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Writing Bootcamp Unit  
Quotation Analysis Exercise

### One Quotation, Two Meanings: Quotation Analysis Exercise

#### **Abstract:**

This challenging lesson gives students practice in analyzing quotations very closely. The exercise begins with the premise that quotations never “speak for themselves,” and that writers need to explain what quotations mean. To prove this point, this lesson shows students that specific quotations can in fact “mean” (or support) very different claims; in fact, students use a single quotation to advance almost opposite arguments. The goal of the lesson is for students to understand that quotations may be very malleable, and thus they always need clear framing and explanation. This lesson uses a short essay, “What is an American?” as the basis of its worksheet. N.B. This activity can be quite difficult for high school students, and may work best at an advanced level.

#### **Standards:**

W.11-12.1 (Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.)

W.11-12.2 (Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.)

#### **Procedure:**

I have students work on this exercise after they learn the mechanics of quotation integration. Once they know how to weave quotations into their writings, their next task is to understand that quotations, no matter how skillfully woven into writing, do not stand on their own or “speak for themselves.”

Students come into this class having read and briefly discussed Akbar Ahmed’s article, “What is an American?” The essay is below, in Materials. Ahmed, a professor of Islamic Studies at American University, suggests legal, cultural, experiential (ie, key moments in our history), and political dimensions within his essay; for example, he cites the Constitution, Bart Simpson, 9/11, and America’s superpower status in making his arguments. (Other readings may of course be substituted, but the quotations and underlying claim statements on the worksheet (see Materials, below) would have to be changed.)

When you email (or hand out) the worksheet to students, you will have to explain it a bit, because it can be confusing. In essence, the worksheet presents two topic sentences below each quotation; the student should choose *one* topic sentence for each quotation and write a follow-up sentence or two beneath each topic sentence, using and quoting *parts of the quotation* as evidence. The student need not quote the whole quotation; indeed, an important aspect of the exercise is that students choose both what parts to quote and how to frame those words. For example, considering the second quotation, you might note that the first topic sentence is quite

neutral and straightforward, taking Ahmed at his word; one's evidence here should describe the "lack of unity" Ahmed sees. On the other hand, the second topic sentence focuses on Ahmed himself, and suggests that he is confused – so one's evidence might mention Ahmed's repetition of "bewildering," as if he cannot keep up with American cultural change.

Each student will complete three mini-paragraphs on the worksheet. When students are finished, you should hear competing readings of each quotation from the class and consider how a single quotation manages to "mean" two very different things. Note what portions of the quotations are used for each topic sentence, and how students set up those segments.

Alternately, you might ask students to complete both mini-paragraphs for a given quotation. While this approach may be more difficult for some students, it will also lead students more directly to the malleability of quotations because they are re-framing each one themselves.

### **Materials:**

#### **I.**

Below you will find two topic sentences underneath each quotation. Please choose *one* topic sentence for each quotation, and use *parts of the quotation* to support the claim of that topic sentence. Look carefully at the quotation and select the sections of it that help you prove the claim you've chosen.

1. "The primary definition involves the legal citizenship of the United States. This ensures the protection guaranteed by the Constitution and, in turn, obliges the citizen to accept the philosophy underlying the Constitution."

Ahmed's first definition of Americanness is reassuringly practical.

Ahmed's first definition of Americanness makes dangerous assumptions about what American citizens think.

2. "Today, American culture appears much more fragmented. There is a bewildering range of shows, music, religious and political discussions available to the viewer. There are equally bewildering role models. The excesses of the consumerist culture are embodied in figures like Paris Hilton, who is a caricature of herself."

Ahmed's notion of cultural fragmentation documents the distressing lack of unity in America.

Ahmed's notion of cultural fragmentation seems quite out of touch, as if he has little experience with current trends.

3. “Because America is a superpower -- currently the superpower -- it attracts both admiration and envy. Most foreigners, when asked to spot Americans in Paris, Cairo, or Delhi would say they are taller, fatter, and louder than anyone else. Even America's neighbors see it as bullying and arrogant. Ask Mexicans or Canadians what they think of America.”

Ahmed’s conception of America’s superpower status is one-sided, focusing only on the unpleasant consequences of our power.

Ahmed’s conception of America’s superpower status is refreshingly attuned to the opinions of our global neighbors.

## II.

Akbar, Ahmed. “What is an American?”

While grappling with ideas for a book on American identity ([\*Journey into America\*](#), Brookings Press, forthcoming) I've been trying to figure out what actually defines an American and would be grateful for any assistance by readers of this column.

The primary definition involves the legal citizenship of the United States. This ensures the protection guaranteed by the Constitution and, in turn, obliges the citizen to accept the philosophy underlying the Constitution. The concept and practice of checks and balances is fundamental to the Constitution. The citizen can also assume the protection of the military and the other security agencies from different kinds of threats.

Being a legal citizen is more than the acquisition of a passport, it is also the recognition of the ideas that were forged by the Founding Fathers of the United States. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin were extraordinary statesmen by any standards and had a collective vision of a new society in a new world. Jefferson's eloquence and imagination are clearly reflected in the stirring words of the Declaration of Independence. It is that Declaration that Americans celebrate on the Fourth of July with fireworks.

A more visible and therefore more obvious definition of Americanness comes from a sense of belonging to American culture. Movies, television shows, and sports create heroes, a language, and references for Americans. Expressions are picked up from television shows and become part of mainstream language. Bart Simpson's expression "eat my shorts" from the 1990s, for example, is now a recognized part of the American lexicon.

American culture was more unified in a general sense a generation ago when television was still a relatively new phenomenon. The glow of the Second World War and its victory still suffused

the nation. Americans had fought a just war and triumphed over some of the most evil men in history. Americans saw themselves, and were largely seen by the world, as the good guys.

Today, American culture appears much more fragmented. There is a bewildering range of shows, music, religious and political discussions available to the viewer. There are equally bewildering role models. The excesses of the consumerist culture are embodied in figures like Paris Hilton, who is a caricature of herself. Many people are seduced by the idea of consumption for the sake of consumption, excess for the sake of excess. This zeitgeist also feeds into the idea of being American, the notion that every American has the absolute right to do what they will of their lives.

America's fragmented culture also means that superstar politicians like Barack Obama are seen so differently by so many Americans. To some, he is almost Christ-like in his virtues and promise. To others, he is the Antichrist and is set to destroy America itself. The extremity of these opinions reflects the fragmented nature of America today. Different opinions in the arena of politics is the very essence of democracy and the debates between Jefferson and John Adams were as acrimonious as they are between Democrats and Republicans today. The difference is that after the bitter political exchanges, Jefferson and Adams could spend years as kindred souls, exchanging letters and ideas about a variety of subjects. The atmosphere around Obama today is becoming dangerously brittle and I suspect will become even more tense in the coming months as the economy and international affairs challenge him further. The debate around Obama then will expand beyond politics to the realm of the irrational and the subconscious which will include race and religion.

Great moments of achievement and catastrophe also bring Americans together. These special moments in a nation's life capture the imagination and focus on that special meaning of being American. These are the moments that Americans will remember and put away in their minds in the category of "where were you when...?" The moon landing forty years ago is one of those great achievements which only Americans were capable of pulling off and therefore it was a uniquely American achievement. Similarly the assassination of JFK in 1963, the American diplomats taken hostage in 1979, and the attacks of 9/11 brought the nation together in grief and shock.

There is a fourth definition which comes from non-Americans. Because America is a superpower -- currently the superpower -- it attracts both admiration and envy. Most foreigners, when asked to spot Americans in Paris, Cairo, or Delhi would say they are taller, fatter, and louder than anyone else. Even America's neighbors see it as bullying and arrogant. Ask Mexicans or Canadians what they think of America.

The question of defining a large country, indeed a continent, is a challenge. I have been traveling the length and breadth of the country with a team of young American researchers to discover the answer. What we found was a sense of vitality, openness to discuss issues, and belief in the vision of America inspired by the Founding Fathers. We also found uncertainty and anger.

I would very much like to read your ideas on what being an American means.