To Assay the Essay

by

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Although it certainly doesn't rank in my list of top ten entertainment options, the Jay Leno show does have one redeeming component. And it's truly scary. Jay walks the streets with microphone and camera, asking simple questions to random people. Things like 'Who is the current vice president of the United States?" Often the answers are honest ignorance, other times downright frightening. "Uh, Bill Gates?" We shudder to ponder the social implications of the widespread ignorance that Jay Leno uncovers.

However, we don't have to travel downtown to find similar answers to simple questions. Recently, I asked a group of high school students: "What is an *essay*?" Responses varied:

"Something you don't want to do…"
"I have no idea."
"A really long report."

The best answer received was: "A paper with an introduction, a body and a conclusion." (A student who'd been in my class before, I believe…)

More revealing than that, however, was what happened when I asked myself the same question. I wasn't really sure! I couldn't clearly define an essay, especially when I asked myself: What's the difference between a "report" and an "essay"? We did reports in sixth grade; we did essays in high school (maybe), and we did "papers" in college. But what does the word actually mean, and is there some insight to be gleaned from an exact definition?

According to Webster's Dictionary, *essay* (the noun) has, in the context of writing, the following definition: "A short literary composition on a particular theme or subject, usually in prose and generally analytic, speculative, or interpretive." In simpler terms, an essay should express the ideas, opinions or belief of the writer about one particular subject.

My ignorance of the true meaning of the word helped me identify a clear problem in the world of teaching composition: the great gap between writing "reports", where students dutifully (because they have to) present (copy and change a few words) facts diligently obtained (chosen almost at random) from a reliable source (the encyclopedia), and writing an "essay," where we must express an analysis or interpretation (i.e. have an opinion) about facts or others' ideas.

In elementary and junior high school, students can happily write reports complete with charts, illustrations, and nice covers, and get good grades. However, in high school and beyond, those same students will get slammed for writing reports with "just the facts." Professors expect thought, opinion, observation, analysis. And hence the problem: A+ report writers do not essayists make. For many of us, when we hit college, it was simply sink or swim; figure out what the teacher wants or suffer a bad mark. But must it be so for our students? Where's the bridge?

In our Structure & Style Syllabus, the Formal Essay is taught as Unit VIII. In its simplest form, the Unit VIII essay consists of three Unit IV or Unit VI topic-clincher paragraphs sandwiched between an Introduction, giving background information and stating the three topics, and a Conclusion which restates the three topics while commenting as to what is the most significant thing and why. Indeed, it is this part of the conclusion that begins to teach the student the difference between "Report" and "Essay" because it is in making the statement as to what is "most important and why" that the student is forced to have an opinion about the facts, if merely a simple one. When students are writing reports about animals, states, or countries, etc., it is a little hard to have much of an opinion. What, really,

is the most significant thing about flamingos? Who cares? However, as we move through a progression of subject areas, it becomes gradually easier to have an opinion. The chart here illustrates such a sequence. One strategy for developing students' understanding of the essay is to start with the most basic type of subject - an animal - simply to teach the model (Intro-Body-Conclusion). At this level, the opinion in the conclusion is of little importance; it is far more critical THAT they choose something as "most significant" than WHAT is chosen. The WHY, however goofy it may sound, is an important component in the model, and will become critical later on when the opinion is about a person, event, or issue.

When the basic model is understood, you can then move on to another assignment with a state or country. Now, with states, countries and things, the topic selection becomes a little more important, as transitions will seem smoother when topics are somewhat related. If, for example, the report is about Japan, it makes more sense to choose for the three topics "government, emperor, & economy" than "emperor, geography, & cuisine." Additionally, it's a little easier to have an opinion on "the most significant thing" about a state, country, or thing.

People and events become more interesting, as the potential for opinion (and thus debate) expands. Writing about Cortez, a student would have a chance to take a position on whether he was a noble Christian explorer and warrior bringing Christ to a pagan blood-thirsty people, or a greed-driven imperialist intent on exploiting and destroying a peaceful native culture. Topic selection would become even more critical, as it would be important to include the facts which would support your view (and possibly avoid facts that would not). Similar situations could easily occur with event-type subjects such as causes of wars, consequences of presidencies, etc.

Then, hopefully, with sufficient preparation using countries, people, and events as subjects, the student will be ready for the essence of an essay: issues. With issues, topic selection becomes strategic, and the persuasive essay model will be the most effective in presenting an opinion in a more powerful way.

What about literary analysis? This is a common question and occasional criticism of the TWSS syllabus. We don't address it. One problem with writing about literature is that it really doesn't seem very important. It's not real. However, if literary analysis must be done, the process is similar. A character can be written about in the same way as a biographical essay on a real person: first choose three (or four, or five) aspects of that character's actions, motives, personality, behavior, etc., and write a topic-based paragraph on each, then add an introduction and conclusion, being certain to say what is the most significant thing about the character and why. The same can be done with events, symbolisms, foreshadowing, etc. Generally, however, assignments in literary analysis come with specific goals (compare/ contrast, give reasons why characters did things, etc.). Although many high school English teachers may beg to differ, literary analysis is probably the least useful (and consequently least important) type of academic writing for students to be concerned with.

Then, of course, there's the matter of the "thesis statement," which is often stressed by high school and university teachers. The basic presentation of a thesis-based essay is to state a position (opinion, theory, analysis) in the introduction and then validate the position by citing supporting evidence while refuting opposing arguments. This model, however, is not persuasive. It states a position right up front, which means that anyone who disagrees with the thesis is not likely to finish reading the paper, or if they do, will already be predisposed against what's to come. Certainly, stating the thesis in the introduction is fine for literature analysis (since very few people are passionate about symbolism in Moby Dick), but it is disaster for any type of issue—based writing which has the potential for controversy. With subjects such as gun control, partial-birth abortion, aerial wolf hunting or uniforms in school, writers usually have a strong opinion and the goal of writing is to gain support for the writer's position. Therefore, it would be better to use a persuasive model which asks a question in

the introduction to engage the reader (rather than a thesis statement giving away the position in the first paragraph).

Undoubtedly, there are as many “ideal” ways to write an essay as there are teachers who assign them. Our goal is not to teach the “dictated-from-God” perfect way to write an essay, but to nurture students in several key ways:

1) develop in them a sense of structure by having them use and understand a few specific, concrete models,
2) gradually build their ability to formulate and express an opinion through a developmental progression in subject selection, and
3) build confidence in writing on a wide range of subject areas, thereby preparing them for any academic or vocational need later in life.

By using a subject-based developmental approach to teaching the essay, we can naturally and smoothly move students from simple report writing to persuasive writing on current issues. Start with animals because they are easy. Teach structure constantly. Finish with persuasion. And don’t forget to smile while you’re doing it!