

How should our
society assign value
to human life?



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Sample Student Essays

The Value of Life

Writing Assignment

So far in this assignment sequence, we have heard a number of different voices giving insights into the value of life. Hamlet's soliloquy offers an emotional, metaphor-laden insight into the thinking of a young man contemplating suicide. Lance Armstrong's autobiography uses storytelling from a first-person perspective to get across how the famed cyclist thinks about life. Amanda Ripley's article from *Time* magazine provides insight into the problems involved in translating the concept of valuing life from abstract terms into actual dollar amounts. The Human Life Value Calculator establishes specific criteria for assigning monetary value to a person's life.

You might not fully agree or disagree with any of the texts' essential claims about the value of life. This makes your voice an important contribution to this discussion about how we should value human life. Where do your ideas fit into the terrain mapped by the other texts we have read? Is it right to assign dollar values to a person's life? Do suffering and illness impact how we should value life? Assume that the audience for your piece consists of intelligent citizens interested in this issue-the same types of people, for instance, who read *Time* magazine.

As you write your essay, think about the different ways the authors we have read make their points about valuing life. Depending on the points you are trying to make, you might choose to use some metaphors for life, as Hamlet does, or tell some stories the way Armstrong does. You may choose to include some words from people you interview, as Ripley does in her article, or you might even choose to establish some criteria for how human life should be calculated in monetary terms. As you construct your essay, make conscious choices

the ways you can represent your ideas to your reader.

Be sure to refer to and cite the readings. You may also use examples from your personal experience or observations.

The sample student essays that follow reflect the EPT Scoring Guide's criteria.

Sample student essay with a score of 6:

The Value of Life

Should people put the value of life into monetary value or should life be kept solely as an emotional quantity? People and societies throughout the ages have been trying to answer the problem of putting the value of life into terms of dollar bills. The ancient Egyptians buried their dead with all of their worldly belongings. They believed a person's monetary worth on Earth was over, and they should take all of that earthly worth with them to the afterlife. Modern day Americans are different from the Egyptians. Today people believe that the families of the dead should be compensated for "their" loss.

It is true that life is a precious commodity much like a diamond. But unlike a diamond, life has no set monetary value. But today's government is trying to change that. After the tragedies of September 11, 2002, the federal government started a federal fund to help the victims and families of victims of the attacks. This fund would give priority to people who were injured in the attacks, then to the spouse, and then to the parents. Sounds great doesn't it? Your husband dies and now you just lost your income, and the government is going to pay you for your loss. Well don't jump on the

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bandwagon so fast now. This might sound great now, but once you are knee deep in the program, it won't be so fun. To figure out how much money a person will receive from this fund is determined by a multi-step process. First they figure out how much an individual would have earned had there been no attacks. This would mean that a banker's family would earn far more than the family of a janitor in the buildings. Is it true that a banker is worth more to society than a janitor? Is a lawyer more important than a desk clerk? Then the fund adds \$250, 000 as a base cover, and then another \$50, 000 for a spouse and each child (Ripley 12). This would imply that a married man who has 6 kids is more important than a married man with no children at all. Is it more important in society to " make babies" than it is to just live your life? What about people who haven't yet had a chance to start a family because their lives were cut so short? Now all that money sounds like a blessing, doesn't it?

Well now that you have your foundation money, now you have to subtract the money you get from life insurance, pension, Social Security death benefits, and worker's compensation. After these " little" subtractions, you now have the total that you are going to receive from the government's fund. Now you are going to be hit with new questions after all this, for example is a rich man with high life insurance, high pension, and no children worth less than a poor man with no life insurance, no job, and ten children (Ripley 13)? The answer to all these questions is no. The lives of all people should be valued at the same price, if you are to set a price at all. A rich man should be the same as a poor man; a woman with no children should have the same life value as a woman with seven kids. The point is that if the

government is going to put a monetary value of a human life, than it should be the same for everyone. “ We hold these truths to self-evidence: that all men are created equal” (King Jr.).

There are many arguments against putting a money value on human life and two of the most impressive come from Alephonsion Deng and Lance Armstrong. Alephonsion Deng is one of the Sudanese Lost Boys. “ We crossed a thousand miles of war ravaged country without the hope of sanctuary. Bullets replaced food, medicine, shelter and my loving parents. I lived on wild vegetable, ate mud from Mother Earth, and drank urine from my own body” (Deng 16). He had to walk across an entire country from refugee camp to refugee camp, always with the thought of death behind him. He didn’t have the luxury of being able to go down to the grocery store when he ran out of food. He had to scavenge for what ever he could get his hands on. If Mr. Deng was asked about the government’s 9/11 victims fund, which is set to put a monetary value on life, he would probably be outraged. After what he had been through he would probably say that it is impossible to turn something as valuable as life into terms of money.

Lance Armstrong survived a long battle with cancer, and after this battle came out with a new outlook on life. “ When I was 25, I got testicular cancer and nearly died. I was given less than a 40 percent chance of surviving, and frankly, some of my doctors were just being kind when they gave me those odds” (Armstrong 1). Before having the ordeal with cancer his out look on life was just live it fast, everything was fast for him. After surviving the unbeatable he came out with a brand new outlook on his value of life. He now preached that life can end very quickly and that everyone should live

their lives to the fullest terms possible. If someone asked Lance Armstrong about the government trying to put life into terms of dollars, bills, he would have a heart attack. Much like Mr. Deng, he would think that life is precious and the government should not demean it by trying to bring money into the same picture frame as life.

Should life be put into monetary values? The answer is no. Life is way too precious of a commodity to put into terms of money. People who have been on the brink of death would all say that you cannot put a value on the natural high that is known as life. To go back to an earlier metaphor, life truly is like the most precious and valuable of gems. They are similar in rareness and beauty, but are different in the fact that gems have a set money value, but life is a lot more stupendous than any gem on Earth. That is why life doesn't have a monetary value and never should.

Work Cited

Armstrong, Lance, and Sally Jenkins. It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to life. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001.

Deng, Alephonsion. " I have Had to Learn to Live With Peace." Newsweek 31 October 2005: 16.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "I Have A Dream". Mephis Educational Computer Connectivity Alliance. 11/21/05. <http://www.mecca.org/~crights/dream.html>.

Ripley, Amanda. " What is Life Worth?" Time December 2002: 12-13.

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Unknown, [Human Life Value Calculator](#). Life and Insurance Foundation for Education. November 14, 2005 http://www.life-line.org/life_human.html.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide’s criteria for a score of 6. The superior response indicates that the writer is very well prepared to handle college-level reading and writing. Because this prompt asks for an edited (that is, revised and polished) essay, student papers should reflect the appropriate degree of organization, content, and editing.

- The writer addresses the entire topic and responds fully to all aspects of the prompt.
- The writer demonstrates a thorough critical understanding of the readings by incorporating them into the argument and by quoting them extensively, accurately, and, generally, in correct MLA format; occasional “dropped in” quotations indicate that the writer has not yet fully mastered this process.
- The writer uses rhetorical questions to undercut the assumptions made by sources with whose opinions the writer disagrees; rhetorical questions are occasionally overused, but the writer attempts to mitigate them with details from the reading.
- The writer has a smooth and easy writer’s voice, addressing the reader directly and confidently.
- The essay uses a sophisticated inductive strategy, marshaling evidence first and saving the conclusions for later.
- The essay remains focused throughout.

- The essay makes use of source material beyond the readings; it also ties different types of support material together nicely.
- The writer avoids a formulaic essay approach and brings the reader “full circle” at the end by returning to the opening idea (the gem).
- Errors are rare and do not detract from meaning.

Sample student essay with a score of 5:

The Value of Life

People often question how we should measure the value of life. Can life be calculated into dollars and cents? Should one's value be determined by their life's accomplishments? Or does the value of one's life depend solely upon how much that individual embraces and loves their existence? In my personal experience I have found the latter to be true. Life is given value and meaning by one enjoying and accepting it.

Someone once said “ You should not fear death, but fear the un-lived life”. This means that one should not fear the end of a journey, but enjoy the trip. To me this is absolutely true. Why should we spend our time fearing the inevitable? We are given only a few short years to experience the world, friendships, loves, and losses. Even the bad experiences teach us to appreciate the good ones. This doesn't mean we should all go out and be terrible people just so we will appreciate our good experiences, but rather that we should learn from our mistakes. Lance Armstrong's view of life is similar to this; he says that sometimes life is fun, and great, and other times it is horrible, but whether good or bad our experiences make us stronger people. It is these experiences which give our lives meaning.

Meaning and value however, are completely different issues. So how can the value of one's entire life and worth be translated into monetary values? The people at most life insurance companies will tell you it is a simple mathematical process based on age, physical health, and income. Subtract \$1000 for every year over 40, subtract for any diseases, or illnesses, add 50 times their yearly income and voila! You'll have the value of anyone's life calculated in an instant! Unfortunately, this process cannot be applied to memories and experiences. You can't subtract points for every bad experience, lost love, and abandoned friendship and even the bad memories are carried around with us forever. Amanda Ripley's article, from TIME magazine, outlines, some of the problems with calculating the monetary value of life. Many people view the amount of money they receive as a measure of their loved one's value, which creates problems for the people who have to award the money. Calculating the value of life in dollar worth can be a complicated issue involving tough emotional and moral dilemmas.

Value is something which each individual assigns to their life depending on how much meaning it has to them self and others. A life is not a self contained object; it is a network which is shared with others. All people have value not just to themselves but to others as well. If you died tomorrow you entire network of friends and family would surely mourn for you. All of the people whose lives you have touched would mourn for you. In Hamlet's soliloquy, he neglected to consider what effect his life had on his family and friends. Everyone whether they realize it or not, has some kind of effect on the people around them. Hamlet thought of his own life as worthless and thought everyone else did too.

Life's value cannot be determined by dollar value, popularity or even by one's accomplishments. If one doesn't value life them self then they will be unhappy therefore making people around them unhappy. People must depend on themselves to make their lives valuable and meaningful. Ultimately it is people's own ability and willingness to value life which gives them worth.

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Armstrong, Lance, and Sally Jenkins. It'ss Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to life. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001.

Ripley, Amanda. " What is Life Worth?" Time December 2002: 12-13.

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

Unknown, Human Life Value Calculator. Life and Insurance Foundation for Education. November 14, 2005http://www.life-line.org/life_human.html.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide's criteria for a score of 5. The clear competence of the essay indicates that this writer is quite ready to handle college-level reading and writing. Because this prompt asks for an edited (that is, revised and polished) essay, student papers should reflect the appropriate degree of organization, content, and editing.

- The essay thoroughly addresses the prompt and raises the pertinent question of the difference between value and money.

- The writer remains focused throughout the essay, offers a clear thesis about enjoyment and acceptance, and pursues that thesis throughout the supporting paragraphs.
- The writer uses transitions to guide the reader, such as the sentence that ends the second paragraph, “ It is these experiences which give our lives meaning,” which transitions to the opening sentence of the third paragraph, “ Meaning and value however, are completely different issues.”
- Occasional shifts in diction (for example, “ one” in first paragraph, to “ we” in the second, to “ you” in third) are distracting; the essay mainly uses a conversational tone that works very well for this writer.
- The writer makes a lovely case in the fourth paragraph for life as a “ network” rather than a “ self-contained object.”
- The essay’s second half begins to repeat itself, particularly in the final two paragraphs, although the writer attempts to mitigate this repetition by using the Hamlet example.
- Errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are minor; the writer could use some practice with commas.

Sample student essay with a score of 4:

The Value of Life

The value of life. What is it exactly? We will never know the true definition of the value of life because there are so many different perspectives in this world and everyone will think their perspective is right.

According to the Human Life Calculator, our value is based on the amount of money we will make in our lives and nothing more. It depends on the money we make, how many children we have, and how much we spend on ourselves each month. Some people find it fair to actually compare the value of life to the dollar amount they are worth. They might even look into it so much that people choose their partner according to their monetary values and not the emotional attachment. There are many people like that these days that only worry about money and what society thinks of them instead of wanted to be truly happy.

I don't agree with the Human Life Value Calculator what so ever. No person's life should be estimated on their monetary worth. It should go deeper then that. It all depends on how they want to live there life and if they think they live it to the fullest. If they live it to only become rich and die rich then so be it that is their own personal value. But to assume that every person values their life that way is completely and utterly wrong

When it comes to Hamlet, he wonders if there is even a value to life. " To be, or not to be-that is the question:" that is his main issue throughout the entire play. He pretty much loses everything that means anything to him in his life so he can't help but wonder if there is even a point anymore. Anything he truly valued, such as his father and Ophelia, was taken from him. He has nothing to value so why should he question the value of life?

Life has many hardships no matter who you are, even if you are Hamlet. It still has a value to it. It teaches you to value you what you have because you never know when or they may not be there.

Lance Armstrong is a whole different story. He looks at life in such a positive perspective now unlike before. Unlike many people, he was given a second chance to live his life. He values every single thing because he never knows when it will be his time to go. He was lucky the first time but no one knows if he will be next time, if there is a next time. He learned the hard way not to take life for granted but to take advantage of it and live everyday as though it were your last.

Not everyone is as lucky as Lance Armstrong. He now realizes how valuable his life and everyone in it is but that's because he was given a second chance. There are so many people out there who wish they would have realized how valuable everything was before it was too late because they didn't get that second chance. We may not realize it until it happens but when we or a loved one goes through suffering or illness it truly impacts how we value life. It makes us face the reality that not everyday is guaranteed and people will not stay with us forever no matter how much we wish they would.

I think, as a society, we should value life not by how much money we have or how much we are worth but by how much we enjoy life and everyone in it. It shouldn't take the death of a loved one for us to realize everyday is valuable. We should wake up everyday realizing it's a new day and be thankful for it. I'm not saying to wake up and say "today might be my last" but realize it, embrace it. Take nothing for granted and live everyday to its fullest. If you love someone then tell them. If you want to start a business then do what it takes to start one. Do whatever you have to so that when you leave this world you are happy with who you are and what you accomplished. Don't expect to

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have no regrets or make no mistakes because those are what helped to form you to the person you become over time. I admit I am far from perfect but that is what makes me and I am happy with myself. I love my life and everyone in it who helps to form it. I wouldn't take anything back or do anything over because if I did I wouldn't be the intelligent, free spirited, young woman I am today. I value my life to the fullest and it will never be based on money or praying to be given a second chance because I didn't live it right the first time.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Lance and Sally Jenkins. *It's Not About The Bike: My Journey Back To Life*. New York: Berkley Trade, 1991.

Human Life Value Calculator

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Alan Durband. London: Hutchinson and Co., 1986.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide's criteria for a score of 4; however, it is a strong 4. This adequate response to the topic suggests that the writer should be able to handle college-level reading and writing. Because this prompt asks for an edited (that is, revised and polished) essay, student papers should reflect the appropriate degree of organization, content, and editing.

- The essay is a classic “ befuddling” 4 paper; it wobbles between a 5 paper and a 3 paper, never really settling in either camp.

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- The writer opens with a rhetorical question and then moves quickly to a clear, if simplistic, thesis.
- The writer attempts to integrate the readings by including supporting detail, although the essay offers only a single direct quotation.
- The works cited list provides a quasi-MLA format for sources.
- The logic in the third paragraph fails to persuade; the writer opens by showing Hamlet questioning life's value and then closes with the question, " He has nothing to value so why should he question the value of life?"
- The essay is somewhat repetitive, restating the idea of personal satisfaction as the best gauge of life's value.
- The essay lacks transitions in general, although the opening sentence of the penultimate paragraph, " Not everyone is as lucky as Lance Armstrong," is an exception.
- The writer opens each paragraph with a statement that focuses on the reading; however, the second half of each paragraph, which features the writer's own experience and opinions, generally becomes repetitive, rambles, or offers a cliched conclusion.
- The writer struggles with usage (than/then, there/their, everyday/every day), mechanics (especially punctuation), and grammar, although such instances do not greatly detract from meaning; the shifts in person in paragraph six, however, are quite distracting.

Sample student essay with a score of 3:

Extreme Life

What is life? I don't know, but I know it is full of obstacles. Sometimes they are small, sometimes they aren't. I don't think there is a point to it, but who knows? Another thing I know, everybody dies at the end, so why won't people live it to the maxim instead of just sitting on their bums and doing nothing, Being alive to me is to experience new adventures and to have fun.

Life is worth living for as long as you can. As Lance Armstrong said, " I want to die at a hundred years old with an American Flag on my back on the star of Texas on my helmet." It is very fun living out to your maximum, doing extreme sports like bungy jumping. I think that life should be extreme. It is also nice to come back home to someone who loves you and cares about you. I love food; I think it's another great thing to spend time with friends, especially when you can dig in and pig out. Its nice to have friends that are there for you when you have problems, and you know that they will help you out. Life is just a great things, but it doesn't always feel like it.

" To be or not to be" is Hamlet's famous quote. I bet every single person on earth has come to this decision. Besides the great things in life, you come across difficulties. For example losing the loved one. I think that hurts the most. Another thing is when you don't feel loved or accepted. That's when people come out of their limit and start doing bad stuff like drugs. When it gets really out of hand, they try to commit suicide. I believe that anybody who tried it or attempts suicide it are failures in life. As Lance Armstrong said, " Why don't we all just stop and lie down where we are?" what is we just do it? It's just an easy way out of life, escaping all the obstacles and pain. There is a lot of it. You friend can stab you in the back, your family

member can die, there are just too many to name. You should just love life enough to struggle through the painful times.

“ Why would I want to change, even for a day, the most important and shaping event in my life?” Lance Armstrong’s words. Express how I feel. I would not give me life up for anything. I have made many of bad mistakes that I should not have done, but those mistakes make me the person I am today. I wouldn’t want to look or be any different than I am right now. I love my life, and I hope everyone else does too because it’s the only one we’ve got. You will have to start loving it or that only one wont be a good one.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide’s criteria for a score of 3.

Although the essay suggests developing competence, it is flawed in significant ways that suggest the writer needs additional practice before being able to succeed in college-level reading and writing. Because this prompt asks for an edited (that is, revised and polished) essay, student papers should reflect the appropriate degree of organization, content, and editing.

- The essay responds to the prompt at the opening, although it moves away from the prompt later.
- The writer attempts to define life itself rather than discuss the value of life.
- The writer offers a thesis about adventures and fun but does little to offer support for that thesis.

- The essay's paragraphs, although short, are overworked in that they contain several ideas competing for space; the essay does not attempt to separate paragraphs into discrete ideas.
- The paragraph about eating and hanging out with friends struggles with logic, perhaps because the writer is still trying to connect the evidence to the thesis; by the third paragraph, the writer seems willing to move away from the thesis completely.
- The opening of the third paragraph (“‘ To be or not to be’ is Hamlet’s famous quote. I bet every single person on earth has come to this decision”) makes neither logical nor rhetorical sense.
- The writer attempts to quote texts directly but lacks the skill to incorporate quoted material properly.
- The writer shows a limited syntactic repertoire; the first paragraph, for example, contains four rhetorical questions out of six “ sentences.”
- Errors of grammar, usage, and mechanics accumulate to detract from meaning; there are several missing apostrophes and fragments (see the second sentence of the final paragraph, for example).

Sample student essay with a score of 2:

Value of Life

This is a question that runs through everybody's mind. What would somebody pay for a life? What would you do if your life ended tomorrow? Would you tell someone that you cared about the most that you loved them? What would you do for your final hours? How do you think the people aboard the 9/11 plane attack felt as soon as they knew that they weren't going to see their families anymore? These questions are all very goods questions but

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the most important one is “ Have you been living the life that you wanted to live”?

Humans always follow others ways of posture and ways of thinking. People picking up laughs, looks, even the way they think about other people. Think of it this way...if someone put a gun to year head and they said, “ Give me three reasons why I should not pull this trigger”? What would you say? It might sound like a harsh, blunt question but if you think about it.... where you living your life to the fullest?

Posers always get on everybody’s nerves. They are going to look back on their lives and think what they did was really stupid. Their values of life are following somebody’s else’s footsteps, following others stories, what they like, don’t like because they can’t think for themselves. They rely on other people to make their decisions for them.

The final thought is the toughest thought of all. Things all bundled up inside your head. The only thing to realize is that people don’t make you who you are. You make the decisions that will lead your life, the rest of your life. What would your family get if you died? “ Tack on an extra \$50, 000 in pain and suffering for a spouse and for each child.” That’s what you would get. Now think to yourself, are you living your life to the fullest, what you think is good?

Ripley, Amanda. “ What is a life worth?” Time : 11 Feb. 2002.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide’s criteria for a score of 2. The serious flaws here indicate that this writer will need considerable additional practice before being able to succeed in college-level reading and writing. Because this prompt asks for an edited (that is, revised and polished) essay, student papers should reflect the appropriate degree of organization, content, and editing.

- The essay opens with a statement about questions, followed by six rhetorical questions in a row.
- The writer seriously overuses the questioning strategy, with three additional questions in the second paragraph and two in the fourth (concluding) paragraph; the essay itself finishes with a question.
- The essay neglects the prompt; it discusses “ values” rather than the value of life.
- The final paragraph attempts to approach the prompt by quoting Ripley (although the writer does not attribute the quoted material), but the quotation is ineffectively dropped into the concluding text.
- The essay does not demonstrate any discernible organizational strategy.
- Some sentences make no sense at all, such as “ People picking up laughs, looks, even the way they think about other people.”
- Errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present but not all that profound; lack of logic and content is the issue with this essay.

Sample student essay with a score of 1:

The Value of Life

People put a money aspect on people for example, when people have money then we need them, we don't even care about anyone unless they have money. When disasters like sunamis happen, people want to find their family but don't understand the water infected and no one knows what's happening to any one anywhere.

Katrina for example. They (the army) use colors where dead are, yellow were sick are, green x marking the spot where people who are worth saving were. We help people everywhere in the world but not our own people, to save them, even the army was there making every one get out of their house if they wanted to or not, they might get shot if not. People have always come here to make a new life and this is what happens? It's way messed up. Is this how to value people?

Shakespeare knew how bad life can be. "To be or not to be" said Hamlet who thought not. We have to find out a way to help and overcome what might happen next so everyone is not so discouraged because money is not the answer or stocks or bonds or jewelers but only love.

Commentary

This essay illustrates the EPT Scoring Guide's criteria for a score of 1. The fundamental deficiencies here indicate that this writer will need a great deal of additional practice before being