

English Language and Composition
Reading Time: 15 minutes
Suggested Writing Time: 40 minutes

Directions: The following prompt is based on the accompanying four sources.

This question requires you to integrate a variety of sources into a coherent, well-written essay. Refer to the sources to support your position; avoid mere paraphrase or summary. Your argument should be central; the sources should support this argument.

Remember to attribute both direct and indirect citations.

Introduction

In a culture of television in which the sensations of one season must be “topped” in the next, where do we draw the line between decency and entertainment? In the sixth season of popular TV show, “American Idol”, many Americans felt that the inclusion of mentally disabled contestants was inappropriate and that the remarks made to these contestants were both cruel and distasteful. Did this television show allow mentally disabled contestants in order to exploit them for entertainment?

Assignment

Read the following sources (including any introductory information) carefully. Then, in an essay that synthesizes the sources for support, take a position that defends, challenges, or qualifies the claim that the treatment of mentally disabled reality TV show contestant, Jonathan Jayne, was exploitative.

Refer to the sources as Source A, Source B, etc.: titles are included for your convenience.

Source A (Americans with Disabilities Act)

Source B (Kelleher)

Source C (Goldstein)

Source D (Special Olympics)

***Question composed and sources compiled by AP English Language and Composition teacher Wendy Turner, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, Lexington, KY, on February 7, 2007.*

Source A

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Full text is available at:
<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm#Anchor-Sec-49575>.

The following passage is an excerpt of the current text of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

The Congress finds that:

- (1) some 43,000,000 Americans have one or more physical or mental disabilities, and this number is increasing as the population as a whole is growing older;
- (2) historically, society has tended to isolate and segregate individuals with disabilities, and, despite some improvements, such forms of discrimination against individuals with disabilities continue to be a serious and pervasive social problem;
- (3) discrimination against individuals with disabilities persists in such critical areas as employment, housing, public accommodations, education, transportation, communication, recreation, institutionalization, health services, voting, and access to public services;
- (4) unlike individuals who have experienced discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, religion, or age, individuals who have experienced discrimination on the basis of disability have often had no legal recourse to redress such discrimination;
- (5) individuals with disabilities continually encounter various forms of discrimination, including outright intentional exclusion, the discriminatory effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers, overprotective rules and policies, failure to make modifications to existing facilities and practices, exclusionary qualification standards and criteria, segregation, and relegation to lesser services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs, or other opportunities;
- (6) census data, national polls, and other studies have documented that people with disabilities, as a group, occupy an inferior status in our society, and are severely disadvantaged socially, vocationally, economically, and educationally;
- (7) individuals with disabilities are a discrete and insular minority who have been faced with restrictions and limitations, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment, and relegated to a position of political powerlessness in our society, based on characteristics that are beyond the control of such individuals and resulting from stereotypic assumptions not truly indicative of the individual ability of such individuals to participate in, and contribute to, society;
- (8) the Nation's proper goals regarding individuals with disabilities are to assure equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for such individuals; and
- (9) the continuing existence of unfair and unnecessary discrimination and prejudice denies people with disabilities the opportunity to compete on an equal basis and to pursue those opportunities for which our free society is justifiably famous.

Source B

Kelleher, Susan and Brian Alexander. "One Local Man Stung; Another has a Ball". *Seattle Times*, Jan. 19, 2007.

Should Jonathan Jayne get another chance to sing before 36 million people on national television, don't be surprised if he selects "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." A day after "American Idol" judge Simon Cowell dismissed Jayne's performance and commented on his girth, the Renton native was reveling in his newfound fame and waxing philosophical about the price he was willing to pay for it.

"I think it was absolutely wonderful," Jayne, 21, said Thursday from his home, where he spent the day fielding phone calls from reporters. "I was just having a blast, and this is what you get for having a blast." "This" is a spate of TV columnists, personalities and bloggers decrying the cruelty meted out by "American Idol" judges, who snickered and snorted their way through critiques on contestant's clothing, weight, height and, in the case of one man, his eyes. The smarmy barbs have become a typical, even anticipated part of the show. But viewers apparently had a soft spot for Jayne. He seemed genuine, earnest and vulnerable, prompting viewers to lash out against his treatment. "It's one thing to make fun of the voice teacher who is obviously in the wrong profession, but another to pick on someone's physical features in front of millions of people," one viewer wrote on Entertainment Weekly's web site.

Jayne said he gave it his all after producers selected him out of thousands of potential contestants during a round of auditions in Seattle last October, telling him he was "different and he was singing pretty good." The judges — Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson — complimented his personality, but Cowell sarcastically referred to his waistline and asked if he was wearing the portly Jackson's pants.

Jayne, who watched the show with his mother, seemed mystified by the backlash. Although viewers speculated about his disabilities, he said he will talk only about his abilities. And if people want to throw a pity party for him, he said, they'll have to do it without him: He's too busy talking to reporters and handing out the phone number for his new agent.

On Thursday night, Jayne planned to reprise his performance of "God Bless America" for a social club he belongs to. For Jayne, the barbs come with the difficult career path he's chosen, one that he hopes will lead to a DJ job or a gig as a talk-show host. "If you're going to make it in TV, the first time you're going to fail, the second time you're going to fail, the third time you're still going to fail. The fourth time you might get somewhere, the fifth time you might get something really good, and the sixth time you're going to be a star."

He also observed that the negativity "doesn't make me look bad. It does make Simon, Paula and Randy look bad."

Source C

Goldstein, Lisa. "Judging the Judges." Jan. 19, 2007. Full text available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lisa-goldstein/judging-the-judges_b_39099.html.

My jaw dropped while watching this week's "American Idol" auditions—and not at the horrible performances of contestants. I was astonished at the horrors committed by the show's judges and producers. When did it become okay to mock, bash, and cruelly tease people who clearly have social, mental, emotional, or intellectual disabilities?

It was as if the short yellow school bus pulled up in front of high school cheerleading tryouts and let the special education students out to line up, try out and be ridiculed. Some of the "American Idol" contestants displayed what appeared to be textbook symptoms of disorders on the autism spectrum, such as Asperger's Syndrome, which makes one oblivious to social and emotional cues. People with Asperger's have difficulty making eye contact or using appropriate facial expressions and body language.

Okay, everyone was old enough to sign a waiver authorizing the show to do what it wants with footage of them. But a minimal amount of common decency should prevent the "American Idol" producers and the judges from publicly mocking and taunting people who clearly are burdened with disabilities that impair their self-awareness and block them from judging their own talent. Of course everyone should have the right to audition. A person with an autism spectrum disability could be the greatest singer in the world. But if he sucks horribly, yet still believes he is talented despite being humiliated by the judges, couldn't they eliminate him from the competition without hanging him out to dry from coast to coast?

Many of the most ridiculed contestants said on the air that their friends, coworkers, or family had encouraged them to try out. The people who sent these vulnerable contestants to the firing squad are no better than the judges who shot them down.

The finale on Wednesday's episode said it all. They showed a montage of the ridiculed contestants singing the Pussycat Doll lyrics, "Don't You Wish Your Girlfriend/Boyfriend was a Freak like Me?"

Is this what Americans want to watch? Has American popular culture regressed so much that the nation gets its jollies re-enacting an adolescent nightmare of social rejection in the high school cafeteria?

There's only one way to handle this embarrassing situation. I think the "American Idol" judges and producers should all be given wedgies and then stuffed into lockers.

Source D

Statement from Special Olympics Regarding Fox Television Show “American Idol.” Jan. 21, 2007. Full text available at <http://www.specialolympics.org>.

Much has been said and written in recent days about the treatment of Jonathan Jayne, an “American Idol” contestant and former Special Olympics athlete, during his appearance before judges Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson that aired last week on the Fox Network.

While polite isn’t a word one would normally associate with Cowell and company, a viewing of the episode in question shows that the judges were in fact gracious and very encouraging to Jayne during his rendition of “God Bless America.” At one point, Abdul commented admiringly about Jayne’s spirit and advised him to “Always believe in yourself.”

Whether on the stage of “American Idol”, or on the field of competition for Special Olympics, people with intellectual disabilities don’t want to be pitied. They want to be judged for who they are and appreciated for what they can achieve. “American Idol” should be commended for providing Jayne with the same opportunity to succeed as any other contestant.

At the beginning of the audition Cowell asked Jayne if he thought he could win. “I have an amazing personality and I think I can,” responded Jayne.

Jonathan Jayne may not be going to Hollywood this round, but he’s demonstrated that he’s a winner by having the courage to follow his dream—on “American Idol”, in a Special Olympics competition, or wherever he chooses to give his best.