

Forms of the Essay

The American Experience

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Preface

Learning to write well—perhaps the greatest challenge facing the first-year student—is certainly not easy, but neither is it impossible. This book does not pretend to solve all the problems that confront the beginning writer. Rather, its aim is to provide, through instruction and example, materials that will help student writers to extend and refine the skills they already have. To this end, *Forms of the Essay* is a collection of readings, chiefly expository, chosen to involve students in the kind of active, careful, and analytic reading that provides the best foundation for their own writing.

Most of the forty-eight essays are brief—1,000 to 3,000 words. Among them are many familiar authors and classic essays, along with a large sampling of fresh and interesting pieces, all emphasizing excellence in both thought and style. We have tried to offer a selection of readings that will serve as models for writing while at the same time stimulating the student's own intellect and imagination.

The collection represents the diverse forms of the modern essay, arranged along familiar lines. The essays are classified according to the traditional rhetorical modes, with the major emphasis on exposition. As examples of contemporary prose forms frequently encountered by the general reader or required of the everyday writer, we also include two new categories: the profile, and observing and reporting. In addition, all the essays are linked by a common focus on contemporary American life and culture.

We have also included apparatus that builds on the reading of the essays themselves, again emphasizing those skills common to both good reading and good expository writing. Each section begins with a brief discussion of a particular rhetorical mode or technique, showing how it is exemplified in the individual readings that follow. Each essay is introduced by a biographical note, and most are followed by exercises designed to measure comprehension and to develop vocabulary and usage, as well as by suggestions for discussion and writing.

Finally, we want to express our appreciation to those friends who gave us suggestions and encouragement as we prepared the manuscript: Ann Morehead and Georgia Cornell of City College of San Francisco, and Andrew Griffin at the

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The Essay

Although the works of some earlier writers are today also called “essays,” the essay was more or less invented in the sixteenth century by Michel de Montaigne, a writer and philosopher who produced several volumes of brief, personal prose writings. Following no particular pattern, he set down his primarily subjective views, opinions, feelings, and called the results “essais,” or “trials,” from the French verb “essayer” (“to try”). Today, the term essay still means any brief, personal prose work that demands no particular form in expressing a subjective attitude or opinion rather than a totally objective or scientific view of its subject. But the word has also come to signify a large, loosely defined literary genre that includes almost all short nonfiction prose: the freshman student’s weekly composition, a *New York Times* editorial, the President’s latest speech, any magazine article.

Any subject or issue may provoke an essay—Montaigne’s own topics ranged from “The Affection of Fathers for Their Children” to “On Cannibals.” Those collected in this book, the products of many different minds, represent an even wider scope of taste and interest. Essays also vary greatly in form, including pieces as informally arranged as Terkel’s profile-interviews, as individualized and unique in shape as the memoirs of Kingston and Anderson, or as formal as Campa’s carefully arranged study. They come in almost every length, too, as the selections here demonstrate, exhibiting every shade of tone and style, from the light, amusing touch of White to the solemn or impassioned words of Davis or Baruch.

In fact, the essay in its various forms represents virtually every aspect of *rhetoric*—the term that in modern usage describes the whole art of prose writing. This is why the study of the essay is usually the basis of the first-year composition course. It is also why the selections in this text are arranged according to the four traditional rhetorical patterns or forms of discourse: Narration, Description, Exposition, and Argument and Persuasion. (In addition, we have included two nontraditional categories: Observing and Reporting, and Profiles. While these are not basic forms of discourse, they are forms of the essay commonly encountered by students in both reading and writing.) The essays chosen for each category emphasize a basic rhetorical pattern, but of course most of them employ other forms of development or arrangement as well.

Because you may not be reading the essays in the order in which they appear in the text, it is a good idea to begin this book by reading the explanatory headnotes for each of the major rhetorical forms. (Pay special attention to the discussion of *thesis*. Unlike the other divisions in the book, it represents neither a mode of discourse nor a rhetorical device. Rather, it is the central idea that every reader and writer must find or develop in every essay.) This preliminary study will help you to a general understanding of the basic forms of the essay and its fundamental patterns of organization before you attempt a thorough study of any single rhetorical pattern or device.

Narration

The mode of discourse called narration follows a pattern we are all familiar with from our earliest childhood—the pattern of storytelling, in which events are arranged in chronological sequence, in their order in time. As you will see in this section, *narration may deal not only with the imaginative events of story* (“Once upon a time . . .”), but with the subjective impressions of personal experience (“When I was in my teens”) and the factual events of history as well (“It all began with Christopher Columbus”).

The storytelling impulse itself, however, is the major force behind all narrative: readers want to know how things happened and what happened next; the writer’s task is to make the series of events both clear and interesting. All four essays in this section are primarily narrative—that is, their main function is to tell a story. Elsewhere, however, you will see narration employed as a secondary technique, to support other types of discourse, primarily exposition or persuasion.

There is, of course, usually a point, a special meaning that gives coherence to every narrative. If there were not, the sequence of events would be simply a list (9:00, arrive at castle; 10:00, meet Princess; 10:01, fall in love with Princess; 11:00, slay dragon). In narration this point or main idea is usually shown—implied through dialogue or action—rather than expressed directly in a thesis statement. (One exception is the fable. For example, in Aesop’s “The Hare and the Tortoise,” the moral, “*slow but steady wins the race*,” is not simply a neat way to end a suspenseful tale, but a direct statement of the theme, the *meaning* of the narrative.)

In general the meaning behind the events determines the emphasis and pace of a narrative; thus, the writer need not treat every portion in the same way. Anderson, for example, summarizes a number of incidents in a sentence or two, but devotes several paragraphs to the central episode; White telescopes the main event into a single paragraph, which is nevertheless effective because it has been so skillfully anticipated. Brown, whose narrative does not focus on any single event, reveals a more regular, chronologically balanced pattern of narration, though he, too, treats some incidents expansively and summarizes others. Unlike the others, Kingston’s

narrative does not follow chronological sequence, but moves impressionistically backward and forward in time according to what she *feels* is most important.

Without this meaningful variation, a narrative would be dull, like the novel Mark Twain once scornfully criticized as merely “one damn thing after another.”

Afternoon of an American Boy

E. B. WHITE

E. B. White is one of America's best-known writers. An essayist, poet, and storyteller, he has written for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. He is also the author of the well-known children's books *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Now a full-time resident of Maine, he tends his garden, raises animals, and continues writing. This essay is a narrative describing his first date, which, though painful at the time, came to assume a new meaning.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which plays an important role in this selection, was the congressional committee charged with investigating communist infiltration in both government and the arts—especially in the movie industry—and membership in supposedly subversive organizations. Often its investigations were conducted without sufficient evidence. J. Parnell Thomas's committee, described here in an imaginary "guilt sequence," was the forerunner of the infamous and more powerful McCarthy Senate Committee of the early 1950s.

- 1 When I was in my teens, I lived in Mount Vernon, in the same block with J. Parnell Thomas, who grew up to become chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. I lived on the corner of Summit and East Sidney, at No. 101 Summit Avenue, and Parnell lived four or five doors north of us on the same side of the avenue, in the house the Diefendorfs used to live in.
- 2 Parnell was not a playmate of mine, as he was a few years older, but I used to greet him as he walked by our house on his way to and from the depot. He was a good-looking young man, rather quiet and shy. Seeing him, I would call "Hello, Parnell!" and he would smile and say "Hello, Elwyn!" and walk on. Once I remember dashing out of our yard on roller skates and executing a rink turn in front of Parnell, to show off, and he said, "Well! Quite an artist, aren't you?" I remember the words. I was delighted at praise from an older man and sped away along the flagstone sidewalk, dodging the cracks I knew so well.
- 3 The thing that made Parnell a special man in my eyes in those days was not his handsome appearance and friendly manner but his sister. Her name was Eileen. She was my age and she was a quiet, nice-looking girl. She never came over to my yard to play, and I never went over there, and, considering that we lived so near each other, we were remarkably uncommunicative; nevertheless, she was the girl I singled out, at one point, to be of special interest to me. Being of special interest to me involved practically nothing on

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