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How to Write an Essay

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How to Write an Essay

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Klett Lerntraining

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Preface

This book has been written in the belief that the art of essay-writing is only partly a matter of divine inspiration. The other parts – by far the greater in number and importance – are skills that most thinking and speaking mortals are fully capable of mastering with a little effort, a good deal of practice, and, I hope, a reasonable amount of pleasure. Good essays are a joy to read, and they are no less fun to write. Most of the obstacles to pleasurable writing can, once identified, be readily removed. This book is concerned above all with the obstacles; but I hope at least the odd glimpse at some of the pleasures will be afforded along the way.

The book is intended above all for students of English at German universities – the very people who, in one way or another, have had a major part in writing it. Not only have I helped myself rather freely to examples poached from genuine student essays, but much of the thinking behind the book has been informed by my teaching in the English department of the University of Cologne. I should like to take this opportunity to thank my students at Cologne, not only for their unsolicited contributions to this book, but for all they have taught me over the years. My thanks also to Selwyn Jackson and Ansgar Nünning who read and made valuable comments on the manuscript, and to Timothy Jones for supplying the essay on Katherine Mansfield's short story "Miss Brill".

Richard Aczel
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Introduction

1 What is an essay?

Types

The essay as a genre remains notoriously difficult to define. It is probably fair to say that there are as many types of essay as there are types of essayist. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), himself a fine essayist, described the essay as “*a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular or orderly performance*”. Although the type of essay discussed and practised in this book will be anything but “loose”, “irregular” and “undigested”, it is worth bearing in mind that the term essay has, historically, regularly been associated with ideas of the tentative, unscientific, and even the amateur. This is reflected in the titles of some of the most famous essays in the English language, from Charles Lamb’s “In Praise of Chimney-sweepers” to J.B. Priestley’s “On Doing Nothing”.

History

The term “essay” comes from the French *essayer* (to attempt); and the generic term *essai* was coined by the French writer Montaigne in 1580, and used in the title of his famous volume of *Essais* published in that year. For Montaigne, the essay was a kind of trial or cross-examination of an idea.

This is as good a definition as any, but it leaves the field wide open – an openness reflected by the history of the essay as a genre itself. The “father of the English essay”, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), wrote short, moral and didactic essays on such subjects as “studies”, “ambition” and “travel”. By the end of the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke could use the term “essay” in the title of a full-length philosophical treatise, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Since then, the name “essay” has been applied to works as far apart as Alexander Pope’s philosophical poem in heroic couplets, *An Essay on Man* (1733–4), and G.K. Chesterton’s short meditation “On Lying in Bed”.

Argument

What all these types of essay have in common is an interest in argument. They do not simply state facts or opinions, nor do they tell a story: they *argue a case*. They take an idea, or cluster of ideas and, in Montaigne's sense, put them on trial.

As in most trials, the purpose is to prove a point and reach a verdict. To reach the desired verdict, the essay must do three things. It must produce strong arguments, express these arguments clearly and forcefully, and support them with convincing evidence. Whether you are writing an essay on the rights and wrongs of capital punishment, or on the use of metaphor in a poem, the success of your essay will depend above all on these three factors. They will form the central focus of this book.

2 Critical essays

Focus

How to Write an Essay is a practical guide to essay writing for students of English. It focuses on the planning, structuring and formulating of critical responses to literary texts. The type of essay discussed and practised in this book is generally referred to as the critical (or literary critical) essay.

In spite of the book's particular literary critical focus, the practical and analytical guidelines it offers should be relevant to all forms of essay writing. To write an essay of any kind, you need to know certain basic techniques. These include: how to analyse an essay question; how to select and order the main points of an answer; how to write well-structured paragraphs, introductions and conclusions; how to express your arguments clearly and convincingly; how to check and revise your work; and how to practise and improve your essay-writing technique. All of these points are covered in detail in the individual chapters which follow.

Thinking

"Writing" as such forms only one relatively small part of the essay-writing process as a whole. One can only "write up" an essay when one has decided what to say and how best to say it. Essayists who begin writing before they have finished thinking usually get in a muddle and lose sight of the question

they are meant to be addressing. This is not to deny that some of our best thoughts have the annoying habit of coming half way through the composition of an essay. But there is a lot we can do to train our thoughts to arrive in good time and sort themselves out in an orderly fashion before we launch into the first words of our introduction.

Good writing is the result of good thinking. To say that someone writes well is to say that they have organized their thoughts in a clear and convincing manner. This book, therefore, is above all a book about thinking – or rather, about thinking aloud. It attempts, step by step, to go through a series of more or less automatic thought-processes and to render them conscious. Once we have seen what these processes involve, and how we can make them function as effectively as possible, they can become automatic again. When it is no longer necessary to think aloud while planning and formulating an essay, this book will have served its purpose. Like all guidebooks, its ultimate aim is to render itself superfluous.

3 How this book works

Detail

Presumably, you will never have to write an essay quite as long as John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. This book will primarily be concerned with short essays of five to ten pages (1,500–3,000 words). To write a whole book on something so small is inevitably a risky business: it can seem a bit like trying to open an envelope with a fork-lift truck, or like a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea, as someone once said of the prose style of Henry James. You might find yourself asking: "Do I really have to read all this just to write an essay? Do I have to follow all these steps and stages and checks and double-checks? If so, writing a single essay is going to take me a lifetime."

The type of "thinking aloud" practised in the following chapters is rather like an analysis of a goal in a football match, played back in slow-motion. Of course, it only takes seconds for the ball to land in the back of the net. Likewise, when the processes described in this book are actually executed,

they only take a matter of minutes to perform. By looking at them in slow-motion, we simply see more exactly how they are best carried out.

Most of the stages of thinking described in the following pages are matters of common sense. Once you have grasped them they will become reflexes that you perform quickly and automatically. A sprinter watches his or her race in slow-motion replay in order to learn how to run faster. I hope it will be the same for essayists using this book.

Content

The book's chapters are presented in the order in which you should go about writing an essay. Before you start planning essays you will need to know how to analyse essay questions. This is the focus of **Chapter 1**.

Chapter 2 shows how to plan an essay. It is the longest, most detailed, and probably the most important chapter in the book. A full, coherent plan is an essential ingredient of a good essay. This chapter discusses ways of selecting relevant points and of putting them in a clear and logical order. It also shows how a good plan can generate ideas for introductions and conclusions.

In **Chapter 3** we turn to the writing process itself. This chapter focuses on how to structure and link essay paragraphs.

It is followed by a chapter on those problematic paragraphs that form the beginning and end of an essay: the introduction and conclusion. **Chapter 4** discusses various types of introduction and conclusion and illustrates their appropriate use.

Chapter 5 concentrates on questions of style. It offers a series of positive guidelines for expressing ideas clearly and concisely, and offers a list of important stylistic weaknesses that should be avoided.

Chapter 6 deals with finishing touches, such as presentation, checking and revision. It also offers ten tips for improving your essay-writing technique, and a simplified summary of the main points of the book.

Chapter 7 looks beyond the literary critical essay and shows how the skills developed in the book can be applied to other types of essay (descriptive, reflective, and argumentative).

Although you are advised to read the chapters in order, each chapter forms a relatively independent unit. So, if you have particular questions

about, say, introductions and conclusions, you will be able to go directly to the chapter concerned.

Examples

How to Write an Essay is a *practical* guide. For this reason most of its points are based on, or illustrated through, examples. Therefore a wide range of essay questions are referred to in the book, dealing with a variety of literary texts. It is not necessary to have read all the texts mentioned to understand the practical points that are being made. [Chapter 3](#), however, is based on one text in particular: Katherine Mansfield's (very) short story "Miss Brill". The text of this story is given in full in an appendix at the end of the book. You should read the story in conjunction with [Chapter 3](#).

A further appendix provides a sample essay based on the question discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

Most of the examples in the book have been taken from genuine student essays. Sometimes the content has been slightly altered to strengthen the point being made. In several cases the style has been improved to match the level of a fairly articulate native-speaker. This is because the examples perform two functions. On the one hand, they illustrate the various techniques and problems under discussion. On the other hand, they are also intended as examples of essay style. Where the examples are negative this will be made clear. Otherwise they suggest the type of discourse appropriate to critical essay-writing.

Practice

However practical this book aspires to be, it can never take the place of the best method of improving your essay-writing: practice. The more you write, the more natural the habits encouraged by this book will become. Literature is all about the effective and engaging formulation of our ideas. To become a better essay writer is also to become a better student of literature. We all need to be exposed as regularly as possible to the exciting, frustrating, inspiring challenge of putting pen to paper which faces all writers. The pleasure we experience in producing a clearly organized argument or a well-turned phrase will add to our pleasure in enjoying similar, if perhaps greater, achievements in our reading. I hope this book will go some way

towards cultivating such pleasures, but it is through practice alone that they will deepen and multiply.

CHAPTER 1

Approaching Essay Questions

Introduction

Before beginning to plan and write essays it is essential to choose a suitable question or topic and to be quite sure that you understand exactly what the question requires you to do. Some of the most common (and serious) weaknesses of students' essays stem from a basic failure to pay close attention to the wording of essay questions and to recognise both what the question suggests and what it demands. Even in the mad rush of producing essays under examination conditions it is essential to devote sufficient time to the careful study of questions and topics. This chapter offers a brief outline of the basic stages involved in analysing essay questions, then gives a series of examples of typical questions and how to approach them.

1 Unpacking and Decoding the Question

Basics

Some essay questions are fairly straightforward and the type of response required will at once be clear. Other essay questions may be more complex, and it will be necessary to **unpack** and **decode** them before setting to work on planning and writing. As a general rule it is safer to expect most essay questions and topics to be more complex than they appear at first sight. For this reason it is always wise to read them at least twice through.

Here is a fairly simple example of an essay question which appears to be self-explanatory, but actually needs to be unpacked and decoded:

Example

Discuss the function of symbols in James Joyce's short story "Eveline".

1 Unpacking

Parts

Unpacking a question means opening it up and breaking it down into its basic parts. These basic parts are: a) the keywords of the question; b) what the question suggests; and c) what the question demands.

Keywords

The keywords of a question are the basic terms which will define the scope and focus of your essay. They are of absolute importance, and you must bear them in mind at every stage of planning and writing your essay. A momentary loss of concentration on these keywords will lead to the cardinal sin of irrelevance.

There are two types of keywords to look out for in essay questions.

Focus

The first are focus-keywords which set out the topics on which you will have to concentrate. Focus-keywords can be either general (setting the essay's overall frame of reference), or specific (defining the essay's central concerns).

Approach

The second type of keywords are approach-keywords which tell you what you are required to do with the topics identified by the focus-keywords. Typical approach-keywords are words like “discuss”, “define”, “describe” “examine”, “characterize”, “compare”, “identify” (etc.). While focus-keywords tell you what to write about, approach keywords tell you how to write about it. The ability to identify both kinds of keywords quickly and accurately is an essential of good essay writing.

In the example essay question given above, most of the keywords are focus-keywords. The general focus of the essay will be James Joyce's short story “Eveline”, while its specific focus will be on the function of symbols.

The only approach-keyword is discuss. This very common approach-keyword is actually rather vague. It leaves the angle of approach to the question relatively open. It will be decoded in the next section.

Other approach-keywords are more specific. They include keywords like: “characterize”, “compare”, “contrast” “describe”, “evaluate”, “list”,