The Last Meow

Reading Rhetorically

Prereading

Activity 1  Getting Ready to Read
Write for five minutes about the following question:

How important are pets in your life and in the lives of people you know?

With a small group of your classmates, share what you have written and talk about whether we pamper our pets too much.

Activity 2  Introducing Key Concepts
List words that relate to pets or veterinarians, and then create a semantic map.

Activity 3  Surveying the Text
Discuss the following questions with your class:

• The title of the article is “The Last Meow,” and it was published in the category of “Annals of Veterinary Medicine.” The subtitle states: “Organ transplants, chemotherapy, root canal—how far would you go for a pet?” Based on this information, what do you think the article will be about?

• What can you tell about the article by looking at its length and the lengths of its paragraphs?
Making Predictions and Asking Questions

Discuss the following questions with your class:

1. Read the category in which this article appears (Annals of Veterinary Medicine), the title, and the subheading. What do you think this text will be about?

2. This article appeared in The New Yorker magazine. What do you know about this magazine? Who do you think is the intended audience for this piece? What other audiences might be interested in this topic? How do you know?

3. Will the article take a position on the topic of veterinary care for pets? Why do you think so?

4. What is your answer to the question: How far would you go for a pet?

5. Will the article be negative or positive in relation to the cost of veterinary care? Why do you think this?

Introducing Key Vocabulary

Script Writing

Write a “script” using eight words from the chart shown below—two from each column. Using those eight words, design a script for a scene you might see on a TV drama or a news program. Make sure each person in your group has a speaking part and that the scene is no more than five minutes long. Use a dictionary to ensure you are using the words correctly.

| unequivocal | compensated | general practitioner | dialysis |
| ravishing   | compelled    | incurable             | transplant |
| absurdiy   | ravage       | mercy                 | terminal   |
| dichotomy  | droop        | suffering             | donor      |
| support    | bewilder     | family member         | euthanasia |
| exotic     | strays       | medical treatment     | lethal injection |

Using Key Vocabulary

Complete the following sentences by changing the verb in parentheses into either an –ed form or an –ing form:

1. The patient, ________________ (ravage) by the effects of diabetes, was a candidate for a kidney transplant.

2. The disease was ________________ (ravage) the kidneys of the cat.

3. The ________________ (droop) cat was held in the arms of her owner.
4. The cat ___________________ (droop) as the owner handed her to the veterinarian.

5. _________________, (bewilder) Shawn Levering looked around the veterinary hospital.

6. He was given a _______________ (bewilder) number of choices.

7. The veterinarian made a _______________ (compel) argument for saving Lady’s life.

8. He was _________________ (compel) to choose between his hot rods and his cat.

9. The _________________ (transplant) kidney was working fine.

10. The surgeon had _________________ (transplant) the kidney the night before.

**Reading**

**Activity 7**

**First Reading**

“The Last Meow” is a fairly long and complex article. To help the reader, the author has divided it into eight parts. You are going to look at the parts separately. As you read, think about why Bilger created these divisions.

A. Your teacher has read Part 1 aloud. Now you will discuss the questions below about Part 1. Form groups and choose a recorder. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

- What is wrong with Lady? What is the treatment? How much will it cost to treat her?
- What kind of person is Shawn Levering, her owner? How can you tell?
- What kind of person is the veterinarian, Cathy Langston? How can you tell?
- Why do you think Shawn is willing to pay for Lady’s treatment? Is he the kind of person you would expect to pay for high-cost treatment for a pet?

B. For Part 2, your teacher has read the first sentence of each paragraph aloud and predicted what the paragraphs will be about. Now read Part 2 and decide if your teacher’s predictions were correct.

C. Now read parts 3 through 7. Start by reading the first sentence of each paragraph in Part 3 and predict what Part 3 will be about. Then confirm your predictions or revise them if you find they are wrong. As precisely as you can, write a one-sentence summary of Part 3. Follow the same process for parts 4 through 7.
Now that you know what “The Last Meow” is about, answer the following questions:

- Think about your original predictions. Which predictions were right? Which did you have to modify as you read “The Last Meow”?
- What is the most significant sentence in the article? Underline or highlight it. Why is it the most important sentence?
- What is the main idea of “The Last Meow”?
- How has Bilger responded to the question of whether Americans are spending too much on their pets? How do you know?

**Rereading the Text**

Now reread “The Last Meow,” and annotate it as you reread. Underline, highlight, and draw arrows. In the left-hand margin, make comments about the main ideas, questions or objections, and the connections between ideas. In the right-hand margin, write your reactions to what Bilger says and what the people he writes about say.

Compare your annotations with those of a classmate. Then go back and revise your annotations if you wish.

**Analyzing Stylistic Choices**

Answer the following questions:

**Words**
- Reread the first paragraph of Part 1. What words does Bilger use to compare Lady to a movie star? Why does he make this comparison?
- Now read the second paragraph. What words does Bilger use to describe Shawn Levering? What point is Bilger making about Shawn?
- Now read the third paragraph. Identify the medical terminology in this paragraph. Why does Bilger use it?
- What do Lady, Shawn Levering, and Cathy Langston represent? What problem or issue do the first three paragraphs suggest that “The Last Meow” is going to explore?

**Sentences**
- Look at the first paragraph of Part 2. Each sentence is quite long except the last. What is the effect of ending the paragraph with, “The ferrets are called Larry, Mo, and Curly”?
- What is the purpose of the parentheses in the third sentence?
- Why does Bilger give us a long list of examples of animals treated in the exotics unit?

**Paragraphs**
- How are the paragraphs in this article different from paragraphs in a newspaper article?
Looking Closely at Language

Answer the following questions based on “The Last Meow.”

1. According to Bilger, how has veterinary medicine changed in the last 20 years?
2. Why does Guy Pidgeon say that veterinary medicine is driven by emotion?
3. If you could own an exotic pet, what would it be?
5. What is Shawn willing to give up in order to save Lady? Use the word “sacrifice.”
6. Do you feel sorry for the Leverings? Use the word “sympathetic.”
7. What problem does the story of Lady and the Leverings represent?

Considering the Structure of the Text

Look again at the one-sentence summaries you wrote for sections 3–7. Use that information to write one-sentence summaries of parts 1, 2, and 8, and then write brief statements describing the rhetorical function of each part.

Here are some questions to answer.

• What does each part do for the reader? What is the writer trying to accomplish?
• What does each part say? What is the content?

Now look at the organization of the article. Consider these questions:

• Which part is the most developed?
• Which part is the least developed? Does it need more development?
• Which part is the most persuasive? The least persuasive?
• From your work in charting the text, what do you think is the essay’s main argument? Is it explicit or is it implicit?
Using Critical Vocabulary

Complete the following sentences so the second part further explains the first part, clearly demonstrating your understanding of the underlined words:

1. When pet owners are willing to spend thousands of dollars on veterinary medicine, it clearly shows ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

2. In the past, veterinarians mainly treated cows, sheep, and horses; now, however, ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

3. Patients who have a close relationship with their pets seem more likely to recover; a reason could be ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

4. Health care for pets is becoming comparable in many ways to health care for humans; for example, pet owners can ____________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

5. People feel empathy for their pets; ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

6. Euthanasia is an option for animals, but people ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

7. The veterinarian persuaded the owners to have the cat put to sleep; ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

8. People don’t seem to transfer the feelings they have for their own pets to strays; in fact, ____________________________
   ______________________________________________________________.

Postreading

Thinking Critically

Questions about Logic (Logos)

1. Locate the essay’s major claims and assertions and ask yourself whether you agree with the author.

2. Look at support for the major claims and ask yourself whether there is any claim that appears to be weak or unsupported. Which one, and why?
Reading the Assignment

This activity gives you an opportunity to review your writing assignment.

On-Demand Writing Assignment

You will have 45 minutes to plan and write an essay on the topic below. Before you begin writing, read the passage carefully and plan what you will say. Your essay should be as well-organized and carefully written as you can make it.

After reading the passage, explain Bilger’s argument and discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with his analysis. Support your position by providing reasons and examples from your own experience, observations, or reading.

Americans now spend $19 billion a year on veterinary care for their pets, up from $11 billion just seven years ago. Add
to that the cost of pet food and other supplies, and the number rises to $47 billion, nearly three times as much as the federal government spends on welfare grants. Poodles get root canals, cats undergo chemotherapy, rabbits are treated with radiation, and prairie dogs get oxygen therapy in intensive-care units. People spend enormous amounts to pay for special diets for their pets while cities create parks for off-leash puppy play dates. For a price, we can take our dogs for day care or psychotherapy and buy them $200 cashmere sweaters and leopard-skin beds. Clearly, our love affair with our pets has gotten out of control.

Adapted from Burkhard Bilger’s “The Last Meow” The New Yorker

Take the following steps for this exercise:
• Read the assignment carefully.
• Decide which issue you are going to discuss.
• Discuss the purpose of the assignment. What will you try to accomplish in your essay?

Getting Ready to Write

Answer the following questions, which will help you get ready to write:
1. What are the author’s major claims?
2. Which claim is the strongest? The weakest? Has he left anything out?
3. How credible is the author on this topic?
4. How does the argument affect you emotionally?
5. Has the author tried to manipulate your emotions? How?

Formulating a Working Thesis

Writing down a tentative thesis at this point is a good habit to develop in your writing process. Your thesis should be a complete sentence and can be revised several times. A focused thesis statement will keep your writing on track.

Record your responses to the following questions in preparation for writing your tentative thesis statement:
• What specific question will your essay answer? What will be your response to this question? (This is your tentative thesis.)
• What support have you found for your thesis?
• What evidence have you found for this support? (Evidence can include facts, statistics, authorities, personal experience, anecdotes, stories, scenarios, examples, and so forth.)
• How much background information do your readers need to understand your topic and thesis?
Activity 17

**Writing**

**Composing a Draft**

When you write an argument essay, choose a subject that matters to you. If you have strong feelings, you will find it much easier to gather evidence and convince the readers of your point of view. Keep in mind, however, that your readers might feel just as strongly about the opposite side of the issue. The following guidelines will help you write a good argument essay:

1. **State your opinion on the topic in your thesis statement.** To write a thesis statement for an argument essay, you must take a stand for or against an action or an idea. In other words, your thesis statement should be debatable—a statement that can be argued or challenged and that will not be met with agreement by everyone who reads it. Your thesis statement should introduce the subject and state your opinion about that subject.

   Bilger never makes his thesis explicit. This strategy is called an implied thesis, and professional writers sometimes use this strategy because they are skilled at making the focus of their essays clear to readers without ever saying exactly what their opinion on the topic is. However, we can infer that Bilger’s thesis is something like this: “Americans need to reassess the balance between the pleasure our pets bring us and the excessive costs of their veterinary care and the possible suffering it causes.”

   Some other statements about developments in veterinary medicine would not be debatable and, therefore, would not be effective theses:

   - **Not debatable:** In 2000, three-quarters of veterinary students were women, and most of them wanted to treat pets.

   - **Not debatable:** According to Dr. Pidgeon, owners can still weigh the costs and benefits of saving a pet’s life.

   The first example is a statistic (a fact based on research). It is not an opinion and cannot be used as a thesis. The second example is a statement about another person’s opinion, not the writer’s opinion.

2. **Take your audience into consideration as you write your essay.** When you write your essay, you will need to assume that your audience is generally well-informed but may not have the specific knowledge you have gained through reading and discussion.
as you have moved through this module. You will need to provide your readers with information and your sources for that information, whether you are citing statistics or paraphrasing someone else’s argument.

You may also want to let your readers know who you are. You can indicate, for example, that your family has two cats, a dog, and a hamster, so that when you talk about the emotional benefits of having pets, they will know that you are knowledgeable about this. On the other hand, Bilger reveals very little about himself. What we do know is that he has done fairly extensive research by observing pet owners, talking to professionals in the field of veterinary medicine, and reading research about the effects of pet ownership. In academic writing, an author’s credibility is often based on the research he or she has done rather than on the writer’s personal experience.

In writing an academic essay, you will usually want to take a clear stand on the issue but also acknowledge some possible alternative positions. By explaining why they are not as strong as your position, you will better respond to your readers’ potential objections.

Bilger, however, does not follow this strategy. He presents arguments on both sides of the issue of providing state-of-the-art veterinary care to pets. He does not take a clear stand on either side, although you might argue that he leans toward one direction or the other. His article leaves readers wondering about another perspective on the issue—that of the pets themselves, who are unable to express their wishes.

3. Choose evidence that supports your thesis statement. Evidence is probably the most important factor in writing an argument essay. Without solid evidence, your essay is nothing more than opinion; with it, your essay can be powerful and persuasive. If you supply convincing evidence, your readers will not only understand your position but may agree with it.

Evidence can consist of facts, statistics, statements from authorities, and examples or personal stories. Examples and personal stories can be based on your own observations, experiences, and reading, but your opinions are not evidence. Other strategies, such as comparison/contrast, definition, and cause/effect, can be particularly useful in building an argument. Use any combination of evidence and writing strategies that supports your thesis statement.

In “The Last Meow,” you can find several different types of evidence. Here are some examples:

**Facts**
- The Animal Medical Center has its own oncology, dentistry, and dermatology departments. (Part 2, paragraph 9)
- In 1962, veterinarians were still a utilitarian breed. (Part 2, paragraph 12)
• A group called In Defense of Animals has lobbied communities to define people as “guardians” rather than owners of their pets. (Part 5, paragraph 35)
• Oregon legalized assisted suicide in 1997. (Part 6, paragraph 41)

Statistics
• By the year 2000, women represented 75 percent of veterinary students. (Part 2, paragraph 13)
• Between 1980 and 2001, the number of dogs and cats in the United States grew from 98 million to 130 million. (Part 2, paragraph 13)
• Americans now spend $19 billion on veterinary care, up from $11 billion just seven years ago. (Part 8, paragraph 48)

Statements from Authorities
• Reference to research by Erika Friedmann on the effect of pet ownership on the recovery of heart-attack patients (part 3, paragraph 21)
• Statements by Georgie Duckler, attorney, on wrongful death suits applying to pets (part 5, paragraphs 33–35)
• Statement by Steven Wise, animal-rights attorney, about “legal personhood” for animals (part 5, paragraph 37)

Examples and Personal Stories
• The personal story of Shawn Levering, Cathy Langston, and Lady

4. Anticipate opposing points of view. In addition to stating and supporting your position, anticipating and responding to opposing views are important. Presenting only your side of the argument leaves half the story untold—the opposition’s half. If you acknowledge that there are opposing viewpoints and answer them, your argument is stronger.

Bilger chooses to take a stance of objectivity about the issue of providing high-cost veterinary care to pets. In order to appear objective, he is careful to balance evidence on both sides of the issue. He tells the heartrending story of Lady and her owners, which causes readers to sympathize with people who spend enormous amounts of money they may not be able to spare to keep their pets alive. And he provides evidence for the medical and psychological benefits of pet ownership. However, he also provides evidence of how extreme the spending has become at the same time that many animals are neglected. He raises the question of whether extreme measures are even in the best interests of pets like Lady. By raising these questions, Bilger challenges his readers to think more critically about these issues, but he does not provide easy answers.

5. Maintain a reasonable tone. Just as you probably would not win an argument by shouting or making mean or nasty comments, do not expect your readers to respond well to such tactics. Keep the “voice” of your essay calm and sensible. Your readers will be much
more open to what you have to say if they think you are a reasonable person.

Bilger maintains a reasonable tone throughout his essay. Although he provides a lot of evidence that spending on pets has gotten out of control with the example of Lady and her owners, he acknowledges the complexity of the issue when it is faced by real people with real animals. We are more ready to be thoughtful about the issue because he makes a reasonable argument rather than a strident appeal.

6. **Organize your essay in such a way that it presents your position as effectively as possible.** You want your audience to agree with you by the end of your essay; therefore, you need to organize it in a way that will make it easy for your readers to follow. The number of paragraphs will vary depending on the nature of your assignment, but the following outline shows the order in which the features of an argument essay are most effective:

   **Introduction**
   - Background information
   - Introduction of the subject
   - Statement of your opinion

   **Body paragraphs**
   - Common ground
   - Ample evidence (logical and emotional)
   - Opposing point of view
   - Response to the opposing point of view

   **Conclusion**
   - Restatement of your position
   - A call for action or agreement

The arrangement of your evidence in an argument essay will depend to a great extent on your readers’ opinions. Most arguments will be organized from general to particular, from particular to general, or from one extreme to another. When you know that your readers already agree with you, arranging your details from general to particular or from most to least important is usually the most effective strategy. Using that order, you build on your readers’ agreement and loyalty as you explain your thinking on the subject.

If you suspect that your audience does not agree with you, reverse the organization of your evidence, and arrange it from particular to general or from least to most important. In that way, you will be able to take your readers step by step through your reasoning in an attempt to get them to agree with you.
Bilger’s essay follows the general outline just presented. Here is a skeleton outline of his essay:

**Introduction**
- Part 1: The story of Lady and her hospitalization for a kidney transplant

**Body Paragraphs**
- Part 2: The evolution of veterinary care in the U.S.
- Part 3: The medical benefits of pets
- Part 4: Lady’s surgery
- Part 5: The evolution of the legal status of pets
- Part 6: The question of quality of life for pets
- Part 7: The success of Lady’s surgery

**Conclusion**
- Part 8: Revisiting the main questions:
  1. Should the money spent on pets be spent on children or on other animals?
  2. Are the benefits that pets provide their owners worth the costs as exemplified by the Leverings and their pets?
  3. What would the animals say?

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**Organizing the Essay**

The following items are traditional parts of all essays:
- An introduction (usually one or two paragraphs) that “hooks” the reader and provides a thesis statement, or roadmap, for the reader
- The body (as many paragraphs as necessary), which supports the thesis statement point by point
- A conclusion (usually only one paragraph) that summarizes the main points and explains the significance of the argument

The number of paragraphs in an essay will depend on the nature and complexity of your argument.

Here are some additional hints to help you organize your thoughts:

**Introduction**
- You might want to include the following in your introductory paragraph (or paragraphs):
  - A “hook” to get the reader’s attention
  - Background information the audience may need
  - A thesis statement and an indication of how the essay will be developed (“forecasting”). *Note:* A thesis statement states the topic of the essay and the writer’s position on that topic. You may choose to sharpen or narrow your thesis at this point.
Body
- Paragraphs that present support of the thesis statement, usually in topic sentences supported with evidence. (See “Getting Ready to Write.”)
- Paragraphs that include different points of view or address counter-arguments
- Paragraphs or sentences in which you address those points of view by doing the following:
  - Refuting them
  - Acknowledging them but showing how your argument is better
  - Granting them altogether but showing that they are irrelevant
- Evidence that you have considered your own values, beliefs, and assumptions; the values, beliefs, and assumptions of your audience; and some common ground that appeals to the various points of view

Conclusion
- A final paragraph (or paragraphs) that includes a solid argument to support the thesis and indicate the significance of the argument—the “so what?” factor

Draw horizontal lines through your essay to distinguish these three parts, and label them in the margin.

Developing the Content
Here are few highlights about developing your essay:
- Most body paragraphs consist of a topic sentence (or an implied topic sentence) and concrete details to support that topic sentence.
- Body paragraphs give evidence in the form of examples, illustrations, statistics, and so forth and analyze the meaning of the evidence.
- Each topic sentence is usually directly related to the thesis statement.
- No set number of paragraphs makes up an essay.
- The thesis dictates and focuses the content of an essay.
Revising and Editing

Activity 20

Revising the Draft
You now need to work with the organization and development of your draft to make sure that your essay is as effective as possible.

Peer Group Work
Work in groups of three or four. Each student will read his or her essay aloud to the other members of the group. Then complete Part I of the Evaluation Form for each essay.

Paired Work
Working in pairs, decide how you will revise the problems your group members have identified.

Individual Work
Revise the draft on the basis of the feedback you have received and the decisions you have made with your partner.

Revising Guidelines for Individual Work
• Have I responded to the assignment?
• What is my purpose for this essay?
• What should I keep? What is the most effective?
• Where do I need more details, examples, and other evidence to support my point?
• What can I omit? Do I use irrelevant details? Am I repetitive?
• Are parts of my essay confusing or contradictory? Do I need to explain my ideas more fully?
• What should I rethink? Is my position clear? Do I provide enough analysis to convince my readers?
• How is my tone? Am I too overbearing or too firm? Do I need qualifiers?
• Have I addressed differing points of view?
• Does my conclusion show the significance of my essay?
• Have I used key vocabulary words correctly to represent the ideas from the article? Have I used words that refer to specific facts from the text?

Activity 21

Editing the Draft
You now need to work with the grammar and mechanics of your draft to make sure that your use of language is effective and conforms to the guidelines of standard written English.

Edit your draft on the basis of the information you have received from your teacher or a tutor. Use the editing checklist in the evaluation form provided by your teacher.
The suggestions below will help you edit your own work:

- If possible, set your essay aside for 24 hours before rereading it to find errors.
- If possible, read your essay aloud so you can hear errors and any rough spots.
- At this point, focus on individual words and sentences rather than on overall meaning. Take a sheet of paper and cover everything except the line you are reading. Then touch your pencil to each word as you read.
- With the help of your teacher, figure out your own pattern of errors—the most serious and frequent errors you make.
- Look for only one type of error at a time. Then go back and look for a second type and, if necessary, a third.
- Use the dictionary to check spelling and to confirm that you have chosen the right word for the context.

Activity 22

Reflecting on the Writing
When you have completed your essay, answer the following six questions:

1. What was most difficult about this assignment?
2. What was easiest?
3. By completing this assignment, what have you learned about arguing?
4. What do you think are the strengths of your argument? Place a wavy line by the parts of your essay that you feel are very good.
5. What are the weaknesses, if any, of your paper? Place an X by the parts of your essay you would like help with. Write any questions you have in the margin.
6. What have you learned from this assignment about your own writing process—about preparing to write, about writing the first draft, about revising, and about editing?