

What is an Essay?

The only place where “success” comes before “work” is in the dictionary.

I start with this quote for the simple reason that some of what we need to know about essays is not particularly entertaining. It might even seem like work. Hang in there; it gets better.

Defining the Essay

M.H. Abrams notes that the essay is “Any short composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject.”

For me, the essay has always been a thing for teaching in the spring. I see the planning, researching, and writing of an essay as a major project. A variety of prerequisite skills—idea gathering, topic narrowing, topic sentence and paragraph writing, and more—are required. As the months from September to February or March pass, I try to build the anticipation toward the opportunity for essay writing. I think about how Tom Sawyer convinced his friends to white-wash Aunt Polly’s fence:

“...I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

That’s how I try to make essay writing—a task worthy of care, attention, and anticipation.

Although how you actually define an essay will depend on you and your class, you will probably want to cover the following in a very basic way:

- the purpose of an essay
- the basic structure of an essay
- how the essay structure fulfills the purpose
- types of essays
- what an essay is not

When the time finally arrives, I use cloze notes to reinforce how we, as a class, have defined the essay. I believe that cloze notes take the drudgery out of note taking, provide the essential skeleton for tidy notes, reinforce the key elements of what is being studied, and show students that you are using note taking for a reasonable, helpful purpose and not just to give yourself an extended coffee break.

The Shape of the Essay

For many of today's students, an essay is five to seven paragraphs of prose writing that explains or persuades. The actual length of the body of the essay is not particularly relevant. What is important is that students understand the general overview of the essay.

1. The introductory paragraph is relatively short. On a classroom whiteboard I draw my lines in green to symbolize *Go*. It is the beginning and invites the reader to proceed. The concluding paragraph—in red to symbolize *Stop*—is also quite short.
2. The body paragraphs are longer than either the introduction or conclusion. The left margins are as straight as an arrow, as a teacher's path to the coffee machine, or as a Sunday-school teacher's sense of humor. While the right margins are as crooked as a dog's hind leg, a politician's promise, or a principal's path to the point he is trying to make, they are straight enough to centre the writing as would a picture frame. Arrows join the paragraphs, showing that the preceding one is connected to the latter.
3. The sentences in blue on my classroom whiteboard are the topic sentences. Topic sentences, in individual paragraphs, will have been taught earlier in the year and in previous grades. When I am drawing and coloring the essay picture, I will remind students of the concept of a topic sentence, but won't dwell on it until we look at some exemplars

Exercise

Look at the cloze exercise on the next page and complete the sentences using information from the text you just read.

Defining the Essay: Cloze Exercise

Name: _____

An essay is an opportunity to _____
and to _____.

In its most basic form, an essay is five _____ written about
_____. One paragraph _____ the topic, three body
paragraphs tell _____, and the final paragraph acts as a
_____.

An essay is a series of paragraphs where you :
_____,
then you _____,
and then you _____.

An essay is "any short composition in prose that undertakes to

- discuss a matter,
- _____,
- or _____ (main idea)

on any subject."

What an essay is not:

- an _____ —a longer piece found in a newspaper or magazine
- a _____ —an account or a statement of facts
- a _____ —"Hey, essay, how's it goin'? Whassup?"