

## Neat People vs. Sloppy People

“Neat People vs. Sloppy People” appears in Britt’s collection *show and tell*. Mingling humor with seriousness (as she often does), Britt has called the book a report on her journey into “the awful cave of self: You shout your name and voices come back in exultant response, telling you their names.” In this essay about certain inescapable personality traits, you may recognize some aspects of your *own* self, awful or otherwise. For a different approach to a similar subject, see the next essay, by Dave Barry.

I’ve finally figured out the difference between neat people and sloppy people. The distinction is, as always, moral. Neat people are lazier and meaner than sloppy people.

Sloppy people, you see, are not really sloppy. Their sloppiness is merely the unfortunate consequence of their extreme moral rectitude. Sloppy people carry in their mind’s eye a heavenly vision, a precise plan, that is so stupendous, so perfect, it can’t be achieved in this world or the next.

Sloppy people live in Never-Never land. Someday is their *Métier*. Someday they are planning to alphabetize all their books and set up home catalogs. Someday they will go through their wardrobes and mark certain items for tentative mending and certain items for passing on to relatives of similar shape and size. Someday sloppy people will make family scrapbooks into which they will put newspaper clippings, postcards, lock of hair, and the dried corsage from their senior prom. Someday they will file everything on the surface of their desks, including the cash receipt from coffee purchases at the snack shack. Someday they will sit down and read all the back issues of *The New Yorker*.

For all these noble reasons and more, sloppy people never get neat. They aim to high and wide. They save everything, planning someday to file, order, and straighten out the world. But while these ambitious plans take clearer and clearer shape in their heads, the books spill from the shelves into the floor, the clothes pile up in the hamper and closet, the family mementos accumulate in every drawer, the surface of the desk is buried under mounds of paper and the unread magazine threaten to reach the ceiling.

Sloppy people can’t bear to part with anything. They give loving attention to every detail. When sloppy people say they’re going to tackle the surface of the desk, they really mean it. Not a paper will go unturned; not a rubber band will go unboxed. Four hours or two weeks into the excavation, the desk looks exactly the same, primarily because the sloppy person is meticulously creating new piles of paper with new headings and scrupulously stopping to read all the old book catalogs before he threw them away. A neat person would just bulldoze the desk.

Neat people are bums and clods at heart. They have a cavalier attitude toward possession, including the family heirlooms. Everything is just another dust catcher to them. If anything collects dust, it’s got to go and that’s that. Neat people will toy with the idea of throwing the children out of the house just to cut down on the clutter.

Neat people don’t care about process. They like results. What they want to do is get the whole thing over with so they can sit down and watch the *rasslin’* on TV. Neat people operate on two unvarying principles: Never handle any items twice, and throw everything away.

The only thing messy in a neat person's house is the trash can. The minute something comes to a neat person's hand, he will look at it, try to decide if it has immediate use and, finding none, throw it in the trash.

Neat people are especially vicious with mail. They never go through their mail unless they are standing under a trashcan. If the trash can is beside the mailbox, even better. All ads, catalogs, pleas for charitable organizations, church bulletins and money saving coupons go straight to the trashcan without being opened. All letters from home, postcards from Europe, bills and paychecks are opened, immediately responded to, then dropped into the trashcan. Neat people keep their receipts only for tax purposes. That's it. No sentimental salvaging of birthday cards or the last letter a dying relative ever wrote. Into trash it goes.

Neat people place neatness above everything, even economics. They are incredibly wasteful. Neat people throw away several toys every time they walk through a den. I knew a neat person once who threw away a perfectly good dish drainer because it had mold on it. The drainer was too much trouble to wash. And neat people sell their furniture when they move. They will sell a La-Z-Boy recliner while you are reclining in it.

Neat people are no good to borrow from. Neat people buy everything in expensive little proportions. They get their flour and sugar and two-pound bags. They wouldn't consider clipping coupons, saving a leftover, reusing plastic nondairy whipped cream container or rinsing off tin foil and draping it over the unmoldy dish drainer. You can never borrow a neat person's newspaper to see what's playing at the movies. Neat people have the paper all wadded up and in the trash by 7:5 A.M.

Neat people cut a clean swath through the organic as well as the inorganic world. People, animals, and things are all one with them. They are so insensitive. After they've finished with the pantry, the medicine cabinet, and the attic, they will throw out the red geranium (too many leaves), sell the dog (too many flies), and send the children off to boarding school (too many scuff-marks on the hardwood floor).

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## Questions on Meaning

1. "Suzanne Britt believes that neat people are lazy, mean, pretty, callous, wasteful, and insensitive." How would you respond to this statement?
2. Is the author's main *purpose* to make fun of neat people, to assess the habits of neat and sloppy people, to help neat and sloppy people get along better, to defend sloppy people, to amuse and entertain, or to prove that neat people are morally inferior to sloppy people? Discuss.
3. What is meant by "as always" in the sentence "The distinction is, always, moral" (para.1)? Does the author seem to be suggesting that any and all distinction between people are moral?

## Questions on Writing Strategy

1. What is the general *tone* of this essay? What words and phrases help you determine that tone?
2. Britt mentions no similarities between neat and sloppy people. Does that mean this is not a good comparison and contrast essay? Why might a writer deliberate focus on difference and give very little or no time to similarities?
3. Consider the following *generalization*: “For all these noble reasons and more, sloppy never get neat” (para.4) and “ The only thing messy in a neat person’s house is the trash can” (para.8). How can you tell that these statements are generalizations? Look for other generalization in the essay. What is the *effect* of using so many?
4. **Other Methods.** Although filled with generalizations, Britt’s essay does not lack for *examples*. Study the examples in paragraph 11 and explain how they do and don’t work the way examples are supposed to, to bring the generalization about people down to earth.

## Question on Language

1. Consult your dictionary for definitions of these words: rectitude (para.2); *métier*, tentative (3); accumulate (4); excavation, meticulously, scrupulously (5); salvaging (9).
2. How do you understand the use of the word *noble* in the first sentence of paragraph 4? Is it meant literally? Are there other words in a essay that appear to be written in a similar tone?