

Sample Synthesis Essay

Understanding Smoking

Is smoking such a horrible thing? Is it really as bad as some claim it to be, or is it just a bad habit that some of us carry around, which warrants little public attention? There are many, widely varying answers to these questions. Which ones are right? Though they may claim to, no one really knows. These questions will always be debated. What many fail to realize is that the answer undoubtedly lies somewhere within an ever evolving and adapting compromise between the consciousness of smokers and the tolerance of anti-smokers. Failing to realize this leads many, when faced with the question of public policy toward smoking, to take a hardline stance. In the end, these extreme, uncompromising positions do nothing toward contributing to the further understanding of the issue. Rather, they inflame the fury of those on the other side of the fence, and inspire them to do the same. This is why we rarely come across a writer or politician who has a moderate stance on this issue. Most of the readings one can find on this issue are no more than the bickering of those who refuse to realize that the answer to this issue, like any public policy issue, will not be found on the fringes, but somewhere in the middle. I recently read two examples of these types of writings; one pro-smoking, and one anti-smoking.

The first I read was a piece by Lyndon Haviland, called "A Silence That Kills." This was a three-page rant about the hazards of smoking, written from the perspective of a health professional. As I'm sure you can imagine, her writing is full of medical statistics which credit her argument. She explains how "Tobacco remains the leading cause of death in the United States, killing more people than AIDS, suicide, murder, car accidents, and drugs combined (Haviland 150)." She also points out, for example, that "The World Bank predicts that by 2030, tobacco-related illnesses will cause more than 10 million deaths per year, more than any other cause (Haviland 150)..." The facts she presents are compelling. She does a great job of conveying the scope of the impact that tobacco has on our species. In every sentence of her essay, Haviland seems to make the assumption that the reader is of the opinion, as she is, that smoking should be abolished in America. The entire work is a call to action. She uses terms like "we have failed to" throughout the piece. She makes no concessions toward opposing arguments of any type, and doesn't acknowledge in any way that the reader may have a slightly differing viewpoint.

The second essay I came across was written by a long time smoker named Florence King called "I'd Rather Smoke Than Kiss." In her essay, King takes a very pro-smoking stance. She begins with the story of her childhood. She explains that she was raised by a mother who started smoking at 12 years of age, and who smoked up to four packs a day, and how she turned out fine. "My smoke-filled childhood was remarkably healthy and safe, says King (King 145). King herself started smoking for reasons that differ greatly from most smokers. She bought her first two packs at the age of 26, just for the packaging. She wanted to store paper clips in the packs. This part of the story lends itself toward her pro-smoking stance because it debunks the anti-smoker's commonly held belief that all smokers started smoking simply to look cool. She also shares with her reader the story of how she came to enjoy the "post coital" cigarette. However hard and unforgiving her position is, she does a great job of concealing it behind a very light-hearted tone. My personal belief is that, with regard to public policy, the answer to the smoking issue lies somewhere between Haviland and King.

=====

I think that once we can hold back our urges to push the extremist form of our viewpoints and we realize that arriving at the best solution will involve understanding and compromise, we will start to make progress. Smoking is unhealthy, but it shouldn't be prohibited. Many people enjoy smoking to little negative effect, yet it is not advisable to smoke while pregnant. It is with this understanding that we will eventually find the ideal public policy, if we do.