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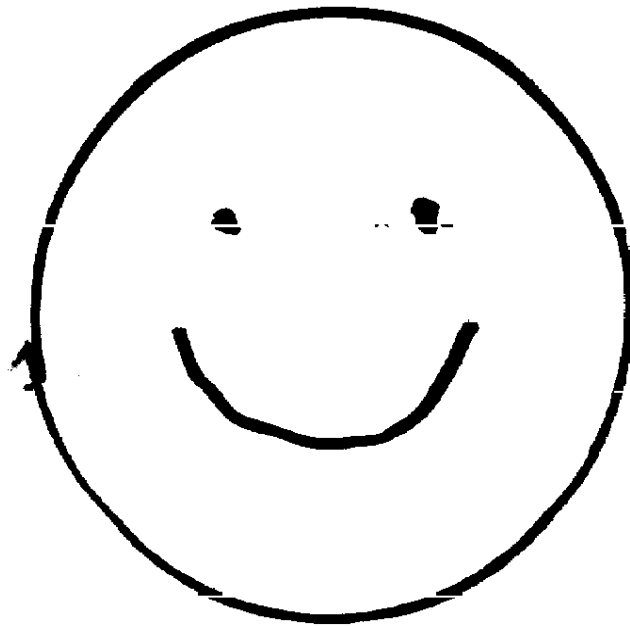
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An essay is, generally, a piece of writing that gives the author's own argument, but the definition is vague, overlapping with those of a letter, a paper, an article, a pamphlet, and a short story. Essays have been sub-classified as formal and informal: formal essays are characterized by "serious purpose, dignity, logical organization, length," whereas the informal essay is characterized by "the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme," etc.[1]

Essays are commonly used as literary criticism, political manifestos, learned arguments, observations of daily life, recollections, and reflections of the author. Almost all modern essays are written in prose, but works in verse have been dubbed essays (e.g., Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* and *An Essay on Man*). While brevity usually defines an essay, voluminous works like John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* are counterexamples.

In some countries (e.g., the United States and Canada), essays have become a major part of formal education.[2] Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills; admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants, and in the humanities and social sciences essays are often used as a way of assessing the performance of students during final exams.

The concept of an "essay" has been extended to other media beyond writing. A film essay is a movie that often incorporates documentary filmmaking styles and focuses more on the evolution of a theme or idea. A photographic essay covers a topic with a linked series of photographs that may have accompanying text or captions.

Definitions

John Locke's 1690 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

The word essay derives from the French infinitive *essayer*, "to try" or "to attempt". In English essay first meant "a trial" or "an attempt", and this is still an alternative meaning. The Frenchman Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was the first author to describe his work as essays; he used the term to

characterize these as "attempts" to put his thoughts into writing.

Subsequently, essay has been defined in a variety of ways. One definition is a "prose composition with a focused subject of discussion" or a "long, systematic discourse".[3] It is difficult to define the genre into which essays fall. Aldous Huxley, a leading essayist, gives guidance on the subject.[4] He notes that "the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything", and adds that "by tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece". Furthermore, Huxley argues that "essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference". These three poles (or worlds in which the essay may exist) are:

The personal and the autobiographical: The essayists that feel most comfortable in this pole "write fragments of reflective autobiography and look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description".

The objective, the factual, and the concrete particular: The essayists that write from this pole "do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. Their art consists of setting forth, passing judgment upon, and drawing general conclusions from the relevant data".

The abstract-universal: In this pole "we find those essayists who do their work in the world of high abstractions", who are never personal and who seldom mention the particular facts of experience.

Huxley adds that the most satisfying essays "...make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist."

History

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Montaigne

Montaigne's "attempts" grew out of his commonplacings.[5] Inspired in particular by the works of

Plutarch, a translation of whose *Œuvres Morales* (Moral works) into French had just been published by Jacques Amyot, Montaigne began to compose his essays in 1572; the first edition, entitled *Essais*, was published in two volumes in 1580.[6] For the rest of his life, he continued revising previously published essays and composing new ones. A third volume was published posthumously; together, their over 100 examples are widely regarded as the predecessor of the modern essay.

Europe

While Montaigne's philosophy was admired and copied in France, none of his most immediate disciples tried to write essays. But Montaigne, who liked to fancy that his family (the Eyquem line) was of English extraction, had spoken of the English people as his "cousins", and he was early read in England, notably by Francis Bacon.[7]

Bacon's essays, published in book form in 1597 (only five years after the death of Montaigne, containing the first ten of his essays),[7] 1612, and 1625, were the first works in English that described themselves as essays. Ben Jonson first used the word *essayist* in 1609, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Other English essayists included Sir William Cornwallis, who published essays in 1600 and 1617 that were popular at the time,[7] Robert Burton (1577–1641) and Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682). In Italy, Baldassare Castiglione wrote about courtly manners in his essay *Il Cortigiano*. In the 17th century, the Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián wrote about the theme of wisdom.[8]

In England, during the Age of Enlightenment, essays were a favored tool of polemicists who aimed at convincing readers of their position; they also featured heavily in the rise of periodical literature, as seen in the works of Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Samuel Johnson. Addison and Steele used the journal *Tatler* (founded in 1709 by Steele) and its successors as storehouses of their work, and they became the most celebrated eighteenth-century essayists in England. Johnson's essays appear during the 1750s in various similar publications.[7] As a result of the focus on journals, the term also acquired a meaning synonymous with "article", although the content may not be the strict definition. On the other hand, Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is not an essay at all, or cluster of essays, in the technical sense, but still it refers to the experimental and tentative nature of the inquiry which the philosopher was undertaking.[7]