

Sample Essay #1

My Instagram Nightmare

by Belinda, Age 17

I remember being so happy when I got my Instagram account set up. I love taking pictures, and it seemed like I'd graduated into some new realm where I could communicate directly with not just my far-flung friends and relatives, but with the world at large.

In the first month, I posted pictures of my dog, Master, and pictures of my friends and me at the Exploratorium. I posted pictures of things I'd seen and found interesting, including a dead whale that washed up on Ocean Beach. Usually I'd get four or five likes, and a comment or two.

One day I posted a picture of a friend of mine, who I'll call Yesenia. She's my age, 16, and is kind of a fashion star at our school. She always has the latest looks. So I took a picture of her standing in the school foyer, as she posed like Tyra Banks.

My account is public, and I'd never thought much about it being public. But when I posted that picture of Yesenia, everything changed. It was viewed hundreds of times. The comments were posted by strangers, and most of them they were sexist and offensive. It was like a hundred sick vultures had swooped down to denigrate my friend.

Yesenia saw all this and came to me, crying. Please take it down! she asked. I did, immediately. But someone had taken a screenshot and posted it on another Instagram account. It was out of control. It was a meme. The sick comments only increased. People from all over the world were objectifying Yesenia because of my picture, a picture I thought was cute and innocent. Yesenia stopped coming to school. She missed a whole week.

Finally, when our school counselor heard about all this, he was able somehow to delete all the images of Yesenia from Instagram. I have no idea how he did it. Maybe the police got involved.

I learned a lot from that experience. I learned to make my Instagram private. I learned that if I post something with my friend's picture in it, I'm responsible for what happens to that picture. I learned that there are a lot of sick people in the digital world, and unfortunately before posting anything, we have to think about how these sick people might use what we post.

The next time I took a picture of a friend, I decided to just show her. I didn't need to post it. She loved it, and just looking at that photo, giggling about it together, was better than any hearts or likes or comments I could ever get online.

Sample Essay # 2

Technology Gives Me A Way In

by Jonas, Age 17

Technology is different for me than it is for most people my age. Many teenagers are taken hostage by an overwhelming need to be connected twenty-four seven. This need for constant access to social input leaves many of my peers disconnected from the world around them. In my life as a teenager, technology is a lifeline into the reality many seem determined to ignore. I type to communicate, and technology in my world is used in a way that is unlike that of many. I share my journey with technology in hopes that others my age will learn to open themselves to a new world of technology where voices like mine will be heard.

I am autistic, and although I talk some, my verbal output doesn't reflect my thoughts in their entirety. Not unlike my peers, I depend on technology to share my opinions. However, the platform and audience vary greatly. I don't need my thoughts and feelings broadcast on social media. It is not a part of my world nor does it affect my view of myself. Perhaps this is just another factor that sets me apart from others my age. The way I see it, technology helps me join the real world while for others it creates a way out. What I need is to open communication with my family. Typing to communicate allows me the opportunity to do that. Their dedication to my happiness never falters, and I have welcomed the chance to appreciate them with typed expressions of gratitude.

Many people these days spend more time looking at screens than they do interacting with people in person. Faces illuminated by shiny devices leave the world glowing with disconnected people wandering through life totally unaware of anything not happening on a screen. I know it seems like an autistic mind is not really turned on like a typical person's is. I assure you this notion could not be more wrong. We are very much aware of what's going on around us and want nothing more than to be a part of the conversation. Under the pressure to participate in conversation, thoughts may come out in fragments. For example, thinking a full sentence, yet saying only a word. Through the use of technology, I am able to express myself with the depth that more adequately corresponds to my thoughts.

Imagine waking up every day knowing that you'll spend all of it unable to express yourself, the people around you at a loss for a way to make a solid connection. In my autistic world, technology gives me a way in, while my peers use it as a way out. If you have the ability to say what you are thinking, I encourage you to not let yourself take it for granted by wasting the chance to tell the people in your life what is on your heart and mind. The truth about technology is that while doing its share of harm, it also does a great deal of good. There are voices to be heard, should you choose the right path to listen.