



BEYOND THE SHINING IDOL

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To endeavor toward a completed essay is to approach an unsolvable problem. Every idea, every opinion, every notion we possess will never find its way to another mind in its original form. When we communicate, each interaction asymptotically approaches our initial thought in the mind of our listener. College professors, however, want these thoughts on paper, flawlessly formatted, immaculately worded, gradable, testable, markable, and most importantly: whole. For students, who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, the essay can be muddled by expectations and requirements; academic language, complex prompts, and fear of negative feedback threaten to overwhelm a writer.

The first use of the word “essay” is attributed to an influential French writer named Michel de Montaigne, but it was only once his British contemporary Francis Bacon began to describe his own writings as essays that the term became widely used. The French verb *essayer* means “to try,” and, further back in its etymological history, meant “to test the mettle of, or put to trial.” It suggests unpolished writing, and its use in American academia is a bastardized version, far removed from the original French. In fact, the twelve-point, Times New Roman, double-spaced, and single-sided papers we’ve so often faced are listed as the third definition for essay in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary after the long-forgotten “to test” and “to try.” The priority of these definitions reveals that the complex structures and opaque verbiage we’ve come to expect from “good” writing are superfluous. Bacon used the word to alter the metric of writing, prioritizing exposition over formalities. During its infancy, the essay was embraced as a release from the strict rubric of traditional academic writing. How did it become a formulaic mass-manufactured piece, a shining idol of academic competence?

The true nature of the essay implies rough edges, a handmade sincerity that says, “These are my thoughts, as clearly as I could depict them. They are unfinished, waiting for you, the reader, to make what you will with them.” There’s a professor at Evergreen who never likes to talk about writing as being “done.” He emphasizes that a piece of writing is ever evolving, that you could edit and rewrite and revise the same paragraph a hundred different times. Keeping this perspective can be an important strategy for avoiding writer’s block: let go of the desire for a perfect essay, and be willing to regard a piece as “due, never done.” If we allow ourselves to accept the knowledge that our writing will forever be unfinished, it releases us from the pressure of a blank page begging for perfection. Without the fear of missing this imaginary target, the process and provenience alike finally become approachable.

Unfortunately, such an easy-going attitude towards essays is not common, nor easy to develop, and mention of an essay assignment can stir up apprehension, procrastination, and dread. Submitting your essay to your professor doesn't afford you the instant feedback of a personal conversation, which makes the process feel especially daunting. Since we, as individuals, cannot see into the minds of our readers, each and every essay we aspire to write requires a head-on confrontation with the unknown. To begin with the intention of getting everything 100% right naturally feels overwhelming. When you encounter this obstacle, remember that you as the writer are not alone! Communication goes both ways, and readers share the responsibility of interpreting ideas. Despite appearances, writing is anything but a solitary task: your readers can make new connections between your ideas, analyze your language, and discover untold perspectives. Communicating with your readers and receiving their questions and feedback will help you iterate toward an essay with which you are completely satisfied.

In academic writing, the guidelines of a perfect essay follow a rigid and terribly uninspiring formula. As the essay developed throughout the centuries, certain effective strategies of argument and diction became recognizable and gained repeated use. However, in order to teach academic writing, professors saw fit to mold these informal techniques into intimidating requirements and rubrics that allowed them to quickly evaluate every piece of writing they received—scrawling bright marks along the margins and cryptic symbols between the sentences they deemed unworthy. These comments may or may not come as a surprise, but they often feel like direct attacks on us or our ideas as authors, rather than assessments. By repeating this pattern throughout academia, teachers have firmly planted themselves into the role of editorial board in the minds of their students. Ideally, feedback should be taken (and given) as a chance to improve the clarity of a piece, and professors needn't hold a monopoly over editing and revision. The grammatical errors your professor criticizes may seem cold, distant, and unrelated to your thesis, but these changes can clarify and strengthen the way your ideas impact your readers.

All communication is flawed, and all we can do as writers is try. Being a writer often means finding contentment with imperfection. We tweak our words, their order, and their implications. We use thesis statements and transition words to guide readers through our thoughts, hoping that they reach conclusions similar to our own. And it is time that we stop claiming our authorship timidly, in fear of critiques and edits. It's time we claim our attempts as fabulous, messy, intricate *essayers*. It's time we embrace the trials and the drafts, and celebrate them for what they are: triumphs of process and revision, lumpy and imperfect, but earnest endeavors to communicate.

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