The Whole Family Under One Roof?

Introduction

A Victorian family circa 1860 (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

If you're like many Americans, you have just spent a few days in close quarters with your parents, grandchildren, siblings, etc. You're ready to go home, or ready for them to go home. But for a growing number of families in which adult children can't afford to live on their own, this is the new normal.

These "boomerang" children have been the butt of jokes on late-night television and even in commercials, but what's so bad about moving back in with your parents? Could extended families under one roof — a common arrangement in years past — be the way of the future?

The Only Faithful Human Institution

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I live on a cul-de-sac in Irvine, Calif., that includes eight 2,500-plus-square-foot homes. When we moved into the neighborhood 27 years ago, six of those homes included two baby-boom parents with children and two couples with empty nests. Now there are no longer children on our street, although adult kids are still living in two of the homes. In my house we now have three spare bedrooms — we keep the doors and the heating vent shut to conserve energy.

Houses like mine are a root of the current world financial crisis. In 2006, housing prices in the United States began to crash. That's about when our last daughter left for college. Our house, along with millions of others across the country, literally became worth less when the last kid moved out. The demand for big houses declined even while the new home builders were madly adding more square feet. Circa 2012 housing in the U.S. has lost about a third of its value, down from $25 trillion to $16 trillion by some estimates. This sharp decline in value of the American housing stock has catalyzed a worldwide restructuring of our economic systems. And just wait until 2020 when the full burden of baby-boomer retirement and decrepitude is recognized.

The cure for this demographic disaster is the pooling of resources across generations that we are already seeing in America. The idea of the nuclear family is now obviously obsolete. We are all reverting to the old reliance on the extended family that anthropologist Margaret Mead correctly described as the only faithful human institution. The government won't be there to help on this one. Boomerang kids are actually a blessing in disguise. They're allowing us to relearn how to live in multigenerational arrangements as humans almost always have. Yes, the lessons for balancing proximity and privacy are tough, but such learning is essential for all of us in the 21st century.

I'm Not Seeing a Boomerang

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One of the stories parents like to tell ourselves is that our young adult children want to move back in with us. Our 20-somethings are referred to as the Boomerang Generation, noted for their failure to launch. There is just one problem with the story of the Boomerang Generation: It is not true.

Census data show that what is really new about young adulthood is the percentage of young adults who live on their own. From 1880 to 1970 the percentage of U.S. born women in their twenties who lived on their own (not with parents and not with a husband) was always less than 15 percent. By 1980, the percentage of young adult women who lived on their own had risen to 27 percent, and to 33 percent in 1990, to 39 percent in 2000, and to 42 percent today. The delay of marriage and the extension of singleness can make it appear as if young people are more likely to return to the parental nest. If one examines single people in their twenties, who are the people who have the option of living with their parents, the percentage who live with their parents is now about 45 percent. That may seem high but it isn't: in the past single people in their 20s nearly always lived with their parents.

The Great Recession has actually had no effect whatsoever on the percentage of young adults living with their parents in the United States. This is not so surprising; the (even greater) Great Depression did not affect family structure much, and neither did the Industrial Revolution. Family structure changes slowly over time. Economic ups and downs have little effect on who lives with whom.

A Sensible Use of Spare Rooms

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The direct consequence of the turn of the century residential building boom is that now, in 2012, there are a lot of spare rooms in all those houses. Indeed, the chances are the greatest in the last 50 years that an adult family member is now living in your spare bedroom.

Multigenerational living is ahead for all of us. Baby boomers will be living with their kids as they begin to experience the infirmities of old age. By 2020 they'll need help with their disabilities, and the most sensible helpers will be members of the extended family living close by. The practice now of living together as adults across generations will be a big help.

Boomerang kids and baby boomers are learning about the balancing act between proximity and privacy that will be required in the modern families of the remainder of this century. Both physical structures and financial arrangements are being developed to accommodate such changes. For example, approximately one-third of American homes can be remodeled to include an accessory apartment with a separate kitchen and entrance. The major home builders have finally begun to experiment with such designs as well. Cross-generational financial agreements are burgeoning including shared real estate investments and adult children moving back home while saving money to repay college loans (which are exempt from bankruptcy proceedings).

Extended family members are already creatively designing a new future in these tough times. Indeed, now is the time to get ready for the coming changes in the American family.

REFERENCE: Essay series printed with permission from *The New York Times*, 2011.

General Prewriting Guidelines for Essays

Note: These general guidelines apply to the writing of a variety of genres or text types. The guidelines are designed to help students become thoughtful and process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, readers and writers. They are not meant as a strict sequence for prewriting. Writing is a recursive process, and a student may choose to develop the thesis or central/ controlling idea after generating and organizing ideas related to the topic.

Read and Understand the Prompt or Assignment

Prompts or writing assignments are often jam-packed with text. This can make it difficult to locate the key information that tells students what they need to know about the topic.

Suggestions for teaching students to read and understand writing prompts or assignments include the following:

- **Read** through the entire prompt or assignment.
- Then **reread** the prompt, sentence by sentence.
- **Circle words or phrases that are not recognized and understood**. Think about how the words are being used. Try to figure out what the words mean in relation to the words surrounding them. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to determine and/or confirm word meanings.
- **Lightly section off information about writing logistics** (length/page requirements, grading criteria, formatting guidelines, due dates, etc.). This leaves the information directly related to the essay's specified topic and purpose. While the logistical information is important, it can overwhelm and camouflage what the essay is supposed to be about.
- **Underline or highlight any sentences that are either questions or commands**. Look for key words, such as *argue, compare, cover, discuss*, or *list*. For example: "*Discuss* three examples of pollutants, *compare* and *contrast* them, and *argue* which is the worst." These key words also help to establish the purpose of an essay. Optional: Write the questions and imperatives at the top of the page.
- **Identify whether the topic is specified**, or if students have a choice about what will be written about. If it is specified, do your students have a clear understanding of what the topic is?
- **Determine the purpose of the assignment or prompt.** Teach students to use the key words to help them: Is it to explain or prove? Think about how the purpose affects the type of writing your students will do. Teach students to narrow the topic based on the purpose for writing.
- **Look for any information about the audience.** Teach students to ask themselves if there is any information in the prompt or assignment about the audience for whom they

will be writing. Teach them to think about what most people know about the topic.

- **Determine the type of essay required.** Teach students to try to imagine what kind of essay they'll be writing based on the prompt or assignment. Have criteria been established for how the writing will be evaluated? Is a rubric included? Teach students to think about similar types of writing that they have done and to ask questions when they are not sure of the task.

Sample Key Words

Key Word	Description
Analyze	• Break the issue or problem into separate parts. Discuss, examine, or interpret the parts and how they are related. • Look at the validity and persuasiveness of any reasons/supporting facts/ evidence given for a position. Determine if the conclusion is justified on the basis of these claims.
Compare and Contrast	Describe similarities and differences between two or more objects, situations, or ideas. May need to look at a before-and-after comparison.
Define	Tell or explain what a particular word or term means in the essay. Go beyond a dictionary definition to clarify the way in which the term or phrase is being used.
Describe	Give a detailed account, naming characteristics, parts, or qualities.
Discuss	Include explanations, reasoning, pro and con arguments, examples, analysis, and so forth.
Evaluate	Determine the value of something to discover how good or bad it is. May involve arguing that something is good or bad and explaining the logic of the reasoning. Is based on relevant evidence.
Explain	Help the reader understand the reasoning behind a position by showing logical development. May need to demonstrate how something works or how to do something step by step (procedural).
Illustrate	Give examples (not draw pictures) to clarify and elaborate ideas.
Prove	Support opinions with logical arguments and evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and/or expressions of commonly accepted beliefs.
State	Tell the reader opinions and/or facts in a convincing and concise way.

REFERENCE: Adapted from The California State University Expository Reading and Writing Course, 2008.

Develop the Thesis Statement or Central/Controlling Idea

Note: Specific guidelines for expository essays, persuasive essays, and personal narratives are included in separate handouts.

Tips for developing a clear and concise thesis or central/controlling idea include the following:

- **Get to the point.** Teach students to answer the question "What are you going to write about and why is it important?" Often, the answer to this question becomes the thesis!
- **Be sure of yourself.** Teach students to write like they believe it. Why should the reader believe a thesis or central/controlling idea if students don't sound like they believe it? Teach students to avoid words and phrases like *I think*, *I believe*, *might*, *maybe*, and *possibly*.
- **Don't believe the one-sentence myth.** Teach students that a thesis or central/controlling idea can be more than one sentence long. The thesis statement should be as concise as possible, but sometimes it may take more than one sentence to state the purpose and main focus/point of the essay.
- **Don't be afraid of change.** Teach students that if, while writing the essay, they realize they have lost focus and are writing about something different than what the thesis or central/controlling idea says—and they think the new idea is better than what was originally planned—to go with it and revise the thesis or central/controlling idea!
- **Clearly address the topic or prompt.** Questions to ask include the following:
    - **So what?** Does the thesis or central/controlling idea teach the readers something new or does it challenge an idea they have? Why is it significant? Does it compel the reader to think differently or take action? How much background information do the readers need to understand the topic and the thesis? Why should the reader care about the topic/subject?
    - **What are its implications?** What will have to change if the thesis or central/controlling idea is true? Will people have to think differently, take action, and/or change a policy? Does the essay present a new or different perspective? Teach students to ask themselves if they can support the thesis or controlling idea with evidence.
    - **Is it original?** Nothing is more boring to readers than something they've already heard before. Although the author may believe passionately in something and want to present the argument or position in a certain way, he or she should try to offer something different than what most readers have already heard.
    - **Is it focused enough?** Focus on a sufficiently narrow aspect of the subject area. Topics that are too broad or large need to be limited or narrowed so that the writer has a manageable topic to develop.

Generate and Organize Ideas Related to the Topic

After the topic or subject is identified and/or the thesis is developed, teach students to think about the main points and supporting ideas related to the topic. A variety of idea-generation strategies are typically taught and used to help students come up with these points and ideas. These strategies are designed to help students brainstorm as many related facts, examples, reasons, incidents, comparisons, contrasts, and causes/effects that they can think of before they begin to write their essays.

Typical brainstorming strategies include the following:

- **Free association.** As the most commonly used brainstorming technique, free association is useful for generating topic ideas and developing supporting arguments. This method can help students conceptualize a lot of different thoughts and ideas about their topic. The steps in this strategy include the following:
  - **Write the topic or thesis sentence** on the top of a piece of paper.
  - **Circle the key words.**
  - **List anything that relates to that topic.** Think of related terms from class and from readings. Include ideas that are related to the general topic.
  - **Examine the list**. Are any of your ideas similar or related? Divide these ideas into separate groups, or connect them with lines.
  - **Weigh relevance.** There may be ideas that don't relate to the topic. If these ideas seem to have potential but don't have enough evidentiary support, forget about including them for now. Teach students that they can always come back to them later, if need be.
- **Webbing/Clustering.** Mapping ideas that come to mind about a topic is another popular brainstorming strategy. The strategy typically involves these steps:
  - **Write a key word or phrase** in the center of a page with a circle drawn around it.
  - **Write related ideas** around the circle. Draw lines to signify which ideas should be classified together. Identify subtopics to the main topic during this process.
  - **Add supporting details** that branch off the subtopics.

  By grouping ideas together in this fashion, students automatically begin to order and decide what they want to say and, often, how they want to say it. Once students have recognized how the ideas are clustered or structured in the web or map, they can focus their energy on drafting and explaining the branches or links between the main ideas/points.
- **Informal outlining.** This strategy involves listing main ideas and the details related to the topic in the order in which they will be addressed. If ideas are randomly listed during a free-association brainstorming activity, they can be numbered to show the proposed progression and development of ideas within the essay.

REFERENCE: Virgil Undergraduate Writing Center, 2001–2005.

Model Lesson: Reading and Understanding Prompts

First, I am going to carefully read the entire prompt from "The Whole Family Under One Roof?"

Read aloud the entire prompt.

"If you're like many Americans, you have just spent a few days in close quarters with your parents, grandchildren, siblings, etc. You're ready to go home, or ready for them to go home. But for a growing number of families in which adult children can't afford to live on their own, this is the new normal.

"These 'boomerang' children have been the butt of jokes on late-night television and even in commercials, but what's so bad about moving back in with your parents? Could extended families under one roof—a common arrangement in years past—be the way of the future?"

Now, I am going to reread the prompt one sentence at a time.

Reread the first sentence.

The first sentence reads: "If you're like many Americans, you have just spent a few days in close quarters with your parents, grandchildren, siblings, etc."

Think aloud.

I think this is just an introductory generalization. It states that many Americans have just spent a few days during the holidays with family members/relatives who don't live with them. I am going to circle the words *close quarters*. I think the word *quarters* refers to a place where people live, such as a house or apartment. The author describes the quarters as being close. I wonder if this means close together? Maybe it means that the place seems small when so many people are inside. This makes sense! I think that I need to read the next sentence to get more information to understand why this is important.

Reread the second sentence.

The second sentence states: "You're ready to go home, or ready for them to go home."

Think aloud.

This sentence is easy to understand and seems to be related to the first sentence. I am not sure if either sentence contains key information about the topic. I do think these two sentences are saying that spending time in close quarters with relatives is something that most Americans can only tolerate for a brief period of time.

Reread the third sentence.

"But for a growing number of families in which adult children can't afford to live on their own, this is the new normal. "

Think aloud.

I think this sentence presents another view of families sharing close quarters. Although I am not sure what the two words *new normal* mean. I am going to circle these two words. I am going to try and figure out what these words mean in relation to the first two sentences. I do know what *new* means and what *normal* means. I think that the "old" mindset described in the first two sentences about families coming together and sharing close quarters must be changing. It appears that in today's society, families who have adult children who can't afford to live on their own are becoming more common and accepted (the new normal). Maybe the topic of the essay is children living with their parents. I need to keep reading to be sure.

Reread the fourth sentence.

"These 'boomerang' children have been the butt of jokes on late-night television and even in commercials, but what's so bad about moving back in with your parents?"

Think aloud.

First, I am going to highlight this question. But I don't see any key words that give me clues to the purpose of the essay. This may not be the question I am supposed to answer in my essay. I am confused by the term *boomerang* as it is used to describe children. I know that a boomerang is a weapon from Australia that is curved or designed to return to the person who throws it. But why would you describe children as boomerangs? Oh, I think I understand now. It probably means that some children who have left home are coming back home to live.

The first part of the question is stating that society is making fun of this new trend. The second part of the question seems to be asking me to consider why it would be so bad to move back in with your parents. I wonder if that is what I am supposed to write about. That would be an interesting topic. I need to read the last sentence before I will know for sure.

Reread the last sentence.

"Could extended families under one roof—a common arrangement in years past—be the way of the future?"

Think aloud.

I will highlight this sentence, too. I think the first part of the sentence is summing up the main topic discussed in the first paragraph. It mentions extended families under one roof. I am going to circle the words *extended families* because I am not sure what *extended* means in this context. I know that when something is extended it becomes longer. I am going to look *extended* up in the dictionary.

Here it is: *Extended* also means "to make larger." So, an extended family would be a family that is made larger when children or other relatives move in.

The sentence also says that extended families were common in the past. It must have been a long time ago, because I only know of two of my classmates who have their older siblings or grandparents living with them. I think this part of the sentence, *a common arrangement in years past*, is suggesting that extended families may once again become a widespread and common occurrence in today's society.

I am also going to circle *the way of the future*. But I think that this is just another way to say that extended families will become the "new normal."

I am certain that this last question specifies the topic of the essay. I can also determine that the purpose of the essay is to explain my position on the topic of whether extended families living under one roof will or will not become a widespread and common living arrangement in our future society.

I didn't see any writing logistics or key words in either of the paragraphs. The audience is not specified either.

REFERENCE: Prompt adapted from *The New York Times*, 2011.