

Questions for Professor Arens

1. What is the specific assignment for this essay?

ENV 110: Biodiversity is a survey course that seeks to introduce students to the many perspectives one can take on studying the current biodiversity crisis. In the term paper assignment, students are asked to choose one of the themes and perspectives we've discussed in the course and develop it more fully by exploring a specific example. Students are asked to develop a question and answer it in the course of the essay.

2. How does this assignment fit with the goals of your course?

Because ENV 110: Biodiversity touches on so many topics, it can cover none of them in real detail. The purpose of the essay is to allow students to choose a theme that most interests them and explore it in more depth.

3. Why does this student's essay stand out for you as strong writing?

Jenn's essay stands out for several reasons. First, it is clearly structured and written. She asks a specific question in her first paragraph and answers it by systematically evaluating evidence that addresses the fundamental definition of keystone species. Second, the question is original. To my knowledge, no one has previously proposed the walrus as a keystone species. Thus, the paper represents applying existing knowledge to a wholly new question. That is the essence of scientific communication: Answering an original question. Jenn's essay demonstrates that one can answer an interesting scientific question by simply exploring the primary literature with a discerning and critical eye, and without having a lot of advanced knowledge before starting the project. Finally, Jenn concludes that the walrus is not a keystone species. Many students feel that if their answer is negative—if they reject their hypothesis—the paper has failed. In fact, good science rejects a hypothesis more often than not. It takes intellectual courage to put that in writing.

Questions for Jenn Kirst

1. How did you go about completing this essay? What steps did you follow?

This essay was completed in a number of steps. First we had to propose a topic and include a brief description of what we wanted to incorporate into our paper. We also had to justify the relevance of this topic to our course. Once our topic was approved, we had to find references of information that would relate to our paper topic and write a summary of the main points within these sources. After that was finished, we wrote an abstract that summarized the main points and topics we were going to discuss in our paper; then we began the paper. Once I sat down to begin writing, I followed a guideline I had constructed for myself that was basically an outline for my paper. I decided to first define what a keystone species was then explain the relevance behind this concept. I then introduced facts about the walrus that were relevant to determining if it was in fact a keystone species

following up with the connection between these facts and the definition of a keystone species. Lastly I concluded my research.

2. What was the most challenging aspect of this essay assignment?

For me the most challenging part of this essay was perhaps finding a topic that I felt I could go into a lot of detail about without overloading the reader with information. I wanted to make sure anyone, not just people with background knowledge of this topic, could follow my paper and understand what steps I took in reaching my conclusion.

3. How does this essay connect to your work in the course as a whole?

This essay connected to my work in the course as a whole because biodiversity is the measure of the variety of kinds of organisms present within an ecosystem. It is inevitable that organisms in an ecosystem will interact together and this interaction will lead to competition. Organisms can only co-exist once they develop niche differentiation. Within the ecosystem, certain organisms have bigger roles than others and are called keystone species if their influence exceeds their abundance. What I did in my essay was try to find a connection between a specific species, the walrus, and a keystone role within the species' ecosystem. What I found was that the walrus does not have the most influence or control over its environment as other species found in that same environment do.

4. What is the most important thing you learned from doing this essay?

The most important thing I learned was how to find something that interests me, and develop it into research. I am very interested in how ecosystems work and how species interact with another and this essay helped me to understand one way that this interest can be applied to real-world studies.

5. Describe the way your Writing Colleague supported you in the process of writing.

My writing colleague helped me in the proof-reading part of this essay. I would submit a draft to her and she would comment on it, making sure I was staying on track with my original plan and was within the requirements of the assignment.

Questions for Amanda Bartlett, Writing Colleague

1. Describe the way you supported the student in completing this writing project.

The term paper was divided up in sections that were handed in separately. The research, References Cited page, abstract, and drafts were all done in steps. We had meetings for all the different parts and went over what needed to be in each one and what small changes should be made for the next part.

2. What did you find to be the most challenging aspect of this assignment?

There were a lot of specific, technical parts to this paper, and a lot of people got confused or weren't sure what to do. I think it was more detailed than other papers they had written before. It was also different from any of the other writing assignments in the class. They had to write several drafts of Natural History Minutes, but these were much shorter than the term paper and written for a different sort of audience and for a different purpose. The term paper asked more of the students writing it.