



Divide and Conquer: Writing Excellent Literary Essays

Now that we have finished Mark Twain's famous and important novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, we will look at three documentary pieces that relate to the things Twain saw as issues in society that needed changing. The overarching issue he hated was slavery, but he also satirized foolishness, shallowness, group think and gullibility in society as a whole. Sometimes it seemed as if Huck Finn was the only character with a sense of self awareness. (Well, of course, there's Jim and Dr. Robinson...) Remember that Twain said *Huck Finn* was a book of his "where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision, and conscience suffers defeat."

In the 1960s in Palo Alto, California, a high school teacher embarks on a fascinating and fearful class experiment that shows how foolish, shallow, gullible, and lacking self-awareness many people can be and how quickly community can become a group think type mob. He is not dealing with slavery here, but with another horrible crime against humanity, Hitler's Nazi movement. This documentary, *The Wave*, shows a young truth-teller like Huck emerging. Although in a different setting and with a different personality, Lori becomes the voice that we should listen to just as Huck Finn was the voice of reason in his story (Twain's voice). *The Wave* is linked to [harrellland website](#) if you want to see it again.

In 1970, Jane Elliott, a third grade teacher in Iowa, devised a classroom experiment documented in *A Class Divided*. Again we see foolishness, shallowness, gullibility, and group think at work in the area of stereotyping (racial profiling, we might call it today). Ms. Elliott is the truth teller with her children, but the real revelation comes in the documentary. The children return as grown-ups to view the experiment. They all become truth tellers in this case, and we see the powerful impact of role playing just as *Huck Finn* shows the power a piece of literature can carry. This PBS program is also linked to [harrellland website](#).

The third documentary that we will see is called *Three Sovereigns for Sarah*. It makes real for us the horrors of the 1692 Salem witch hysteria in America. Certainly you will wonder at the foolishness, gullibility, and group think, along with greed, fear, and cruelty that overtook an American community and caused awful destruction. The truth-teller, Sarah Cloyse, barely escapes with her life, and lives only long enough to narrate her true story in this docudrama.

That takes us to now. One would think and hope we have learned something from these powerful events in history. My question to you is what should we learn; what have we learned?

In order to answer this question we will write an essay. However, we will do this in a group think exercise that is positive rather than negative as in the above examples. We will begin with a handout, Building Blocks for Essays. I will help us brainstorm and begin the introduction and thesis for the essay. Then you will form four groups; each will write a body paragraph(s) supporting the thesis with one of the examples. After that is done in class, everyone will have access to the body paragraphs which I'll post on the class page. All you'll then need to do for your individual essay is:

- finish your introduction
- write the conclusion (where you summarize what should be learned)
- be sure you have good transitions between paragraphs
- be sure you like the organization and wording from the group work
- be sure it's grammatically sound
- make a title
- Use the Having a Writing Conference with Yourself sheet as you edit

