

PDII POINT OF VIEW WRITING EXERCISE

Explanation of Point of View Assignments: This year we are seeking new ways to develop the student writing assignment. Instead of open-ended journaling, students will be asked to complete a point of view exercise for one of the two literary selections provided for each module. These assignments proceed in a systematic graded progression of increasing complexity, from simple patient and physician perspectives to the interactions of patient, family member and doctor points of view.

For each module, students will have a choice of either a prose excerpt or a poem. The instructions will specify which point of view the students should adopt. In at least one of these readings, the point of view asked for will be clearly present. In the other selection, it may be implicit or nonexistent, so students will have to rely on imagination to generate a response if they choose this selection.

Point of view: First, the students will write a couple of paragraphs from the specified perspective. They are instructed to use the first person singular (“I”) instead of the third person. They may imagine they are talking to their doctor, a family member or friend, a patient, a colleague, or someone else. They may write about anything they wish – elaborating on the themes or issues expressed in the selection; imagining new information (feelings, concerns, perceptions) about the speaker that is not stated, but might be derived from the content that *is* present. The goal is to make the assignment more than a mere summary of what the speaker says. Students should pay attention to the text, and incorporate or build on its content, but they should also try to enter imaginatively into the speaker’s world, and take some creative leaps!

Personal reactions, reflections: Next, students will write a paragraph or two describing their reactions to the literary selection: how the reading affected them, what they learned from it, and/or how it felt to speak in the voice of another. This aspect of the writing assignment is more free-form than the point of view exercise, and is designed to give students an opportunity to briefly explore a broad range of emotional and intellectual responses to the readings.

Instructions for Co-Leader Comments: In commenting on the **point-of-view** aspect of the student assignments, co-leaders should help students expand their understanding of point of view possibilities by sharing their own interpretations and alternative understandings of the selection. Since this is an exercise to develop empathy, it is important to emphasize the possible feelings and emotional responses of the speaker. Responses to the **personal reflection** section of the writing will be similar to co-leader responses to student journaling in previous years.

PDII MEDICAL HUMANITIES POINT OF VIEW (POV) WRITTEN EXERCISES

Module 1: "Darkness Visible" or "The Legacy" – patient pov

Module 2: "Heartsounds" or "EKG" – patient pov

Module 3: "The Patient Examines the Doctor" or "I Stepped Past Your Room Today" – physician pov

Module 4: "Imagine a Woman" or "F.P." – physician pov

Module 5: "If The River Was Whiskey" or "Two Suffering Men" – patient and physician pov

Module 6: "Autobiography of a Face" – family members' pov

Module 7: "On Being a Cripple" or "Nursing Home" – family members' pov

Module 8: "Dr. Cahn's Visit" or "Foreign Body" – patient, doctor, family members' pov

Student Explanation: The point of view (pov) writing assignments are intended to help you develop insight into and empathy for the perspectives of patients, family members, physicians, and not least of all, yourself. The exercises proceed in a systematic, graded progression of increasing complexity, from simple patient and physician perspectives to the interactions of patient, family member, and physician pavs. Each module will include one short prose reading and one poem. You may choose which one you want to use for the pov exercise. In at least one of the readings, the pov asked for will be clearly present. In the other selection, it may be implicit or nonexistent, and you will have to use your imagination to generate it. For each literary selection, the instructions will specify whose point of view you should adopt.

First, you will be asked to write a couple of paragraphs as though you were standing in this person's shoes. Try to use the first person singular form ("I") instead of the third person. You may imagine you are talking to your doctor, a family member or friend, your patient, or someone else. Write about anything you wish—elaborate on the themes or issues expressed in the selection; imagine new information (feelings, concerns, perceptions) about the speaker that is not stated, but might be derived from the content that *is* present. Try to make this assignment more than a mere summary of what the speaker says. Pay attention to the text, but also enter imaginatively into the speaker's point of view, and see what emerges!

Then you will be asked to write a paragraph or two about your own perspective on the reading. You may discuss how the reading affected you, what you learned from it, and/or how it felt to imagine yourself within the life of the narrator.

The entire assignment should not be longer than a page.

Below is an example of this exercise, using a well-known poem by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet of the 1950s and '60s Anne Sexton, who saw many physicians for an array of physical and psychological problems, and ultimately committed suicide.

Doctors

**They work with herbs
And penicillin.
They work with gentleness
And the scalpel.
They dig out the cancer,
Close an incision
And say a prayer
To the poverty of the skin.
They are not Gods
Though they would like to be;
They are only a human
Trying to fix up a human.
Many humans die.
They die like the tender,
Palpitating berries
In November.
But all along the doctors remember:
First do no harm.
They would kiss it if it would heal.
It would not heal.**

**If the doctors cure
Then the sun sees it.
If the doctors kill
Then the earth hides it.
The doctors should fear arrogance
More than cardiac arrest.
If they are too proud,
And some are,
Then they leave home on horseback
But God returns them on foot.**

- Anne Sexton

Patient Point of View: You want to know about doctors? I've seen more than my fair share of doctors. I've spent so much time with them, maybe by now I'm something of an authority on doctors. They think they know all about me, but I know something about them too. Poor men! (and my doctors mostly *are* men) – sometimes they think they are gods, cutting, diagnosing, prescribing, deciding. But on the inside, they are just like you and me, flawed, fallible humans. Many of them are good men – gentle, even when they must inflict pain – trying to avoid hurt and harm. They pray for help too, just as we do. Sometimes they remind me of my mother!

But they can be arrogant. I suppose it's an occupational hazard. After all, when they do the least bit of good, everybody touts their successes. On the rare occasions I myself feel slightly better, I praise my doctors to the skies. When they make a mess of things, somehow it just disappears, and no one is the wiser. So who can blame them for being cocky? But in the end, they are just like you and me. They may climb on their high horse – but they will be knocked off, like the rest of us, to stagger home, trounced once again by death.

These doctors, they are so afraid of death. Death isn't the worst thing. We all die, you know. In the face of death, they should remember to humble their pride. The doctors won't ever win that battle. Neither will you. And neither will I.

Personal point of view: As a health care provider, Sexton's poem made me feel a little defensive and more than a little guilty. I wondered about the times I come across as arrogant or uncaring to patients. I thought about times I have been "knocked off my high horse" by an unexpected poor outcome, and resolved to use these events to help me keep a humble attitude. The poem also showed me how much patients see about us as healers and as human beings, and how much respect we should have for their insight. As a sometime patient, I identified with Sexton's mixture of respect and suspicion toward her physicians. Not only doctors, but also patients, would like to think of physicians as gods. This poem reminded me not to place my doctors on any pedestals. Finally, speaking in Sexton's voice increased my curiosity about her life – and suicide. Through her eyes, I saw the tender allure of death, and how it might become a welcome escape from suffering and despair.