

**A First-Year Writing Lesson:  
Practicing exposition techniques  
with the Ruby Bridges Quilt and the Quilt Index  
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Here are some typical questions from first-year writing students:

"What's the difference between *description* and *definition*?"

"What's the difference between *description* and *summary*?"

"What's *process analysis*?"

The following exercises are designed to **practice some of these exposition techniques**, to better understand them and use them in college writing.

(The Tier 1 Writing Program at MSU uses two course textbooks, *The Little, Brown Handbook* (MSU edition) and Bruce Ballenger's *The Curious Researcher*. Instructors outside of MSU would need to adapt the exercises to their own textbooks or [online reference](#), of course.)

First, please **open your handbook** to section 6c, beginning on page 38.

Then, open [this link to the Ruby Bridges quilt exhibition](#) at the **MSU Museum**.

**Please copy the questions below to your Google Doc**, and try to answer each one in a sentence or two, using the examples in your handbook for models as needed. You can look for more information online if necessary. Share the Google Doc with your instructor and at least one classmate, who will be your peer-review partner.



(You can also use [this further link](#) to the catalogue entry from *The Quilt Index*.)

1. **Narration.** The quilt refers to a (true) story about a little girl, [Ruby Bridges](#). Briefly, in a sentence or two, what is this story?

2. **Description.** Describe the quilt in the photo. Colors, shapes, patterns? (Which of your five senses are you using? Which senses could you use if you had the actual quilt in front of you?)

3. **Illustration (through Examples).** The Quilt Index classifies (see no. 6) their quilt collection according to different categories such as Style, Purpose, Time Period and Function. The Ruby Bridges quilt is placed in the Function category of Art/Personal Expression. Find two other examples of quilts in this category that you especially like. Which are they, and what do you find pleasing about them?

4. **Definition.** See the definition of “quilt” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Note how the standard definition is in two parts: a general category (“blanket” or “bed covering”) followed by more precise information to narrow down the category.

Think about the cultural artifact or cultural practice that you wrote about for Assignment 2, the Cultural Literacies writing, and create a definition using this format. Afterwards, compare your definition to one found in an online dictionary.

(Instructors outside of the MSU Tier 1 Writing Program could offer a list of sample cultural artifacts and practices, and explain the terms as necessary.)

I'll try it: here is an impromptu definition of “beauty contest”:  
“Beauty contests are **public competitions** [general category] **.in which people, usually young women, are ranked according to their perceived physical beauty by a panel of judges** [narrowing down the category].”

How does my definition compare to Merriam-Webster's?

Now you try it with your A2 artifact or practice, or another one of your choice.

5. **Division analysis.** The Quilt Index breaks down the components of each quilt, for example the fabrics used and the construction techniques. Here's an example: the Chrysanthemum

Quilt uses two types of fabric and four patterns, and two construction techniques. How about the Ruby Bridges Quilt?

6. **Classification**. As we saw earlier, the Quilt Project sorts its huge collection into various categories, or Classifications. We have seen that the Purpose/Function of the Ruby Bridges Quilt was Art/Personal Expression. Where is this quilt placed in category Time Period? Location?

7. **Comparison/contrast**. The Quilt Project has an online Comparison tool. Open a page of quilts, like this one, and select two or more by checking the box “Click to compare” on the right. Then click on “Compare now” at the bottom of the page.

Comparison: find at least two similarities between the two quilts.

Contrast: find at least two differences.

8. **Cause-and-effect analysis**. One of the essays in the Quilt Index asks, “Why are plant and flower designs so popular in 19th-century American quilts?” What answer does the researcher find?

(Optional imaginative question: if you made quilts, what images and designs might you use? Why?)

9. **Process analysis**. Here is a lesson plan for middle-school pupils, teaching them the basic process of making a single quilt block. What are the steps of the process? Can you explain it in 3 to 5 short steps?

Finally, **summary**. This process is different from the nine that we have just seen, because it is carried out on an existing text. You can find tips on summarizing in section 8b4 of your handbook (pp. 63–50) and pp. 113–115 of *The Curious Researcher*. As you see, a summary gives the main points of a written text, briefly: it captures the main ideas. Both Ballenger and the handbook give you examples.

Look at the beginning of this essay, [“Men and Quilts in the USA,”](#) by Joe Cunningham:

“To make a quilt is to engage in a tradition deeply entwined with the American cultural identity. Everyone knows what a quilt is, and most people have someone in their lives who makes quilts. These quiltmakers, it hardly needs mentioning, are women. To say the word “quilter” is to suggest womanhood in the same way as saying the word “cowboy” suggests manhood.

“That is why people are always surprised to learn that I am a quiltmaker, surprised and a little shocked. It is slightly shocking, because I am a man who has chosen to go into a woman’s world, and not even a woman’s professional world such as nursing, but a world conceived, developed and maintained by women for the purpose of making things to give away--in other words, a world where no normal man would choose to go.

“It is not just the needlework that wards off men from the quilt world, it is also the idea that quilts constitute an entire gift economy, where women buy fabric and supplies so they can make quilts as gifts for everyone around them. This idea, that a quilt is a gift, arose in the early 1800’s in the U.S.A., becoming one of the chief features of the American quilt. In Europe, the quilt was a fancy bedcovering in formal bedrooms of the well-to-do. Re-imagining quilts transformed the market from decorative items for the wealthy few to gifts for all. This conception continues today; nearly all quilts are made for someone the quilter knows and loves. Once the gift idea was encoded in the DNA of the American quilt, as it were, it became virtually certain that no man would be interested in quilts. It was an activity in which there were no economic incentives, no competitive incentives and no male company.”

What is Mr. Cunningham's main point?

How does he support or develop it?

Once you have the answers to these questions, summarize the above passage in a couple of sentences, between 25 and 50 words.

When you have finished all ten exercises, compare and contrast your work with your partner's. Discuss your findings together.