

**PERHAPS I AM  
A REAL WRITER  
AS LONG AS I GO ON WRITING,  
AS LONG AS I GO ON TRYING,  
WHICH I SHALL ALWAYS DO.  
—Madeleine L’Engle**

## **Unit 2—Lesson 4**

### **Madeleine L’Engle**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

On the eleventh of November, 1918, on a private railway car in a French forest, the Germans and the Allies signed the document that officially ended World War I. Seventeen days later, on November 29th, Madeline L’Engle Camp was born in New York City.

Before the war, her father, Charles Wadsworth Camp, had been a journalist and a playwright. When he returned to the United States several months after the Armistice, he quit his job as a journalist and devoted his time to writing fiction, plays, and movies. He and L’Engle’s mother, Madeleine Barnett Camp, had been married for twenty years by the time L’Engle was born. They had an active social life, full of operas, dinner parties, and talented, artistic friends, and they did not make room in that life for their daughter in the way most families would consider usual today. L’Engle was raised primarily by her English nanny, “Mrs. O,” eating her meals on a tray in her nursery, except once a week, on Sunday. And then, not surprisingly, she and her parents had little to say to each other.

Instead, L’Engle lived in a world of imagination. She learned to read and write before she was five, and occupied herself by reading<sup>1</sup> and by making up her own stories. She learned to play the piano and loved music. In fourth grade, however, L’Engle changed schools. The new school put a strong emphasis on sports, and L’Engle, who was never good at them, became a social outcast. She soon felt that her unpopularity among her fellow students was echoed in her relationships with her teachers. Eventually she stopped doing her schoolwork entirely and threw herself even more passionately into a world of stories, both the reading and the writing of them. Two years later, another change of schools was, so to speak, her salvation; she found a teacher who appreciated and encouraged her, and she was happy.

When L’Engle was twelve, the Camps moved to the French Alps. Here the story becomes uncertain. L’Engle always said that her father’s lungs were damaged by exposure to mustard

1. L. M. Montgomery (of *Anne of Green Gables* fame), E. Nesbit (who was a childhood favorite of C. S. Lewis), and Frances Hodgson Burnett (who wrote *The Secret Garden*) were some of her favorite authors, along with George MacDonald, whose writing was perhaps most influential in L’Engle’s own life and work.



**Lesson  
Preview**

**This lesson explains what sets a literary essay apart from a basic essay and talks about how to write one.**

gas during World War I, and that the move was prompted by his deteriorating health and increasing need for clean air. However, her cousin, Francis Mason, flatly contradicted this, saying he never heard a word about his uncle's lungs having been damaged, and that he knew Charles Camp as a man who "was never ailing in his life."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly it was cheaper, during the Great Depression, for the family to live in Europe. And with the difficulties Camp was having getting his work published, that would have been reason enough for the move. Whatever the cause, L'Engle grew up worried about her father and afraid of another war.

In Europe, the Camps lived in various rented houses—including a chateau which had no stove, refrigerator, or running water, having been altered very little since it was built in the eleventh century. L'Engle was

2. This "he says, she says" situation, where two people who ought to know what they're talking about tell widely or even totally divergent stories about an event, occurs frequently in life. There are several possible reasons for these divergent accounts of Charles Camp's health.

L'Engle could be wrong. The two families, Camp and Mason, were apparently quite close. Charles's funeral was held, in fact, at the Mason house, and Francis Mason was fifteen at the time—old enough to be paying attention. According to Mason, his mother (Charles's sister) was devoted to Charles, and was an inveterate talker. He argues that he would surely have known if his uncle's lungs had been damaged in the war. Charles Camp was, by several accounts, both L'Engle's and others', a heavy drinker. Perhaps the Camps left America to disguise Charles's alcoholic decline from their friends, and told their daughter, who was just a child during her father's illness, the story about mustard gas to protect her from the truth.

On the other hand, Mason could be wrong. The Camps lived in New York for most of Mason's life, only spending the four years before Charles's death in Florida, where Mason and his family lived. If the Camps were private people, and didn't want their troubles to be common knowledge, perhaps Charles's talkative sister was the last person they would confide in. And L'Engle, though young and naïve, was present during fourteen years of Charles's life that Mason missed.

Or one or the other of them could be lying: L'Engle to hide what really happened or to spice up an otherwise mundane event; Mason because he had an axe to grind or to make himself more important. There are probably other possibilities, as well.

When you run across a situation like this—where it appears at first that someone must be lying—try to keep an open mind. Think through the possibilities, and do some digging to see what other information you can find. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each side. Sometimes you'll be able to find that one side or the other is right, and sometimes—as with L'Engle and Mason—you'll find that you just can't tell, and you have to hold the two (or more) possibilities in your mind indefinitely.

## Unit 2—Lesson 4: Madeleine L'Engle

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sent to a boarding school in Switzerland, where she went by a number rather than a name and was miserable a good deal of the time. She made a friend, however, and managed to survive mentally and emotionally by engaging in small acts of defiance—like reading detective novels (forbidden by school rules) under the covers at night, and writing.

After the Camps had been in Europe just two years, L'Engle's grandmother fell ill, and wrote asking them to come and care for her. They moved to Florida in the spring of 1933, and L'Engle enjoyed a summer of swimming, reading, writing, and walking on the beach with her father before heading to boarding school in South Carolina. It was here that she began to blossom. She was elected to the student council, got leading roles in the school plays, and was frequently published in the school literary magazine. Then in the fall of her senior year, her father contracted pneumonia and died. L'Engle was unable to express her grief outwardly, and turned again to writing to try to make sense of her life.

After graduating, L'Engle attended summer school to prepare for her college entrance exams. She was accepted by Smith College, in spite of her math scores. There she majored in English, helped establish the school's literary magazine, and started writing plays. In 1941, she graduated with honors.

L'Engle's extended family felt she ought to return to Florida to provide companionship for her widowed mother, but both women rejected the idea. Instead, L'Engle made a beeline for New York City, which was to her "the best possible school for a writer." She found an apartment and two roommates, and adopted "Madeleine L'Engle" as her professional name. She then devoted herself to writing, which she had always known was what she wanted to do, and acting, which she enjoyed, and which paid the bills. Her first novel was published, then a play, then another novel.

Three years after her move to New York, L'Engle was acting in a production of Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, when an actor named Hugh Franklin joined the cast. They felt an immediate attraction for each other, and after two years of on-again, off-again dating, they were married in January of 1946.

That spring, while visiting some friends, they fell in love with an old farmhouse in Connecticut. They bought the house and, still living in New York, drove out on weekends and during breaks between shows to re-wallpaper, rewire, repair plumbing, and refinish floors. Once the house—which they christened Crosswicks—was habitable, they began spending summers there and winters in New York. But after five years of this, they decided that it was time for a change. With their four-year-old daughter, Josephine, they moved to Crosswicks full time. Their son, Bion, was born in the spring.

The Franklin family spent the next ten years living year-round at Crosswicks. They bought the general store in their small Connecticut town and struggled to keep it alive. L'Engle was working in the store, raising their children, cooking, cleaning, teaching Sunday School,

leading the church choir, reading, writing, hosting a constant stream of guests and stray animals, and making time for Hugh. Financially the family was so straightened that they couldn't afford a hot bath more than twice a week. L'Engle had hit a dry spell in her work, and received rejection notice after rejection notice from publishers. In a two-year stretch in the midst of this decade, they lost four of their closest friends, and adopted seven-year-old Maria, the daughter of two of those friends. But they pushed through, made the store successful, and became part of the community.

And then both Franklin and L'Engle began to feel strongly that Franklin needed to get back to acting—it was his vocation, his gift, and he needed to use it. They sold the store at a profit, and after a cross-country family camping trip, began searching for an apartment in New York City that would accommodate both their family of five and their budget.

In 1962, not long after their return to the city, L'Engle's dry spell ended. She finally found a publisher for a book that had been rejected twenty-six times before. The book, *A Wrinkle In Time*, went on to win the Newbery Medal. Suddenly L'Engle was a celebrity in high demand, receiving a constant stream of fan mail and speaking invitations.<sup>3</sup> A search for a quiet place to write ended at the library of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where she went from writing quietly at a table, to working as a volunteer librarian, to being the official Writer-in-Residence.

**Maritain wrote that 'fiction differs from every other art in one respect: it concerns the conduct of life itself.' Thus any discussion of the writing of fiction is theological, even if God is never mentioned.—Madeleine L'Engle**

For years, life continued on a fairly even keel. L'Engle wrote, taught writing seminars, lectured. Franklin had steady work acting. And then in May of 1986, while L'Engle was away on a lecture tour, Franklin was diagnosed with cancer. They spent the summer at Crosswicks, where Franklin was treated by doctors they knew, and the family was helped by their friends in the community. But Franklin suffered from complication after complication, and died just four months after his diagnosis.

After her husband's death, L'Engle continued to spend most of the year living in New York City. She taught writing at the school her children used to attend, wrote, and accepted speaking engagements. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were a great delight to her. Madeleine L'Engle died in September of 2006, at the age of eighty-eight, after three years in a nursing home.

3. She spoke particularly often at Wheaton College in Illinois, and in the seventies, Wheaton added L'Engle's papers to their Special Collections.

### **The Selection**

Madeleine L'Engle saw herself as a storyteller, and it's for her stories—including the Newbery Award-winning *A Wrinkle In Time*—that she's famous. But she also wrote poems, prayers, a play, and several books of essays. You'll be reading *A Circle of Quiet*, the first of a series of four loosely autobiographical extended essays. The book is bounded, beginning and end, by a summer spent at Crosswicks, the family home in the countryside of Connecticut, but wanders at will through time, space, and idea.

### **While You Read**

Read with paper and pencil nearby, and make a note of people, places, things, and ideas that recur.



## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

### SECTION ONE

1. Why does L'Engle go to the brook? What does she find there?
2. Why does L'Engle think the burning bush wasn't consumed?
3. How does Sartre feel about the "isness" of the oak tree? L'Engle?
4. How does L'Engle describe the concentration an artist needs?
5. How does L'Engle define *hubris*?
6. When, according to L'Engle, can writers be self-conscious about their writing?
7. Why did L'Engle get angry when the bank bounced her check?
8. L'Engle mentions two reasons to question the idea of self-image. What are they?
9. How does L'Engle define an icon?
10. How is the white china Buddha an icon for L'Engle?
11. How does L'Engle respond to the idea that "it's been said better before"?
12. What does L'Engle say about giving a child a self-image?
13. L'Engle says that she could not tell the group in Ohio how to give a child a self, or what a self is. What did she have to offer them instead?
14. What image does L'Engle use to describe how she knows there is "an essential, ontological" part of her?
15. What does Hugh Bishop of Mirfield say about love?
16. What does L'Engle say about religious art?
17. Why does L'Engle mention Einstein, Churchill, Byron, Demosthenes, Homer, Socrates, and Jesus?
18. What did it mean to L'Engle when Grandma offered to give up the organ?
19. What three ways does L'Engle say humans can live their lives?

### SECTION TWO

20. What did the Brechstein story come to mean to L'Engle after she had finished it?
21. Does L'Engle think a writer can create a wholly imaginary character? Why or why not?
22. What does L'Engle believe is included in any kind of story?
23. Why does L'Engle think that most of her favorite mystery writers are Christians?
24. What was Una able to see in her experiences when she turned them into story?
25. What challenge does L'Engle see in relationships with children?
26. What, besides pleasure, does L'Engle think people seek in sex, drugs, and gangs?
27. Why does L'Engle think people get interested in astrology?
28. Why does L'Engle think children don't want to be like their parents' generation?
29. What is the dichotomy in L'Engle's thinking concerning old age?

30. What gives us freedom, according to L'Engle?
31. What does L'Engle describe here as the responsibility of the writer? Of people in general?

### SECTION THREE

32. What does L'Engle say we need for our full development?
33. What's another way the china Buddha is an icon?
34. Why does L'Engle tell stories about her two teachers?
35. L'Engle is against controlling vocabulary and content in children's books. Why?
36. What concerns L'Engle most about sexual promiscuity?
37. How does L'Engle want her own fear of the dark answered?
38. What does L'Engle say changed with the splitting of the atom?
39. What does a reference point do, according to Charlotte Napier?

### SECTION FOUR

40. L'Engle writes: "In *Two Cheers for Democracy* E. M. Forster says, 'I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.'" What does L'Engle say happens when humans choose a cause instead of a person?
41. What does L'Engle say is one of the worst effects of the huge increase in technology in the last hundred years? Why does the increase create this effect?
42. What does L'Engle say we lose by treating "anything beyond . . . pragmatic knowledge" as unnecessary or dishonest?
43. What does L'Engle say we have to give children "that will stay with [them] when there is nothing left"?
44. How does L'Engle distinguish between fiction and nonfiction writing?
45. What does Einstein say is "the fairest thing we can experience"?
46. To what Bible story does L'Engle compare her "wailing" over the continued rejection of *A Wrinkle in Time* by publishers?
47. Why, after arguing for the particular and against the general earlier in the book, does L'Engle disagree with the idea that "in an emergency one must not depend on law or on structure but on judging the situation as it arises"?
48. How does L'Engle finally respond to the hypothetical situation about the group of men in the Arctic?
49. What helped make Dearma's death bearable for L'Engle?
50. What does L'Engle say the discoveries of science do for some people?
51. What does L'Engle say makes us capable of tears and laughter?
52. Why is L'Engle grateful that she can't bake cake?
53. What finally enabled L'Engle to overcome her intellectual reservations and embrace Christianity?



## LITERARY LESSON: WRITING A LITERARY ESSAY

### Introduction

*Essay* literally means “try, attempt, take a shot at,” and the literary essay carries that flavor of trying something out. The first essayist, Michel de Montaigne, wrote that his essays shaped him as he tried to shape them. E. B. White called his essays “a ramble in the woods, or a ramble in the basement of my mind.” Writing a literary essay is as much a way of thinking out loud—and in the process discovering what it is you really do think—as it is a way of communicating your thoughts to others.

The foundation for a literary essay is an idea, and not just any garden-variety idea, but a Big Idea. Montaigne tackles friendship, solitude, truth, and the inconsistency of human behavior, among many other topics; White’s essays range over subjects including change, death, freedom, the role of government, and the American Dream. At their core, literary essays are about what it means to be human, and how to live a good life.

But whatever meaning and purpose there is in life must, for most of us, be found in the course of our humdrum everyday existence (since the vast majority of us will never, say, cure cancer or end apartheid) and a good literary essay is firmly anchored in the humdrum and everyday. One of E. B. White’s essays begins, “Saw a cat hunting in a field as I drove the little boy in to school this morning . . .” Another starts with the radio playing in the auto repair shop, then meanders through imagination, government forms, taxes, prices, sheep-keeping, sleigh rides, and what cars have done to the economy and to education, ending up with the opinion that with the advent of the automobile we have lost “the realization that there is more to a journey than the mere fact of arrival.” In a literary essay, the writer thinks about meaning and goodness by meditating on the particulars of day-to-day life.

### Tangible and Intangible

*A Circle of Quiet* is no exception. The book’s opening is set solidly in the immediate and everyday: Four generations of one family have gathered for the summer in a big old house. They’ve filled all the beds and are eating enough to sustain a small army. The dishes and cleaning are a pain in the neck. Sometimes, the woman in charge of it all needs to get out of the house.

L’Engle tells us where she goes when she needs a break: a small, secluded brook, ten minutes’ walk from the old house. She describes her time there, dangling her legs off a stone bridge and watching the water flow. And then, making her first connection to an intangible idea, she tells us what she finds at the brook: perspective, peace. Next she describes the journey to the brook: crossing the lawn, ducking under the willow tree, climbing over the stone wall, following the string path, passing the blueberry bushes. And from blueberry bushes, she shifts again to ideas: from the blueberry bush to the burning bush to the nature of

being. Throughout the book, L'Engle weaves together the tangible and the intangible, in and out, in and out, moving back and forth between the two.

### **Finding Something to Write About**

Think about your own “tangibles.” While L'Engle was writing *A Circle of Quiet*, she was also cooking, cleaning, taking care of grandbabies, traveling, and teaching. We know this because she talks about these things in the course of the essay. E. B. White wrote against a background of breeding chickens, patching barn roofs, running air raid drills, dosing spring-drunk lambs<sup>4</sup> with tea, and filling out government forms. We know because he mentions them all in his essays. Every day you fill twenty-four hours with various activities. They may not seem noteworthy to you—you're used to them, you do many of them every day—but, as Henri Nouwen observes, our own mundane experiences are often what resonate most deeply for other people.<sup>5</sup> Grab a pen and paper and make a list of things you do. You could write about ballet practice, a track meet, a debate tournament, cleaning your horse's stall, working on the four-wheeler, playing in a football game, collecting teacups, eating dinner with your family, a snowball fight, scrapbooking, building a model airplane, a trip to the ocean, taking a walk: Anything can be the beginning of a literary essay.

Once you've chosen a topic, use the Five W's and an H—who, what, when, where, why, and how—to brainstorm ways in which your “tangible” might connect to “intangibles.” If you chose to write about your teacup collection, you might ask:

- *How many cups do I have? What do they look like?*
- *Where and when did I get them?*
- *Why did I start collecting teacups, in particular?*
- *Do I use them? If so, how? How do I store or display them?*
- *Do I have a favorite? Why?*

Jot down the answers to these questions and any others you can think of. Perhaps your cups primarily have a flower pattern, or perhaps they're primarily in bright colors with gilding. Perhaps the teacups you have were given to you by family members, or bought to commemorate special occasions in your life. Perhaps your favorite cup belonged originally to your great-great-great-grandfather, or perhaps your favorite is the most unusual. Perhaps you started collecting teacups because you enjoy the ritual of afternoon tea so much. Perhaps you only use them for display, or perhaps you use them to house your button collection, or

4. According to White, very young lambs will get drunk from eating large quantities of fresh spring grass and stagger wildly around the barnyard until they pass out and collapse.

5. “But aren't my own experiences so personal that they might just as well remain hidden? Or could it be that what is most personal for me, what rings true in the depths of my own being, also has meaning for others? Ultimately, I believe that what is most personal is most universal.”—Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*.

perhaps you actually drink out of them. Perhaps your enjoyment of the ritual stems from the beauty of the fine china and fancy food, or from a family tradition of sharing tea, or from a special fancy tea you had as a child. Perhaps you have a particular interest in the tea ceremonies of cultures around the world. Notice how these answers suggest “intangibles”: the importance in your life of a particular visual aesthetic, perhaps, or of family, or tradition, or history, or adventure.

### **Beginning the Writing Process**

The next step is to turn your brainstorming into a rough draft. Take your list of brainstorming questions and answers and write about them again, this time with more detail. Tell stories that illustrate what you’re talking about—like the time you went to a fancy afternoon tea when you were five, or the great-great-great-grandfather with the flowing beard and mustache whose cup (with the mustache guard) you have—and use descriptive words and phrases. Try to paint pictures for your readers, so they can see what you’re writing about. *A Circle of Quiet* is full of stories, vivid and engaging, about things L’Engle has seen and done.

When you’ve written down everything you can think of about your chosen topic, it’s time to do some cutting. L’Engle covers ideas like language, the nature of being, art, time, community, compassion, creation, forgiveness, joy, pride, love, and truth. She talks about those ideas using stories about the white Buddha, the brook, the burning bush, the babies, the choir, Madison Avenue, music, fairy tales, her class at Ohio State University, poisoned snow, the summer, and a host of others. But she was writing a 245-page book. You don’t have room for more than one or two ideas.

Look through what you’ve written and think about the Big Ideas it might suggest. Try to decide what one idea stands out or seems most important to you. You may have written about the bright colors on your cups, the cups you got as gifts, the cups to commemorate special occasions, the cup from your great-great-great-grandfather, the cup that’s an unusual shape, the button collection you store in your teacups, the time you went to a fancy tea as a five-year-old, the times you’ve drunk tea with your family members over the years, and your fascination with the tea rituals of cultures other than your own. From this list, you could select the items that seem to fit into a theme of family and tradition: cups to commemorate special occasions, *the cup from your great-great-great-grandfather*, *the time you went to a fancy tea as a five-year-old*, and *the times you’ve drunk tea with your family members over the years*. Or you might select the items that suggest a theme of newness and adventure: perhaps *the bright colors on your cups*, *the cup that’s an unusual shape*, and *your fascination with the tea rituals of cultures other than your own*. Decide which of those ideas appeals to you more, which of them seems more in line with the real reason that you collect teacups, and leave the parts that don’t support that theme for another day.

## Creating Structure

Even though you don't have room to write about as much as L'Engle does, the general structure of a literary essay remains the same. Rather than moving in a linear fashion (from an introduction, through body paragraphs, to a conclusion) a literary essay tends to spiral: it moves forward, but it also returns to touch repeatedly on the same ideas.

This can be hard to visualize in *A Circle of Quiet*. You may remember that you've seen ontology and the white Buddha go by several times before, but it's time-consuming and difficult to pinpoint all the places they're mentioned in the book. The spiraling structure is easier to see in a shorter essay. E. B. White's essay *Spring* is five pages long, divided into twelve sections. The sections cover:

1. Spring, and "anything else of an intoxicating nature that comes to mind."
2. Whether or not the hog has been bred.
3. Superman, Inc., which is endorsing children's books, but not children's books by Louisa May Alcott.
4. The family's reading of Alcott's *Little Women*, and the "wrenching experience" of reading about the Europe of Alcott's day in the spring of 1941.
5. The literally intoxicating effect that spring grass has on lambs.
6. The lack of snakes so far this spring.
7. A pair of starlings trying to finish their nesting before flickers steal their nest.
8. The first really warm day of spring, with the twin lambs snuggling happily with their mother, the forsythia blooming, and the goose settling in to hatch her eggs.
9. Syrup from the writer's own maple trees.
10. A friend's comment about White's writing.
11. The difficulties involved in managing a brooder-stove, and the trance that one lives in when one has a fire, and particularly a brooder-stove fire, on one's mind.
12. The deepening of the fire trance when one is tending a brooder-stove fire in the spring of 1941; the feeling that it's crazy to tend to farming when the world is crashing down; the feelings that "the land, and the creatures that go with it, are what is left that is good," and that "a man has to live according to his lights even if his lights are the red coals in the base of a firepot."

The widely disparate sections of the essay (pregnant pigs, *Little Women*, snakes, and maple syrup, anyone?) are unified because they all deal with things that are happening in E. B. White's life in the spring of 1941. Beyond that, various sections are connected by a repetition of words or ideas. White mentions intoxication in the first section and the fifth, Louisa May Alcott in the third and fourth, and lambs in the fifth and eighth. He mentions the war in the fourth and twelfth sections. He mentions chicks, brooder stoves, and fires repeatedly in the eleventh and twelfth. If you draw lines in the margins between the repeated subjects, you can see the leapfrogging of ideas and their progression toward a final purpose.

With the pieces you have left from cutting down your rough draft, you can begin to create some kind of loose order in your own essay. There are many ways to approach this task. You could use images, as White does in *Spring*. He paints a series of little pictures of things related to spring on a farm—the snuffling hog in her pen, the drunken lambs staggering and weaving around the barnyard, the snakes sunning on the rock pile, the rapid darting of the starlings, the lamb sitting on its mother’s back, the homemade syrup on pancakes, the chicks at the persnickety brooder-stove “with their collars turned up, blowing on their hands”—and these images help create an orderly progression toward the conclusion that “a man has to live according to his lights even if his lights are the red coals in the base of a firepot.” You could use chronological order: tell about your teacup collection starting with the first cup you got, selecting a few of the most memorable over the intervening years, and ending with the one you added most recently. You could create a progression from the more specific to the more general by starting with the occasion when you received your first teacup, moving to why you like drinking tea, then moving to the importance of ceremony and ritual in human interaction.<sup>6</sup>

Most important, you need to make sure that the beginning of the essay and the end of the essay are related. In *A Circle of Quiet*, L’Engle begins by talking about summer, family, the brook, and the burning bush:

We are four generations under one roof this summer . . . My special place is a small brook . . . And then there are the blueberry bushes, not very many, but a few, taller than I am and, to me, infinitely beautiful. The burning bush: somehow I visualize it as much like one of these blueberry bushes.

She ends the book on the same note:

I’m off to the brook again. Summer is almost over; the golden rod is aflame. The bush burns with the red of autumn. The family has scattered, is scattering, to England, Mexico, Florida, California, to the big house across the lane and up the road.

So the tangible things come full circle. Likewise, the same intangible idea appears at the book’s beginning and end. The final paragraph says:

Gregory of Nyssa points out that Moses’s vision of God began with the light, with the visible burning bush, the bush which was bright with fire and not consumed;

6. Specific organizational techniques are useful and important. But past a certain point, knowing how to organize your thoughts into a good literary essay is intuitive, and following steps laid out in your English textbook can only take you so far. The best way to develop this intuition is to read other essayists, pencil in hand, and examine the ways they structure their work. Circle or underline main ideas when they appear. Examine transitions between the tangible and the intangible. Try to see if you can identify an organizational technique (use of images, chronological order, progression from specific to general, etc.). The more reading and noticing you do (and the more writing you do, intentionally copying the techniques you’ve identified) the better you’ll get at knowing what feels right as you approach structuring an essay.

but afterwards, God spoke to him in a cloud. After the glory which could be seen with human eyes, he began to see the glory which is beyond and after light. The shadows are deepening all around us. Now is the time when we must begin to see our world and ourselves in a different way.

The words *vision*, *visible*, *seen*, *eyes*, and *see* are contained in four consecutive sentences. Similar words appear at the beginning of the book:

[T]he house is still visible . . . often I need to get away completely. . . . There's a natural stone bridge over the brook, and I sit there, dangling my legs and looking through the foliage at the sky reflected in the water, and things slowly come back into perspective. . . . From the stone wall to the brook takes two balls of twine. Unreliable eyes make my vision variable, and there are days when my string path is extremely helpful. . . .

Here the key words—*visible*, *looking*, *reflected*, *perspective*, *eyes*, *vision*—are scattered over the first six pages. But the central idea is present from the first.

This building up to an idea by repetition of words may not be consciously noticed by the reader on a first pass. To find the words dealing with vision or seeing in the beginning of *A Circle of Quiet*, I had to go back and look for them, knowing that the idea was present in the conclusion. But the presence of the key words contributes greatly to the reader's sense of satisfaction when he or she finishes the essay, to the sense that the essay is rich, whole, complete.

### **Finding Your Conclusion**

It's important to note the difference between the way L'Engle handles the idea of seeing/vision/perspective at the beginning and at the end of *A Circle of Quiet*. As the book opens, the idea is present in seed form—scattered through the first several pages, mentioned but not emphasized more than anything else—but by the final paragraphs that idea is much more concise, defined, emphatic. The exact idea with which a writer sums up an essay doesn't have to be—indeed, often can't be—present at the beginning. The purpose of an essay is to “try,” to try ideas on for size, to develop an idea as you go along. When you're writing a literary essay, you may not know exactly what the essay will have to say when you begin writing it.

You sit down to a piece of paper and start to tell a story about how stressful the household chores are with a houseful of company all summer long, how sometimes you have to get away for awhile, and how much better you feel when you get to the brook. As you're writing, you realize that the change you undergo when you get to the brook has something to do with perspective, with getting far enough away from the hubbub to get some perspective on your life. Then it dawns on you that having perspective is seeing things properly; that how we see

things and whether we see them properly has everything to do with what it means to be human and how humans can live a good life; and that a change in the way we see the world is necessary for humans to live a good life in this—or any—day and age. All you were thinking about when you started writing was how tired you are of folding laundry. The central idea of what's now an essay came to you as you were writing.

As you continue to revise your own literary essay, you don't need to force a structure onto it. Essays come in all different shapes and sizes. Some are closely focused (like an essay about one person's teacup collection) while others are loosely connected (like an essay about the different things that happen on the farm in the spring). The most important thing is to make sure that there is a coherent theme running through the essay and that at least the germ of the idea presented in the conclusion is present in the opening paragraphs.



## WRITING EXERCISES

For the first three exercises, use the techniques outlined in the Literary Lesson to write a literary essay. Include your pre-writing and rough draft in the finished assignment. This means you should clearly label and hand in *at least*:

- A list of “tangibles” with the chosen topic noted in some way.
- A page of brainstorming on your topic using the Five W’s and an H.
- A rough draft fleshing out your brainstorming session.
- A second draft that’s been focused by cutting extraneous material.
- A final draft.

1. Write a literary essay on something from your everyday life.
2. Write a literary essay on learning. Describe a moment in your own educational career where, as Walker Percy says, “something magical” happened.
3. Select an essay by Montaigne (collections should be available from your library) and write your own literary essay on a similar topic.
4. Find a book of E. B. White’s essays (like *Essays of E. B. White* or *One Man’s Meat*) at the library and choose one of his essays (other than Spring) to analyze. Write a paper of at least five paragraphs identifying the tangibles, the structure, and the intangible. Use supporting quotations from the essay.

[Continued]

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5. L'Engle writes about icons and her white china Buddha on pages 17–23. These can be controversial topics. Write an opinion paper either (1) arguing for or against the use of icons by Christians, or (2) discussing whether a Buddha statue is an acceptable decoration for a Christian. Include an introduction, at least three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
  6. L'Engle writes: “In *Two Cheers for Democracy* E. M. Forster says, ‘I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.’” Do you agree or disagree with Forster’s position? Write a paper of at least five paragraphs arguing for your position.
  7. L'Engle’s friend Quinn was taught at his seminary that God cannot suffer (page 193). Agree or disagree in a paper of at least five paragraphs. Use at least three examples from the Bible (with direct quotations) to support your arguments.