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WRITING LESSON

YOUR DREAM HOUSE



The YES! Magazine article **Living Large in a Tiny House** is a story about Dee Williams downsizing from a three-bedroom bungalow to an 84-square-foot house.

Students will use Dee Williams' article to write about their ideal house, its size and key features.

Part 1: The Article **"Living Large in a Tiny House"**

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Part 5: Sample Essays

"**A Family of Friends**" by Rowan Treece, Grade 6

"**Smaller Suits Me Better**" by Ritika Mazumder, Grade 12

"**Garden Souls**" by Paw Soe, Grade 11

"**Downsizing Our Consumer Culture**" by Chris Harrell, Appalachian State University

Part 1: The Article

Living Large in a Tiny House

Dee Williams doesn't need a big house to be happy. Instead she found happiness in a 84-square foot house on wheels.



When she sold a three-bedroom home and moved into this 84-square-foot house in Olympia, Washington, Dee Williams found freedom. Photo by Betty Udesen.

ByCarol Estes

Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Winter 2009 issue

In 2003, Dee Williams was a classic slacktivist. She says so herself. Yes, she was passionate about social justice and environmental issues, but she spent most of her free time driving back and forth to Lowe's and Home Depot for materials to remodel her three-bedroom house in Portland, Oregon. "I would feel like a grand national champion because I'd found a great parking space, or gotten a really great deal on a piece of plywood."

Then events conspired to deal out a dose of humility.

She went to Guatemala and helped build a school, a friend's emails from Uganda brought news of malaria and hungry children, and a very dear friend got cancer. It made her remodeling concerns seem trivial.

"He was getting sicker and sicker, and I didn't have the time or the money to really throw myself into helping him. I was

spending a lot of time and money on my house. So the house was the easiest thing to try to get rid of."

In 2004, Williams sold her bungalow, shedding a mortgage payment of over $1,000 per month, and bought plans for an 84-square-foot house on wheels. It cost her $10,000 to build, a quarter of which went for photovoltaic panels that generate her electricity. Now her house is paid for, and her monthly bills total about $8—for heating.

> **The big gain, though, was the gift of living intentionally.**

Even with the economic freedom she gained, it wasn't easy to leave her house. "I loved my house and I liked my community in Portland." And she knew that day-to-day life in the tiny house would be very different. "I'm going to have to carry water, I'm going to have to deal with my compost toilet, find a place to shower."

"It was scary," she admits. "But I also felt like, God! This is so cool!"

Leaving her stuff behind was not that hard for Williams. It was liberating. She got rid of photos, old love letters, her college letter jacket—"all that crap that you have because it reminds you of who you used to be." Her friends and family have quit giving her things for Christmas, she says, "unless I get some kind of, you know, short fork!" She allows herself to own no more than 300 items, and she keeps careful count. "Not because I have obsessive-compulsive disorder," she laughs, but because she once bet a friend that she had less stuff than he did. She's kept count ever since.

The hardest part of her drastic downsizing, Williams says, was the loss of autonomy. "I moved into somebody else's backyard, which felt a little bit like the kind of thing a 25-year-old would do, not a 40-year-old. That's been the biggest area of growth for me—living in a small house in somebody's backyard and having to ask for water." But it's okay, she says. It's brought her into closer relationship with her neighbors. "The neighbors on this side," she says, pointing to the east, "I helped them build a French drain last year. The neighbors on the other side, I built them a chicken coop. It's easier to participate when you've got more time."

The big gain, though, was the gift of living intentionally. "It's kind of a jazz-up," she says. "The more intentional you are in your choices, the more every change makes room for more changes. It doesn't make me feel bad about myself. I just love that there's this endless potential. To see that you have this power. You get to choose what you want. That's been cool."

So what will Williams choose next?

She's thinking of downsizing to a gypsy wagon that wouldn't have the sleeping loft, "only because sometimes I feel like that's a lot of wasted space—and I'd have a lower heating bill, greater economy of space. And I'd be just as happy in a smaller space."



Dee Williams featured in a National Building Museum Exhibition.

Carol Estes wrote this article as part of Sustainable Happiness, the Winter 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Carol is a contributing editor at YES! Magazine.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

If you had the choice, what size house would you live in? What are important features your house would have, and what would you intentionally avoid?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. "9-10" is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?
Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/your-dream-house

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/ or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

A Family of Friends

By Rowan Treece, Grade 6

I read the YES! Magazine story, "Living Large in a Tiny House," about Dee Williams with my class, and we began to discuss our dream homes. To give us a reference point, we measured our 720-square-foot classroom and it suddenly seemed huge compared to Dee's 84-square-foot house. I wondered, if I had the choice, what I would eliminate from the 1,536-square-foot house where I live now. Dee's article gave me ideas about what I would build if I were 25 years old, working as a ballerina, and building a home. The home I would build would be in a group of 100-square-foot houses or apartments where my fellow dancers would also live. There would be a shared living space of 1000 square feet for us. Next, the infrastructure of the community would be energy and water efficient. Finally, I would make the outside a comfortable, green, functional space. This home would reflect our values while giving us a place to live and work with our friends.

A community home would be ideal because of its economic and ecological advantages. Since we would work together, we could share nearly everything, from resources to transportation. We could take mass transit or have one communal car. A portion of our salaries would be pooled to buy necessities, leaving us some for personal use. The shared living space in the community would include a dance studio for rehearsing, a kitchen, a living room, and shared bathrooms. These things would help avoid the greenhouse gases of multiple people driving to the same place, and the excessive use of energy, water, and resources.

As a community, we would be extremely careful of our water and energy use. We would use Energy Star appliances and compact fluorescent light bulbs. Each micro house would have a water catchment system to collect rainwater that we would filter, pump, and heat on demand, instead of having unused tanks of hot water, wasting energy. Part of each roof would have solar panels on it, which would help reduce global warming by using sustainable energy. All of our faucets and showerheads would be low flow, reducing our wasted water, lowering or eliminating our water bill, and drastically lowering the amount of electricity we use for heating water.

Another very important component would be the livable and energy efficient outdoors. The micro houses would have green roofs as well as gardens between them to grow food and flowers. The grass and plants on the roofs would be an added layer of insulation to prevent heat from escaping. All of our kitchen waste would be composted to make fertilizer for the plants. The water catchment system would also collect water from the gutters, which we would use to water the plants. While we would want our waste to be net zero, we would still want the surrounding grounds to be comfortable and welcoming. We would have gathering places with fire pits, and a secluded water feature that would also function as a water filtration system.

I dream about living with my friends nearly every day. At ballet, our community is so strong that we all feel like sisters. The environment is very important to us because we know it is our responsibility as the next generation. Energy and water conservation, growing our own food, and overpopulation are very important matters. Everything about these homes would show what we care about. From dancing, to each other, to working together, to saving the planet, this home would be a perfect space for all of us.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Smaller Suits Me Better

By Ritika Mazumder, Grade 12

For 13 years, I lived in the same house, in Mumbai, India. All of my laughs, tears, scabs, and the rest of my childhood are stored in that 700-square-foot "two-bedroom-hall-kitchen flat," as it is called in India. Although now the flat seems incredibly tiny, it was once simply perfect for my family of four; I shared a room with my little brother. We never thought of it as small because we did not know better. Most people around us lived in similar homes, and we had not seen an average middle class family live in conditions better than our own. But my father had higher goals. In 2008, after my father cleared the United States Medical License examination, my family moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, into a home that was spellbinding.

It was something different. It stood by itself. It was its own building: a house with four carpeted bedrooms, two enormous living rooms, an elegant dining room, bathrooms with garden tubs, and a kitchen three times the size of the one in India. Furthermore, it had a front and backyard with a patio overlooking the greenery. My family enjoyed that house for the first year—the snowfall, the fall colors, and the colorful spring. It only took a little more time for me to realize that I loved this big house, but I would rather have a smaller house that is luxurious, yet enclosed.

If I could choose the house I live in, I would want it to be a midpoint between my small flat in India and my sizable house in Arkansas. The two houses I've lived in has made me realize that I want a house based on its four members and not on its four walls. The physical spaciousness of my large Arkansas house became a key factor in detaching me from the rest of my family. My brother and I went to school, my father to work, and my mother ran errands. Once we all returned, I was in my room, my brother in his, my mom in the kitchen, and my dad on his computer. We lacked family bonding time, whereas, in a small flat we had no choice but to spend time with each other.

The best suited house for me now, and for when I have a family of my own, is one that is contained, with few, yet capacious rooms—a cozy home with modern style and a layout that facilitates closeness and camaraderie. Moreover, I would like a sprawling backyard with plenty of room to play a casual game of soccer or football, and to tend a small vegetable garden tucked in the corner where I would learn to take care of the plants and take in the beauty of the outdoors. I would also like to have a friendly gathering once in a while, to make a snowman or build a bonfire during winter, to pot plants during summer, and to take full advantage of having land that we never had—or could have—in India.

Although I favor ample green space, I would avoid an area where houses and neighbors are isolated from each other. Human contact plays an important role in shaping the people we become. I wish for a close-knit society where I can see kids playing and couples walking, as opposed to cars passing and complete stillness.

As Dee Williams says in the YES! Magazine article, "Living Large in a Tiny House, "every change makes room for more change." Change helps families and individuals grow. Bigger is not necessarily better. In fact, in this case, it is the complete opposite. A bigger house with endless luxuries distracts its members from one another, diverting their focus to materialistic things.

I cherish the childhood I spent in my flat, conversing with my family from different rooms, using inflatable mattresses when friends slept over, and watching shows together on one TV. Although my brother and I fought every

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Ritika Mazumder essay continued)

day over our shared bedroom, we at least talked to each other, as opposed to locking ourselves in our rooms like we do today. I would gladly change where I live now and move into a smaller place, as long as I could spend a few more golden moments with my family before starting on a path of my own.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Garden Souls

By Paw Soe, Grade 11

C.S. Lewis once said, "You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body." What if our houses were like bodies, and the happiness and love in life were our soul? And why do we often think that it is an absolute must for our souls to reside in our bodies? Who says our souls can't be free of our bodies, and be just as simple and pure as ever? Likewise, just because we can't live in an extravagant mansion or have a backyard with an inground pool, should we be any happier than if we were to live in a run-down shack or one-bedroom apartment? Do the walls that confine you feel as relaxing and comfortable as the breeze brushing your hair into the winds or soft green grass tickling the bottom of your feet? Are they as heartwarming as gingerly holding the hands of someone you love or listening to the familiar laugh of a family member or friend? Do they give you the overwhelming satisfaction you get after finally completing a project that you've worked you hardest on for days and nights?

The YES! Magazine article, "Living Large in a Tiny House, about Dee Williams downsizing to an 84-square-foot house, made me think about my family roots and values. I have been raised to believe that these simple gestures aren't found in gold and diamonds or in a fancy house with a hundred rooms for no one to live in. My family and I are immigrants from Burma who came over with little to our name, but it really didn't matter seeing as our happiness wasn't usually found in materialistic objects. Since I was very young, my parents had taught me to love nature and everything in it. They were both raised in a rural area of the country. My father's family lived in a two-room, bamboo-thatched house, and my father spent most of his youngster days traipsing across rice paddy fields and climbing trees, entertaining himself with the things he could find outside. Even now, he claims that those were his happiest days. It never became a priority for our family to have the best toys or the biggest home. As long as we spent time outside, where all the magic and splendor of life really was, we were content.

My family has lived in four houses now, and no matter how big the backyards were, each one was filled with abundant gardens. Whether we lived in a two-story house or a one-story apartment, the draw of our home was always the garden with its delicious tomatoes and green beans. For my parents, a good garden was always something to be prideful of. Squash, pumpkin, cucumber, tomato, three different types of chili, gourd, watercress, carrots, potatoes, and much more were routinely planted every year.

A good garden reflects its owner because if a garden prospers it means that it has been cared for properly. It has to be watered twice a day, weeded all the time, trimmed nicely, and filled with many types of vegetables. A successful garden requires massive effort and has to be loved if it is to do well, and, in return, the garden will love you back by giving to you all the fruits of your hard work. The grown vegetables can be passed around to neighbors, given as presents to people who need them, and are, overall, beneficial for not just yourself, but also for everybody associated and even not associated with you. In our small communities, gardens bring everyone together.vv,v,

What's the use of the fanciest or largest home if all you get after constantly cleaning it and working so hard to make it look nice is just a fixture to stare at? What home is worth all your time and money if it can't give you the joy you need? I don't need a big, fancy mansion with a huge patio and a pool in the backyard. All I need is a quaint, simple house with nicely sized windows to let the sun in and a grand backyard with a garden to pour all my intent and determination into so that I may give back to the people who have loved me. To me, that's happiness.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Downsizing Our Consumer Culture

By Chris Harrell, Appalachian State University

If you were to take a 30-minute drive from my home on the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, you would encounter a small patch of land, less than two square miles in size. Rising above the landscape, to the top of a hill in the heart of this area, you would face a sea of rusted metal roofs stretching into the horizon. This informal settlement is known as Kibera Slum, the largest slum in Africa and one of the largest urban slums in the world. Within its tight confines, Kibera is said to house well over half a million residents, although this estimate has been as high as one million. Understandably, it is a difficult task to comprehend the entire population of Seattle living on a piece of land smaller than the university campus where I am currently enrolled. The majority of Kibera is comprised of row after row of 12x12-square-foot shacks crammed with up to eight inhabitants each.

Most people have probably never heard of Kibera, apart from a possible glimpse of it in international news during the horror of the 2007-2008 Kenyan post-election violence. The amazing thing about Kibera is not its size, nor its impoverished population. It is not the fact that much of it does not contain basic infrastructure like toilets, running water, or electricity. The truly astonishing thing about Kibera is the abundance of life that can be found there. For hundreds of thousands of Kenyans, extreme poverty is a reality, and one that they live with day to day. Even after 18 years in Kenya, and having seen life in Kibera with my own eyes, it never ceases to amaze me the sense of normalcy and indeed the joy of its people who can somehow call a 12x12 shack their home.

Carol Estes' YES! Magazine article "Living Large in a Tiny House" illustrates the drastic lifestyle changes of Dee Williams after her realization that the majority of the world lives with much less than the privileged West. Dee downsized her home to an 84-square-foot wagon, containing only the bare essentials needed for her to live comfortably. As much as I admire Dee, the thought of living in a house no bigger than my dorm room is a frightening prospect. If I had the choice, and taking into account my desire for a family, I would lean more towards a 1,500-square-foot house. Like Dee, I would want to utilize green energy sources like solar water heating, and photovoltaic, wherever possible. One of the most appealing aspects of the article to me was not the size of Dee's house, but her admitting that purging her life of junk was liberating. If nothing else, I would intentionally avoid the accumulation of, in Dee's words, "all that crap that you have because it reminds you of who you used to be."

For me to say that moving to the United States was a life adjustment would be a drastic understatement. I am often asked, "What is the biggest difference between the U.S and Kenya?" Not wanting to alienate myself, or sound conceited, I usually reply with something trivial like the differences in food or the fact that I am no longer an ethnic minority. What I long to describe to people is what I feel when I turn on the television and see MTV cribs displaying 10,000-square-foot mansions, priced in the tens of millions of dollars. Reading articles about the $5.8 billion price tag on the recent U.S elections, I can't help but ask myself what that money truly accomplished.v,

One of the things that I have noticed, living in a "developed" country for the first time, is the pervasive feeling that "we" are here, and "those people" are there. A common sentiment is the belief that to live with less is to forfeit happiness. It seems that an essential

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Chris Harrell essay continued)

component of any materialistic society is the unfortunate delusion that we are living in a vacuum, and that our ethical and financial choices cannot possibly affect someone thousands of miles away.
