

The Art of the Essay (emagplus)

In this extract from EMC's The Literature Reader, Judy Simons explores the essay in the digital age – and provides some practical tips.

The critical essay does not conform to a single format which has to be rigidly adhered to. Like other literary genres, it is a flexible medium, a creative space in which academics, students, authors and general readers can share opinions. Literary experience is not constant but changes over time, and modern essays are generous in acknowledging the diversity of readers and their backgrounds. [...]

'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,' wrote George Orwell. 'When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting ink'. Orwell's *Inside the Whale* (1940) is both a classic example and a clear-sighted assessment of the art of writing critical essays. Wide-ranging in scope, beautifully structured, eschewing jargon or complicated terminology, it addresses its central subject head on. Its insistence on clarity and honesty is sound advice. Believe in what you are saying and do not try to dress up your ideas in highbrow language or rely on clichés.

There are many student guides on the market which provide a template for essay-writing. Websites such as essaydragon.com advise on the different stages of planning, structure and style while a number of university English departments publish online handbooks, which contain excellent practical pointers. There are also helpful YouTube videos, which take you through the composition process step by step. Yet because an essay should always be personal, there can be no absolute prototype. It is helpful to remember that the verb 'to essay' also means 'to try'. Your essay is a means of testing out ideas and polishing the techniques used to structure them.

My own top five tips are:

1. Know your subject. This relies on reading the text for yourself. At A Level you may feel that you have done this exhaustively. Yet, understanding is also about engaging with that text, the story it tells, and whether or not it has the power to speak directly to you as a reader, not just via your teacher. Literature that is set for A Level has usually been selected for its complexity and its potential to enlighten or affect your thinking. So, read and read again!
2. Conduct research. This does not necessarily involve seeking out obscure primary sources, although reading Keats's letters or Mary Shelley's 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* will offer considerable insights into their works. Rather it means reading around the text, understanding the contexts, including its literary history, and knowing what other commentators have said. Writing an essay is not an isolated activity. When you embark on it, you are entering an ongoing debate about literature, including with other students and with academic critics, whose ideas will help inspire your own. Remember that there is no 'correct' interpretation of a text and that it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with others' opinions. This is an important step in articulating your own position.

3. Answer the question. Most essay topics offer a deceptively simple proposition that demands a more subtle answer; for example, 'How far do you agree with the view that in *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan are victims rather than villains?'. Your essay should of course sustain a focus on these two characters and the scenes in which they appear. But the phrasing also invites a review of the primary value system embedded in the action, such as the human and social values of family, respect for order, filial obedience, love, charity and kingship. How do Shakespeare's dramatic methods, the juxtaposition with Gloucester's family or the positioning of Lear's speeches excoriating his daughters fit into the play's exploration of power? Is there really scope for ambiguity here? Don't forget that the best essays show evidence of an enquiring mind so you should not be shy about using question marks.
4. Structure your argument. Where an author can be equivocal or abstruse, the critic should be aiming to be clear and to untangle. Planning what you are going to say is essential. You may find that as you make notes on your reading, your proposition evolves in unexpected ways. The key is to organise your points into a logical format that supports your main case. This avoids your ideas spilling out onto the page in a random sequence that results in a disjointed or rambling piece of work. In a comparison piece, for example, you should aim to keep your paragraphs balanced alternately between the texts. Remember too to keep to the prescribed word count. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the more you write the more compelling your thesis will be.
5. Provide the evidence. Every claim you make must be underpinned by reference to the text or to relevant contexts. This is what makes your line of reasoning convincing. You need to be selective about the material you use, but if you have followed points 1-4 above, this should come naturally. Quotations from the text underpin and strengthen your interpretation. They can be used alongside any background information you have, for example about the cultural climate in which a writer's work was produced and the literary conventions of the day. Do not make the mistake of expecting characters in a Victorian novel to behave according to twenty-first century codes. It is the judicious use of reference to characters, scenes, authorial voice and imagery that will ensure your essay comes alive.

The Essay in the Age of Digital Technology

Digital technology has opened up a massive literary resource. It provides access for researchers to a range of materials which were once available only in a specialist library, such as copies of original manuscripts, out of print books and articles and biographical or historical information. It allows for new scholarship and literary discoveries that contribute to the essay's intervention in an evolving live debate.

Wikipedia, Google and other search engines can, however, tempt a reader towards simplistic analysis. A work of literature amounts to more than its surface narrative or plot synopsis. The internet is seductive because it appears to be comprehensive but its information is only as reliable as the person who posted it, and not all online views are equally valid. A critical perspective located via Google can range from incisive analysis by a learned scholar to a barely literate high school essay on *Jane Eyre*, such as some of those on the Bartleby website. Surfing the internet requires scrupulous discrimination on the part of the consumer, and it should never, ever be used as a sales outlet from which to purchase ready-made, supposedly bespoke coursework essays.

On the plus side, digital media have created a new approach to essay writing, with online magazines such as Electric Lit offering alternative publishing outlets. A whole blogosphere has emerged, populated by enthusiastic litbloggers, who exchange views, reviews and mini-essays. Blogging, where

typical posts are between 800 and 1500 words, affords a spirited, democratic space for literary discussion. As one commentator has noted, 'it does more than an essay because of its playfulness'. Yet its explosive growth has sparked controversy, with some, such as one chair of the Man Booker judges, claiming that blogging will only result in the 'detriment of literature'. Check out the regularly updated Literature Blogs UK Top 10 and make up your own mind.

Rarely do blogs follow the accepted conventions of critical essay writing. They are more casual, allowing for impromptu, open-ended observations that reaffirm a collective passion for literature. They can be quirky, playful or angry. They challenge the specialised rhetoric of the literati and what some see as an ivory tower complacency. Yet many academics, authors and teachers are themselves active bloggers, who find in the blog release from academic conventions and who know they can reach new audiences with a speed and directness that gives their views both currency and significance.

Readers live in the contemporary moment, and the power of present-day media shapes both textual meaning and production. Technology has opened up a world in which literary experience is not confined to the traditional print format. This is why the essay remains such a dynamic form, constantly renewing itself with each external stimulus. Do not give up on its rewards.

This extract is taken from **EMC's The Literature Reader**, a collection of articles by leading academics and writers on a wide range of topics from modernism and experimental literature to Shakespeare and the contemporary novel.

Article Written By: Judy Simons is a Research Fellow at the University of London and Emeritus Professor of English at de Montfort.

This article was first published in emagplus for emagazine 88, April 2020.

Print

© 2020 | English & Media Centre. All rights reserved. Website by **Studio 24**