An essay assignment suitable for large introductory organic chemistry courses is described. Students were asked to write four-to five-page essays about any organic compound of their choosing that was in the news recently, was used widely, or had some social significance. The assignment was designed to stimulate student interest in the role of organic chemistry in their lives, to help them make connections between classroom information and the “real world”, to have them practice their writing skills, to teach them to use the library and other sources of scientific information, and to help them improve their grades by evaluating them with an instrument other than an exam. Techniques used by the instructor to manage the burden of grading a large number of essays are described.
Introduction
Most organic chemistry instructors have heard their students complain that the material they learn is irrelevant to their “real lives.” Apparently many students feel that organic chemistry is a hurdle they must overcome in order to achieve their other goals (usually, medical or pharmacy school), rather than a body of knowledge which will serve them well in the future. In order partly to address this sentiment, I asked the ca. 120 students in first-semester introductory organic chemistry (spring 1996) to write a five-page essay about an organic compound of their choice that was in the news recently, was used widely, or had some social significance. The experiment described here was largely successful. A similar assignment, but with assigned topics in an introductory chemistry course, was described by Pyle and Trammel in 1982 [1].

Purposes of the Assignment
The assignment was designed to stimulate the interest of students in the role of organic chemistry in the world. I thought that if students realized the relevance of organic chemistry to their lives, they might become more excited about the topic. To encourage their interest, the students were given permission to write about any organic compound they chose.

The assignment was meant to encourage the students to make connections between the material they learned in class and “real world” situations. Knowledge that is well-connected and integrated with other knowledge is most likely to be retained by students. I also hoped that the students would use their newly gained knowledge to understand issues that are of wide public concern.

The assignment forced the students to write. Writing is an art that is ignored in most science courses, and many science students think that it is not important for them to be able to write well [2]. Of course, it is important, as any professional scientist knows, but it must be admitted that the traditional methods of testing in science courses, with their emphasis on symbolic expression and factual knowledge, give this impression. I hoped that the assignment might help to impress on students the importance of writing well, thus better preparing them for careers in academia or industry.