

(THE FOLLOWING ASSIGNMENT IS AN EXAMPLE THAT DR. SKEES USES WITH HIS STUDENTS)

Hero or Traitor? Edward Snowden and the NSA Spying Program

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PURPOSE:

By examining Snowden's motives as well as the repercussions of his actions, students can employ critical thinking to evaluate Snowden's acts and consider how they themselves might act when confronted with an ethical dilemma. The case allows students to consider the conditions of justification and one's obligations to take ethically sound action.

TASK:

You will ultimately be writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in which you give a MORAL evaluation of what Edward Snowden did. The problem you must address is a moral one: do you think that what Snowden did was or was not morally justified? Argue for your position.

AUDIENCE AND GENRE:

This letter must be a minimum of 1000 words and you should envision this letter appearing in the local paper. So, think of your audience as the readers of the newspaper. It will also be published digitally and linked to various social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.). This is a letter to the editor of a newspaper, not a formal academic paper. Nevertheless, utilize the accompanying document discussing the facts of the case and make reference to sources and individuals involved in the case.

I say you will “ultimately” write this letter because this is a writing-to-learn assignment. We will be taking a “milestones” approach. You will read a little, brainstorm a little, take notes, formulate ideas, establish a thesis, etc. It is a process.

MILESTONES:

Milestone #1

The first process will test your reading comprehension skills. Read the accompanying document and answer the reading comprehension questions that I am also passing out. These questions are asking about basic facts laid out in the document that relate to the case. Successful completion of this milestone will demonstrate your ability to read critically and identify another person's position on an issue. It will also show your ability to effectively use and share information for the problem-at-hand.

Milestone #2

The next milestone will be to create annotated bibliographies of a certain number of sources cited in the accompanying document. This will test your ability to access information as well as communicate, organize, and synthesize it. Finally, it will strengthen and hone your skills at accessing and using information ethically and legally.

Milestone #3

We will then take time to brainstorm a bit. We need to evaluate our immediate moral intuitions that we had about Snowden's actions when we first heard about them in light of the information we have gathered. We all had an immediate reaction to the moral rightness or wrongness of what he did; we now need to think critically about our position in light of the facts we have spent time gathering. Is our position still defensible? If so, how? If it is not, why is it not? The milestone to be accomplished from this brainstorming session will be a well-articulated thesis regarding why you think he was morally justified or not and a clear expression of at least three significant reasons to support your position.

Milestone #4

From this point on we are in the drafting phase of our letters. You will write a rough draft, read them in small groups. Make a short verbal presentation of your argument to show that you can express succinctly and clearly what your letter is going to say. From this session, you will clean up your rough drafts, creating second and third drafts. I will make comments on them. You will re-write in light of my comments. Then, you will take it to the writing center and have them read it. You will take notes on their comments and re-write it in light of them. You may consider all versions or drafts of your letter as "mini-milestones" getting you better at saying what you are thinking.

The path to clear thinking is always cut by the steady, diligent hand of a writer—her pen like a machete, hacking through a wilderness of overgrown and dense ideas. Moreover, fertile thought is only ever cultivated from such an unruly jungle.

Again, this is a writing-to-learn assignment. Writing is not the package in which you deliver your ideas but, in fact, the process whereby thinking itself occurs. You need to realize, as Peter Elbow (1973) rightly points out, that "meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with...Think of writing not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message" (p. 15).

So, get ready—go ahead and pre-heat the oven.