**Lit and Comp - Take a Stand/Propose a Solution unit**

Writing a Letter to the Editor - (Formative Assessment)

A letter to the editor allows any citizen to publish an opinion. The best letters to the editor go beyond simply taking a stand - they also defend it.

For this assignment, you’ll take a stand on any issue. That’s the easy part. You’ll also need to defend it and show an understanding of likely counterarguments, which you’ll have to address in your letter.

Searching for an idea? Check out “[301 Prompts for Argumentative Writing](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/05/301-prompts-for-argumentative-writing/?_r=0)” from *The New York Times*.

**Assessment (Formative assessment category)**

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|  | **Areas to improve** | **Learning Targets** | **Areas of strength** |
| Idea Development and Elaboration (25) |  | **- The essay contains a clearly defined introduction that introduces the topic with a hook and a thesis/purpose statement.**  **- The writing contains unified body paragraphs.**  **- The writer thoroughly explores the issue, acknowledges counterarguments, and effectively responds to the counterarguments.**  **- The writing shows evidence of thoroughly understanding the issue and provides researched examples.**  **- The conclusion offers effective closure.** |  |
| Style/sentence fluency (15) |  | **- The writing shows variation in sentence structure and length (at least one long sentence of 60+ words and at least two short sentences of 8 or fewer words).**  **- The writing includes introductory dependent clauses, introductory phrases (specifically prepositional and participial), appositive phrases, correct use of semicolons, etc.**  **- The sentences clearly and efficiently express ideas.** |  |
| Conventions (10) |  | **- Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are polished; the writing contains minimal errors that don’t detract from the content.** |  |

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A few weeks ago, a fight broke out somewhere in school. Shortly after, any attention my students had been paying to my lesson on misplaced modifiers disappeared instantly – someone “Snapped” a video of the fight, and before I knew it, practically the entire class was on high drama alert. Living through the experience on their own phones, my students suddenly had plenty of attention, but it wasn’t for misplaced modifiers. Everyone wanted to know about the fight. It took several minutes to get the class back on track. Sure, the disturbance was annoying and inconvenient (at least from my point of view), but what’s more unsettling is shamelessly standing by to record a video of a fight or any kind of emergency and only making an effort to “Snap it” our upload it to YouTube. What happened to decency? Why are so many incapable of feeling empathy until a crisis lands on their own doorstep? Must everything be purely for entertainment? The “bystander effect” is nothing new, but today’s technology has given us a free pass to gawk rather than take helpful action; people should resist the urge to selfishly post the business of others online.

When witnessing a situation escalate into a heated argument or fight, there’s no need to record if the intent is solely to post the incident online for the enjoyment of others. **One might argue that a bystander could bring the incident to a halt by showing that everything is now “on record”; plus the video could serve as evidence should law enforcement become involved.** Great in theory, this argument lacks application in reality. Many who record such videos never share them with law enforcement; however, plenty of these videos end up online for the world to see and to mercilessly make fun of those in the video, people who most likely didn’t know their situation was being recorded and now, beyond the efforts of moving past the incident, must deal with additional personal humiliation. In 2012, Darin King, then a 14-year-old middle schooler, and his mother decided that home schooling was the only way to escape the bullying that culminated in a fistfight (in which Darin took the majority of the blows) being recorded and posted to YouTube. No one took the video to school authorities or law enforcement, but his classmates shared the video and posted comments like “I just watched it. Hahahahaha” and “I just showed it to my dad, he bust out laughin.” Those who posted comments should consider whether they would enjoy being subjected to such words themselves.

Posting a video of someone else’s fight online is inconsiderate and disturbing enough, but “bystander effect” videos don’t stop there. In recent years, a number of high profile cases, such as those in Stuebenville, Ohio have seen bystanders posting videos of sexual assault. A definitive line needs to be drawn. **Opponents might say this is an unfair comparison because fights and sexual assaults are completely different.** This is true, but the consequences of bystanders sitting idly by, recording video, and then posting it without consent can be disastrous in both situations. In 2013, both 15-year old Audrie Pott of Saratoga, California and 15-year-old Rahtaeh Parsons of Halifax, Nova Scotia took their own lives after photos and videos of their assaults spread over the internet. Like Darin King, they felt drastic measures were the only way to escape the humiliation and harassment. Unfortunately, their stories are not unique. It’s more important to maintain privacy and recover from a personal and devastating incident than it is for a bystander to score a bunch of “likes” or hit a million views at someone else’s expense.

Widespread appearances of online “bystander effect” videos will only make the problem worse. Earlier this month, Representative Terri Bryant from southern Illinois proposed a bill that would make it illegal to record fights and share them online. This is a good start because if people felt less inclined to record and post, they might be more likely to break up a fight or call out to stop inappropriate action. **Undoubtedly, Bryant’s bill will face legal challenges as opponents will cry censorship, citing first amendment rights**. However, practically nothing is free of limits, and the first amendment is no exception. When posted and spread online, “bystander effect” videos and images can incite cyberbullying and violence, in which case the first amendment might not protect them. Anything that can deter inaction and thoughtless “bystander effect” video postings should take precedence over someone’s abuse of first amendment rights.

If we continue the status quo, “bystander video” recording and posting will become accepted and expected. We will have no choice but to become accustomed to living in a world where personal issues are subjected to unwelcome recording and publishing for the world’s entertainment, a world where personal lives and matters are reduced to Jerry Springer-esque drama for the masses. Are we really going to let this happen? Should we be okay with an open lack of empathy and respect for privacy, and is that what we want the next generations to accept as how we value and treat one another? The answer should be no, which is why we need to prevent further impulsive and insensitive “bystander video” publishing.

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| **Point**: There’s no need to record a fight or other such incident if the only intent is to post it online. | |
| **Counterargument**: *Opponents might say that they’re trying to stop the action by making it known that they’re recording it, and the videos could be used as evidence should law enforcement officials become involved.* | **My response to the counterargument**:  This sounds good in theory, but many who record don’t offer their videos to law enforcement, yet many of these videos end up online for the world to see and comment against the wishes of those appearing in the videos or images. Honest bystanders should be all law enforcement needs to take appropriate action. If it involved you or a family member, would you want the world to mercilessly comment on and mock your situation? |
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| **Point**: Posting a video of someone else’s fight online is inconsiderate and disturbing enough, but “bystander effect” videos don’t stop there. In recent years, a number of high profile cases, such as those in Stuebenville, Ohio and Nova Scotia, have seen bystanders posting videos of sexual assault. A definitive line needs to be drawn somewhere. | |
| **Counterargument**: *Opponents might say this is an unfair comparison because fights and sexual assaults are completely different.* | **My response to the counterargument**: The consequences of bystanders sitting idly by, recording video, and then posting it without the consent of those in the video can be disastrous in both situations. Hurtful comments about the distributed materials can lead to more drama and possibly violence. It’s more important for those in the video to maintain privacy and recover than it is for a bystander to score a bunch of “likes” or hit a million views at someone else’s expense. |
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| **Point**: More widespread instances of “bystander effect” videos circulating online will only make the problem worse. Earlier this month, Representative Terri Bryant from southern Illinois proposed a bill that would make it illegal to record fights and share them online, saying, “I just want to send a clear message that it is unacceptable to stage these fights or be a willing bystander.” If people felt less inclined to record and post, they might be more likely to break up a fight or call out to stop inappropriate action. | |
| **Counterargument**:  *Opponents might call this censorship or say it challenges first amendment rights.* | **My response to the counterargument**:  Practically nothing is free of limits, and the first amendment is no exception. When posted and spread online, “bystander effect” videos and images can incite cyberbullying and violence, in which case the first amendment might not protect them. Anything that can deter inaction and thoughtless “bystander effect” video postings should take precedence over someone’s abuse of first amendment rights. |