me joy and pleasure. I felt great as an older teenager in my only pair of tight, dark-blue jeans and my green-striped shirt. I had one pair of shoes, but they were uniquely mine, and every step in them gave me confidence. In Seattle the joy and confidence these clothes gave me were replaced by the daily chore of deciding what to wear from the many beautifully-colored shirts in my closet. I didn't feel connected to my clothes like I did when I had few to choose from and worked hard to get what I had.

I eventually realized that I had to adjust to my new ability to be a consumer.

Relearning "Enough"

Visiting Manyatta every year and trying to find a balance between my two homes changed my consumption habits over time. These days, as I push the large cart through Costco, I imagine what people in Manyatta are experiencing at the moment I'm about to spend excessively.

Instead of being attracted by anything that is on sale, I find myself thinking how fortunate I am to be in a place where there are so many options. I also feel lucky that I am likely the only person from Manyatta in any Costco store in the world at that moment. Such reminders make me appreciate my purchases and use them sparingly, because I find joy in simplifying my lifestyle. I don't aim to match the living standards in Manyatta or to live up to the expectations of society in Seattle—I actively practice being conscious about my choices.

Memories of my childhood help—like my neighbors enjoying a cup of water after a long wait, taking each sip as if it were the most delicious and expensive drink in the world. Like them, we could savor our possessions, share what we don't need, and take pleasure from others' enjoyment. Consuming just enough.

Simon Okelo wrote this article for The Human Cost of Stuff, the Fall 2013 issue of YES! Magazine. Okelo founded One Vibe Entertainment, a nonprofit that helps Kenyan youth realize their potential through music, art, education, and technology. He is a contributor to Slum Rising, a project of the Seattle Globalist.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Simon Okelo, who grew up in Kenya, had to relearn what "enough" means. He came to appreciate the volume of options at Costco, but practiced restraint to purchase just what he needed. Imagine that you simplified your life. What things would you choose to pare down or get rid of? What might change for you? What might change for society if other people did this?

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/simple-living

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.

Trophies and Goodie Bags

By Annika Holliday, Grade 6

Why is the reward for doing something always more stuff? After reading the article, "Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff," by Simon Okelo, and watching "The Story of Stuff," produced by Annie Leonard, I started looking at all of the stuff collecting dust on my shelf. Why did I get a trophy for participating in a sports league? Why did I get a goodie bag full of little toys and candy for going to a party? I do not need all those bouncy balls, cartoon characters, stickers, and plastic things that end up in a pile on my shelf and that I eventually throw away. Does our society understand the negative consequences to the environment when we produce trophies and cheap toys for party bags?

There are only a few of my soccer, tennis, and skiing trophies that I am truly proud of because I had to fight hard to win them. Trophies are given out to improve self-esteem and make us feel good about ourselves, but they do not mean anything to me if I did not earn them. The United States has five percent of the world's population, but uses 30 percent of the world's resources and produces 30 percent of the world's waste. Nearly all of the plastic toys that go into a party bag are made in poorer countries and end up in a landfill. I could easily get rid of half the objects on my bookshelf. Why do I have all this stuff, and what do I really need?

We need to change our behavior and begin to pay more attention to what we buy and receive. Compared to 50 years ago, the average United States citizen consumes twice as much and is exposed to double the amount of toxic chemicals. We should think about all the energy and waste that goes into making memorabilia and disposable household products. What is the environmental and social impact of making cheap products that we end up throwing away? According to Annie Leonard, only one percent of all materials are still in use six months after their date of sale. Ninety-nine percent of materials is too much waste. Four billion pounds of toxic chemicals per year are released into the air. Thirty percent of children in the Congo are dropping out of school to mine metal so we can have cell phones and computers. We need to start thinking about our choices. Do we need to buy the newest iPhone? Do we need to hand out goodie bags at birthday parties? Do kids need trophies to reward participation? If we stop buying these things, companies will stop producing them, and then we will have cleaner water, air and soil. Next time I go shopping, I will not buy something just because it is cheap; I will think about if it is going to be useful to me.

It is not just individual behavior, but our culture that we have to change. According to the childstats.gov website, there were 48.7 million children in the United States in 2012. Assuming that all 48.7 million children have a birthday party, invite eight other kids and give each child a goodie bag with five toys, then a factory somewhere would have to produce 1.9 billion toys a year just to fill all those goodie bags. Most of these little toys cost less than a dollar, so parents fill up party bags easily without much thought. I think if someone did a research study on how long children play with these toys, the result would show that the toy breaks or children move on within a few minutes. As a society, we need to change the tradition of handing out useless plastic toys at birthday parties because it is harming the environment and children do not need more toys that just get thrown away. For me, the little bit of happiness I might get after receiving a toy is now replaced by guilt when I open up the trash can.

Our parents might think that they are saving

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Annika Holliday essay continued)

our self-esteem by giving us all this plastic, but we have a voice. We need to tell our parents that the toys and trophies they give us do not create long-lasting happiness. We do not want them to buy us more stuff that puts toxic chemicals into the air, water, and soil. My generation needs to consume less - a lot less. I do not need useless toys just for going to a birthday party. I do not need a trophy because I participated in a sports league. Like Simon Okelo, every time my family buys something, I will ask myself two questions: Is it going to be useful to me? Do I really need it? Even though I am only eleven years old, change can start with me.

Part 5: Sample Essays

A Simpler Life

By Nick Young, Grade 6

As I read the YES! Magazine article, "Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff," by Simon Okelo, it made me think of how I'm very lucky to have what I have. Simon grew up with hardly anything and I've grown up with nothing to worry about. It makes me wonder what it would be like without my iPhone or Lucas, my faithful dog. I'm starting to think that simplifying my life might not be as easy as I originally thought it would be.

The first thing I could do to simplify my life is get rid of my precious iPhone 4. In the wonderful few months that I've had it, I've had the best time of my life. Now I have way more independence. I'm finally allowed to head down to Langley with a friend to bask in the occasional sunlight. We eat pizza and catch movies because my parents feel OK letting me go since I can call at a moment's notice. Even though my phone and I have developed a wonderful relationship together, I know in my heart it is not a necessity. Sure, I would be "out of the loop" without my iPhone because all of my social media comes off that thing. And I wouldn't have as much freedom from my mom and dad because without the phone they wouldn't let me go hang out with my friends. But I know I could live without it. Basically, life without my iPhone would be much simpler, but not as much fun.

The second thing I could do to simplify my life is get rid of our family dog Lucas. Lucas is a lot of work, but I can't imagine living without him. He is one of my favorite companions. I love to pet his sleek, shiny black fur. I always know I can trust Lucas to keep a secret. I can tell him anything and he will listen. Sometimes at night Lucas sleeps in the middle of our hallway, equally close to everyone, trying to be loyal and protecting us from any intruders in the night. What if suddenly my family didn't have enough money to feed him so we had to give him away? I wouldn't have to scoop his poop or feed him if he was gone but then I also wouldn't be able to play with him or take him for walks. So, again my life would be simpler but there would be a piece missing from my heart.

As you can see, my life would be greatly affected if I had to simplify it by giving away some of my precious keepsakes. I think instead that I—and others in our society—could make a difference by donating food, and outgrown clothing and shoes. I would have less clutter, and hunger and poverty would be reduced. If we only used what we needed, then this Earth would be a much better place. So reader, just take a moment and think," Do I really need this?" You too can help the world in your own small, but very important way.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Doing Without

By Spencer Reed, Grade 12

Most of what surrounds us is unnecessary. We could meet our needs with nothing but a small shelter, a single set of clothing, and some food. Not many people would choose to live with so little; certainly, some would (and do), but they are the exception rather than the rule. To some degree, our possessions can increase our happiness beyond the point at which they meet our basic needs. For instance, for the families living in Manyatta described by Simon Okelo in his article, "Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff," more possessions could improve their quality of life. Some luxuries would have a noticeable positive effect on these families because they appreciate what they have to a greater degree than do people living in societies of excess. As demonstrated both anecdotally by his experiences and in most happiness surveys of rich and poor countries, more wealth does not equate to more happiness, and money is not a permanent prescription for all worldly woes.

I think there is a point of equilibrium between the opposite extremes of all-out consumerism and the simplicity dictated by widespread poverty. However, I don't believe that this balance is the same for all people. Instead, the goal of each person should be to find their own compromise. This goal is more attainable for those lucky enough to have viable choices. Whereas I have the freedom to simplify, the choice to be more materialistic isn't a realistic option for someone born into poverty. I would like to level the economic playing field so that more people can have more—and then choose less. I myself would like to find a balance between minimalism and abundance and between a lifestyle that is more organic and one that is consumerist.

Although I grew up in the materialist mecca of America, through international travel and spending time in the wilderness, I have also seen life lived without excess. Many of my best memories come from my experiences with simplicity. I have always spent large chunks of my summers deep in the Adirondacks, on a small island of Raquette Lake, in a tiny cabin without running water or other modern conveniences. Spending so much time in the solitude of wilderness showed me the world that exists beyond our industrial prison, and the peace of mind that can be found there. There is a tangible, visceral connection to the wilderness and its inhabitants, from the many deer to the rare bears, to the loons with their haunting, beautiful cries, to the fish that are their prey. Even in the middle of storms, when it was freezing or so windy that it seemed as though the cabin might be blown across the lake, I would never have traded a second spent there for the safety and security of my warm and comfortable home.

I also recall the joy of spending a week in a small and isolated Peruvian community, where my family and I were made to feel as welcome as locals. Once, we visited the house of a family that very rarely allowed foreign visitors. They had a young child who was very sick and required extensive medical care. The family made traditional clothing and souvenirs to be sold in the village to tourists. They had to do this instead of farming because they needed a reliable source of money to pay for their daughter's medical expenses. They were not abandoned, though; the community all pitched in to help them. The villagers sold all the souvenirs, making sure that the family got fair

prices and had time to spend with their child. They also frequently came by to help with chores or cooking or anything else the family needed. Despite having few possessions and little money, they were the most generous people I have ever had the privilege to meet.

In America, I find a different picture. Our basic needs are, for lack of a better word, necessary, while I would classify almost all of the remainder of what we have as either for entertainment or comfort. Many of us could easily halve our stuff without even noticing a change in our quality of life. Simply put, in American society we have more than we need. In choosing to be consumers above all else, we not only pollute and damage the environment but cause a great deal of harm to the people who make our possessions. The environment and factory workers who suffer from substandard working conditions are not the only ones who pay a heavy toll for our excessive lifestyles. We have so much stuff that our view of what is truly important in life is clouded. In short, our materialism has become detrimental to our own happiness.

Change starts slowly. Simon Okelo learned to appreciate the real value of things, and so can we. As individuals, we can live intentionally and with awareness. One person doing so won't change the world, but as more and more individuals and communities move away from our current consumerist mentality, change will come. Sharing Simon's revelation and the stories of others who have experienced similar shifts in perspective is one practical and effective action for change. You and I can also begin by recognizing our affluence and making more conscious choices. Instead of being guided by the question, "Do I want this?" we should be guided by the question, "Do Ineed this?" or, failing that, "Why do I want this?"—a question that reminds us that we can be just as happy or happier with less.

I doubt that we'll ever be reductionist enough to choose to live with nothing but our most basic necessities. However, by being more conscious of our decisions we can lead more balanced lives—for ourselves and for our planet. We may choose to keep some of the things we don't need, but we should remember that we can live without them. Buying for the sole purpose of having is a vice of our society. We would all be better off if we rejected the idea that more is always better. As Edward Abbey said, "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell."

Need or Want

By Sana Naz, Whatcom Community College

There is a thin, delicate line that distinguishes needs from wants, and for most of us the line is blurry. The field of wants is so enormous that once a person enters it, the abundance of choices engulfs the person. The secret of a satisfied life is to choose what we need, not what we want. In the YES! Magazine article, "Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff," the author Simon Okelo genuinely knew the satisfaction of buying things with his own hard-earned money. For a person like Simon, who later moved to America with his wife, it was very easy to be lured into a buying frenzy upon seeing rows of beautifully displayed items in the grocery stores. Simon's control over his spending is very inspirational for me because he maintained his thrifty purchasing habits even when he had the power to buy lavish things. He achieved the real art of spending money by examining his needs, not his wants.

Simon's feeling of amazement upon seeing thousands of affordable items in Costco is very similar to my personal experience when I came to America. In my country of Pakistan, the grocery stores are filled with things stuffed in small packages that can be consumed in a short period of time; they also have very few sales promotions. When I first went to the American grocery stores, their fascinating offers and variety of products drove me to impulse buying. Filling my cabinet with things I actually didn't need made me recall my simple consumption habits in Pakistan. I looked into my overflowing cupboards and thought that the food dumped in there might be priceless to those who are suffering from hunger. This realization was the turning point of my purchasing habits in America. Paring down my wants and buying just what I need gave me the highest level of satisfaction. Unlike those who are struggling to fulfill their basic needs, for me, simplifying my life is a way of being thankful for being able to have enough of everything.

Just like Simon's beloved pair of brown shorts, I also had few clothes when I was in my country. But when I came to America, my closet and dresser started filling up with clothes that seemed attractive at the time I bought them. In less than six months shirts, cardigans, and jeans got buried under newly purchased clothes, and I soon forgot about the old ones. This impulse buying continued until one day I saw piles of clothes stuffed in my dresser. I asked myself, "Do I really need all those items?" I realized they could be useful to someone else, so, I gave some of my unwanted dresses to a used clothing store.

The same can be said about food. Buying food just because it comes in fancy packaging is not a wise decision. Buying unhealthy food in fancy packaging is even worse—it's like buying poison. I shouldn't spend money on food I don't want to eat or food that is unhealthy for me. It's better not to buy it than to put it in my refrigerator and let it—and my body—go bad.

As individuals, it may seem like an insignificant act to cut down on our wants, but, as a whole, our collective effort can make a great impact on people who are living below the poverty line. A simple reduction of our grocery lists might contribute to fighting hunger all over the world. There is a broader aspect to this little effort of paring down our wants, which may help those who can only imagine buying what we don't even care for. In the words of marketing and business, if the demand increases, the price goes up. We, as consumers,

are the people who actually set the demand for anything that is available on the market. If we all put our efforts towards limiting our purchasing habits, we can cut down the demand for goods that are wanted, but not necessary. With this effort we can help reduce the price of goods, and make them affordable to those who are struggling.
