

## Rudiments of Essay Writing

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### Abstract

Today, we find that the command of the written word is in increasing demand in the business world, both as a key to a job and success in it., “Persons who hate to write or are afraid to do it, may endeavour to get by with talking instead. But sometimes, the necessity to write can no longer be avoided. The moral is simple:

Learn to write as crisply, clearly and effectively as you can. You’ll never regret it.”

This paper stresses on the rudiments of essay writing skills – the procedure of composing is more than just a method of communicating; it is a way of putting forth one’s opinions. Writing a composition sharpens one’s observation, expands vocabulary and also improves one’s thinking. The writer, the purpose of writing and the reader are the three essentials of composition. The tools and steps of writing a composition will enable teachers to bring out the best in the students. Thus the students, teachers and all educationists will work for the betterment of themselves and for the nation at large.

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**It took me fifteen years to discover I had no talent for writing, but I couldn’t give it up because by that time I was too famous.**

**Robert Benchely**

Today, we find that the command of the written word is in increasing demand in the business world, both as a key to a job and success in it. The author Jefferson D. Bates (1985) in his book, ‘Writing with Precision’ – has rightly stated that, “Persons who hate to write or are afraid to do it, may endeavour to get by with talking instead. But sometimes, the necessity to write can no longer be avoided. The moral is simple:

Learn to write as crisply, clearly and effectively as you can. You’ll never regret it.”

The researcher has had a few years experience of teaching English in different schools. She has observed that composition writing is the most neglected. For the students it is an extremely tedious job. They are neither interested nor motivated. As a result, the quality of their composition is pathetic. Keeping these observations in mind the researcher thought of helping the students to perform better in writing. Hence at the M.Ed. level, the researcher conducted a short exploratory research on Essay Writing Skills and found that training in the art of essay writing training greatly improved students’ essay writing skills.

At present, the researcher is a lecturer in a B.Ed. College. She has had the opportunity to interact with students, teacher trainees and school teachers. Teachers often complain and talk about the poor performance of the students in essay writing. They feel it is a sheer waste of time, as the students are not interested. Even if they are guided, they do not rise

to the expectations of the teachers. At times students copy from essay books. This is the plight in our schools.

The researcher feels the need of improving the quality of writing English Compositions through concerted training efforts and through drill and practice. Hence, the topic of research involving the development of a programme for enhancing the writing skills of students in English Composition seems to be a must.

### **Meaning of Essay**

An essay – is a typically short piece of writing, from an author’s personal point of view. Essays are non-fiction but often subjective; while expository, they can also include narrative. Essays can be literary criticism, political manifestos and learned arguments, observations of daily life, recollections and reflections of the author.

The definition of an essay is vague, overlapping with those of an article and a short story. 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’]. It is very difficult to define the genre into which essays fall.

The following remarks by Aldous Huxley, a leading essayist, may help: “Like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about nothing. By tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay. Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, and the concrete particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay’s three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. The most richly satisfying essays are those which 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.” [Collected Essays, “Preface”].

The word essay derives from the French infinitive “essayer,” the meaning “to try” or “to attempt.” In English, “essay” first meant “a trial” or “an attempt”, and this is still an alternative meaning. The first author to describe his works as essays was the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne [1533-1592]; he used the term to characterize these as ‘attempts’ to put his thoughts adequately into writing. Inspired in particular by the works of Plutarch, Montaigne began to compose his essays in 1572; the first edition, entitled “Essais” was published in two volumes in 1580. For the rest of his life he continued revising previously published essays and composing new ones.

Francis Bacon’s essays, published in book form in 1597, 1612 and 1625, were the first works in English that described themselves as essays. Ben Jonson first used the word “essayist” in English in 1609, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

In recent times, essays have become a major part of a formal education. Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills, and essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants. Essays are used to judge the mastery

and comprehension of material. Students are asked to explain, comment on, or assess a topic of study in the form of an essay. [Wikipedia, 2001]

### **Essay Writing Skill**

Essay writing occupies a unique place in the teaching of English; it helps one to master the mechanics of writing. The more one handles it, the more efficient one becomes. More composition will definitely result in better composition. The compositions written at school are trial exercises or attempts to express one's thoughts to the best of one's ability in a particular language. The written composition remains at the heart of the education system. It is a challenging intellectual exercise for the exploration of ideas and hence cannot be underestimated. Due importance should be given to written composition in schools. Students should be able to write compositions, pertaining to different topics within the range of their experience and hence an important concern of the new English syllabus is to help the learner in writing compositions.

Composition is a term we all know. Literally, it means "to place together." It has this meaning in music, in art, in architecture, and in language use. In all four of these areas the literal meaning of composition extends to "place together for a purpose" and "place together in such a way that you affect others." Composition is one of the main aims of the organized structure of our language. Rhetoric is the personal use of that structure for a purpose. The skills of composition and rhetoric, observed first in reading and then applied, form a master key to effective writing. This is a personal act. No writer can pretend that it is not. Writing is a pact between writer and reader. Revision is also a pact between writer and reader, whether or not the teacher is the ultimate reader. [Lavin et al. 1965, p. iv]

### **Procedure of Composing**

The method of writing an essay is a very difficult task. It is so complex that no one has yet been able to explain exactly what all the ingredients of that process are. One idea seems to be included in every attempt to define the process of composition, however. It is that the procedure of writing a composition is more than just a method of communicating; it is a way of putting forth one's opinions. When the mind is full of thoughts and ideas and one tries to systematize it particularly when one makes an attempt to write in a logical manner, one is engaged in the process of composition.

### **Significance of Composition**

#### **Sharpens Observation**

Suppose one wanted to describe a sunset to a friend who had never been west. What skills would one need? First of all, one would have to observe the sunset more carefully than ever before. One would also have to think, while one looked closely at it. Exactly what colours or shades of colour does one see? Is one shade of red like the colour of a ruby or is it crimson red? Do some of the clouds fan out like the tail of a running horse? Perhaps this is the first time one has really seen a sunset, although one has been watching the sunset for a life time.

### **Expands Vocabulary**

Composing also develops vocabulary. Maybe one's old collection of words isn't good enough to communicate a new experience. If one uses vague or imprecise language, one's friend will not possibly see the sunset as it is described. Hence one should be able to build up new vocabulary in order to convey the right information.

### **Improves Thinking**

Writing enhances one's thinking, as well as the ability to see new relationships. If one's friend knows what a horse's tail looks like, one could use the picture as a comparison to give the friend a clear picture of the shape and colours of the clouds. But one would have to make the comparisons for him. To do so, one would have to observe closely, look for resemblances, and think about effective connections.

### **Three Essentials of Composition – the Writer, the Purpose for Writing and the Reader**

One cannot write in a vacuum. Whenever one writes, one must have a reason for writing. It may be to express thanks for a gift, to wish good health to a friend, to write an apology, to promote a good cause. Whatever the purpose, it immediately specifies a particular reader: an aunt, a friend or may be a person in authority. As one begins to compose, one also has a stock of ideas. Occasionally, when one "must" write, one may have trouble with ideas. But whenever one wants to write, the ideas come. Regardless of the type of writing that is being done, the composition situation always includes three elements that require careful attention:

1. The writer – one's beliefs, experiences, feelings and the entire knowledge one has acquired to date.
2. The problem or purpose of writing.
3. The reader's attitudes, personality, needs and knowledge.

### **The Writer**

One's best writing must be based on one's own experiences or feelings or knowledge. Novelist Mark Twain lived along the Mississippi and heard the dialects he used in Huckleberry Finn. Anne Frank recorded in her diary the terror and misery she felt, as her family hid from the Nazis. [Lavin et al. 1965, pp. 219-220]

### **The Purpose of Writing**

How many purposes can one think of for writing? One situation may give many purposes for writing, for example for a Student Election Campaign one may write slogans, make announcements, and put up bulletins and posters. One may compose a nomination acceptance speech, then a campaign speech and finally an acceptance speech.

After the election, one would thank the supporters, sympathize with losers, congratulate other winners and thank a teacher who advised on a rewrite of the speech. One would speak informally to each person orally, but one knows that notes and letters are more

striking than quick thanks. In each case one has a different purpose for communication, because speeches, thank-you letters and notes have different purposes, one also has to adjust the writing to each relationship. Always remember that good writing is done to accomplish a particular purpose and the writer must design one's writing to realize that purpose. If one ever has difficulty with writing, go back to the reason for writing. Then make the writing suitable to that topic. There are four rather common purposes for writing: to commune an idea, to state an emotion, to accumulate information, or to get someone to do something.

### **The Reader**

One must plan one's writing not only to achieve one's purpose, but also to suit the audience. Sometimes one may have to approach an audience opposed to the main idea, one may have to "sneak up on it." One may decide to change the paper or speech. Or one may use a particular simile or metaphor because one knows it will interest the reader. Would one give directions for getting to the post office in the same way to a resident of one's town as one would to a tourist or a foreigner? Hence it is necessary that one must select and organize the material carefully so that it suits the feelings and expectations of the reader. Just as one speaks to one's family in one way and to strangers in another way, so one must write in a variety of ways for a variety of readers. [Lavin et al. 1965, pp. 223-224]

### **Steps in Composition**

All compositions, short or long, involve a series of steps. These steps are known as the composing process. By taking these steps one at a time one can usually produce a good composition. Of course, the time and effort one spends on each step depends on the length of the assignment and the purpose.

West. W. William has given nine steps in the Composing Process.

- Step One : Build up one's thought process for writing.
- Step Two : Become aware of opportunities to communicate.
- Step Three : Decide the precise reason for writing.
- Step Four : Amass ideas and opinions.
- Step Five : Assimilate the collected material.
- Step Six : Organize the material so that it accomplishes the purpose, suits the audience and fits one's own personality.
- Step Seven : Write the rough draft.
- Step Eight : Revise.
- Step Nine : Check the paper for errors.

### **Step one: Build up one's thought process for writing**

Every minute one increases the thought process for writing. Night and day the senses stack up new stores of impressions and images. In one's many subjects – mathematics, history, and science – one accumulates ideas very rapidly. In one's leisure moments too – reading magazines and newspapers, watching television and movies – one accumulates ideas. Every day one thinks more precisely, reasons more sensibly, draws conclusions more competently and generalizes more authentically. One never stops growing in skills and ideas. In one sense, one becomes a new person every day, so every day one has new ideas to communicate. The first step in the writing process is to develop one's thought process continually, persistently, willfully and to learn how to call on it quickly and effectively.

### **Step Two: Become conscious of opportunities to communicate**

Perhaps one has met a “loner.” “Oh, don't bother about him,” one's friends may have said. “He doesn't like people: he wants to be alone.” May be. But more often than that it is not that the “loner” actually wants friends. He probably longs for recognition and communication. He simply hasn't learned when to communicate and how.

One would have real problems trying to live a whole day without saying or writing a single word. One may write out history assignments; take notes for science; jot down call numbers in the library; enter a supermarket contest. In the next six years, one will express ideas, resentments, beliefs, attitudes and opinions thousand times. So one should become conscious of opportunities to communicate.

### **Step Three: Decide the precise reason for writing**

After interviewing and reporting about a famous personality, one may be asked to write about him or her. But how can one narrow and focus the details of that person's life in just a five minute report? One must determine the specific purpose and let the purpose help one to select the details. Suppose one has two purposes for writing on this subject: a school assignment and a personal interest. This personal interest focuses one's report on a specific topic and narrows that topic to manageable limits. One of the most important steps in composing - determining your specific purpose, becomes almost automatic if one has a strong interest and a desire to communicate.

### **Step Four: Amass ideas and opinions**

The library is one's first source of information as one seeks to increase one's knowledge, to confirm certain ideas, and to correct misinformation. One knows how to use the encyclopedia for an overview only. One knows how to locate current articles. One knows how to use the card catalogue. One also knows how to look at different reference books. It is a known fact that one source leads to another, and one answer sparks another question. For many topics one's source of information may be a friend, a parent, a teacher, or an acquaintance with special background. One could look at many more details from different angles and make a thorough study of a particular topic but eventually, one forms opinions and expresses them in one's own words.

### **Step Five: Assimilate the collected material**

If one has researched the subject well, one will have pages full of notes and a head full of ideas. But the details will not be in order. The material must be put in a systematic order. Once one has the material, talk about it to different people. Experiment with different patterns. This is the really creative part of composing, because as you mull over and assess the facts that are gathered, one may relate them as no one else ever has. Then, one is the creator. It should not be necessary to mention that a creator does not copy.

The assimilating process is one of the most important and difficult in composing. If one does a short cut in the process by copying out paragraphs from the sources, one is really cheating oneself of the chance to create and grow. Even if a few changes are made in the use of the vocabulary, the organization never becomes one's own: because without one's own ideas on the material, nothing will be learnt, for the essentials will fade away and one's work will be in vain. It is sheer integrity, not to present as one's own, such undigested chunks of material which are not yours. And it is simple good sense not to waste the reader's time with a clutter of disorganized ideas. To communicate with an audience, one must know more than the audience about the subject, and one must digest and reshape the information according to one's personality.

### **Step Six: Organize the material so that it accomplishes the purpose, suits the audience and fits one's personality**

It would be appalling to pour out all one's ideas about a particular topic. Therefore the collected material should be arranged in a coherent manner in relation to the main idea and suggestions could be made in the organization of the material.

### **Step Seven: Write the first draft**

One's first draft is the information about the topic and what one thinks about it. One wants to scrutinize what one knows about the subject by putting it on paper. The best way is to write the whole composition so that one's ideas have a kind of natural relationship. One could fill in all the particulars, examples and descriptions, as one keeps writing. It is easier to omit later.

### **Step Eight: Revise**

In the heat of composing, one may have created some ideas which seemed related and good, but which, at a second look, don't seem to make sense. Often one may find that the order of the sentences or certain ideas may not fit in. This happens more easily after a day or two between writing and revising. On the first draft, check the overall organization, the logical sequence of the sentences, and finally evaluate the word choice.

### **Step Nine: Check the paper for errors in the written work**

Errors in the written work like spelling and punctuation may seriously damage the value of one's work. Such mistakes could mean that one doesn't respect the reader and that one hasn't worked carefully and sincerely on a worthwhile subject. Don't let hard work be wasted because of such simple errors. Check the written material. Build good habits in minor matters. See that the written work is neat and correct. It will help convince one's reader that what one is saying is correct. [McCabe et al. 1968, pp. 225-230]

## Tools of Composition

If one has to create a meaningful composition, one must understand more than just what should be done. One must know something about how to do it. Just as there are tools for other crafts, so there are the following tools for the proper craft of composition.

- The Sentence
- Parts of Speech
- Vocabulary
- Paragraphs enrolment
- Punctuation
- Capitalization
- Spelling
- Agreement
- Dictionary

The **Sentence**: When we speak or write we use words. A sentence is a group of words which makes complete sense. All sentences have two necessary parts. They are the subject and the predicate. We must have a subject to speak about and we must say or predicate something about that subject. [Peechaatt, 2000, p. 4]

**Parts of Speech**: Words are divided into different kinds or classes according to the purpose for which they are used. The different kinds of words are called Parts of Speech. They are eight in number :-

- |                 |                  |                 |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Noun.        | 2. Pronoun.      | 3. Adjective.   |
| 4. Verb.        | 5. Adverb.       | 6. Preposition. |
| 7. Conjunction. | 8. Interjection. |                 |

[Nesfield, 2008, p. 4]

A **Noun** is a name word. It names an object, person, place, emotion or idea.

A **Pronoun** substitutes for a noun. It designates a person, place, or thing without calling it by name. [McCabe et al. 1968, pp. 260-261]

An **Adjective** is a word used to add something to the meaning of a noun.[Wren and Martin, 2006, p. 3]

A **Verb** states what is happening, what the action is. It usually tells you either what the subject is doing, or what the condition is in the sentence. The form of the verb tells you about the time (past, present, future) of the action. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 261]

An **Adverb** is a word that modifies a Verb, an Adjective or another Adverb. [Peechaatt, 2000, p. 6]



A **Preposition** is a word used with a noun or a pronoun to show how the person or thing denoted by the noun or pronoun stands in relation to something. [Wren and Martin, 2006, p. 3]

A **Conjunction** is a joining word. It joins words and phrases to one another, one clause to another clause, or one sentence to another sentence.

[Nesfield, 2008, p. 5]

An **Interjection** is an exclamation or sound indicating an emotion or feeling, such as “wow”, “oh” and “ouch”. There is usually no grammatical connection between an interjection and the words it stands with. The interjection is followed by an exclamation mark. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 262]

**Vocabulary:** The words one uses are really important to one’s writing. If the words are not adequate or apt, the ideas will not be understood or appreciated. As ideas become more complex, vocabulary must grow to accommodate them. There are various sources that one can avail of to learn new words.

Vocabulary lists are probably the most common source for new words. It is not enough to memorize them for a test, but one should make a special effort to use the words that are learnt.

New experiences such as travelling, trips to museums, group activities such as sports or clubs can give one new words. Reading different kinds of literature will give one new words.

Many words can be formed from the same base or root. Their meanings are changed somewhat by prefixes and suffixes. Some words are in the same word family. Knowing the meaning of any one of these words can lead one to understand the others. Hence it is very important for one to use the word which expresses the exact meaning. It is also important to use the appropriate level of vocabulary. The simple word is sometimes better than the fancy one. [McCabe et al. 1968, pp. 262-263]

**Paragraphs:** Paragraphs may vary in length from a single sentence to a page or more, depending upon their purpose. Each paragraph should cover a distinct stage in the development of one’s composition.

One should start a new paragraph when one is sure that no supplementary statements are needed to support and explain the topic of that paragraph. Most paragraphs should begin with a topic sentence that states one’s main idea.

Whatever our conception of a paragraph might be, we tend to forget sometimes that a paragraph is often nothing more than a visual device used to break up a solid block of words on a page. [McCabe et al. 1968, pp. 264]

**Punctuation:** Punctuation is the art of signifying with greater clarity by full stops or points, the meaning of sentences and the pauses to be made in reading and writing. Punctuation marks are signals that serve three purposes: they mark off

units of expression, they indicate patterns of intonation, and they help to clarify meaning. You should always have a good reason to support your use of every mark of punctuation. [Kakkar, 2009, p. 276]

**Capitalization:** Capital letters are used to begin a sentence. Capitalize the first letter in the names of particular people, places, things, days of the week, months and special holidays, organizations, firms and institutions. The first word in a title and all other words in a title except short prepositions, conjunctions and articles should begin with a capital letter. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 271]

**Spelling:** Serious spelling problems are often related to reading problems. Occasional troublesome words, however, bother everyone. One should try to discover why one misspells words. If one is still confused about ie or ei check the rules for that. It is good to refer to a dictionary, since many dictionaries contain the basic spelling rules. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 272]

**Agreement:** A subject noun and the main predicate verb should agree or correspond in number. A pronoun should agree with its antecedent (the word to which it refers). A singular subject requires a singular verb. A plural subject requires a plural verb.

Always locate the subject before one can write the verb. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 274]

**Dictionary:** A dictionary is an extremely valuable tool. The different sections of the dictionary give a lot of information; one should check the table of contents of a dictionary and try to be well versed with its contents so that one is able to use it well. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 275]

**Conclusion:** One must be able to use such tools if one has to make one's ideas acceptable to the audience. Creating and organizing ideas demands initiative, power of mind and considerable labor but most readers and powerful groups frequently judge the ideas on the basis of one's subject-verb agreement or on some other mechanical item. Therefore it is very necessary that one should master the tools of composition.

Remember that what is considered correct varies with the situation. Moreover, the range of what is acceptable is narrower in written English than it is in spoken English. Because people emphasize "correctness" in writing more than they do in speaking, some speakers must learn a whole new "dialect" for writing. It's worth the effort. Appropriate usage, effective word choice, punctuation, spelling and an acceptable written form – these are the tools of composition. [McCabe et al. 1968, p. 255]

Unfortunately composition writing is the most neglected subject. For the students it is an extremely tedious job. They are neither interested nor motivated. Students have not been guided in this art they are reluctant to compose essays and they feel they are incompetent. As a result the quality of their composition is pathetic. The number of students is too large in each class and the teachers find it impossible to guide the students individually. Corrections are done haphazardly.

Although writing is more difficult as compared to oral communication a person can acquire the art of writing through proper training and adequate practice. Since linguistic skills and experience play an important part in composition writing teachers play a very important role in enabling the students to write well. Writing holds a significant place in all walks of life. Hence all those involved in the field of education could cater to the needs of the students.

In conclusion I would like to quote Edward Bulwer- Lytton,

“Beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword”.

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