

Ruts, Routines, and Rituals **An Essay Assignment**

Topic. Write an essay about a predictable set of actions that a person or group goes through on a regular basis.

Audience and Purpose. To survive in this kind of world, people tend to do the same things over and over. These repeated actions help us draw comfort from the familiar, learn new skills, squeeze a lot of work into a busy schedule, do more than one thing at a time, and give meaning to major transitions that we go through during the course of our lives. In this essay, your assignment is to describe and interpret a series of actions that you or someone you have observed repeats on a regular basis. If it is a mindless, boring habit like assembling a hamburger at a fast-food restaurant or detailing your car for a date, you may write about it in a negative way as a rut. Your purpose might be to help readers see that living life mindlessly is a slow form of death that ends in the ultimate rut, the grave. If it is a comfortable set of actions that helps you through the day such as what you do to get ready in the morning or what you and your friends do during the lunch hour, write about it in a positive way as a routine. Your purpose might be to remind readers that a certain amount of repetition can give us a sense of stability in a world of constant change. If it is a series of actions that you or a group repeats to give meaning to some aspect of life such as an Eagle Scout Court of Honor ceremony or a communion service at church, write about it as a ritual that is pregnant with meaning and symbolism. Your purpose might be to help readers understand what an unfamiliar ritual like Ramadan means or why others should begin participating in a ritual like the Race for Life.

Development Strategy. To develop this kind of personal essay, use a combination of narration and description. Choose a rut, routine, or ritual that you know from firsthand experience or through careful observation so that you can write about it in considerable detail. To test drive the topic, do some free writing for five or ten minutes to see what you have to say. If this results in some interesting material, try some focused free writing in which you describe in minute detail the topic for the purpose of helping readers visualize it. If this results in a clear description/narration that readers can easily visualize, try writing a thesis (main idea sentence) that will help you shape the first draft into a purposeful, coherent essay. If this works, share your first draft with a preliminary audience before writing a final draft.

Sample Topics

my family's Saturday morning routine
what I do to get ready for school in the morning
what my job requires me to do on a regular basis
the chores I do around the house
what my coach does to get the team ready for a game
Sunday dinner at Grandma's house
preparing for a dance recital
wedding rituals in a small southern town
a teenage girl/boy prepares for a date

driving to school on autopilot
getting ready for deer season
a mother gets her children ready for bed
my weight training regime
closing the store at the end of the day

how I relax after a long day
my neighbor's predictable patterns of behavior
how I keep my skin looking good
my homework routine
my cousin's weird eating habits
what I do to bring good luck on the football field
my mom's grocery-shopping routine
the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church
hanging out with my friends - a typical Friday night
my Dad's Sunday morning newspaper routine
Christmas rituals at my house
being taken for a daily walk by my dog
my peculiar study habits

Sample Thesis Statements

1. Force of habit means that an elderly person's daily routine does not vary much.
2. Some families celebrate birthdays in highly ritualistic ways.
3. Job supervisors can be very picky about requiring workers to follow the same routine each work day.
4. Little sisters who clean their rooms methodically every Saturday morning can be hard to live with.
5. Some of us are more dependent on certain routines than others, but we all need the stability and continuity that repeated behaviors bring.

Sample Essay

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Dad's Daily Duties

We are all creatures of habit. Some of us are more dependent on certain routines than others, but we all need the stability and continuity that repeated behaviors bring. My dad is no exception. He pretty much follows the same routine every day so that I can almost set my watch by his actions. When my mother died two years ago, his schedule became even more regimented as he started raising me and my brothers on his own.

When Dad's alarm clock goes off at 6:00, he gets up immediately, uses the bathroom, adjusts the thermostat in the hallway, and takes a shower. Then he yells, "Up and at 'em!" at about 50 decibels so that everyone in the house knows it's time to get up and begin preparing to go to school. If my brothers and I don't pile out of bed right away, he sticks his head in the door and yells, "Hit the deck!"

By 7:00, Dad has breakfast ready. When we drag ourselves into the dining room, he looks up from the stove and greets us cheerfully with "Morning, sleepy head" or "Well, look what the cat drug up." As we eat our bacon, eggs, and toast, he reminds us of our chores or other obligations for the day. "Carl, don't forget it's trash day. Make sure the garbage can's on the curb before you leave for school." "Jimmy, it's your turn to wash the breakfast dishes." "Danny, when you get off from work today, be sure to go by the feed store. Here's a list of what we need."

Before we leave the breakfast table, he makes us all look at him and promise that we will make our mother proud that day. He knows how much this means to us because Mom made us promise from her death bed that we would make her proud every time she looks down from Heaven. So far, it's working. We are all doing well in school, and my older brother Danny has a good part-time job that brings in extra money.

When Dad returns from work at 5:30, he makes sure we are all present or accounted for and then sits down in his favorite chair to read the newspaper and mail. By 6:30, he is supervising the preparation of our evening meal. We are all expected to help in one way or another, and we take turns saying grace. By 7:30, we have the dishes washed, dried, and put away. Dad then checks our homework. If everything meets his approval, he lets us watch TV with him or we play a game.

At 10:00 sharp, Dad calls us to the den and expects us to listen attentively while he reads a passage from the Bible. Then he leads us in a family prayer and wishes us a good night's sleep. By 10:30, Dad's bedroom light is always off and he's sound asleep.

Some of my friends think my Dad's routine is boring and predictable, but it's nice knowing that he's always there for us. I'm proud that he keeps me and my brothers on the straight and narrow path. I think Mom must be proud of him too.

Essay Reminders. Don't forget: 1) a good essay consists of three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion; 2) the main idea is stated clearly in a sentence called the thesis; 3) the topic is narrow and well developed; 4) the author writes about the topic from personal experience for an audience of readers who will benefit in some way from reading it; 5) the material is divided into paragraphs logically to make reading the essay easy; and 6) the topic is developed specifically, using one or more of the following development strategies: analogy, definition, description, cause/effect, comparison/contrast, division/classification, examples, narration, and process analysis.