

## Sample Essay “Suspended in Time”

### Find the Implicit Thesis

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 92 of *Acting on Words*.

#### ***Finding an Implicit Thesis***

Inexperienced writers sometimes assume that real-life stories of danger, injury, or death are inherently dramatic and interesting. This assumption often results in narratives that are overwritten, obvious, and even manipulative. A tendency toward cliché can all too easily take over personal essays that deal with action and risk. In the following essay, written as a course assignment, Tamara Pelletier places the emphasis on accurate recall, resulting in an account with a dominant impression that eschews “exciting” description in favour of a closely observed psychological point of view.

Read Tamara Pelletier’s “Suspended in Time” below. In your own words, what is her thesis statement in this selection? Your suggestion should include a topic, controlling idea, and reasons. Once you have thought about this question, read our commentary below.

#### Suspended in Time

Tamara Pelletier

I untie my apron and throw it into the laundry. I take one last look around the bakery before I lock it and leave for the weekend. I walk home even though my feet are aching. It does not seem to take as long as it usually does because I know that I do not have to return to work for two more days.

I grab my hastily packed bag and head for my mum’s car. My little sister has her seatbelt on and is drawing in the back seat. My mum comes and sits in the driver’s seat. “Do you have everything that you’ll need?” she asks me. I nod and she puts the car in reverse, and we back out of the driveway. She is driving me to the bus station in a city near ours so

that it will not be such a long ride for me. I am excited because I am going to see a friend for the weekend.

We pull onto the highway and the usual banter begins about plans for the weekend along with the arguments about the radio station we listen to. We near the bus station and turn onto a main road. We go up a hill. Two cars ahead of us is a blue car that seems to be weaving a little and jolting. I think to myself, “That person is going to cause an accident.”

A couple of seconds later the blue car brakes suddenly at the crest of the hill, to avoid hitting some ducks that are crossing the road. The car directly in front of us stops, and my mum stops as well. I breathe a sigh of relief because I did not think she would make it. Just as I am about to congratulate her on not slamming into the car in front of us, I am violently thrown forward. I see a flash of white, and I am suspended in time. What seems like minutes later there is the resounding echo of what must have been the thunderous sound of a crash. I open my eyes and there is broken glass all over me. My car seat is reclined. I look up and everyone else in the car is covered in glass. The hood of the car is mangled, and steam is emerging from the front of the car. My little sister is screaming; she has blood on the corner of her mouth, and my mum cannot believe what has just happened. A frantic man comes to the side of the car asking if everything is OK and if he can help. He is apologizing; he must be the one who has hit us. I reach down into my purse and pull out my cellular telephone. I dial 911. I feel uncertain because I have never had to do this before. They take my name, my address, and ask me what has happened. Who is screaming? Is anyone hurt? I do not know how to answer these questions, and I just ask them to send someone to help. I continue talking to the dispatcher as I get out of the car.

The elastic that was holding my hair in a ponytail has been knocked off by the force of my head whipping around. I begin to look in the back seat for my elastic when I notice that the car is demolished. We had been pushed into the car in front of us. My little sister is holding her neck and screaming, but she is walking around. Another man comes running from one of the cars that has lined up behind us and calmly says he is a volunteer firefighter and that my sister should lie down. He takes control, and the ambulance and

fire truck arrive. They begin to put my sister on the spine-board; they start babbling about puncture wounds and broken bones. It finally dawns on me that we have been in a very bad accident.

I want to walk around; I have got so much nervous energy. The ambulance attendants keep telling me to sit still, but I am shaking and I cannot see exactly what is going on from where I am sitting. I look down and see that there is blood on my elbow. The attendant takes me to the ambulance and bandages it. I do not want it to be bandaged because it does not hurt and it has stopped bleeding. I hop out of the back of the ambulance, and my sister sees that my arm has been hurt; she starts screaming all over again. Everything is moving so fast, but nothing seems to be happening. The cars are still where they were when they crashed, my sister is still on the ground screaming, and there is nothing I can do to make things change any more than they already have.

My mum is busy with my sister, so police officers are trying to ask me questions. I answer them as best I can through the fog that I am in. The ambulance attendants finally finish getting my sister strapped down to the spine-board, and we all get into the ambulance for a ride to the emergency room. I am sitting in the front seat, and we do not seem to be going fast enough to get there but too fast for comfort. The attendants start saying that my sister needs an IV, but my mum (who is a nurse) is insisting that we wait until we reach the hospital.

When we arrive, we are rushed in through the blue swinging double doors. There is a mob of nurses and doctors who rush around and start asking questions. One of the nurses is trying to calm down my still screaming sister. They start an IV and tell her to lie still because her neck might be broken. This makes her more anxious and she gets more frantic.

Finally my sister calms herself down, and they take her to get some X-rays. I sit in her curtained area to watch our belongings. I think she will be fine. There is a general hubbub about the ward as people are being moved around and tended. I sit quietly and watch as people walk by and listen to snippets of conversation. My situation suddenly does not

seem as dire as it was just 20 minutes earlier. The ordeal is over as fast as it had begun, and the reality of what could have happened begins to set in.

### ***For Further Thinking***

1. What psychological state is conveyed but never named in this essay? Give two or three descriptive details that contribute to our sense of the narrator's condition.
2. From what you know of human responses to the direct experience of traffic collisions or similar misadventures, how accurate is the portrayal in this essay? Explain.
3. Comment on the author's use of present tense. In what way does it serve the overall purpose of the essay?
4. Describe the author's style throughout the essay, including the types of verbs and sentence patterns she favours. For information on sentence patterns, see "Sentence Patterns" under Chapter 2 at this website, and for more on sentence patterns and verbs, see "Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors" under Handbook at this website. How do the author's verbs and sentence patterns contribute to our interpretation of a possible thesis?

## **Commentary**

### **Finding the Implicit Thesis—a Suggested Answer**

The author's matter-of-fact descriptive manner does not explicitly indicate a subject never mind a thesis. So we have to work from clues. Her title "Suspended in Time" suggests that her subject may well be the state of being suspended in time, a paradox—everything "moving so fast" yet "nothing ... happening." Even if the title was not her own preferred choice (we can't assume that authors title their published items), we recognize that the centre of this description is a traffic accident and, specifically, the state of mind that occurs to the narrator who experiences the dramatic event. In her final two sentences, the accident survivors now under treatment and observation in the hospital, she

observes that “suddenly” the situation seems much different and “the reality of what could have happened begins to set in.” We infer that the young woman describing the incident has been in shock since the impact occurred.

What seemed to happen as a result? She shielded herself from panic and other disruptive emotions by entering a “suspended” paranormal condition. Her description indicates that she was able to function, remain somewhat engaged, even help out (she places the all important 911 call). Different readers will express the possible central meaning in different words (their own), but it seems as if the writer is suggesting that through this experience she learned both that shock is a shielding mechanism that speaks to how life’s fearsome challenges *can* be handled, and perhaps above all that life is mysteriously fragile and fleeting (moving so fast) and therefore precious (an absolute, enduring value). Taking a stab at expressing this in the formula put forward for expository essay thesis assertions, we might say that the **topic** is shock, that the **controlling idea** is the exceptional, even profound, awareness that emerges from experiencing a shocking incident (grave danger), and that the **reasons** for this claim about shock are its effects, as described in the essay—an altered sense of time and reality, a sense of calm, and a sense of new reassurance.

When a thesis is implicit, it shares the mystery and manners of theme in literary forms such as novels and short stories. It must be interpreted. Personal essays, like “Suspended in Time,” tend to rely on narration and description, to show and suggest rather than tell directly. As a result, such essays frequently do not assert their thesis formally and directly, as expository –style essays generally do. Such meanings must be interpreted. Seeking the implicit thesis of a personal essay that chooses the more indirect “creative” approach to expression and evocation therefore involves many of the same methods of analysis that are used in literary and film analysis. For more on “theme” in these forms of literature, see “Literary and Film Analysis” under Chapter 15 at this website.

Efforts to interpret the implicit thesis of narrative and descriptive writing might well include an interest in the author’s language choices, including types of words and sentence patterns. Pelletier favours the linking verb “is” throughout her essay. (For more

on linking verbs in concert with subjects and subject complements, see “Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors” under Handbook at this website). Writing instructors frequently discourage the use of linking verbs for some of the same reasons that they discourage passive voice: these forms can make the writing appear listless. In Pelletier’s essay, however, frequent forms of the verb “be” contribute to a mood of “being” rather than “doing” and help to induce a suspension in time. She also favours compound sentences (two independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction). In *Mimesis*, a classic book on language patterns, cultural outlook, and philosophical meaning, Erich Auerbach discusses the Biblical use of compound sentences and how he believes they impart a certain spiritual outlook of acceptance. It might be argued that one effect of Pelletier’s frequent compound patterns is an insistence on the balanced coexistence of states, temporal and suspended, normal and shocked, agitated and calm, as well as the sense of one thing following another not through causality so much as simply because that is the way things are (capturing the psychology of being and detachment rather than usual logical outlook).

While it is tempting and easy to “read into” the use of various language patterns—making them suit one’s predetermined ideas—thoughtful attention to the artistic effects of language at the sentence level can be helpful when combined with attention to other clues embodied in what the language says directly, how it is structured at the larger level of paragraphs and essay sections, and what else you know about the topic and its relationships.

Whether you write personal essays within your university program will depend in part on your own aims and instincts and the provisions of your courses. The best way of entering into a state that allows you to practice this more indirect narrative and descriptive form is to read as many fine exemplars of the form as you can.