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Anti-Intellectualism Summary and Response

“Anti-Intellectualism, Why We Hate the Smart Kids”, an award winning essay by student Grant Penrod, analyzes modern culture in order to understand why smart people are often outcasts. Penrod argues that the key reasons that intelligent people are persecuted are cultural perceptions of nerds as awkward, public figures who have become successful without academic achievement, and an unhealthy attachment to material gains over personal improvement. In his conclusion, Penrod argues that anti-intellectualism is damaging to society, and encourages readers to “lay off “ the smart kids (757).

*Technically* speaking, the essay is an analysis of society. It’s explicitly stated in the title, “Why We Hate the Smart Kids”. The thesis talks about explaining the phenomenon of anti-intellectualism, and all of the supporting evidence to the thesis give reasons that anti-intellectualism might exist. In fact, Penrod hardly gets into the reasons why this sentiment may be harmful to society until the conclusion. So, in a very technical sense, the papers purpose is one of explanation.

However, when reading the essay, it seems fairly apparent that Penrod has an agenda. He wants to promote the cause of intelligent people, and perhaps bring them back from the fringes of society, from being the outcasts. While the body of his essay is mostly factual and explanatory statements, he still manages to achieve his purpose by leaving the paper accessible to a wide audience, implying several things heavily, and through a conclusion heavy structure to his essay. He weaves his argument into the essay using these tactics in order to make convincing points.

Penrod keeps his audience general, in order to reach as many people as he can. The essay is not heavily targeted towards any particular group, as indicated by the lack of specialized jargon. In addition, the word choice, while somewhat complex, includes mostly words someone with a high school education would be familiar with.

The word choice is not only full of familiar words, but the words have a definite opinion to them. Words like “stereotype”, “perpetuation”, and “intimidating” have strong negative associations, and appear frequently throughout the essay hand in hand with all mentions of anti-intellectualism. Even the word anti-intellectualism, or anti-anything for that matter, brings around a certain negativity. The heavy use of negative words begins to create an association with anti-intellectualism, making the idea of hating smart people less desirable.

The essay reserves its main argument for the conclusion, after the negative associations have had time to set in. The conclusion brings up several new points, and leaves the reader with some ideas that had not been present in the essay up until that point. In fact, the conclusion does little to mention the original thesis, saying only “[r]egardless of the causes of anti-intellectualism, the effects are clear” (757). Instead, the conclusion focuses on the effects of anti-intellectualism.

So, while the essay is technically talking about the causes of anti intellectualization, it uses strong connotations and a strong conclusion to help the reader come to the belief that anti-intellectualism is a bad thing. And it does this with a very accessible text, allowing anyone to be a part of the movement to support intellectuals.