2009 Student Writing Conference
Outstanding Essay Award Winners

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Zürich

Zürich was soundless in the mornings. Ancient gray stone buildings surrounded the pristine streets, positioned as if they were afraid to cast a shadow on the path of its residents. Citrus dust consumed the warm air at the Stadelhofen main train station in late July, signaling the beginning of the chaotic working day. The station lived across from the elite Opera House. The stern and regal statues on the tip of this exclusive house defended the petite city with their shields of ivory pearls, protecting it from unwanted visitors. The narrow tram tracks, which separated the Opera House from the station, shook silently as the small sophisticated trolleys in the distance engaged in their sunrise jog. Italian and Romanian men in their orange jumpsuits swept the entrance to the station with their witch brooms collecting trash off the ground as an ode to their city. They, like me, were foreigners too. We knew that the Swiss would never pick up their own trash, but this was our home now, our place.

The station stood above ground with an open face where the sun would shimmer in the morning and a closed back to shield its weaknesses. The openness of the station enabled those who stood in Stadelhofen town square to see the trains abduct their passengers, and those who waited for the trains to look upon those in the tiny bush scattered town square socializing and kissing. The Swiss would kiss three times, one kiss on the left cheek, one kiss on the right, then another on the left as if it had been planned. The station laughed at the kissing. It laughed in its gray wisdom at order and constant punctuality. The station was tired; tired of being spat upon, and ridiculed if its trains were a few minutes late. The station was exhausted from being used but not appreciated.

White and gray speckled pigeons waddled inside the Bahnhof (“train station”) as if they were late for an appointment, but frightened away by a gust of urea off the damp tracks as the trains rushed by. Colored newspapers nervously rustled the black, gum-spotted ground, providing
the locals with a quiet gesture that the train was indeed coming. No soul dared to speak in the morning as the clocks gave their early lectures. The revered white clocks with red hands ticked meticulously at all corners of the station. Fifty pinstripe men and women fidgeted with their Cartier watches, impatiently tapping their leather heels. They were waiting for the metal beasts to arrive; a train that arrives one minute late is a cultural tragedy.

The Bahnhof rumbled as the Zug ("train") S13 revealed its face through the dark cave to pick up its passengers. The beast screeched to a halt, arrogantly displaying its modern elegance. The smooth, segmented blue caterpillar with key scratched plastic windows, opened like a spaceship in a sci-fi movie. The black and white pinstriped zombies pushed their way into the masculine train. All were on their way to their upper-class banking jobs, to be paid by the city.

Within an instant the train had taken off and all that was left in front of me were the damp brown tracks sticky with dew and oil. When I slowly looked up from the tracks, Stadelhofen town square emerged with its magnificent fountain ablaze in the sunrise chill. The light reflecting off the water highlighted the faces of teenagers who walked around the fountain to sit on the wooden benches, cigarettes between their fingers and coffee in hand, dressed in colorful scarves and light knitted sweaters. The smell of cigarette smoke that feathered off the cigarettes swarmed the train station as the wind blew from the fountain as it did every morning. Skinny women in Gucci sweatpants walked their small pugs, poodles, and designer handbags around the lime-green hedges, hoping to catch the eye of the young handsome entrepreneur who was passionately drinking his espresso under one of the scattered maple trees.

I stood patiently waiting for my train, the Zug S16, observing the familiar faces of people I recognized but did not know as they bustled around the rosy fountain. A foreigner, I saw more than just the city’s eccentric perfection, narrow sidewalks, and imminent success of the people who paced by silently. I saw that the majesty of this place as the Treffpunkt ("meeting place") of all cultures. I felt the pressure of cultural regulations press down upon my American accent, but this tiny city, with its crude people, is my place, my home, my Zürich. I accepted it for what it was and nothing more. The train station was the heart of my memories and just as I had come, I had to leave my place.

The S16 arrived mutely as a ghost. I climbed into the Zug one last time and placed my hands on the scratched plastic windows.
Dress to Impress?
Musings on Self-Presentation

"A person's wardrobe is perhaps the best way to find out about their personality," writes Bridget Allen in her 2006 web article, "What Your Clothes Say About You—The Good, Bad, and Ugly." "Before you choose your outfit for the day, think about how you want other people to see you and interpret your personality" (Buzzle.com). It is said that most people form their opinions of those they meet within the first thirty seconds of their introduction. It's not our word and thoughts, then, that initially define us as who we are; rather, we convey ourselves to those around us through nonverbal means: the way we wear our hair, our clothing selections, piercing and tattoos (or lack thereof), and our scent play major roles in how others perceive us. Likewise, the way we choose to present ourselves in these respects says much about how we want to be perceived and how we feel about ourselves.

My personal wardrobe varies rather drastically. Like my father, my friends joke that I have "more clothes than a woman." As a rule of thumb, though, I am said to dress "well" (I was voted "Best Dressed" of the senior class for those yearbook favorites) and tend to put most of my money not into my car or into food, like perhaps most young men my age, but into my clothing. That is not to say that I do not wear sweatshirts or t-shirts, because I do. I don't, however, own one pair of sweatpants. Though I am terribly opposed to buying clothes for the sake of wearing a label, I do shop at designer stores. However, the majority of my clothing is purposefully without any company image, slogan, or
otherwise identifiable factor. Likewise, I have no qualms about purchasing clothing at a Wal-Mart or comparable department store. More than showing off where I bought my clothing, I care more that it looks good and presents me in a positive image.

As I said, I never wear sweatpants. Typically, one will see me in a well-fitting pair of jeans, a button-down Oxford-style shirt (patterned or solid), and one of my many pairs of shoes, chosen to match my outfit. Of course, my selection of clothing varies from day to day; I may choose to wear khakis, or I may choose to wear a sweater, rugby shirt, or (on somewhat rare occurrences or if the temperature is too hot) a t-shirt. Point being, I don’t necessarily identify with the athletic crowd donning basketball shorts and hooded sweatshirts every day, nor do I consciously choose to wear clothes that are multiple sizes too large for my body. My jeans are as damage-free as possible (sadly, though, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to purchase any jeans without some kind of “distress”; apparently it’s fashionable to wear jeans that look as though they lost an altercation with a weedwhacker). Though I certainly don’t don a shirt and tie every day, I generally avoid “dressing down.”

I suppose, generally speaking, I try to present a certain self-confidence and self-respect through my clothing. I consider myself someone who’s deserving of some degree of respect, and so I dress in a fashion that conveys that I should be taken seriously. My father, my band director, and then my cadet captain in ROTC all stressed the same important message: self-respect is a prerequisite to others respecting you. Therefore, I respect myself enough to dress appropriately, while not overdoing it in such a way that I become something of a joke or perceived as uptight or self-righteous. I suppose, in a nutshell, I try to express that I mean business, but I still like to have a good time.

I generally wear at least one ring, a necklace, occasionally a bracelet, and two earrings. My ring is my family’s Masonic Blue Lodge ring, passed down from father to son either when the son has become a Mason, or when the father has died. The ring has been in existence for four generations, and I intend to keep that legacy alive; the ring has special value to me. My necklace is a faux stone cross on a leather band. Its purpose, aside from fashion, is self-explanatory: my faith is an important part of my life, and I express that through this necklace. My earrings are an interesting talking point, because I honestly cannot say what specific reasoning led me to getting my ears pierced. Interestingly enough, most of my friends have said it didn’t surprise them at all, and seems to be natural with my personality. It was honestly something of an impulse decision, but I feel that they’ve fit into my persona rather easily and certainly don’t detract from the image I want to create for myself; if anything, one friend said it makes me seem more confident in myself.

I keep my hair clipped short, and always have since my military fixation set in when I was about fourteen years old. I keep it long enough to be able to style it the way I do though; I’ve had this hairstyle since I
was in middle school when all the guys were doing it; I’m one of the few who decided to keep it. I periodically buzz my hair off; interestingly, I’ve noticed that the drastic haircuts come in times of life change. I keep longer sideburns, though am careful to not grow them so wide or long that they grow over into Elvis-territory. I grew them initially, I think, because I was never allowed to in my high school marching band and decided that I would try them out; clearly, they’ve grown on me.

I find facial hair looks dirty on me and conveys a lack of self-concern. I generally stay clean-shaven (of course, I’ll occasionally inadvertently fall behind, but don’t let it get past the “shadow” stage). I use scented body wash, shampoo, and deodorant; I religiously wear a small amount of spray-on cologne. Alongside my professional appearance, I want to convey enough self-interest to keep myself clean and clean-smelling.

I have three tattoos. I have the Masonic square and compass on the right side of my chest; a squared cross on my upper right arm with “DOULOS” (Greek for “slave”) written beneath it (based on scripture, doulos defines our chosen relationship with Christ); and on my back, Tazzy (The Tasmanian Devil). The first two, I think, are rather self-explanatory; the third is a memorial tattoo for my father. He had the same tattoo on his bicep, and I decided to carry him over into my life in another way through my tattoo. More important about my tattoos, though, is their placement. Most people, unless they explicitly ask, or see me at the beach, don’t even know that I have tattoos. In this day where body art has become as common a form of expression as art or music, the tattoos I have are not for display purposes. Each piece has a specific value to me personally, and it is for these reasons that I had the tattoos done. Though I’m certainly not ashamed of them, I do not show them off. They’re for my eyes and mind, not for everyone else. That, my friend Michele says, speaks more to my personality than anything: the fact that I have these tattoos, but purposely have them in places that no one else can see without my showing them.

I’m a smoker. I’m not necessarily proud of it. It’s a nasty habit I picked up while cooking professionally, but it has become, at least to some degree, part of my life, and my image to others. “Smoking is an outward signal of inner turmoil or conflict and most smoking has less to do with nicotine addiction and more to do with the need for reassurance,” write Allan and Barbara Pease in their book The Definitive Book of Body Language (265). Though I’m not sure that I smoke to satisfy a need of reassurance, I do agree that less about an addiction and more about a vice. It certainly creates a certain self-image; perhaps that I’m not closed-minded, that I’m easy-going, and that yes, I make stupid decisions sometimes. Someone has told me that though it’s a terrible habit, it seems to have raised my confidence in myself, rather than lowered it.

Though my self-presentation varies from day to day, and occasionally I completely change a variable of my image (a new hairstyle, perhaps, or an impulse piercing), I still actively attempt to create a self-image that is
self-confident, makes me seem approachable, and yes, I certainly on some level want to present myself as an attractive male in the presence of females. I’m unsure as to which came first though, the confidence or the wardrobe. Regardless, I’ve found that as time has worn on, I’m still very self-confident wearing more casual clothing; I feel just as sure of myself if I go out in a t-shirt and jeans as I might wearing a fitted Oxford shirt and dressier pants.

Case-in-point: at one juncture, either consciously or subconsciously, I aimed to create a new self image; to turn the shy, overweight, and ungroomed middle school boy of my youth into a Type A-personality who presents a confident, easy-going nature, and who deserves to be taken seriously (and of course, somewhat popular with ladies). For the most part, according to those I’ve asked, I have done my job. Male friends openly walk up to me in public and shake my hand in greeting, girls wave, and I have the respect of my coworkers and superiors. Simply from understanding how people perceive others and how to manipulate it to my advantage, I’ve completely revamped myself into a new person that people tend to enjoy being around. As Ol’ Blue Eyes once sang, “I’ve got the world on a string.”
The French Think We’re Cowboys

This essay is all about stereotypes, particularly stereotypes by geographic location. Before I begin, I would like to include a brief warning. This may seem like a strange way to start an essay, but I think this one calls for it. I’m including this for a few reasons, the first being that I don’t want to offend anyone, yet at the same time have no intention of being any less horrible. For that reason, I now ask anyone who is easily offended to kindly put this essay down and take a nice relaxing walk for the next few minutes. The other reason I include this warning of what is to come is to ensure that it is understood that my classifications are merely observations of the way people classify each other. They are meant to be humorous and should not be taken seriously. My personal belief is that stereotypes have a basis, but are overgeneralizations and should be laughed at, not taken seriously. However, the list I am about to include is going to be written in an outlandishly belligerent manner, which is why we had to send all of the softies out of the room. With all that out of the way I will warn you by saying this: The following essay is going to be rude, abrasive, and generally inconsiderate to the feelings of others. Now I feel that I can get started on my list of stereotypes by geography across America.

The East Coast: The East Coast is home to what is probably the most concentrated mass of aggression and frustration anywhere in America. With that many people crammed into such a small space, it is easy to see how people would develop such uncontrollable rage. Anyone would be irritable standing in a subway pressed so close to a complete stranger that the Funyons on his breath are actually making you tear up. To just say that East Coasters are angry would not be doing their unique level of rage justice. Words fail to describe their anger at the world, and the only
apt description would be to say that they make the Incredible Hulk look like a British talk show host on Ritalin. A few of the things that anger East Coasters are: waiting for anything longer than ten seconds; any other car on the road at any time of day; clouds that look a little too much like things; art; and other people. People on the East Coast are simply not willing to put up with anything. Somewhere between being hit up for spare change every twenty-three seconds by someone you suspect to be the same six or seven homeless people changing disguises, and the hot garbage smell, the ability to tolerate anything disappears. This genetically mutated group of people can only thrive where they can go around grudgingly ignoring others like them. Namely, on the East Coast.

The South: The South, a simpler place where things just seem to move a little slower. This is probably because everyone who lives there thinks a little slower, and it tends to bring things to a standstill. The South is a place where if you think your cousin is good looking, then by all means marry her and have seventeen children with three eyes and kneecaps in the middle of their chests. In the South, it is okay to get up at noon, start drinking at one, watch NASCAR for three and a half hours, and fall asleep on the couch to reruns of Jerry Springer. The basic Southern stereotype from the ground up goes something like this: Cowboy boots with the words Lynyrd Skynyrd carved somewhere onto them protrude from needlessly tight blue jeans, preferably ripped somewhere or other, which come complete with stains that could be either motor oil or gravy. A plaid button-up shirt or white t-shirt will do, preferably with a gravy/oil stain to match the pants. A belly button must protrude from the shirt in some way, regardless of whether the person is overweight or not, though it remains a mystery how this is achieved by skinny individuals. The standard “business in the front, party in the back” mullet applies to all models who still have hair, and three to five teeth on average are included.

The Midwest: There really isn’t all that much to say about people from the Midwest. Any stereotype of them is generally flat and boring. Coincidentally the stereotype is like the area and its people, flat and boring. The Midwest is a place where there is nothing in any direction save a Wal-Mart, which is a three-hour drive from where you live. Frankly, there isn’t really much else to say about them; they grow crops and a hill is a wondrous marvel of nature to them.

West Coast: What does anyone think of when they think of the West Coast? California, Hollywood, fame, fortune. All of these are acceptable answers. The West Coast is a magical land of broken dreams and plastic people. California is where the rich go to be rich and the airheaded go to be themselves. Something about the high life of fame, fortune, and getting out of DUIs while vacationing in rehab apparently appeals to those special kind of people who partied their way through a semester and a half of college before deciding that it wasn’t for them. There are
really three types of people on the West Coast—four, if you include Governor Schwarzenegger, who is in a class of his own. The first type is the Rich People. They are the type whose only job is to be rich and irresponsible. This is the kind of person whose idea of a normal week is something like this: Early Monday is spent shopping for $8,000 sunglasses, which once they have been attained promptly go out of fashion and are destroyed. Monday afternoon through Wednesday evening is spent drinking continuously followed by a pleasant drive in the wrong direction down a highway. Thursday is spent in jail for ten minutes, until they are let off, followed by rehab until Friday afternoon, when they will dive back into the spotlight speaking of their newfound sobriety, which will carry them through Saturday and Sunday, until they need to go handbag shopping on Monday. The next type I’ve deemed Spaceheads. I use the term Spaceheads because it defines the sort of person who has mostly a null void of empty space between his ears. These are the type of people who spend their days surfing and bumming about boardwalks. This kind of person wouldn’t know what a closed-toed shoe was if he was being beaten about the head and neck with one, and can barely muster the linguistic ability to form a coherent sentence without the word “dude” in it. The third type I’ll call Plastics. Essentially, these are people who I can only equate with what would happen if a Barbie doll gave birth to a child, and that child then grew up to have no value to society. Generally, this type tries to break into an acting career. Plastics tend to be fake, shallow, and 65% silicone-based.

Florida: I realize that Florida is not exactly a region of the United States, but I felt that it needed to be included at the end as a way to tie all of these other stereotypes together in the one place where they all go to die. Florida, “God’s waiting room,” as they call it. No matter where you come from in the world, if you are over the age of sixty, it is time to make the journey to Florida where you will spend the rest of your years going to dinner at three in the afternoon so that you can get the Early Bird Special and then to bed by eight. Florida can be compared to a modern version of the Eskimo tradition of sending their elders out to sea on a chunk of ice to die. While it seems now we have included Country Kitchen Buffet and golf clubs on our ice chunk, the principle is the same. Take the old people and put them somewhere they can’t bother the rest of us with stories about the old days while gumming their food and making the house smell funny. Though it might all turn out to be a plot by the company that manufactures high socks, khaki shorts, and those Hawaiian print shirts.

If you’ve made it this far, you have probably got one of a few different reactions going through your head. These I assume range from outrage, (meaning you’ve missed the point or didn’t listen when I warned you the essay was going to be terribly unkind) to guilty amusement at what you’ve just read. If it’s the latter, feel free to laugh a bit in your head, this way nobody will think you are a terrible person. Frankly, it’s too late for
me, but you can still salvage your moral standing. No matter what you are feeling right now, if you take anything away from this, let it be the knowledge that stereotypes are silly and absurd. If you can sit there and laugh your head off like an insane person at them, you’ve taken away their power to hurt. It’s only when you let them offend that they have the ability to do harm. So laugh at each other, and laugh at yourself, because in the end the French will still think we are a bunch of dirty cowboys no matter what. So what’s the use in any of it?
The English Department encourages DelVal students to present their best written work at the Fall 2009 Student Writing Conference, which showcases outstanding essays and research projects produced in recent or current DelVal courses. Early entries are encouraged; the final deadline for submissions will be announced in September.

**Big Money Prizes for Outstanding Papers**

To register for the conference, students must submit a hard-copy of their original work together with a completed Registration Form to the English Department Secretary in Miller Hall. Electronic submissions with basic registration information should be sent as file attachments to Prof. Michael Stamps at Michael.Stamps@delval.edu. Students are also encouraged to organize and submit their essays as part of a topical or thematic panel based on a common course assignment—that is, groups of 3–4 students may submit and present their work as a team.

**Registration / Recommendation Form**

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**NOTE TO FACULTY:** Please announce this upcoming event in your courses with a significant writing component, and directly encourage students to participate in the conference by attaching blank copies of this Registration/Recommendation Form to those examples of outstanding writing currently being produced in your classes. Email Michael.Stamps@delval.edu with all questions.