

The wisdom of seventh graders: What to do with a time machine (part 1)

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20061204-14

December 4, 2006



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All the students at a local school were asked to composed an in-class essay on the following topic: “Your science teacher has invented a time machine. You have been selected to take the first trip. Explain in a multi-paragraph letter to your teacher where you will go and why.” (Students were given two hours, plus one additional hour upon request. In practice, many students were finished early and almost nobody requested the third hour.) (Aside: Sometimes I think my readers believe in time machines. For example, one of them wondered [why OLE/COM uses HRESULTS instead of Win32 error codes](#). Um, when OLE was invented, Win32 didn’t exist.) The students really enjoyed this topic. Too much so, however, for more than a few of them turned their essays into a narrative rather than sticking to the assignment. One student was so excited that the essay consisted of a single five-page paragraph. Well, technically it was two paragraphs, thereby meeting the letter (if not the spirit) of the “multi-paragraph” requirement. About halfway down page three was this sentence: “The essay continues in the next paragraph.” Roughly two thirds of the students opted to go into the past; one third chose to go into the future. One student didn’t travel in time at all (!), choosing instead to visit Europe in the present day “to see castles and ruins”. Psst, you’ve got a *time machine*. Why not go and see the ruins before they are ruined? (Actually, some friends pointed out to me that travelling to the present day is still handy. You can use your time machine as a teleporter. And you can even set the time machine to zip you backward, say, eight hours. That way, when you travel from Seattle to Europe, you arrive without any jet lag!) Boys were more likely to want to travel back in time to get rich, although their plans for doing so were not necessarily fully thought-out.

- Go back in time, steal an invention, and then bring it back to the present.
- Go back in time thirty years and invest all your money in Google, Amazon, and Microsoft.
- Go back to the time of Jesus and sell a bag of candy to the king in exchange for gold and gemstones.
- Go to the 1970’s buy up land in California, and then return to the present and you’ll be filthy rich.

- Go back in time, bury some everyday objects, then return to the present and dig them up. Bingo, instant antiques! (This one had a chance of working.)

(Good luck getting anybody in the past to accept today's money.) Girls were more likely to travel in time to meet themselves or close ancestors.

- Go back in time to meet your grandparents who died when you were very young.
- Go forward in time to see how you did. (These people were very susceptible to lapsing into speculative fiction.)

A few students confused a time machine with regressive therapy, choosing to go back in time to re-live a cherished moment from a year or two ago. Psst, if you use a time machine to go into the past to visit yourself on that awesome vacation to Hawaii, you won't re-live the vacation. You'll be watching the other copy of yourself enjoy the vacation. (And that's assuming that the other copy of yourself doesn't see you and freak out.) Several students wanted to change world history.

- Go back to Los Alamos and convince the scientists not to detonate the first atomic bomb.
- Go back to New York City on September 11, 2001.
 - One student has a clever plan: Run into the World Trade Center buildings and pull the fire alarms eleven minutes before the planes collided with the buildings. By the student's calculations, that's enough time to get everybody out of the building but not so much time that the firemen will have arrived.
 - Another student wanted to prevent the planes from crashing into the Empire State Building. (I think he succeeded!)
- Go back to Phuket in December, 2004 and warn everybody about the coming tsunami. (The student acknowledges that he will likely fail but he wants to try anyway.)

Many students wanted to go back in time to observe and experience a historical period. One student wanted to ask Jesus to teach him how to walk on water. (Step one: Be the son of God.) Coming up in Part 2, selected sentences from student essays.

Where would you go if you could take one trip in a time machine?

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