

**:: STRUCTURE ::**

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**1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit we shall:

- Study the literary form essay and
- Discuss the characteristics of the form and its brief history and development.

On completing this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the essay form and its characteristics; and
- Appreciate the essay form for its capacity to hold vast variety of subjects.

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**1.1 DEFINITION**

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The definition of an essay is vague, overlapping with those of an article or a short story. In an academic context, most likely that of University, what defines an essay is the purpose of essay writing. Essays serve as a way to assess your understanding of specific ideas and your ability to explain and argue these to answer a given question. Essays are independent pieces of work, which involve the use of taught materials as well as your own research into the question in order to achieve the highest marks. An essay is usually written in prose, in a discursive way that brings together your ideas, arguments, and evidence to answer the said question or solve a problem. This will often mean writing in the

formal third-person, but some particular types of essay (see the table at the bottom of this page) may require the use of the first person, such as reflective pieces of work. The structure, too, is often similar and can be applied generally to any given essay; specific essay structures and how they differ may be found here. In their simplest and most common form, an essay's structure consists of an introduction (where the arguments are set out or "signposted"), a main body (which builds upon and supports these arguments), and a conclusion (which summarises and offers a clear answer to the question or problem set).

In the broadest sense, the term "essay" can refer to just about any short piece of nonfiction an editorial, feature story, critical study, even an excerpt from a book. However, literary definitions of a genre are usually a bit fussier.

One way to start is to draw a distinction between articles, which are read primarily for the information they contain, and essays, in which the pleasure of reading takes precedence over the information in the text. Although handy, this loose division points chiefly to kinds of reading rather than to kinds of texts. So here are some other ways that the essay might be defined.

One definition is a "prose composition with a focused subject of discussion" or a "long, systematic discourse". Aldous Huxley, a leading essayist, gives guidance on the subject. He notes that "the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything", and adds that "by tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece". Furthermore, Huxley argues that "essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference". These three poles (or worlds in which the essay may exist) are:

- The personal and the autobiographical: The essayists that feel most comfortable in this pole "write fragments of reflective autobiography and look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description".
- The objective, the factual, and the concrete particular: The essayists that write from this pole "do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. Their art consists of setting forth, passing judgment upon, and drawing general conclusions from the relevant data".
- The abstract-universal: In this pole "we find those essayists who do their work in the world of high abstractions", who are never personal and who seldom mention the particular facts of experience.

Furthermore, the word essay derives from the French infinitive *essayer*, "to try" or "to attempt". In English *essay* first meant "a trial" or "an attempt", and this is still an alternative meaning. Essay is an analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation or thesis and usually dealing with its subject from a limited and often personal point of view. Various critics have defined "essay" such as, Aldous Huxley states that the most satisfying essays "...make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist." Aldous Huxley also described the essay as "One damned thing after another." Francis Bacon defined essay as "dispersed meditations"; whereas Samuel Johnson defined it as a "loose sally of the mind."

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## 1.2 CHARACTERISTICS

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First of all, an essay is not confused with the kind of essay you write about a fiction or non-fiction text. That is an analytical essay. A classic essay is something else. Here are some of the characteristics of a classic essay.

1. The essay genre belongs to the category of non-fiction.
2. It is a relatively short piece of prose that you should be able to read in one sitting.
3. The essay expresses the writer's subjective examination of a topic. The topic of an essay could be anything. There is usually only one topic, but this topic is examined from many different angles.
4. The essay is a subjective genre, which means that a writer often expresses his/her own thoughts, experiences and ideas, but it is important to emphasize that while the essay should be personal, it should not be private. Anecdotes and personal experiences illuminate the topic that is discussed.
5. Instead of being closed and conclusive, the essay is often open and inquisitive. There might be something playful about the way the topic is approached, and instead of preaching to the reader, the essay wants the reader to think about the topic. The purpose is not to give any definitive answers.
6. Since it is a personal genre, the personal pronoun "I" is often used and the essay might include anecdotes and the writer will try to examine his/her personal connection to the topic, but at the same time invites the reader on a journey of discovery.

7. There is a close attention to language in the essay and room for creative and literary flourishes like metaphors. The essay is a genre where the creative voice of the writer is felt.
8. The essay sometimes includes different sources: quotes from authors, scientists and academics mixed with everyday observations and knowledge about history and culture.

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### 1.3 BRIEF HISTROY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ESSAY

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Some early treatises—such as those of Cicero on the ‘pleasantness of old age’ or ‘on the art of “divination”’; Seneca on ‘anger or clemency’, and Plutarch on the ‘passing of oracles’—presage to a certain degree the form and tone of the essay, but not until the late 16th century. The Frenchman Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) was the first author to describe his work as essays; he used the term to characterize these as "attempts" to put his thoughts into writing, and his essays grew out of his choice of common topics. Inspired in particular by the works of Plutarch, Montaigne began to compose his essays in 1572; the first edition, titled *Essais*, was published in two volumes in 1580. For the rest of his life, he continued revising previously published essays and composing new ones. Choosing the name *essai* to emphasize that his compositions were attempts or endeavours, an attempt to express his personal thoughts and experiences, Montaigne used the essay as a means of self-discovery. His *Essais*, are still considered among the finest collection of essays of its kind. Later writers who most nearly recall the charm of Montaigne include, in England, Robert Burton, though his whimsicality is more scholarly, Sir Thomas Browne, and Laurence Sterne, and with more self-consciousness and pose, André Gide and Jean Cocteau of France.

At the beginning of the 17th century, social manners, the cultivation of politeness, and the training of an accomplished gentleman became the theme of many essayists. This theme was first exploited by the Italian Baldassare Castiglione in his *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). Among those who pursued this theme was the 17th-century Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián in his essays on the art of worldly wisdom. Francis Bacon's essays, published in book form in 1597, 1612, and 1625, were the first works in English that described themselves as essays. Ben Jonson first used the word essayist in English in 1609, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Major political awareness in the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, made the essay an all-important vehicle for the criticism of society and religion. Because of its flexibility, its brevity, and its potential both for ambiguity and for allusions to current events and conditions, it was an ideal tool for philosophical reformers. *The Federalist Papers* in America and the tracts of the French Revolutionaries are among the countless examples of attempts during this period to improve the human condition through the essay.

The genre also became the favoured tool of authors during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century; such as Edmund Burke and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who looked at the short, provocative essay as the most potent means of educating the masses. Essays such as Paul Elmer More's *Shelburne Essays* (published between 1904 and 1935), T. S. Eliot's *After Strange Gods* (1934) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), and others that attempted to reinterpret and redefine culture, established the genre as the most fitting to express the genteel tradition at odds with the democracy of the new world.

Whereas in several countries the essay became the chosen vehicle of literary and social criticism, in other countries the genre became semi-political, earnestly nationalistic, and often polemical, playful, or bitter. Essayists such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Willa Cather wrote with grace on several lighter subjects, and many writers—including Virginia Woolf, Edmund Wilson, and Charles du Bos—mastered the essay as a form of literary criticism.

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#### 1.4 MONTAIGNE'S CONTRIBUTION TO ESSAY

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Before the word “essay” was coined in the 16th century by Montaigne and Bacon, what came to be called an essay was called a treatise, and its attempt to treat a serious theme with consistency, deprived it of the charm relished in the later examples of essay form in literature. In this sense, the word “essay” would hardly fit the didactic tone of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or his *Metaphysics*. Montaigne, who established the term essay, left his mark on almost every essayist who came after him in continental Europe, and perhaps even more in English-speaking countries. Emerson made him one of his six *Representative Men* along with others of the stature of Plato, Shakespeare, and Goethe. William Hazlitt lauded Montaigne's qualities as precisely those that “we consider in great measure English,” and another English romantic writer, Leigh Hunt, saw him as “the first man who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man.” And the 20th-century poet T. S. Eliot declared him to be the most important writer to study for an insight into the literature of France. With

Montaigne, the essay achieved for the first time what it can achieve better than any other form of writing. The essay became symbolic of man's new attitude toward himself, revelling in change, and hence in growth, and forsaking his age-old dream of achieving an underlying steadfastness that might make him invulnerable and similar to the gods. Now he set out to accept himself whole, with his body and his physical and behavioural peculiarities, and thereby repudiate medieval asceticism. He would portray his foibles and unworthiness, hoping to rise above his own mediocrity, or, at the other extreme, he would exalt himself in the hope that he might become the man he depicted in his essay. Montaigne in his essays pursued an ethical purpose, without any pompousness or rhetoric. He offered an ideal that was adopted by his successors for centuries: perfecting man as a tolerant, urbane social being. But, unlike medieval Christian writers, he would not sacrifice to others the most dearly cherished part of himself. To others he would lend himself, but his personality and his freedom were his own, and his primary duty was to become a wiser human being. No essayist after Montaigne touched on so many varied aspects of life with such an informal, felicitous, and brilliant style.

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### 1.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have learnt about the origin of essay form, its various definitions, the broad structure and the characteristics of the literary form "essay". These have allowed better understanding of the shape and structure of essay form. The history and development of essay form has been charted from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with its main proponent, Michel de Montaigne. These shall lend comprehension to one of the literary forms, i.e. essay.

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### 1.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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**Exercise 1: Rewrite the sentences using the word or phrase in brackets. You may need to change the punctuation.**

1. Reality shows are all the same but many people still watch them. (however,)

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2. We can discover talented people on reality TV and we can vote for the ones we like the most. (**furthermore,**)

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3. One positive thing about reality TV is that it shows normal people. (**one advantage of**)

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4. My first point is that reality TV is fun to watch. (**firstly,**)

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5. Also, you can learn many new things. (**in addition,**)

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6. The opposite argument is reality TV might set a bad example for young children. (**on the other hand,**)

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**Exercise 2: BRAINSTORMING WORKSHEET**

One of the best methods of brainstorming is to begin with a grand list of potential topics and slowly let the best rise to the top. In order to generate a laundry list of important people, events, accomplishments and activities in your life, fill in the worksheet below. As you go through this lesson, you will begin to separate the good ideas from the bad.

**1. If you were writing your autobiography right now, what would be ten events or things that would have to be included? It will be easiest to think over your life chronologically.**

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**2. Ask a few friends or family members to pick five adjectives or personality traits that characterize you. List them here:**

Friend or Family Member #1

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Friend or Family Member #2

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Friend or Family Member #3

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**3. List five accomplishments you have made over the last five years. (Do not limit yourself to accomplishments for which you have been formally recognized since the most interesting essays are often based on accomplishments that may have seemed insignificant at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.)**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**4. List three to five things on which you consider yourself very knowledgeable**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**5. What are your most important extracurricular or community activities?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**6. List 5 people whom you respect and admire. They can be real or fictional, dead or alive.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**7. What is your favorite movie or book?**

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**8. Who is your favorite musician?**

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**8. List two times in life when you failed miserably and two times when you were a fantastic success.**

**Miserable failures**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**Fantastic successes**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Ask your parents, grandparents, or guardians for five events in your life that they will always remember**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**10. List four of your favorite things and four of your least favorite. These can include activities, places, objects, virtues, etc.**

**Favorites**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

**Least Favorites**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

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**1.7 Key Words:**

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**Characteristics** a typical or noticeable quality of someone or something  
**vague** not clearly expressed, known, described, or decided  
**overlapping** covering something partly by going over its edge or covering part of the same space  
**discursive** involving discussion

<b>reflective</b>	A reflective surface sends back most of the that shines on it and can therefore be seen easily
<b>signposted</b>	a pole at the side of a road, especially at a point wheretwo or more roads meet, that lives information about routes and distance
<b>excerpt</b>	a short part taken from a speech, book, film, etc.
<b>precedence</b>	the condition of being dealt with before other things or o being considered more important than other things
<b>discourse</b>	the use of language to communicate in speech or writing or an example of this
<b>anecdote</b>	a short, often funny story, especially about something someone has done
<b>seldom</b>	almost never
<b>analytic</b>	examining or liking to examine things in detail, in order to discover more about them
<b>interpretative</b>	related to explaining or understanding the meaning of something
<b>illuminate</b>	to light something and make it brighter
<b>inquisitive</b>	wanting to discover as much as you can about things sometimes in a way that annoys people
<b>definitive</b>	not able to be changed or improved
<b>metaphors</b>	an expression, often found in literature, that a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object
<b>treatises</b>	a formal piece of writing that considers and examines a particular subject
<b>clemency</b>	kindness when giving a punishment
<b>oracles</b>	someone who knows a lot about a subject and can give good advice
<b>endeavours</b>	to try to do something
<b>whimsicality</b>	the quality of being whimsical (= unusual and strange in a way that might be funny or annoying)
<b>brevity</b>	using only a few words or lasting only a short time
<b>ambiguity</b>	(an example of) the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion
<b>allusions</b>	something that is said or written that is intended to make you think of a particular thing or person
<b>democracy</b>	the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a

	system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves
<b>treatise</b>	a formal piece of writing that considers and examines a particular subject
<b>didactic</b>	intended to teach, especially in a way that is too determined, eager, and often fixed and unwilling to change
<b>repudiate</b>	to refuse to accept something or someone as true, good or reasonable
<b>medieval</b>	related to the Middle Ages (= the period in European history from about AD 600 to AD 1500)
<b>asceticism</b>	the practice of living a simple life without physical pleasures, often for religious reasons
<b>mediocrity</b>	not very good
<b>ethical</b>	a system of accepted beliefs that control behaviour, especially such a system based on morals
<b>pompousness</b>	the quality of being too serious and showing that you think you are very important
<b>rhetoric</b>	speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people

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## 1.8 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Nordquist, Richard. *"The Essay: History and Definition."*
2. Britannica, *The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia*. "essay".
3. Peyre, Henri M.. *"nonfictional prose"*. Encyclopedia Britannica.
4. Literary Devices Editors. *"Metaphor"*.
5. Michel de Montaigne, John M. Cohen, John M. Cohen - *Montaigne Essays*-Penguin Books (1993).
6. *Essay Writing Skills* by Jacqueline Connelly and Patrick Forsyth
7. Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*.
8. Adorno, T. W. et al. (1984). *"The Essay as Form"*.
9. Chevalier, Tracy (ed.) (1997). *Encyclopedia of The Essay*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.
10. Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin.

- **Check Your Progress**

**Multiple Choice Question with Answer**

1. The definition of essay is overlapping with \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Article
  - B. Novel
  - C. Poetry
  - D. Play
  
2. In \_\_\_\_\_ an essay summarises all the arguments and offers a clear answer to question or problem set.
  - A. Introduction
  - B. Main body
  - C. Conclusion
  - D. None
  
3. Who said that "essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference"?
  - A. Francis Bacon
  - B. Aldus Huxley
  - C. A. D. Gardiner
  - D. Charles Lamb
  
4. Which of the following is among the three poles in which essay may exist?
  - A. The personal and the autobiographical
  - B. The objective, the factual, and the concrete particular
  - C. The abstract-universal
  - D. All of the given
  
5. The word essay derived from \_\_\_\_\_ word essayer.
  - A. Greek
  - B. French
  - C. Latin
  - D. German
  
6. In English first essay meant \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. A trial
  - B. A search
  - C. An article
  - D. A note

7. The essay expresses writer's \_\_\_\_\_ examination of the topic.
- A. Subjective
  - B. Objective
  - C. Comprehensive
  - D. None
8. Essay is often \_\_\_\_\_ in manner.
- A. Preaching
  - B. Playful
  - C. Serious
  - D. Objective
9. Who was the first author to describe his work as essays?
- A. Plutarch
  - B. Petrarch
  - C. Michel de Montaigne
  - D. Francis Bacon
10. Michel de Montaigne was inspired by which writer?
- A. Plutarch
  - B. Petrarch
  - C. Plato
  - D. Aristotle
11. In which year T. S. Eliot's *After Strange Gods* published?
- A. 1931
  - B. 1932
  - C. 1933
  - D. 1934
12. Who described essay as 'dispersed meditations'?
- A. Aldus Huxley
  - B. Charles Lamb
  - C. Francis Bacon
  - D. William Hazlitt
13. Francis Bacon's essays, published in book form in which year?
- A. 1597
  - B. 1612
  - C. 1625
  - D. All of the given

14. Who first used the word essayist in English?

- A. Ben Jonson
- B. Francis Bacon
- C. Sir Thomas Wyatt
- D. William Shakespeare

15. The Book of the Courtier published in the year \_\_\_\_\_.

- A. 1527
- B. 1528
- C. 1529
- D. 1530

Answers: 1=A, 2=C, 3=B, 4=D, 5=B, 6=A, 7=A, 8=B, 9=C, 10=A,  
11=D, 12=C, 13=D, 14=A, 15=B.