History of the Essay

Inquire

Overview
The essay has long been a favorite assignment of high school and university teachers. Have you ever wondered why “the essay” is the go-to assignment for your teachers? Where did it come from? Why is it considered so important? What does it actually do? To understand the importance and relevance of this form of communication, it’s helpful to have some familiarity with the history of this popular and versatile form of writing.

Big Question: What is the history of the essay?

Watch: Essays of Old
When you hear the word “essay,” do you tend to break-out in hives? Or do you get excited at the prospect of making your ideas known to the world? Whatever your reaction, chances are you’ve written at least a few essays throughout your life, either as assignments for language arts classes or simply as longer social media posts. Since the essay has so many applications and forms, it can almost be considered a normal part of everyday life.

The essay is perhaps the most well-known form of writing among students due to its role in teaching critical thinking and writing skills. The form’s versatility is perfect for applying any number of different writing concepts, allowing students to explore their interests while also expanding their writing abilities.

But, how did the essay come to be? Who wrote the first essay; do we even know? And have essays always been written the same way? The history of the essay can help you understand both its purpose and why it became such an important part of learning how to write.

Because the essay is so versatile, its definition can also be a bit difficult to pin down. Even just calling it a formal argument is a little too limited, since it can also be the equivalent of a one-sided conversation. When we talk about an academic essay, though, we usually mean a structured discussion of a particular subject. Throughout its history, the essay has been used to spread ideas, mostly through the written word, but also through photography, film, and even music.

What do you know about the history of the essay? Have you ever explored older forms of essay writing? What do you think you could learn from what others have written in the past?
Read: The Essay: Past and Present

History and Purpose

While it isn’t always necessary to understanding the basics, learning about something’s history will usually provide you with some insight into what works and what doesn’t. With the essay, learning its history can help you understand the purpose of the essay and what your goals should be in writing one.

What Exactly is an Essay?

A full definition of the essay, with all of its various iterations, usages, and sub-forms, would probably take an essay in itself to explore. In general, the essay as a basic form involves a close examination of a subject. An essay will usually have a specific point to make about that subject and will use a formal style, particular structure, and specific tone in order to express that point. Some informal styles allow for an essay to have a looser structure and digressions, which are usually related to the subject of the essay but unnecessary to the overall argument. In all forms, the essay will be based around an interesting topic to the author, thus investing his or her personal voice into the material. In this way, the essay tends to differ from a simple treatise on a subject.

Essays can be any length; however, their nature as focused analyses generally prevents them from being longer than a few dozen pages. Book-length essays do exist, but these are often theses, written as in-depth analyses on broad subjects which incorporate points made in other essays as part of their own examination. An assigned essay may have a minimum page requirement that needs to be met. Generally, this is an indication of the depth of analysis that the assignment requires, and should help you in deciding how complex your chosen topic should be.

The Formalization of the Essay

The history of the essay is a bit murkier than that of other writing forms, since we only have a rough formalization of the essay, rather than an exact origin. As far as we know, the actual word “essay” originates in 16th century France, with philosopher Michel de Montaigne’s publication, Essais. The title is a derivative of the French verb, “essayer,” which means “to attempt” or “to try out;” this aligns with an essay being a way to experiment or try out an idea. In a modern context, the essay is used to give your ideas a chance to be heard and argued with, so thinking about the form as a way to “try out” your ideas is just as relevant as treating them like a close examination.

While Montaigne did not invent the essay, he was greatly responsible for its development into a major writing form. Before Montaigne, most non-fiction writing was driven by a static objectivity that precluded any kind of individual interpretations or personal feelings on a subject. Montaigne’s writings, on the other hand, were self-consciously personal and driven by his subjective experiences.

Montaigne’s style was not immediately picked up by the majority writing culture. Francis Bacon, Montaigne’s British contemporary, was inspired by him but his own essays remained more driven by a self-defined objectivity than by Montaigne’s self-conscious subjectivity.

Later writers, such as Leigh Hunt, William Hazlett, and Charles Lamb, however, began adopting much of Montaigne’s stylistic subjectivity. Throughout the Age of Enlightenment and with the advent of printed publishing, the essay gained popularity in Europe as a form of polemic argument and appeared often in periodicals.
When Henry David Thoreau began writing essays, the form became tied to place. This locational element of the essay truly came to fruition in the 20th century, and was used to add geographic, cultural, and political context to arguments based in autobiographical content.

With the advent of **New Journalism** — the loose mix of reporting, criticism, and fiction written in the 1960s — the essay gained even more popularity. This popularity hasn't subsided since. Today, the essay is used in nearly every media form to bring critical thought to the forefront of culture and is, perhaps, the primary means for disseminating in-depth analysis of current events.

**Formal vs. Informal**

The key difference between formal and informal essays is the audience, specifically how you wish your audience to approach the discussed material. Most any subject matter can be approached from a formal, or academic perspective. An **academic essay** seeks to inform; therefore, a writer should show that this is the primary goal. A writer can do this by addressing the audience with a tone and vocabulary that treats a subject in an objective, or at least serious and empirical, way. Academic essays should also use a more rigorous structure to formalize an argument and better inform the reader.

**Informal essays**, however, are written as much to entertain as they are to inform. Informal essays almost create a one-sided conversation with the reader. They are often driven by personal experiences and will use loose structure and language to draw the reader into the writer's individual perspective. Yet, similar to academic essays, an informal essay will generally state a perspective about a subject and leave the reader to decide for themselves whether they agree.

**Reflect: What's Your Type?**

**Poll**

Based on the essay forms outlined in this lesson, which is your favorite to create?

- academic essay
- film essay
- photographic essay
- musical essay

**Expand: Essays in Other Media**

The essay is often understood as an argument in written form. However, since the term “essay” has such a broad definition, the general idea can easily be applied to other, non-written media. Non-written essays share the same hallmarks as written essays: a focus on a particular subject of discussion and a personalization from the author’s point of view.

**Film Essay**

Perhaps the most well-known alternative essay form is the **film essay**. While they usually cover non-fictional subject matter, film essays are different from straight documentaries in how they approach it. Whereas documentaries are usually works of journalism meant to objectively present a subject for the audience’s education, a film essay will take a particular point of view and present an argument in order to gain the audience’s support. Like written essays, film essays take on a particular style that is unique to the filmmaker. As a result, the style used in making the argument is just as important as the argument itself.
Photographic Essay

Like the film essay, a photographic essay relies on visuals in order to communicate a specific idea or point to the audience. Photographic essays are made up of photos showing either a sequence of events or a sequence of thematically linked images that, when viewed in a particular order, implies a specific point of view toward a subject based on the audience’s reaction to the images. It is important to remember that not all sequences of photos are photographic essays, as an essay requires a specific argument be made about a subject.

Musical Essay

Music can also take on the essay form, either by putting a written essay’s text to music or by using musical forms and structures to provide a commentary on a song’s lyrical content. Contemporary genres, especially hip hop and rap, have been especially influential in utilizing specific tones of musical accompaniment to underpin the lyrical content. These genres’ artists use literary techniques, such as irony and strategic emphasis, in order to make a specific point in a unique way; e.g. through musical essays.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Modern Essays and Sketches: Introduction
- More information on the history of the essay

From a History and Poetics of the Essay
- More information on the history of the essay

The Essay: History and Definition
- An article explaining the essay in more depth

Lesson Glossary

academic essay: a structured discussion of a particular subject; written to inform
essay: as a basic form, involves a close examination of a subject
film essay: an alternative essay form, which takes a particular point of view and presents an argument through film, in order to gain the audience’s support
informal essays: a loose structured, one-sided conversation with the reader that generally states the writer’s perspective on a subject; written to entertain and inform
musical essay: an alternative essay form, created either by putting a written essay’s text to music or by using musical forms and structures to provide a commentary on a song’s lyrical content
New Journalism: a loose mix of reporting, criticism, and fiction written in the 1960s, which increased the essay form’s popularity
photographic essay: an alternative essay form, made up of photos showing either a sequence of events or a sequence of thematically linked images that, when viewed in a particular order, implies a specific point of view toward a subject based on the audience’s reaction to the images

Check Your Knowledge

1. Which of the following is not true about essays?
   A. They involve close examinations subjects.
   B. There are informal styles that allow for essays to have looser structures.
   C. Essays are practically similar, if not completely, to a treatise on a subject.
   D. Although the nature of essays prevents them from being longer than a dozen pages, there are also book essays that exist.

   2. Academic essays are written to entertain and create a one-sided conversation with the reader.
      A. True
      B. False

   3. Essays, often understood as an argument in written form, can also be applied to non-written media.
      A. True
      B. False

   Answer Key:
   1. C  2. B  3. A

Citations

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