

# The Illustrative Essay

When writing an illustrative essay, one needs to be specific. If someone tells us that she had an exhausting day, we may nod in sympathy. But if she explains that the dog ran away, the bathtub overflowed, the car broke down, and she was late to work, then we can really understand her misery.

Examples give flavor to writing as spices do to sauces. Without either, the result is bland. Of course, the examples used must be appropriate, sufficient in number, and detailed. When carefully chosen and developed, examples can arouse and hold the reader's interest.

No matter what the subject or style, details enliven all writing. Lewis Thomas, in his essay "On Natural Death," explores a mouse's apparent lack of pain when a cat carries its dying victim in its mouth. He explains that when it is wounded by the cat, the mouse's body releases pain-killing hormones: "Thus it is that the mouse seems always to dangle languidly from the jaws, lies there so quietly when dropped, dies of his injuries without a struggle. If a mouse could shrug, he'd shrug." In this example, Lewis is trying to illustrate the mouse's seeming indifference to pain. The graphic quality of the illustration emphasizes Lewis's point and remains in the mind long after the end of the essay. This is the power of illustration.

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