Before Reading

The Plot Against People
Humorous Essay by Russell Baker

When are little things a BIG DEAL?

Keys get lost. Computers crash. Every day, people encounter problems, inconveniences, and other annoyances that make life stressful. In the following essay, Russell Baker proposes an interesting theory about why such things happen.

QUICKWRITE What are some of the things that annoy you when they break down, don’t work, or get lost? Make a short list of about five items. Then choose the one that annoys you the most and explain why to a classmate.

Annoyances

1. Bus to school breaks down
2. Locker won’t open
3.
4.
5.
Meet the Author

Russell Baker
born 1925

Early Hardships
Russell Baker suffered grief and hardship early in life. He lost his father at the age of five and witnessed his suddenly widowed mother make the painful decision to leave his sister with relatives who were in a better financial position to provide for her. This sad beginning, however, did not dampen Baker’s attitude or his desire to succeed in life. He credits his mother with encouraging him to set high goals: “She would make me make something of myself.”

“Casual” Columnist
Baker’s sharp eye for detail and ability to provide insightful commentary on little things made journalism the ideal career for him. He had always loved news and the appealing stories newspapers contained. Baker knew that he eventually wanted to write for one. “I marveled at the places newspapers could take me,” he once noted. His Observer column, which ran from 1962 to 1998 in the New York Times, showcased Baker’s talent for capturing details. He described it as “a casual column without anything urgent to tell humanity.” Baker wrote about everyday occurrences, such as shopping for groceries and watching television, with wit and humor. His talent for relating personal stories to a universal audience has made him popular with critics and readers alike.

Authors Online
Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML10-533

TEXT ANALYSIS: TONE AND DICTION
While reading an essay, you might notice that the writer seems serious, mocking, or sentimental. That quality of the writing is known as the tone, or the writer’s attitude toward a subject. One way the writer creates tone is through diction, the word choice and the arrangement of the words, or syntax. Notice how Russell Baker uses formal, scientific language in this sentence.

The goal of all inanimate objects is to resist man and ultimately to defeat him, and the three major classifications are based on the method each object uses to achieve its purpose.

Instead of the word “things,” Baker writes “inanimate objects.” Also, Baker’s sentence structure is complicated, or suitable for a scientific paper. The contrast between his elevated style and the everyday topic creates a humorous tone. As you read his essay, notice the diction and details Baker uses to create tone.

READING SKILL: RECOGNIZE CLASSIFICATION
Pattern of organization refers to how a writer arranges ideas and information. Common patterns of organization include

- cause and effect
- chronological order
- comparison and contrast

A fourth pattern of organization is classification. To classify is to sort ideas or objects into groups that share common characteristics. This type of organization is revealed in Baker’s thesis statement: “Inanimate objects are classified scientifically into three major categories—those that don’t work, those that break down, and those that get lost.”

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to identify examples of each category identified in the thesis statement. In the third column, note important characteristics of each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Things that don’t work</td>
<td>car, washing machine</td>
<td>create maximum frustration for people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things that break down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things that get lost</td>
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</table>

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
WASHINGTON, June 17 — Inanimate objects are classified scientifically into three major categories—those that don’t work, those that break down, and those that get lost.

The goal of all inanimate objects is to resist man and ultimately to defeat him, and the three major classifications are based on the method each object uses to achieve its purpose. As a general rule, any object capable of breaking down at the moment when it is most needed will do so. The automobile is typical of the category.

With the cunning typical of its breed, the automobile never breaks down while entering a filling station with a large staff of idle mechanics. It waits until it reaches a downtown intersection in the middle of the rush hour, or until it is fully loaded with family and luggage on the Ohio Turnpike. Thus it creates maximum misery, inconvenience, frustration, and irritability among its human cargo, thereby reducing its owner’s life span.

Washing machines, garbage disposals, lawn mowers, light bulbs, automatic laundry dryers, water pipes, furnaces, electrical fuses, television tubes, hose nozzles, tape recorders, slide projectors—all are in league with the automobile to take their turn at breaking down whenever life threatens to flow smoothly for their human enemies.

Many inanimate objects, of course, find it extremely difficult to break down. Pliers, for example, and gloves and keys are almost totally incapable of breaking down. Therefore, they have had to evolve a different technique for resisting man.

A Plausible Theory

They get lost. Science has still not solved the mystery of how they do it, and no man has ever caught one of them in the act of getting lost. The most plausible theory is that they have developed a secret method of locomotion which they are able to conceal the instant a human eye falls upon them.
It is not uncommon for a pair of pliers to climb all the way from the cellar to the attic in its single-minded determination to raise its owner’s blood pressure. Keys have been known to burrow three feet under mattresses. Women’s purses, despite their great weight, frequently travel through six or seven rooms to find hiding space under a couch.

Scientists have been struck by the fact that things that break down virtually never get lost, while things that get lost hardly ever break down.

A furnace, for example, will invariably break down at the depth of the first winter cold wave, but it will never get lost. A woman’s purse, which after all does have some inherent capacity for breaking down, hardly ever does; it almost invariably chooses to get lost.

Some persons believe this constitutes evidence that inanimate objects are not entirely hostile to man, and that a negotiated peace is possible. After all, they point out, a furnace could infuriate a man even more thoroughly by getting lost than by breaking down, just as a glove could upset him far more by breaking down than by getting lost.

Not everyone agrees, however, that this indicates a conciliatory attitude among inanimate objects. Many say it merely proves that furnaces, gloves, and pliers are incredibly stupid.

The third class of objects—those that don’t work—is the most curious of all. These include such objects as barometers, car clocks, cigarette lighters, flashlights, and toy-train locomotives. It is inaccurate, of course, to say that they never work. They work once, usually for the first few hours after being brought home, and then quit. Thereafter, they never work again.

In fact, it is widely assumed that they are built for the purpose of not working. Some people have reached advanced ages without ever seeing some of these objects—barometers, for example—in working order.

Science is utterly baffled by the entire category. There are many theories about it. The most interesting holds that the things that don’t work have attained the highest state possible for an inanimate object, the state to which things that break down and things that get lost can still only aspire.

They Give Peace

They have truly defeated man by conditioning him never to expect anything of them, and in return they have given man the only peace he receives from inanimate society. He does not expect his barometer to work, his electric locomotive to run, his cigarette lighter to light, or his flashlight to illuminate, and when they don’t, it does not raise his blood pressure.

He cannot attain that peace with furnaces and keys and cars and women’s purses as long as he demands that they work for their keep.
Comprehension

1. **Recall**  According to Baker, how does the breakdown of inanimate objects affect humans?

2. **Recall**  What reason does Baker give for calling furnaces, gloves, and pliers “incredibly stupid”?

3. **Clarify**  How have things that don’t work “attained the highest possible state”?

Text Analysis

4. **Recognize Classification**  Review the classification chart you created. Explain what distinguishes the three classes of objects from each other and what links them. Why do you think Baker chose to discuss them in the order he did?

5. **Connect**  What objects in your own life fit into the classes Baker describes?

6. **Interpret Title**  What is “the plot against people”? Would “Life’s Little Nuisances” be as effective a title for an essay about annoyances? Explain why or why not.

7. **Analyze Tone and Diction**  How would you describe the overall tone of Baker’s essay? What aspects of the essay created the tone—elevated diction and syntax, unexpected images, or other factors? Use a chart like the one shown to provide examples that support your answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Element</th>
<th>Evidence from Text</th>
<th>Description of Tone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Syntax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Images</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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8. **Identify Author’s Purpose**  Considering Baker’s tone and diction in this selection, what do you think his purpose is for writing about this subject? Use strong evidence from the text to support your answer.

9. **Evaluate**  New York Times critic Christopher Buckley said this about humorous writing: “We should always treat light things humorously and serious things lightly.” Evaluate Baker’s essay with respect to Buckley’s comment.

**When are little things a BIG DEAL?**

How do you respond to life’s annoyances? What are the advantages of responding with humor?