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People Get Essays Wrong

Essay writing is important, but people get essays wrong. That's a pretty bold claim to make in an essay writing competition, but hear me out. No doubt words are important.^[1] String words together and you get sentences that form an essay that'll be read by many. Essays connect with ideas and spread knowledge, create joy or even move people to tears. Essays are important. That's why people write them.

However, the practice of essay writing seems outdated. Everyone is different, so why do almost all of us write the same?

That's because people get essays wrong.

How Essays Were Taught

I see it everywhere, the same boring, long and drawn out sentences held back by strict grammar—expressed in a flat monotone. It feels like you just asked ChatGPT to write an essay. No, I honestly think some of ChatGPT's essays have more character than some of the ones I had written in the past. It's largely because of how we're taught to write. I remember one of my English teachers telling me to not put contractions in my writing because it's "informal". But it's completely normal. We use contractions in our daily lives, *don't we all?* Whether it's leaving a note for your friend or talking to your cat, contractions add tempo to ordinary conversations.

This is where we start getting to the root of boring writing: how it's taught. In school, you always had to structure your essays with a thesis or topic sentence, some supporting points with analysis, and finally a conclusion. The conclusion part always confused me. Why would I have to restate my thesis and the reasons that support them, but change up the words a little bit, if I just wrote an entire essay explaining it? It made no sense to me at all. So I would just take my thesis that was usually written in the active voice, and change it into the passive voice. And it worked. Seems like a waste of time; but as long as I got my points for it, I let it slide.

Until recently, when I read a Paul Graham essay titled "The Age of the Essay".^[2] It was about the origins of essays and how they came to be taught in school. All of a sudden, it clicked. In the past, writing was mostly taught at law schools. The essay format that we all know today was really just an outline for a lawyer in court. With the topic sentence as the main accusation or defense, the supporting points to give credit to the claim, and the conclusion—the useless, pointless, waste of words conclusion—was actually the closing remarks for the jury. The conclusion sums up the main point and supporting evidence, so that a jury can easily see the reasons for agreeing with the prosecution or the defense. Sometimes that could be a matter of life or death.

With this newfound knowledge, everything suddenly made sense to me. We weren't taught to write essays to connect islands of knowledge, or explore new intellectual territories. We also weren't taught to write essays for ourselves, even though expressing ideas helps to form them—the reason why essay writing is useful.^[3] Instead we were taught to write in a way that defends our beliefs to others, when we're not busy arguing what we know or making our opinions heard. How can such essays that put blinders on our worldview, limit us to what's already in our head, or block off outside opinions, be *useful to the inquisitive writer*?

A Castle and A River

Many people think an essay is like a castle's massive stone wall, defending one's beliefs and opinions from people who don't agree. Now this might have been the case in the past, like sieging castles was. But today's internet culture actually favors a more collaborative and open-minded discourse,^[4] just as the modern world favors open-door diplomacy over siege warfare.

Nowadays, essays are like flowing rivers that are subject to change instead of an immovable wall. You start writing with a swirl of ideas sloshing around in your head, every word you type out adds a little more clarity to the final composition. Most of the time, I don't even know what I'm going to write about until *after* I start writing.^[5] You can start out having a goal for the end, but as you write and the flow changes, you may end up with something completely different.^[6] And just like a river fertilizes the soil around it, always going somewhere interesting,^[7] a good essay can nurture new ideas and inspire even better ones along the way.

As a matter of fact, the entire literary genre of essays was inspired by a French philosopher named Michel de Montaigne. His work blends casual anecdotes and autobiography with intellectual insight.^[8] His book published in 1580 titled *Essais*, a French word meaning *the*

result of an attempt, was where the word “essay” came from. As an example, this essay is my effort trying to answer *how* and *why* people get essays wrong.

Bring Your Own Voice

Schools also teach that writing must have a strict sentence structure and proper formal grammar at all times. But we don’t talk like that. We all talk differently based on our different experiences; we live different lives and we all speak differently with different people. We use abbreviations and slang to give more character and uniqueness to the way we talk. Writing should have texture and variations in tone that reflect the writer’s personality and thoughts. Writing should be way more expressive by displaying the emotions being felt while writing an essay.^[9] I mean just imagine how boring it would be to listen to a speech or even hold a conversation with someone that talked like a robot. Well, reading an essay with no personality or show of character feels the same way. It feels like Google Translate was reading it in its robotic and monotone voice. And that’s definitely not how I want any of my readers to feel.

Writing simply is also important.^[10] Schools teach students that there are basic words you shouldn’t use in an essay. I’ve heard that words like “happy” or “sad” were too simple and should be substituted with words like “enlightened” or “sorrowful”. Yes, the more complicated words could be more immersive and paint a better picture. Most of the time they simply just aren’t necessary, and the simpler words would serve the same purpose as the fancier ones while providing an easier reading experience. If one’s message is important, then writing with a simpler vocabulary enables the essay to reach a bigger audience, especially non-native speakers or students who are still learning English.

So how do we string words together into an essay that clearly conveys a message, sounds like it has a natural flow, and is simple enough to read? Well, Paul Graham argues for a writing style similar to how you talk.^[11] At the end of the day, that’s what writing is: putting your words into ink on paper, or in this case pixels on a screen. I agree with this style. It cuts out formalities and excess words. Nobody uses those 10-syllable, 15-letter-long words when they’re talking normally. This way it feels as if you can have a conversation with the essay instead of being lectured by it. Writing like you talk allows for easier understanding to a reader and also, a more interesting and interactive essay, where readers can feel like they’re listening to a podcast and could form their own opinions along the way. Though it may seem lazy or feel like no effort was put into it, a short essay that covers the same ideas and topics is often better than a lengthy, long winded essay. In this day and age with decreasing attention spans in readers, retention is everything.

“If you simply manage to write in spoken language, you’ll be ahead of 95% of writers.”

— Paul Graham (“Write Like You Talk”, 2015)^[12]

Writing Your World

Just like short form videos are booming in popularity, a shorter, more concise style of writing will prove to be more relevant with today’s demographics. With creative thought being encouraged now more than ever, unique writing styles are bound to surface, no matter how

crazy they may seem. This is because of how the internet has connected us all so that no matter how you write, you will always have your niche. Because of this, the world of writing will become so much more diverse. Many people now are wandering away from the status quo and are being less shy about sharing their opinions, so this will reflect in their writing styles as well.^[13]

“Useful writing tells people something true and important that they didn’t already know, and tells them as unequivocally as possible.”

— Paul Graham (“How to Write Usefully”, 2020)^[14]

Author’s Note:

A serious looking cat writing an essay is a useful illustration; it tells people something true and important that they didn’t already know. This cat tells them as unequivocally as possible—by writing an essay.

Endnotes:

- [1] Graham, 2020. Importance has two factors: how much it matters to people and the number of people it matters to.
- [2] Graham, 2004. The first of a series of short essays on writing good essays by Paul Graham.
- [3] Graham, 2020. What should an essay be? Paul Graham argues that an essay should strive to be *useful*, instead of merely *persuasive*.
- [4] Take Discord for example, there is a whole server dedicated to Midjourney where people can share their generative AI image creations and build off of one another’s prompts.
- [5] Graham, 2005. “... expect 80% of the ideas in an essay to happen after you start writing it, and 50% of those you start with to be wrong.”
- [6] Graham, 2022. “Half the ideas that end up in an essay will be ones you thought of while you were writing it.”
- [7] Graham, 2005. The path a river has discovered is “the most economical route to the sea.”
- [8] Michel de Montaigne has this to say about his anecdotes: “They often carry, off the subject under discussion, the seed of a richer and more daring matter, and they resonate obliquely with a more delicate tone.”
- [9] My cousin was writing an essay for the other John Locke essay question about what one would do with 10 billion dollars. She realized after writing halfway that 10 billion dollars isn’t nearly enough to solve the world’s problems that she had started out with. This really bummed her out but it really just shows how one’s thoughts evolve with the essay and new revelations emerge.
- [10] Graham, 2021. “... using ordinary words and simple sentences.”
- [11] Graham, 2015. The title says it all: “Write like you talk.”
- [12] Ibid. There, 95% of writers are nearly everybody—and they’re wrong about how they write!
- [13] Fishbein, 2020. Summary of Paul Graham’s writing style that makes him a great writer.
- [14] Graham, 2020. “The exciting thing is not that there’s a lot left to write, but that there’s a lot left to discover. There’s a certain kind of idea that’s best discovered by writing essays.”

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