



Proficient | Exemplar Essay

Criminal Justice Reform

Reform Sentencing and Bail Practices



Claim and Focus

A clear claim about the topic is presented (“Congress should change mandatory minimum sentencing and bail so all defendants are treated fairly and equally in the courtroom”) and focus on defending it is maintained throughout the essay.



Support and Evidence

Clear and relevant evidence is quoted from more than one source in order to support the claim, and the essay demonstrates logical reasoning and understanding of the topic. Counterclaims are acknowledged but not fully explained (“While people who committed violent crimes shouldn't be allowed out on bail...”).



Organization

Clear transitional words (“As a result,” “According to,” “In conclusion”) show the relationships between and among ideas. The essay presents a logical progression of ideas that moves from a purposeful introduction to a clear conclusion.



Language

The essay employs language that attends to the reader's interests with appropriate word choices (“prejudiced,” “nonviolent,” “circumstances”), generally varied sentence structure, and mostly maintains a formal style throughout.



Using Exemplars in Your Lessons

Exemplar essays are tools to take abstract descriptions and make them more concrete for students. One way to use them is to print the clean copies of the essays and allow students to use the rubric to make notes or even find examples of important elements of an essay - thesis statements, introductions, evidence, conclusions, transitions, etc. Teachers can also use exemplars to illustrate what each score point within a trait 'looks like' in an authentic student essay. For additional ideas, please see “25 Ways to Use Exemplar Essays” by visiting the Curriculum Resources page in Help.

Criminal Justice Reform



Reform Sentencing and Bail Practices

Dear Senator,

America's courtrooms should be fair and equal for everyone. In today's courts, there are no protections from lawyers and judges who are prejudiced. Because of this, lawyers and judges can set higher bail for certain defendants and lower bail for others. Mandatory minimums force judges to send people to jail even if they want to give a different sentence. Congress should change mandatory minimum sentencing and bail practices so all defendants are treated fairly and equally in the courtroom.

Mandatory minimum sentences force jail time on people convicted of nonviolent crimes. These unfair sentences don't allow judges to consider the circumstances of what led to the crime or the impact that jail time will have on the family of the person convicted. When a single parent gets convicted of a nonviolent crime that carries a mandatory minimum sentence, her children will grow up barely seeing the only parent they have. Who will take care of her children while she's there? She will lose her job while she's in prison, so she won't be able to pay rent for her apartment. Where will her family live once she gets out? It's harder to get a job with a criminal record, so where will she work? This situation is true for many people who were convicted of nonviolent crimes that require mandatory minimum sentences. It's especially true for people of color. According to Source 1, "African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to [get] lengthy prison sentences. African-American adults are 5.9 times as likely to be [jailed] than whites and [Latinos] are 3.1 times as likely." Mandatory

minimum sentences should be revised to not apply to nonviolent offenders or affect people of color at higher rates (Source 1).

Even before being convicted of a crime, people of color face unfair practices in the courtroom. After being arrested, offenders have to go before a judge to determine if they are allowed out on bail and how much that bail should be. Some people are given the opportunity to make bail and avoid jail time while they wait for their day in court. People who cannot afford to pay the bail are forced to go to jail while waiting for their court dates. As a result, they lose their jobs and housing and cannot provide for their families because they are not working. According to Source 3, due to "structural racism," people of color are more likely than white people to receive higher bail from judges and then not be able to afford it. Furthermore, "statistics show that if you have to wait for your trial in jail, you're more likely to be convicted of the crimes you're accused of" (Source 3). While people who committed violent crimes shouldn't be allowed out on bail, the bail practices in our courtrooms need to be revised to be more fair to people of color and people who can't afford it.

In conclusion, the criminal justice system needs to be changed to be more equitable for everyone. Mandatory minimum sentencing and bail practices should be revised so judges can treat everyone equally regardless of their race or how much money they have.