

ESSAY-WRITING

The word Essay is defined in "The Concise Oxford Dictionary" as "a literary composition (usually prose and short) on any subject." Properly speaking, it is a written composition giving expression to one's own personal ideas or opinions on some topic ; but the term usually covers also any written composition, whether it expresses personal opinions, or gives information on any given subject, or details of a narrative or description.

In fact the word "Essay" is somewhat loosely applied to a variety of compositions, from Bacon's compressed "Essays" on the one hand, to those so called "Essays" of Macaulay, some of which are lengthy articles, almost as big as small books, on the other.

[Addison's Essays are good models for Indian students, because of their brevity and simple directness of style.]

So far as we are concerned here, an essay is an exercise in composition ; and it is well to remember that the word *essay* means, literally, an *attempt*. (Compare the verb "to essay", with the accent on the second syllable, meaning to attempt or try.) The essays you write at

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school are trial exercises or "attempts" to express your thoughts in good English. (School essays of this kind are sometimes called "themes," from the fact that such an essay is a composition written upon a given theme, or subject).

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD SCHOOL ESSAY

1. *Unity.* An essay must be a *unity*, developing one theme with a definite purpose. The subject must be clearly defined in the mind and kept in view throughout. Nothing that is not relevant to it should be admitted to the essay. At the same time, the subject may be treated in a variety of ways and from different points of view.

2. *Order.* The essay should follow a certain ordered line of thought and come to a definite conclusion. It should not consist of haphazard reflections put down anyhow. There should be not only unity of subject but also unity of treatment. Hence the necessity for thinking out a line of thought before beginning to write.

3. *Brevity.* School essays should not be long. The limit should be about three hundred words ; though, of course, there can be no strict rule as to length, which will depend a good deal on the nature of the subject. But an essay should be a brief exercise, concisely expressed.

4. *Style.* In friendly letters, the style should be conversational—easy, natural and familiar ; and in writing such letters we may use colloquial terms which would be out of place in a book. But the style of an essay must be more dignified and literary. Slang, colloquial terms and free and easy constructions are not proper in an essay. At the same time it is a mistake to attempt any flights of fine writing. The language and sentence construction should be simple, direct and natural. The secret of clear writing is clear thinking. "If you clearly understand all about your matter, you will never want thoughts, and thoughts instantly become words." This was said by Cobbett, a writer whose style is a model of clearness, simplicity and directness.

5. *The Personal Touch.* An essay should reveal the personal feelings and opinions of the writer. It should have his individuality in it. Strictly speaking, as has been already said, an essay is a written composition giving expression to one's personal ideas or opinions on a subject ; and this personal touch should not be lost, or the essay will be colourless and devoid of individuality. So do not be afraid to express in your essays your own views, and do not be content with repeating the opinions of others. Let there be a note of sincerity in all that you write.

To sum up :—An essay must be a *unity*, treating in an *orderly manner* of one subject ; it should be *concisely written* and *not too long*, and the style should be *simple, direct and clear* ; and it should have an individuality, or show the *personal touch* of the writer.

Three features are necessary in a good essay—suitable subject-matter, proper arrangement, and adequate power of expression. Where all these three are present, the essay will be a success.

Essays may be classified as Narrative Essays, Descriptive Essays, Expository Essays, Reflective Essays and Imaginative Essays. This classification is useful, so long as it is remembered that these classes are not mutually exclusive, and that some essays may partake of the peculiarities of more than one class. For example, a narrative essay may contain a good deal of description; and essays of all classes should be more or less reflective, for the original idea of this form of composition is an expression of the writer's own feelings and opinions about a given subject. For this reason, let us begin with—

1. *Reflective Essays*.—A reflection is a thought on some subject—on an idea arising in the mind. So a reflective essay consists of reflections or thoughts on some topic, which is generally of an abstract nature; for example; (a) *habits, qualities, etc.*, such as truthfulness, thrift, temperance, cowardice, heroism, patriotism, industry, etc., (b) *social, political and domestic topics*, such as riches and poverty, caste, democracy, liberty, government, family life, education, marriage, business, etc., (c) *philosophical subjects*, such as right and wrong, reality, consciousness, the meaning of the universe, etc.; or (d) *religious and theological topics*.

In treating such themes, you should try (i) to explain, for example, the importance or advantages of possessing good habits and qualities, and the risks and disadvantages of lacking them; and quote stories, fables, or historical or literary references in support of your statements; (ii) discuss the importance of social institutions etc.; (iii) expound and discuss philosophical and theological theories. You should reason and support your statements with arguments and facts.

2. *Narrative Essays*.—A narrative essay consists mainly in the narration of some event, or series of events. I say “mainly” because a narrative essay must not be confused with a short story or bits of history. The narrative it relates should be treated as a subject for thought and comment, and so the essay should be more or less reflective. Narrative essays may treat of—(a) *historical stories or legends* (e.g., the reign of Akbar, the story of Rama and Sita); (b) *biographies* (e.g., life of Shivajee, or of Babar); (c) *incidents* (e.g., a street quarrel, a festival, a marriage); (d) *an accident or natural disaster* (e.g., a flood, a fire, a ship-wreck, an earthquake); (e) *a journey or voyage*; (f) *a story* (real or imaginary).

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3. *Descriptive Essays*.—A descriptive essay consists of a description of some place or thing; e.g., (a) *animals, plants, minerals* such as the elephant, the pipal tree, coal; (b) *towns, countries, buildings* (e.g., Mumbai, Italy, the Taj Mahal); (c) *aspects and phenomena*.

nomena of nature (such as volcanoes, the monsoon, sunlight, organic life); and (d) *manufactured articles* (such as motor-cars, steam-engines, silk, paper, etc.).

4. *Expository Essays*.—An expository (or explanatory) essay consists of an exposition or explanation of some subject ; e.g. : (a) *institutional, industries, occupations* (e.g., parliament, the press, silk-weaving, farming, etc.); (b) *scientific topics* (such as gravitation, evolution, astronomy, etc.) ; (c) *literary topics* (such as the nature of poetry, prose styles, the genius of Shakespeare, the novels of Scott, history of fiction, etc.).

5. *Imaginative Essays*.—Essays on subjects such as the feelings and experiences of the sailor wrecked on a desert island may be called imaginative Essays. In such the writer is called to place himself in imagination in a position of which he has had no actual experience. Such subjects as "If I were a king," or "The autobiography of a horse," would call for imaginative essays.

HINTS ON ESSAY-WRITING

1. *General Preparation*.—One of the chief difficulties young people feel in essay-writing is lack of matter. They do not easily find anything to say about a subject. This is natural, because their experience and general reading are limited. But it may be remedied by reading, and by training the power of observation.

(a) *Reading*.—Bacon said, "Reading maketh a full man"; that is a person who reads much and widely stores his mind with a large variety of facts, thoughts, illustrations and general information. If you want to write good essays you must acquire a love of reading—not simply reading stories for amusement, but reading good books of history, travel, biography and science. Fill your mind with fine thoughts and accurate information. By so doing you will become "a full man", and "a full man" can always find plenty to say on most subjects.

(b) *Observation*.—But all knowledge does not come from books. We may learn much from the life around us—what we see and hear and observe for ourselves. Keep eyes and ears open, and learn from your own experience. Practise writing short descriptions of what you see in everyday life—the people you meet, bits of scenery that strike you, buildings, street scenes, trees and flowers, hills and valleys, the habits of animals and birds. Don't be content with reading other people's description of such things, but see them for yourself. It is surprising what a lot may be learnt from personal observation.

(c) *Conversation*.—Books are written by men and women ; and if we can learn from the books they write, we can learn also from the words they say. Listen to people's conversation ; get them to talk to you about the things they know, and discuss subjects that interest you, with your friends. In this way, also, you may learn much.

A writer reads, observes, and gets people to talk ; and in these ways he is always enriching his mind with ideas and knowledge.

2. *Special Preparation.*—Now we come to the special preparation needed for writing an essay on some particular subject ; and the first thing we must do is to define the subject.

(a) *Defining the Subject.*—It is very important that you should have a clear and accurate conception of the subject of the essay before you attempt to write on it—what exactly it is and (equally important) what it is not. Some subjects are so simple that you can scarcely make a mistake about them ; but some want looking into to define them exactly. For example, "The Uses of Computers". The subject is not how computers work. Nor is it the history of computers. Yet some students, carelessly reading the subject, might easily take up a large part of their essay with such topics. In a short school-essay there is no room for irrelevant matter. You have to come to the point at once, and start away with the subject. The subject in this case is the uses of computers in offices, in industries, in aircraft, in spacecraft, etc. It is, therefore, very necessary that you should define the subject clearly in your own mind, or you may waste much time and paper in writing on more or less irrelevant matters.

(b) *Collecting materials*—(i) *Reading up the Subject*—When you have got a clear idea of your subject, the next step will be to think of what you can say about it. Some subjects are so simple that a little reflection should supply you with sufficient material for a short essay ; but for others, special information will be needed for which you may have to do some special reading. For instance, if you have to write about some historical subjects, or give a description of some country you have seen, you will have to get hold of some book and read the subject up. But in any case, you have to *collect materials* for your essay before you can write it. In schools, class-discussions on the subject, under the guidance of the teacher, are very helpful in this stage of special preparation. In any case, do not attempt to write the essay before you have given some time to thinking over what you can say on the subject. The common habit of beginning to write down the first thing that comes into one's head, without knowing what is to come next, is fatal to good essay-writing.

(ii) *Collection*—As you think over the subject, ideas, facts, and illustrations will pass through your mind. But if you don't catch them as they come, you may forget them just when you want them. So, as you catch birds and put them in a cage, catch and cage these fleeting thoughts by jotting them down on a piece of paper just as they come to your head, without troubling yourself at this stage about their order or suitability. You can examine the birds thus caught at your lei-

WRITING THE ESSAY

1. *Paragraphs.*—Every essay should be divided into paragraphs, and each heading should have at least one paragraph to itself. An essay not thus paragraphed looks unattractive, and is not easy to read.

[A paragraph is a group of related sentences that develop a single point. In constructing a paragraph these principles should be kept in view :—(i) *Unity*. The paragraph must treat of one subject only. (ii) *Variety*. Paragraphs should not all be of the same length or of the same monotonous structure. (iii) *Logical sequence of thought*. (iv) *Topical*

sentence. The most important sentences of a paragraph are the first and the last. In many paragraphs the first sentence states the subject, and is called the *topical sentence* (or key-sentence). The concluding sentence may sum up effectively what has been said in the paragraph.]

2. *Structure of an Essay*.—We may divide an essay into three parts—the Introduction, the Body of the Essay, and the Conclusion.

(a) *The Introduction*.—This, in a short essay, must be very brief. It would be absurd to have the porch bigger than the building itself. It may be simply a sentence, or a very short paragraph. But it should always be arresting and pertinent to the subject. The introduction may consist of a definition or a quotation, proverb, very brief story, or general remark, leading up to the subject.

(b) *The Body of the Essay*. This is really the essay itself—the house to which the introduction is the front door, and the conclusion the back door, or exit.

In arranging the body of the essay *observe proportion*; that is, let each part have due weight given to it. If the subject is "The good and bad influence of Newspapers," do not devote three-quarters of the essay to good influences and so leave only a quarter for the bad. Closely follow your full outline throughout.

The *paragraphs* should be well constructed and should be related to one another according to the direction of your outline; and, as far as possible, the connection between one and another should be shown. Avoid "padding" and keep to the point.

Take pains in selecting *words* and *phrases* which exactly express the ideas which you have in mind; and frame your *sentences* so that they are quite clear and forceful.

Avoid the use of unnecessary words. In revising your essay, look out for useless repetitions and redundant expressions, and strike them out.

Match the words to the sense, and adapt the style to the subject-matter. Do not write frivolously on a serious subject, or ponderously on a light and humorous subject.

(c) *The Conclusion*.—As the introduction should arouse interest, the conclusion should satisfy it. An effective and satisfying end to an essay is as important as an arresting beginning. An abrupt or feeble ending may spoil the whole effect of the essay. A good conclusion may consist of:—(a) a summing up of the arguments of the essay; (b) final conclusion drawn from the subject-matter; (c) a suitable quotation; (d) a sentence that strikingly expresses the main point you want to drive home.

3. Finally, a few words about your *Style in Writing*.—To acquire simple, direct and forceful style in writing calls for constant practice. It does not come "by nature." As the poet Pope says:—

"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance;
As those move easiest who have learned to dance."

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The secret of clear writing is clear thinking. So, be perfectly clear about what you want to say, and then *say it*—as directly, as simply, as concisely as possible. *Be direct* : use short sentences in preference to long and involved periods. *Be simple* : don't attempt any oratory or flowery language but use simple words and constructions and avoid elaborate and superfluous words ; say what you want to say as tersely as is consistent with making your meaning clear. Never use two words where one (the *right* one) will do. *Be natural* : don't try to imitate any author's style, however eloquent, but *be yourself*.

SUMMARY OF METHOD OF PROCEDURE

To sum up:—

1. Clearly define your subject in your own mind.
2. Think over it, until ideas about it come into your mind, and jot the points down on paper as they occur to you—numbering them.
3. Classify these points in groups under suitable headings, rejecting any that are unsuitable.
4. Arrange these headings in a bare outline.
5. Fill in the outline, making a full outline.
6. Now begin to write the essay, dividing it into paragraphs.
7. The essay should consist of introduction, body and conclusion.
 - (a) Make the introduction arresting.
 - (b) Keep the parts of the body of the essay in proper proportion; and take pains in choosing words, constructing sentences and building up paragraphs.
 - (c) Make the conclusion effective and satisfying.
8. Write in a simple, concise, clear, direct and natural style.