

WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

It is any brief composition in **prose** that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuade us to accept a **thesis** on any subject whatever. The **essay** discusses its subject in non-technical fashion, often with a liberal use of such devices as **anecdote**, striking illustration, and humor to augment its appeal.

Essays are not always called essays. They could be called editorials, letters, speeches, sermons, or even hidden as part of a play or novel. An essay is determined by style, purpose, structure, and so on. It is almost impossible to define essay in such a way that all essays can be classified adequately.

WHAT'S A FORMAL ESSAY?

The formal essay is relatively impersonal: the author writes as an authority, or at least as highly knowledgeable, on the subject and expounds it in an ordered and thorough fashion. Examples will be found among the serious articles on current topics and issues in any of the magazines addressed to a thoughtful audience -- *Harper's*, *Scientific American*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and so on. **Formal** essays almost always follow a rigid structure -- the statement of thesis, development of supporting details, etc. -- the five-paragraph essay, for example. The purpose of most **formal** essays is exposition or explanation; whereas the purpose of an **informal** essay may well be entertainment or merely the expression of a personal opinion.

Qualities which make an essay **formal** include:

1. Seriousness of purpose.
2. Dignity.
3. Logical organization.
4. Length.

WHAT'S AN INFORMAL ESSAY?

In the **informal essay** (or "familiar" or "personal essay"), the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to be concerned with everyday things rather than with public affairs or specialized topics, and writes in a relaxed, self-revelatory, and often whimsical fashion. Accessible modern examples are to be found in any major periodical, usually labelled as editorials or essays. Some famous writers of informal essays include Francis Bacon (**aphoristic essay**), Joseph Addison and Richard Steele (periodical **essay**), and Charles Lamb (**personal essay**).

Qualities which make an essay **informal** include:

1. The personal element: self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner.
2. Humor: sarcasm, satire, parody.
3. Graceful style: quotation, figures of speech.
4. Rambling structure: narrative, conversational.
5. Unconventionality or novelty of theme.
6. Freshness of form: virtually unlimited.
7. Freedom from stiffness and affectation.
8. Incomplete or tentative treatment of topic.

One way of discussing essays is to describe them -- as best one can. The following are terms which can be used to consider the author's approach, purpose, and subject matter:

10 CHARACTERISTICS OF ESSAYS (often any one essay may include several of these)

1. **Personal:** Tone is light, deals with author or his world. Interpretive, familiar, conversational. Has characteristics of a monologue.
2. **Formal:** Tone is serious; so is subject matter. Tendency for language to be stylized, grammatically perfect. Intended to educate and arouse.
3. **Descriptive:** Calls for close observation. Contains emotional, evocative, concrete details.
4. **Narrative:** Gives a picture of author colored by personality. Often a thread of story broken by digressions.
5. **Expository:** A process of enumeration, definition, comparison, contrast, illustration, analysis, cause and effect.
6. **Didactic:** Intended to teach, instruct or clarify some point for the reader.
7. **Character Sketch:** Portraying either individual traits, type, class or rank of person with a moral purpose.
8. **Biographical:** Thumbnail sketch often with anecdotes. Written by close associate of subject.
9. **Philosophical:** Also called "reflective." Deals with author's personal views on life.
10. **Critical:** Dealing with some form or piece of art, literature or government. May contain humor or satire.

HOW DOES AN ESSAYIST CREATE EMPHASIS?

Emphasis is a principle of rhetoric dictating that important elements be given important positions and adequate development whether in the sentence, the paragraph, or the whole composition. The more important positions are, naturally, at the beginning and end. But **emphasis** may also be secured:

1. By repetition of important ideas.
2. By the development of important ideas through supplying plenty of specific detail.
3. By simply giving more space to the more important phases of the composition.
4. By contrasting one element with another since such contrasts focus the reader's attention on the point in question.
5. By careful selection of details so chosen that subjects related to the main idea are included and all irrelevant material excluded.
6. By climactic arrangement.
7. By mechanical devices such as capitalization, italics, symbols, and different colors of ink.

TIMED ESSAYS

Directions: You will have 20 minutes to plan and write the essay assigned below. You are expected to express your thoughts carefully, naturally, and effectively. Be specific -- one concrete, pertinent example is worth a thousand words. Remember that how well you write is much more important than how much you write. *Do not write on a topic other than the one assigned below. An essay on a topic of your own choice will receive no credit.*

First, consider carefully the following statement. Then, read and follow the directions that are given in the assignment that follows the statement.

“We need more people who specialize in the impossible.”

Assignment: Do you agree or disagree with this quotation? Has attempting to do what other people have always thought impossible always led to gains for humanity? Write an essay in which you support your view with examples from literature, history, or observation.

Evaluating Timed Essay Questions

Essay can receive a ranking from 0 to 5, with 5 being the highest assessment possible. Essays are evaluated by the following criteria:

- _____ 1. **Legibility.** Is the essay readable?
- _____ 2. **Topic.** Does the essay address the topic assigned in an intelligent manner? Are all aspects of the topic covered proportionately?
- _____ 3. **Organization.** Does the essay have an introduction, body, and conclusion? Does the essay use effective transition words and phrases?
- _____ 4. **Development of Idea.** Does the essay use explicit example(s) to prove the writer’s opinion?
- _____ 5. **Grammar.** Are sentences complete sentences? Do subject and verb agree? Is pronoun reference clear?
- _____ 6. **Punctuation.** Do all sentences have correct end punctuation? Are commas used correctly? Are quotations used correctly?
- _____ 7. **Spelling.** Are there excessive misspelled words? Are those words which are misspelled of some difficulty or are they inexcusably simple words? Are simple homonyms misspelled?
- _____ 8. **Syntax.** Do sentences “flow” together in a pleasing manner? Does the essay include a variety of sentence structures?
- _____ 9. **Diction.** Are the words chosen used correctly? Is the vocabulary of the essay sophisticated enough for high school students? Are the best possible words used?
- _____ 10. **Completeness.** Is the essay finished?