Fear and Loathing at Kohl’s Department Store
Jason Mogus

In Expository Prose Writing, ENG 30065, Dr. Terry Sosnowski asked her students to complete a cause and effect essay. Jason Mogus’s essay “Fear and Loathing at Kohl’s Department Store” discusses the causes and effects of holiday aggravation while working in a retail store.

Six days before Christmas, I’m stuck at the mall,
No hope of a quick trip, we’re doomed one and all.
My wife and my daughter sat weary and tense,
‘if we’d finish the same day?’ kept us in suspense.
On Honda, on Nissan, on Ford and GMs,
on Buick, on Chevy, Toyota and Benz!
C’mon, move a little, some progress to gain,
so the rest of us drivers can soon end our pain.
But instead come the cutters, who shove ahead,
and the rest of us mutter things best left unsaid.
I’m hungry, I’m tired, I now need a shave,
but this line at the mall still keeps me its poor slave.
And what to my frustrated eyes avail?
The guy just in front gets the last one on sale! (Drummond)

The shoppers were ready before dawn. By the hundreds, they came to find incredible Early Bird Shopping Specials and discounts. They crowded the parking lot, causing minor traffic jams and frustration. As the crowd packed itself against the door tighter and tighter, I finally arrived to work. I had never seen Kohl’s this busy inside, let alone jam-packed outside two solid hours before the sun came up. But what else should I have expected? After all, it was “Black Friday.”

For the unaware or possibly un-American, I should probably mention that Black Friday is the day following Thanksgiving (Associated Press). This is when everyone with real grit comes to shop. More than fifty percent of annual sales occur at most department stores in the year’s final two months (Wolk). They wake up sometime before four A.M. and prepare mentally and physically for intense and violent door openings, infinite and unmoving lines for the registers, and the cold and volatile competition in the other shoppers. The perennial shoppers know what to expect for the most part, but the department store workers at least the smart ones understand that preparing for an apocalyptic free-for-all is futile. I had only worked at Kohl’s for six months, but since my coworkers neglected to warn me to park behind the store, I was forced to fight through the insanity to clock in.

Just as I peeked my head over the crowd, I saw my fellow Kohl’s employee, Larry. His comb over, his glasses, and his mustache are impossible to miss. He was safely positioned on the inside for the time being. I pushed my way through the crowd, trying hopelessly to avoid bumping someone too hard. Larry finally spotted me when I was about one hundred feet or so from the door. I saw the grim grin under his mustache, and I knew my fate immediately. Larry opened the first door.

Suddenly the world went into hyper-speed. People shoved into the door, almost trampling Larry in the first minute of shopping. I tried with all my strength to find my way to the door, but the crazed shoppers would not let me pass. I completely gave up, moved aside, and waited until I could slip through the door without injury. As the shoppers piled in the store, it was sheer madness. I had just walked in, and the overhead speakers came alive with a disgruntled voice saying, “We are out of Kodak Easy-Share cameras. We need a carry-out right away.” Two minutes into the shopping day, the cameras were completely gone, and checkout lines had grown exponentially.

Before any of those details had registered in my brain, I stopped to stare at the melee in front of me. It looked like I was right in the middle of a riot, and someone was feeding a highly concentrated dose of speed to these lunatics. I almost felt like Hunter S. Thompson when he covered the Mint 400 race in

the desert just outside Las Vegas: I was in the middle of an anarchy that some called “shopping” just like he was in a sandstorm that some had dubbed a “motorcycle race.” Merchandise was being knocked over on most of the aisles, employees were being yelled at, and I was just attempting to make my way back to the break room. It was a total nightmare, but I finally saw a friendly face in the crowd in my fellow dock worker, Rich, and he said some
thing like, "At least it's not as bad as last year," but it was no consolation.

By the time I made it to the break room to clock in, twenty two minutes had passed, and I had to start doing carry-outs. My fellow dock worker, Ryan Elsass, describes carry-outs as taking some large item out to the car for an old or lazy person who just-so-happened to park on the far end of the parking lot by the horizon. Carry-outs are not always this bad, but I took enough carts out to know that the parking lot was just about the worst place to be when the initial rush was over. Cars were trapped in traffic in many lanes and people scurried between every possible opening to get into the store or back to their cars. I could barely squeeze a cart through the maze of cars and people. Even when I did navigate through most of the traffic, the customer I was helping had often forgotten where she had parked.

Later that morning, I clocked out due to sheer exhaustion. I usually was never tired after work, but Black Friday had drained my energy. I was not as much physically tired as I was emotionally worn out and exasperated. The shoppers were in a hurry all day to wait, and they acted angry and surprised when they found checkout lines long or merchandise sold out. This is what boggled my mind the most. For most people, this was not their first Christmas, yet they were agitated to discover that this Christmas season was going to be the same as the past twenty or so. This must have been the same shock discovered by U.S. soldiers in the first battle of the Civil War when they found out people got hurt and died during battle, causing the "Great Skedaddle." Once people started getting mutilated, Union soldiers ran away terrified. I almost wish those shoppers would have had the good sense to admit they made a simple mistake of shopping on the wrong day as opposed to taking out on employees. Unfortunately Americans have had the "we are right" mentality for a long time.

In the days following Black Friday, I noticed a strange thing about my managers and coworkers: they all had the same fatigued look on their faces. This was especially true for the store manager, Pete, who almost seemed to age ten years in a matter of three days. Pete had never before acted upset or impatient, but this season brought so much stress on his job that I could see the agony grow on his face like a cancer when the dock supervisor, Cory, informed him that the trash compactor was broken. This news hit the dock pretty hard as well because it would force us to put empty boxes somewhere. The Kohl's dock in Belden Village is one of the smallest docks, but the store is the second most successful Kohl's store in the nation (Elsass). We did not have enough room for the merchandise we had, and we were receiving more full trucks everyday full of things we had no room for. How could the managers expect us to work around boxes on top of that? Dock workers began talking considerably less during the work day. The stress was even starting to annoy me when I was not working. I caught myself being irritable and standoffish more and more of the time. I came home one day and yelled at my father when he asked me how my day was. Christmas Madness had officially taken hold of my brain.

Without wasting much time, I naturally moved toward a remedy many Americans have known to use during the holidays: I started drinking when I was not in a good mood. The problem was that I have not been in a good mood for longer than an hour since November started. It seemed to work at first, but I was not the only Kohl's worker with this natural tendency as it turns out. I caught a whiff of alcohol on the breath of other people at work. It did not occur to me to say anything because they were much more pleasant people. I figured that if it prevented them from pissing me off for a while, it was no real loss to me. Yes, I am going to Hell, but at least there is no Christmas season down there.

Drowning my agitation, I started having major problems sleeping. Some nights I would barely get an hour of sleep while other nights I slept twelve or fourteen hours. I stopped the idea of drinking until I was Mr. Happy because it never really worked; however, I still was not sleeping very normally. I had spent all weekend at work, at home listening to music, or watching television while half in the tank. I wasted three days working or drinking and not doing any schoolwork. By the time the Tuesday after Thanksgiving arrived, I had completely neglected almost all of my homework for school. School should have been the first thing I worried about, but I could not ignore the stress of work without preoccupying myself with unproductive activities. Even when I was drinking, playing video games, or staring at the television, I could not really focus on what I was doing. The downward spiral of Christmas was complete because, for the first time, I retreated into depression.

Despite my circumstance, I was not the only person in this mind-set. Seasonal Affective Disorder is a com-
mon holiday experience for many people. This disorder is “a type of depression that tends to occur (and recur) as the days grow shorter in the fall and winter. It is believed that affected persons react adversely to the decreasing amounts of light and the colder temperatures as the fall and winter progress” (Medicine Net). This subject is still being studied, but researchers believe that the lack of daylight is not the only cause.

Many factors can cause the “holiday blues”: stress, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, financial constraints, and the inability to be with one’s family and friends. The demands of shopping, parties, family reunions, and house guests also contribute to feelings of tension. People who do not become depressed may develop other stress responses, such as: headaches, excessive drinking, overeating, and difficulty sleeping. Even more people experience post-holiday let down after January 1. This can result from disappointments during the preceding months compounded with the excess fatigue and stress. (National Mental Health Association)

The Christmas shoppers, the traffic going to and from work and school, the amount of work at my jobs, and the stress of finding presents for everyone contributed to my “holiday blues.” The heaviest contributors were work and traffic which were both results of the Christmas season.

Shortly after school on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, I went to work routinely. Time went slow because I knew I had tons of schoolwork to do after work. My supervisor, Cory, was looking extremely stressed, but instead of finding another way to deal with it, he seemed to be taking it out on the truck crew. Cory was barking orders at people and unsuccessfully trying to speed up everyone on the dock. The crew knew that, no matter how fast we worked, limited space and the amount of merchandise on the truck that day prevented us from finishing our work in any reasonable time period.

After repeatedly being told to work faster and being unable to comply, I had finally had enough stress for one year, so I walked out at break time and never looked back. I refused to spend my Christmas in a horrible mood or completely worn out. Whether I really had Seasonal Affective Disorder or not, I must not have been affected too terribly because I came out of the slump quickly. This does not mean that I advocate quitting to anyone, but it worked for me. Sadly other people can be seriously affected by the symptoms of this disorder.

Starting in the month of November, the Christmas season begins. Shoppers increase in amount and ferocity while traffic gradually becomes impossible to deal with anywhere near the mall. The shoppers flood stores, looking for the best deals or the hottest items. The customers unknowingly hand department stores the majority of their total yearly sales (Wolk). During this year’s Black Friday, a thirteen year old girl was trampled at a Wal-Mart near Grand Rapids, Michigan (she only suffered minor injuries) and violence occurred at a Wal-Mart in Orlando, Florida, when a man supposedly cut in front of someone in a checkout line (Associated Press). At the nearby Kohl’s Department Store in North Canton, the scene was also very grim. Christmas season has become an every-man-for-himself battle with no winners, a whole bunch of unhappy losers, and a handful of injuries.

Works Cited


Elsass, Ryan. Personal Interview. 3 Dec. 2005

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