Exit Level Sample Compositions

We wanted to share with you some samples of exit level TAKS compositions that received 4s in spring 2008. As you will see, the names and other identifying information in the compositions have been changed to protect the identity of the student writers. We hope that these papers will help deepen your understanding of the rubric and of the variety of approaches that students can take when responding to a TAKS prompt.
TAKS Exit Level ELA Writing Prompt
Spring 2008

Write an essay explaining how another person has helped you learn an important lesson.
I stood in complete shock, the raucous laughter ringing in my ears. My blood boiled in my veins as I rotated to face the target of the despicable insults. Peter leaned against the wall and flashed me with his crooked grin, as if he was deaf to the malevolent jokes directed at him. “Why didn’t you say anything?” I spoke, my anger and indignation rising. His reply would puzzle me for the next two years. “Would it change anything?”

Peter was a normal boy in every way except one. He had a limp due to a genetic birth defect. One leg exemplified strength and normalcy, while the other was a twisted tree-like branch. Any other person—including myself—would have been sour and bitter, but not Peter. He accepted his disability with a magnificent grace and humor. When I first became acquainted with Peter, I was surprised at the ease in which he compensated for his misshapen leg.

It was during the early days of our friendship when Peter’s philosophy of life confronted me. Peter and I were greedily consuming ham and rye sandwiches when the gang of boys swaggered by. The vicious jabs at Peter’s condition stung me like a cloud of bees—each sting dripping with more venom than the last. I was tempted to rise from the metal picnic bench and chase after them with a few venomous stingers of my own, but Peter restrained me with a calm look and crooked
"Don't bother, what will it change?" These words astounded me—left me speechless with one half of ham on rye hanging limply in my hand. My heart demanded retribution, but my best friend asked for inaction. Then, Peter explained his philosophy on life. "Sure I can demand an apology, force them to say words they'll never mean, but will it change my life?" Peter ignored the hateful words spoken by the gang of boys. To him, the only words that mattered were the ones that came from his heart.

It took me two years after Peter first explained his philosophy, to understand what he meant. I recall the exact moment; I found clarity in his words. I was facing my own bunch of thoughtless critics—art critics. They demeaned the meaning I had placed with each piece of my art. Hot tears brimmed in my eyes, threatening to overflow, until I remembered Peter's words. Only my thoughts, about myself mattered. No matter what anyone else believed, only I could change the way I felt about myself.

Peter taught me an important lesson that day at the picnic table. He taught me never to take others rude and ill-meaning words to heart, only my words could matter to me.
What is it with guys and the art of dumping? In our entire six months, three weeks and one day, I had never heard him so disgustinglly detached. It's been over for a while now. I think we can both agree: I'm news to me. As badly as I wanted to plead and throw temper tantrums until my heart stopped beating, more was a small inkling that from this horrific moment, inner growth and wisdom would emerge.

This name is unimportant. His name is Michael, or Matt, or Ethan, or Romeo. What is important is that he was my sunshine. We could talk for hours on end until our cheeks hurt from laughing and our heads ached from thinking. Our connection was almost tangible, and gross in its intensity.

With him, the negativity and hate that this world had so clearly faded, returned to me in stark white noise that never got paid attention to like background music at the mall. The fact that he was in my life highlighted rainbows and fields of flowers and Hendrix on the guitar and sappy poems and the smell of fresh laundry and everything else that's good. Like perfect pieces in a two-piece puzzle, we just sort of fit. My head fit perfectly in the hook where shoulder meets neck, when we slowdanced in his garage to Billie Holiday's "I'll Be Seeing You." And his hand formed a perfect clasping of comfort over mine when I thought I'd die of fear from watching Saw 2. I remember feeling so relieved that I would never, for the rest of my life, have to seek the perfect romance. I've had love that old, dried up women have only fantasized about. I had it, and always would.

But we always find a way to be wrong.

As you can probably infer, after hanging up the phone after being officially rejected, I let myself go. I cried like it was going out of style. My insides felt like they were on the brink of bursting, and the only prescription was to cry harder. I cried until my body could no longer supply tears or snot. I cried until my throat was hoarse and
drier than Arizona in the summer. Exhausted, I fell asleep only to wake up and begin crying again. Only harder. And louder. The entire time knowing I would never survive. Reading as to why I deserved this - to have the other part of me run away, never to have anything to do with me again. Like I was some monster on the verge of destroying the entire planet. I would never survive this.  I NEEDED him, like oxygen. Or Death Cab for Cutie.

We always find a way to be wrong.

One morning, chosen at random, I strolled outside for a reason beyond my comprehension. And the sun was shining. And a distant bird was singing an unfamiliar tune. And, almost as if commanded to, I took in a fantastic breath, inhaling for a hundred years. And when I finally came to exhale, my worry floated with it. My troubles caught onto the summer breeze, and were taken far, far away, to a place I wish to know nothing about. And I began to laugh. I laughed all day and night and day again. I WAS ALIVE.

This is what my former nameless love taught me. To truly be happy, you must endure the beauty and the honor life brings your way. I am living, breathing proof that what doesn't kill you can only make you stronger. You must heal and begin again. Because nothing can be done or said that will ever stop the sun from rising.
My hands were sweating, my arms were tired, and I knew it was up to me. Was I nervous? Yeah, I guess you could say that after I had already been sent back to the bench three times today and now, with two strikes and a runner on third, the outcome of the game was completely up to me. My heart was racing, I took a deep breath and stepped into the batter's box. The pitcher started his motion and fired a pitch at the plate.

"Strike three," was all I could hear as I swung and missed.

When I reached the dugout I hastily threw off my batting gloves and packed my bag. Some of my teammates tried to cheer me up with a flurry of pats on the back or words of encouragement. I wouldn't have any of it; I had just struck out with the tying run on third; this loss was my fault.

After about five minutes, the dugout started to clear and I reluctantly started to take off my cleats. From outside the dugout I could hear my favorite coach asking, "Where's Mark?"

I tried to keep my head down, hoping he wouldn't notice me. My attempt to become invisible was failed as he turned the corner and saw me sitting on the bench.

"There you are, come on dude, people are starting to head out," he said.

When he saw that I made no significant effort to hurry up, he sat down next to me and said, "Why are you so upset? You pitched three shut-out innings and made one heck-of-a catch in center field tonight."

"But I still couldn't keep us in the game," I muttered discouragingly.
"Couldn't keep us in the game? So, if you hadn't pitched so good tonight, you wouldn't have had to worry about tying the game, it would have been over a long time before then." He said as he put my glove in my bag.

"But--"

"No ifs, ands, or buts, you were a big reason we were in this game. Even if you hadn't been, there's no reason to get worked up over it. We all have bad days, and I'm not just talking about in the game, but in life itself. You've just got to be optimistic about the situation. Heck, this morning I tripped and spilled coffee all over my shirt. Did I get mad? No, all I could think was, 'Man I'm glad nobody saw that.' He said as he started to smile.

After considering what he said I started to laugh; it was kind of pointless to only see the bad in a situation.

"You see, there's no use being mad over something as little as that. Now come on your mom's waiting." He said as he patted me on the back.

To this day I still think of my old coach when I'm upset about something. "Be optimistic," I tell myself, and because of my coach I like to think I am.
The din of merchants selling their wares, the various colorful fruits lined in stands, the sweet and pungent aromas of exotic foods cooking—common sounds, sights and smells of an African agora—surrounded me. My watch read 1:30 PM so I was sure that the cruise ship would not embark for another four hours: ample time for me to experience the best of Moroccan cuisine. Money-pack in hand and a smile on my face, I earnestly strode about the stalls with an eager palette and a grumbling stomach. Seasoned lamb, steaming shellfish, a plethora of dishes with names I could not even begin to pronounce—I ate them all.

As I stuffed myself like a mad glutton released from "dietary confinement," critical eyes and shaking heads were visible in my periphery. I didn't mind; I was on vacation.

As I neared my fourth helping of spiced lamb chops, a subtle tug on my shirt interrupted me from my meal.

"Hakash peli bekar?" a scrawny boy of about nine years asked me, but, over the din, I could hardly hear him, let alone understand what he was asking.

"Hakash peli bekar?" he repeated a little louder, to no avail due to my American ears. Yet the emaciated look he sported, paired with the
ragged and tattered clothing he wore revealed to me the meaning of his humble plea.

"Here you go," I said, handing him a large loaf of bread that had accompanied my meal. With a grateful smile, and a Morrocan word I could only guess was "thank you," he quickly walked across the bustling marketplace road to a little alleyway. Curiosity getting the best of me and having had my fill, I followed the boy across the dusty road.

Instead of finding a solitary figure feasting on that single loaf, a large group of emaciated and dirty faces sat together sharing what little they had. Tears began to well up in my eyes—out of pity, out of shame. In my selfish extravagance, I realized that I took for granted not only the meals I enjoyed in this exotic land, but the food I had back home. The generosity I witnessed opened my eyes to the fact that, like most first-world citizens, I usually forget to count my blessings. Yet in their humble poverty, true appreciation for what little good fortune had befallen them, twinkled brightly in their eyes as they sat smiling, eating, sharing.
Mom's dreadful grindings... There's a lesson. Dad's belt... Whoa... There's a lesson. Grandpa's life advice... There's a lesson. What about that time you reached far enough until you picked? Definitely a lesson. People have many ways of imbedding lessons into our minds. Teaching us right from wrong, and making sure we learn from our mistakes. But is it always people who have this impact?

Riding toward the endless sunset on the way back to the old crooked red barn. Stopping for a second, I take in the site, the "one hill" country, and the newly planted fields taking on a tint of red from the sun's glow. My horse seems to notice the scene as well, for he stands straight and still looking off into the horizon.

It had been a long day with only three more miles to go until I crossed over that "one hill" and would finally reach home. The turn road was bare except for the hoof prints that were left in an elaborate pattern behind us. The air so still; no sounds could be heard except for the hoofs hitting the dirt with ease. Nothing could go wrong.

The sun was setting quickly; I needed to get home. I decided to push my horse at full speed into that disappearing sun. Thirty minutes earlier I tightened the cinch on the saddle because it became loose. Doing this regularly, I never thought I'd done it any different. Here I go, pushing my horse, faster, faster. Something went terribly wrong. The horse ducked his head and started bucking and kicking like the gate just opened on the chute at a rodeo. I hung on for a while because I assumed he would stop. Assuming wrong. I was quickly thrown to the hard, over-driven dust of the turn road. He began to stop. He stood there, staring at me in pain, and with a look of care in his eyes. I began checking everything on the saddle. Checking the cinch in a traditional fashion.
I concluded the problem. At the earlier cinch tightening, I must have drew the cinch too tight. When this happens, the cinch will pinch the horse with every forceful move of the front legs. I lassoed the cinch, hesitated, and then got back on. One foot was up and I threw over the other, both of our nerves were still in action. I made the ride home; the last mile being in the dark. That eventful evening I was taught to always pay attention to what I am doing. I could have gotten my horse and I both hurt, lying there on the ground in pain. I looked up to see my horse standing sincerely over me, as though checking that I was alright even though he was hurting too. In his eyes I saw love. I learned to love unconditionally, just like my horse unconditionally loved me. Also, he forgave me for my mistake, teaching me the quality of forgiveness. The lesson that brought me home was the important cliche: when you get bucked off, you have to get back on. Life throws curves at you, and not only does this saying pertain to my situation that night, but also to all of the "tight cinches" we come across in life.

Animals teach us life lessons that we have a hard time learning from people. Although so subtle, we are impacted greatly. Tingle cinch... there's a lesson. Unconditional love... there's a lesson. Forgiveness... there's a lesson. Getting back in the saddle... definitely a life-long lesson.