About representative evidence
Notes for Friday, February 3, 2012

Today’s lesson was to have been a debate about representative evidence. I was going to give you a paragraph from the essay (“Women on the Breadlines”) and I was going to have you debate about whether it was a representative passage from the essay.

By “representative” I mean typical, ordinary, like most of the other paragraphs in the essay. In other words, if you were to select several other paragraphs at random, would they be like the one I gave you or would it be significantly different?

The idea here is that, in your paper, you are picking quotes and examples from the essay to support your analysis, and they should be quotes and examples that give the reader an accurate picture of the essay as a whole. If you pick one that is not representative, you might mislead your reader into thinking the essay is different from what it is actually like.

The trick is that an example can be “like” others in different ways. So deciding if a piece of evidence is representative requires you to think about what, exactly, you are trying to represent. (This is what makes the debate interesting. Teams arguing that a sample paragraph is representative will focus on different aspects of the writing from those arguing that it is not.)

Consider the second paragraph on page 169 (the paragraph where Ellen’s friend goes up to the wire cage to get the job of nursemaid). In some ways this paragraph is highly representative of the essay, and in others it is quite unrepresentative.

How it is representative

The essay can be considered highly representative of the essay as a whole for several reasons. First, the author makes important use of physical detail to convey not just the facts, but the feeling and the meaning of those facts. She describes the “old gnarled women,” the young woman’s thin legs and the “neatly mended” runs in her stockings, the “bright spots of rouge” that “conceal her pallor,” the “narrow belt … drawn tightly around her thin waist.” All of this conveys, more intimately than mere facts, the impact of the Depression on this woman and on all of them. In this respect the paragraph is a perfect example of how most of the essay works.

Also, it is representative in its use of anecdotal evidence. Throughout the essay Le Sueur focuses on individuals and tells stories in order to convey the larger patterns of the Depression. Very often these individual examples are quick snapshots that open a window on an entire life, showing us just enough to let us understand before moving on to the next story or to some sort of abstract thinking. In this way, too, this paragraph is like most of the others in the essay.

These are only two of the ways the paragraph could be considered representative. There are others, including aspects of the writing we have not discussed. For instance, her
sentence structure here is a lot like the rest of the essay. The sentences tend to be short and direct, with occasional longer ones that get more complex, creating an overall rhythm to the paragraph: roughly, short-long-short. This is pretty typical. Also, when she writes of the “old gnarled women” she is reversing the usual order of the adjectives—more often, we’d expect to see “gnarled old women.” This is a characteristic trick of Le Sueur’s to keep the writing fresh, avoiding clichés and predictable patterns so that the ideas and images feel new and vivid.

**How it is not representative**

At the same time, we could argue that this paragraph is in some ways quite unrepresentative of the essay as a whole. First of all, and most obviously, it’s the one case where someone actually gets offered a job. In that respect alone it is entirely atypical. (*Atypical* means *not* typical; it uses the Greek prefix *a-* meaning “not,” like *un-* in *unfair* or *in-* in *invisible*. Other words that use this prefix are *anonymous* and *atheist*.)

Another way that the paragraph is unrepresentative is that it depicts a young woman who is full of life, and even a little bit of hope, despite her hunger. Most of the women Le Sueur describes, including Bernice, Mrs. Grey, and the woman in the wire cage, are significantly older than Ellen’s friend. All are more or less beaten down by their poverty, while Ellen’s friend “has a flare of life in her that glows like a tiny red flame and some tenacious thing, perhaps only youth, keeps it burning bright.” This is very unlike the other women in the story.

Finally, the paragraph is unrepresentative because of its use of color. While the use of physical detail is typical of the entire essay, in general color is hardly mentioned. In the three and a half pages before this paragraph, only one color word appears: Bernice’s eyes are “blue.” Le Sueur uses the word “colors” itself a couple of times, but not specific colors, and only to describe something unreal—Bernice’s fantasies or the hypothetical case of what people do when they get a bit of money. She also uses the word “bright,” usually in the same way, but again, no actual color is mentioned. In this paragraph, on the other hand, we are given “red,” “rouge,” and “pallor” (pale skin)—three specific color terms in a single paragraph, compared with just one in the three and a half preceding pages.

**It's not about the theme**

Notice that in analyzing this paragraph I have said nothing about theme. My discussion was entirely focused on the way the paragraph is written. I’m considering whether it is representative in its style, its use of physical detail or anecdote, and in the stories that it tells. You could write about any theme in the essay using these ideas.

**Why it matters**

Some of this may seem trivial here, and you may be wondering why it matters. Who cares if she mentions colors very often?

As far as that individual example goes, it does matter if we’re trying to understand how the writing works. Two writers can both use lots of physical description but create an
entirely different feeling based on the things they describe. Looking at representative examples of their writing can help us understand those differences.

But that is just an example. The larger point is that evidence should give an accurate impression of the object of study. As I’ve mentioned, we’re using a piece of writing as our object of study because this is a writing class. But the same would be true if we were talking about sharks or medicine or students. We must choose our examples carefully so as to give the most representative picture of whatever is our object of study.

This matters a great deal in debate, whether scientific debate, political debate, or any other kind. One of the most frequent criticisms you’ll hear when one person criticizes another person’s argument is that their evidence is not representative, and that therefore it distorts the picture. Conclusions based on unrepresentative evidence are not reliable.

For example, Muslims have come in for a great deal of fear and suspicion, and have been significantly targeted by law enforcement, since 9/11. Some people justify this reaction by pointing out that the 9/11 hijackers were Muslim and that a great deal of terrorism is perpetrated by Muslims. The fallacy here is that those individuals are not representative of Muslims as a whole. (There are, according to one 2009 study*, something like 1.57 billion Muslims in the world; the overwhelming majority of them are ordinary people, not terrorists.)


Sometimes unscrupulous people will use unrepresentative evidence in a deliberate attempt to mislead. Unfortunately, all too often it works, because other people do not take the time to consider whether the evidence is representative.

A famous example was the notorious “Willie Horton” ad used in the 1988 Presidential campaign between George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis. Dukakis, the Democratic candidate, had been Governor of Massachusetts before he ran for President, and during his time as governor there had been a program that allowed prisoners on good behavior to be released temporarily into the community for work. One such prisoner, an African American man named Willie Horton, had taken advantage of the furlough to commit more crimes, including assault and rape. During the campaign, Bush’s campaign manager, Lee Atwater, used the Willie Horton episode to smear Dukakis, implying that Dukakis carelessly let dangerous criminals wander around, free to commit whatever crimes they like. The ad was widely credited with damaging Dukakis in the race, and while it did not give Bush the victory, it certainly helped. Bush ultimately won.

The problem was that the ad used evidence that was unrepresentative—in three different ways. First, Horton was not representative of the type of prisoner released on furlough. Most prisoners really were well behaved and did not commit crimes while out of prison. Second, the Horton episode was not representative of Dukakis’s policies toward crime.
And third, Horton was not a typical Black man. Many people believed that the ad was a deliberate attempt to play on White fears of Black men and the stereotype of Black men as criminals. (Atwater later apologized for the ad, saying that his effort to closely link Horton to Dukakis could “make me appear racist.”)

As you can see, using representative evidence—and knowing when someone else’s evidence is or is not representative—can be vitally important.

**In your paper**

In the Expository essay, you do not need to explain why you consider your examples to be representative. I just want you to think about the question and try to pick representative examples. Don’t pick examples just because they work well for your point or your theme. Pick examples that really are typical of the essay, in their use of physical detail or anecdote, or in some other way that relates to what you are writing about.

Mostly, I want to introduce the concept and get you thinking about it. We’ll be working with it much more intensively in our next assignment.

(We touched on it briefly in the Personal Narrative as well. The idea behind the three moments is that each one should be representative—typical—of that stage in your life.)