

What is Essay?| Definition, Meaning, Features & Forms

By Datta G. Sawant

Essay, relatively much focused genre of literature is known for its intellectual and well argumentative quality. Essays have prominent place in literature, especially in literary criticism. Generally essays are packed with a philosophy over or of a topic. It is full-fledged analysis of a topic. The form, essay has been evolved over the centuries from ancient Greek. But the term essay is used for the first time by French author Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) to his own work entitled *Essais*. Since the time of Montaigne, essay has been developed and shaped as a significant form of intellectual inquiry. It is defined as: **“the work of prose non-fiction interwoven around a subject or topic or point in the form of an argument or counter-argument having its analysis, discussion and clarification, and as whole providing some solution to the matter undertaken”**. There are many views, in favour and sometime, against the form; e.g. Dr. Samuel Johnson says, “A loose sally of the mind, an irregular, indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance”. Johnson had this view at his time and was talking about the quality of contemporary essays. The Oxford English Dictionary defined essay as: “a composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject; originally implying want of finish, but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style though limited in range”. This can be the counter definition to Johnson’s view.

It was Francis Bacon who brought and popularized essay in England. Unlike Montaigne, he changed essay from personal or subjective to impersonal or objective. Montaigne’s aim was to portray himself but Bacon extended its scope to a vast range of topics. The prominent exponents who have handled the form skillfully and became famous essayists are Francis Bacon, Ben Johnson, Voltaire, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Edmund Burke, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Macaulay, P.B. Shelley, George Orwell, Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Adriene Rich, J.M. Coetzee, Thomas Carlyle, Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, so and so forth.

Salient Features/ Characteristics of Essay:

1. It is proportionately short in length like short story and due to its character sketches and length, it is sometimes considered as a story. Brevity is maintained throughout the essay.
2. It is an argument based on a topic or subject and contains description, analysis and clarification on a matter.
3. Logical consistency i.e. coherence among sentences and cohesion of paragraphs. This refers to the structural regularity throughout the essay.
4. According to Huxley, essays can cover a vast range of subjects in its short length; in his words:

“Like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything. 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. But a collection of essays can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly, as can a long novel”.

Here he compared the subject or theme of the essay with that of novel and clearly defined the scope of modern essay.

5. As we have referred above, an essay is, at a larger extent, personal and subjective. Montaigne's essay was to self-expression but Bacon used it as an impersonal and objective tool. W.H. Hudson emphasizes over the personal and subjective characteristic of a true essay.
6. Essay is an expression of writer's personality. It is the direct manifestation of writer's views on a subject, his/ her attitude towards the thing or matter delineated in the essay.
7. The language of essay is well chosen to suit its subject. As it is a short composition, the writer is well aware of its limitations and cannot afford more elaboration of a minor topic.

These are the basic features of essay; and it can be expanded further through the deep study of essays.

Types/ Kinds of Essay: essay can be grouped under two broad categories i.e. formal and informal essay but there are many other forms need to be paid attention. Following are the primary types of essay:

1. **Formal/ Impersonal Essay:** this type of essay is objective. The writer puts his/ her views on a topic as a distant observer and tries to be impartial as possible as he/ she can. The treatment given to subject is serious and the essayist speaks as an authority. Generally these articles are on current topics or issues. T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and Individual Talent* is of this type.
2. **Informal/ Personal Essay:** this is more personal and subjective essay. The essayist writes to reveal his/ her self to the readers. Most of the times, such essays are in the form of some experiences writer had. He/ she narrates the story exposing the point of view regarding some topic or issue or incident. Charles Lamb is the most powerful master of personal essay. His style of writing and language is more engaging and forms an intimacy with the readers. His *Essays of Elia* are famous. In this category other names are E.V. Lucas, William Hazlitt, Leigh-Hunt, W.M. Thackeray, De Quincey, R.L. Stevenson, etc.
3. **Critical Essay:** it is a form used in literary criticism, now practiced freely for a serious topic. John Dryden introduced this essay through his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and *Preface to Fables*. Later this form has become more popular among the critics like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Aldous Huxley, J.B. Priestley, E.M. Forster, A.G. Gardiner, A.T. Quiller-Couch, so and so.
4. **Periodical and Social Essay:** this type flourished in the period of Daniel Defoe (beginning of the 18th century) with his *Review*, a periodical. He wrote on the society, manners and morality. This type has been more authenticated by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in their periodicals *Tatler* (started in 1709 and continued for two years) and *Spectator* (started in March 1711 and continued till December 1712). Then we have Dr. Johnson's essays contributed to *Rambler* (1750-52) and the *Idler* (1758-60). In this series, the name of Oliver Goldsmith is prominent for his noteworthy series *Citizen of the World* contributed to *Public Ledger*, a newspaper in 1760-62. These periodicals borrowed ample material from the then society and its people.

These are very basic literary types of essay. However, today essay has got prominent place in academia where students have to write essays on various topics prescribed in syllabus from primary to tertiary (degree) level. Taking this point in consideration and with a broader perspective, we can list the following types of essays:

5. **Narrative Essay**
6. **Descriptive Essay**
7. **Expository Essay**
8. **Educational Essay**
9. **Persuasive Essay**
10. **Argumentative Essay**
11. **Analytical Essay**
12. **Explicatory Essay**
13. **Review Essay**
14. **Research Essay**
15. **Character Essay**, so and so forth.

Some of the Famous Essays to be Read:

1. *Of Vanity* by Michel de Montaigne
2. *Of Truth* by Francis Bacon
3. *Dream Children: A Reverie* by Charles Lamb
4. *On the Love of Life* by William Hazlitt
5. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* by Edmund Burke
6. *Death of the Moth* by Virginia Woolf
7. *Reflections on Gandhi* by George Orwell
8. *Reflections on Exile* by Edward Said
9. *Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson
10. *Tradition and Individual Talent* by T.S. Eliot
11. *On Self Respect* by Joan Didion

Critical Books on Essay:

1. *The English Essay and Essayists* (1923) by Hugh Walker
2. *Elements of Essay* (1969) by Robert Scholes and Carl H. Klaus
3. *The Oxford Book of Essays* (1991) edited by John Gross
4. *Essay by Contemporary American Women* (1996) edited by Wendy Martin
5. *An Introduction to the Study of English Literature* (2004) by W.H. Hudson
6. *A Background to the Study of English Literature* (2007) by B. Prasad

Works Cited:

1. Abrams, M.H. and Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2009. Print.
2. <http://studyskills.curtin.edu.au/essays/introduction/what-is-an-essay/>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
3. <https://www.bestessays.com/glossary/essay.php>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
4. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/essay>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
5. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-essay-1690674>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
6. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-an-essay-p2-1856929>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
7. <https://www.ukessays.com/resources/undergraduate/essay/what-is-an-essay.php>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
8. <https://www2.palomar.edu/users/jtagg/handbook/whatisanessay.htm>. Retrieved on 10/04/2019. Web.
9. Hudson, W.H. *An Introduction to the Study of English Literature*. Delhi: AITBS Publishers & Distributors, 2004. Print.
10. Prasad, B. *A Background to the Study of English Literature*. Chennai: Macmillan India Limited, 2007. Print.

A definition essay is meant to describe a complex term that has significant background and historical origin and is a relatable term. The word "love" is an excellent example of such term as it is seemingly impossible to explain this concept very briefly. This gives us room to write a definition essay about it, which would give it an accurate representation. Types of Definitions Commonly Used in Essays. So, you have found an exciting term with a complex background worth delving into? Before you decide to make it the subject for your definition essay, consider what you can do with it. Details: What are the characteristics and other distinguishing features that describe the idea of the paper? Negation: Explain what it isn't to narrow down what it is. Origins and Causes: What is the origin of the theme? What is a Definition Essay? A definition essay is a piece of writing where you have to write your own definition of a word. The definition must be well researched and supported by evidence. Also, it might be an explanation of what a certain term means. Some of them have literal, definite meanings like table, pencil, or chair. Some of them are abstract, like love, success, truth and depends on a person's point of view. You can write Definition Essay for a class or just try writing it to improve your English skills, make it something like a language challenge. Let our team of professionals take