

Three

Kinds of Writing



I find it useful to classify writers as either reporters or essayists. Like most categories, these two overlap. But let's try to think of them as distinct for a moment.

A reporter collects information and presents it much as one does a news story on a big city newspaper. The reporter's point of view is in large measure limited to the choice of data, and we all know that that choice is important and can be dishonest. But on the surface, at least, the reporter is not personally wrestling with an idea that he or she wants readers to accept in opposition to the ideas of others. Newspaper readers do not read the reporter's story to see what the reporter thinks; they read to see what has happened. When the reporter writes an interpretation, it is usually a quotation or summary of the opinion of an authority. For example:

Movies are less violent than they used to be, J. C. Flack of Hollywood Pictures, Inc., told a meeting of the National Council of Parents and Teachers last night. "In the last Clint Eastwood movie, Clint gunned down only eight men, and there were only six other violent murders in the film. The woman whose face was slashed by a cowboy did not die from her wounds. Yes, you saw a lot of blood," Flack admitted. "But, hey," he said, "we all have blood in us, and that's natural." Flack said that most of the people in a Clint Eastwood movie deserve to die anyway.

Here the reporter is quoting another authority; she is not giving an opinion of her own.

In an essay, the writer is the interpreter, thinker, explainer, the authority. The essay inevitably has about it the scent of argument. It may not present forensic argument against a sharply expressed point of view (although some essays do just that), but in one way or another the essay informs us that the writer has studied the issue or experienced it inti-

mately enough to interpret it. The essay involves a line of reasoning, beginning with commonly accepted assumptions and proceeding to consequences that are not self-evident.

Some people mistakenly believe that the essay must be about the writer's experience, that essays have to be autobiographical. Some teachers now say that student writers should shape essays around some image out of the writer's personal experience. Then a woman's suffering with anorexia might give her a new insight into standards of beauty represented in nudes painted by male artists; a young man's recollections of an abusive father might help him interpret some of the stories in James Joyce's collection called *Dubliners*. I see such essays coming out of college writing programs now, and they make me uneasy. Many examples of such essays seem self-indulgent and narrow, and teachers who give assignments that call forth such essays seem often to think that young writers cannot think about anything other than their most intimate experiences.

In over thirty years of teaching in three schools—a small private college, a large Southern state university, and a large northeastern private university—my best papers have come from students who became excited about books, ideas, paintings, architecture, science, history, and a whole world of other topics that did not require them to make explicit reference to their own experiences.

Yes, writers like Richard Selzer, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many others have written personal autobiographical essays popular among many readers. Mark Twain's autobiographical narratives *Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, and *Life on the Mississippi* are classics of American literature. But the demand in most college courses and in life beyond college is for writing that makes sense of texts outside ourselves. And inexperienced writers writing personal essays seem easily to me to fall into misplaced passion, sentimentality, and even dishonesty in a mistaken effort to make themselves interesting by displaying their feelings rather than their knowledge or understanding.

Although we can never free ourselves entirely from the influences of our own experiences, part of becoming educated is learning how to stand off somewhat from ourselves and bring a certain detachment to the subjects we write about. Certainly it is no part of the definition of the *essay* that it be autobiographical or "familiar," as some writers now call the autobiographical essay. The essence of the essay is that it involves wrestling by the writer to resolve or clarify an issue. Essays are, in the current jargon, "think pieces." They involve efforts to think seriously about important matters.

The word *essay* was coined by a Frenchman, Michel de Montaigne, in the second half of the sixteenth century, to describe his written reflections on various subjects. His essays resembled public letters about his observations, his reading, and his ruminations. He rambled much more than

essayists do now, letting his thoughts move from one idea to another. He was curious, as all good writers are, asking questions and seeking to answer them. He died in church in 1592, but his integrity and wit make disciples of his thought four centuries after his death.

Montaigne wrote with an independent mind, without accepting the prejudices of the crowd and without seeking favor from the powerful. His writing is natural, unaffected, simple. "I speak to the paper," he wrote, "just as I speak to someone I meet for the first time."¹ He never talked down to readers. Nor did he pander to their prejudices; he never feared to be in the minority. He tried to see things as they were, and his observations were surprising for their freshness. He proved that an honest observer always has something new to say.

He called his pieces *essays*, from the French word *essai*, meaning "attempts" or "trials." For him, an essay was just that—an attempt to think clearly. He was far too humble to claim that he had established truth beyond all doubt. "I freely give my opinions on all things," he wrote, "even those that may go beyond my competence and on which I by no means claim to be an authority. And so my thoughts about them are only to reveal the extent of my vision and not the limits of things themselves."² He supposed that he had made an "essay" toward truth—observing honestly, marshaling his evidence, reflecting on his experience, interpreting it as fairly as he could. When he could not answer a question, he admitted his ignorance. He never claimed to have found the truth about everything.

He knew his conclusions would not satisfy everyone. Still he advanced them tolerantly, serenely, without insulting his opponents, without heating his prose with passion except on the rare occasions when he condemned the religious wars burning across France in his time. He was confident without being arrogant. He did not believe he had to save the world. He believed that reason, clearly and gently set down on paper, would win its own battles. He did not try to crush his foes. He remained somewhat detached, like a man calmly taking us across a varied landscape, expertly pointing out features we otherwise might have missed. He claimed not to be an authority, but he was; his opinions demonstrate wide reading and deep thinking.

Most good essays are akin to Montaigne's—civilized efforts to arrive at truth without rancor, without destroying those who disagree. Good essays appeal to the best in readers, to their sense of fair play, to their best emotions, to their wish to do the right thing, to their ability to think.

Now and then you may be tempted to write passionately for a noble cause. Resist the temptation. A few writers manage great passion for great causes, but success is rare in passionate writers because few of them control passion well. Angry passion easily becomes bombast and self-righteousness. Sentimentality often becomes cloying. Most readers dislike prose dipped in syrup. Superheated prose is usually embarrassing.

One of the greatest essays of modern times is "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," written by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., when he was arrested by a city government whose police chief had turned savage dogs on black citizens—including children—peacefully demonstrating for their rights. Young and old black Americans had been whipped, beaten, bitten, maimed, and killed, and King had every reason to be furious. But his essay does not project fury. Instead, it rises to a quiet eloquence and power just *because* it is calm and reasonable. King had such confidence in the righteousness of his cause and the fundamental fairness of his readers that he did not have to scream his convictions.

King's example teaches us that writers who rudely dismiss opinions with which they disagree do not have much effect on those opinions. You can't write, "That's stupid" or "It's all baloney" or "This is totally ignorant" and expect anybody to take you seriously. Readers usually scorn contemptuous language in writers. If you disagree with something, you have to work out the reasons for your disagreement and present these reasons in careful steps, maintaining the calm and the confidence of one who is unthreatened by dissent. Such careful responses can be crushing and memorable—as Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" proves.

The best prose is tolerant and cool. If you are temperate and measured and reasoned, and if you think of your reader as a friend to persuade rather than a foe to slay, you will have a far better chance of carrying your point than if you dip your pen in fire and write to burn.

Qualities of the Good Essay

Here are some qualities of good essays. Study them carefully.

1. Most essays are short enough to be read at a sitting.

Some books may be called *essays* since a serious nonfiction book involves a sustained argument meant to make us accept the writer's view. In the more common meaning of the word, an *essay* is a shorter nonfiction piece that can be read at one sitting. An essay is extended prose in that it is more than a sentence or a paragraph. Just how long you make an essay depends on your purposes and your audience, but all of us should recall the sound advice of Polonius in *Hamlet*: "Brevity is the soul of wit." Perhaps the Spanish writer Baltasar Gracian said it even better: "Good things, if short, are twice as good."

For new writers, an assignment to write a 2500-word essay may seem monstrous. Experienced writers find the *short* essay far more difficult. They cannot fit all they know into the space available. They must decide what is most important in what they know and how to present it in the

most striking way possible. Every word must count; every sentence must be just right. Every unnecessary word must be chopped out.

2. A good essay gets to the point quickly.

Readers want to know right away why they should read your work. Nothing annoys a reader like delay. "What is this writer trying to say? Why am I reading this?" Remember "Little Red Riding Hood." In the first couple of sentences, we get to the tension that will be the subject of the story, and we read on. Let your readers know quickly where the tension in your essay lies, and get on with it. Don't keep them waiting. Some inexperienced writers love surprise endings. Such endings seldom work in essays. I have never received an effective surprise ending from a student in all my years in the classroom.

3. Write effective titles.

A good title is part of your beginning. Use it to sharpen your purpose so that the reader will know at once what you are writing about. Scholars are fond of titles with a colon in the middle: "Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century." That was the title of a recent article by Mark Bassin in the *American Historical Review*. A title in PMLA (the Publication of the Modern Language Association) was "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism." Such titles have the advantages of a catchy opening and an explanation immediately after the colon.

Titles in popular magazines often do not use colons, but they have subtitles that explain the article to come. The lead story in *Sports Illustrated* for December 21, 1992, had as its title, "The Eternal Example." The subtitle said, "Arthur Ashe epitomizes good works, devotion to family and unwavering grace under pressure."

HOW TO BEGIN

No book can tell you all the ways to begin an essay. Your best bet is to study beginnings written by professional writers and to imitate them. Here are some examples of common types of beginnings. Not that all of them develop a point of tension at the beginning. Something is out of balance or unfinished or in some way portends conflict or opposition.

Tell a story In the January 1993 *Atlantic*, Erik Larson begins like this:

On December 16, 1988, Nicholas Elliot, barely sixteen, walked into the Atlantic Shores Christian School, in Virginia Beach, Virginia, with a semi-

automatic handgun hidden in his backpack. By midmorning a forty-one-year-old teacher had been shot dead, and another teacher, struck by two nine-millimeter bullets, was extraordinarily lucky to be alive. Two other teachers narrowly escaped Nicholas Elliot's bullets. One found herself running a zigzag pattern through the school yard as Nicholas fired round after round at her back. The other, a man who tackled Nicholas and in the process saved the lives of a roomful of crying and praying teenagers, felt a bullet breeze past his head.³

When we read a story like this, the tension is obvious. We want to know what happened next—and why all this happened in the first place. We love stories. They seem to be part of our natural inheritance as human beings.

Two cautions! Be sure the story truly introduces the essay that comes after it. Erik Larson's essay argues that we should regulate gun ownership at least as strictly as we regulate the right to drive a car. The story fits this essay exactly.

And don't represent a story as true when you have no evidence for the details. Don't make things up. For example, don't start a paper like this:

It was night in the royal palace in Greenwich, and a sleepy silence hung over the dark corridors and the rooms where servants lay snoring abed. Only Henry VIII was awake, and he walked the floor aimlessly before the great fire that blazed on the hearth in his room. He could not sleep because he could not purge his mind of the greatest problem of his reign: How could he have a son?

It's perfectly all right to imagine that Henry VIII had every reason for walking the floor at night, worrying about the succession to the throne of England. But no document gives any evidence that such a scene took place. If you are ever caught telling a lie when you write something you claim to be the truth, your reputation as a writer will be ruined forever.

Describe a scene Akin to telling a story is giving a description that arouses curiosity. The reader wants to know, What exactly is happening here? Why is this significant? The scene being described must be interesting in itself. And it must point to the essay that follows. Here is the first paragraph of an essay on Appalachia from the *National Geographic*:

It's hard to know Appalachia. Plenty of people think they do. I thought I knew it before I left my home there, in Kingsport, Tennessee, for the Northeast ten years ago. I knew it as a place that was lush and moody in the summer. Mist clung to the green mountainsides, and the creek beds I waded in to search for salamanders were filled with the scent of honeysuckle. In autumn, slopes and ridges teemed with maples, dogwoods, and oaks—with color that set the land on fire. I remember hiking to Abrams Falls in Virginia

with my girlfriends to swim in a chilly pool under the potent column of white water and sitting on a friend's farmhouse porch at dusk listening to rain fall on the roof.⁴

Notice that even this descriptive paragraph begins with a note of tension. "It's hard to know Appalachia." This writer seems to know it well; she describes it powerfully. But she is going to reveal what she finds are its difficulties and contradictions in the article to follow.

Use a provocative quotation The quotation must say something provocative; we want to know what it means. The essay to follow can then explain it and reveal its significance.

"Romance with commitment. That's what today's woman wants."

These were the words of Calvin Klein, introducing a floral-scented fragrance named Eternity five years ago. That's when *commitment* was in, a word that has gone from connoting entrance into a mental institution to its modern meaning of "permanent relationship" or perhaps a mutual understanding to date steadily at least through New Year's Eve. If you want a word to stand for a long-range commitment, *eternity* cannot be topped. (*Forever* must have been considered, but the diamond people have a lock on that word; *forever* is expensive.)⁵

The quotation must also be significant enough to build your essay upon. A bland quotation will not interest readers, and it may not be enough for you to build an essay upon.

Begin with a simple, definite statement Sometimes it's best to renounce all art and begin with a simple statement that will provoke agreement or curiosity.

On two visits this year I walked, rode, and interviewed people all over Portland, Oregon, trying to figure out how this courteous, well-kept city of 453,000, and especially its downtown, has become a paragon of healthy urban development at a time when most American cities find themselves mired in seemingly intractable problems.⁶

Ask a question Occasionally a question makes a good beginning. The writer may answer it and then proceed to the rest of the article. Or the writer may leave it there to be puzzled over until later in the essay. The question does not have to be the first sentence in the article, but it does have to come quickly.

An African Eve is a seductive idea—dark-skinned, strongly built, the primeval woman, mother of us all. But did she actually exist? Was there actually an evolutionary Garden of Eden in Africa where we all originated more than 150,000 years ago?⁷

Use contrast Very often good essays begin with a statement of common belief or practice and quickly declare a contrary view. You set up a position or a situation that will be recognized by your readers, and you declare after a paragraph or two that you are going to take an opposite, or at least a different, view.

The three best-known buildings of Thomas Jefferson's own design deserve their fame. Monticello, his home, shaped over the years, breathes with his mind like the shell of a living thing, protecting and revealing it. The University of Virginia brings buildings into intimate conversation with one another on a high, ideal plane. The Virginia state capitol, in Richmond, is a frontier temple, democratically elite.

But other buildings important in Jefferson's life are far less visited, though each reveals something about him. All of the five considered here were closed to the public until recently, and even now when they are open they are not heavily trafficked. Each offers a special angle of entry into Jefferson's world, an opening into his mind. Two are ruins (Rosewell and Barboursville), with enough remaining to suggest their former elegance. Two are presidential houses (Montpelier and Poplar Forest), held by private owners until this decade. The one that has remained least changed is the first building Jefferson ever knew.⁸

BEGINNINGS TO AVOID

Here are some beginnings to avoid. Some don't introduce the essay; some are just boring.

The dictionary definition Never begin an essay like this: "Webster's dictionary defines *crisis* as 'a decisive or crucial time, stage, or event.'" Ugh!

We see beginnings like that all the time. That's what's wrong with them. They are the mark of a writer who won't take the time to think of something better.

Yes, the dictionary is an authority, and writers need authority. A dictionary definition contains an outline that an inexperienced writer may follow. Writing teachers see the tired old dictionary beginning hundreds of times—and groan every time.

You can write a good essay about a definition only if different people use the same important word in different ways. If people did not use the word in different ways, the essay would be unnecessary. What does *socialism* mean? You can't satisfy demanding readers if you begin an essay on socialism by referring to a dictionary. Almost every important thinker who has used this word has used it in a special way. Socialism in Sweden is one thing; socialism in the former Soviet Union was something utterly different. A member of the British Labour party will use the word with an entirely different sense from that of an official of the American Medical

Association. Your definition of an important word, derived from your own study, could make the substance of an excellent essay, but it will not be the bare-bones outline of a dictionary. It will be long enough to consider the important variations among the definitions of another.

A vague declaration about history The appeal to history is another old standby that makes teachers and other readers groan.

Throughout history, the family has been an important part of human life. Families were known to the ancient Israelites and to the Greeks and the Romans. They remain important to us today, but they are changing. What are the important challenges facing the family today?

Another ugh! Many subjects require historical background; for example, an essay defining *socialism* or *liberalism* or *humanism* would have to take history into account. But don't start with history unless the historical background of your topic is essential to what you want to say about it.

The justification of the topic Many inexperienced writers begin essays with a kind of apology. Their first statement defends their choice of topic: "Why should we discuss the minor characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?" or "The difference between the theology of Luther's sermons and his formal theological treatises has often been considered by scholars of the Reformation." They follow these opening statements with a survey of previous scholarship, leaving themselves a tiny window through which they can scramble with their own contribution. This is the typical beginning of dissertations. The implied comment seems to be something like this: "I know you think that nobody as young and inexperienced as I am can possibly have anything to say on this subject, but if you will just be patient and give me a break and don't hit me, I'll prove that I have a modest contribution to make."

You don't have to have the permission of previous scholars to make your point. If you think the minor characters in *Macbeth* are worth saying something about, get to work and prove your point. If you find Luther's theological treatises different from his sermons, show your readers what you mean. Don't unroll a long and tedious list of previous scholarship. You may use other scholarship along the way. Indeed you should if you are to have any authority. Refute it, modify it, or use it to confirm your case. But don't begin with an uninteresting summary of what others have done as if you had no right to consider a subject without starting with a recapitulation of the past.

Real writers want to tell readers something. They don't apologize for daring to have an idea. Begin with something strong, something to catch your readers' eyes and make them continue.

The blueprint beginning I've already given an account of the blueprint beginning above in discussing "Little Red Riding Hood." Avoid it. Imagine how startled you would be to find the following beginning of an article in *Sports Illustrated*:

In this article I am going to tell you about the World Series. I shall tell you what teams played in it, provide some background about the seasons and their victories, and describe their coaches. I will also tell you about the star players—their tantrums over their contracts, their run-ins with drugs, their infidelities, and their adorable children—and I shall make some remarks about their parents. I shall include a summary of each of the games and will conclude with the results and, at long last, tell you who won.

You know—almost unconsciously—that this kind of beginning is deadly dull and that reading the story to follow will be like wading knee-deep in mud to get to the end. Don't use it.

The "man from mars" Variations on this beginning include the archaeologist from a future civilization or the person awakened from the dead of an earlier epoch to look on our own time. "If Thomas Edison were to come back from the dead, he would be astounded to see how far the motion picture has progressed since his primitive invention that set film turning through cameras." If Thomas Edison were to return from the dead, he would be on so many talk shows and would have so much to say that his impressions of film would be unimportant. These are tired old beginnings. If they once had verve, it withered long ago. Don't use them. Thousands of uninspired writers have worn them out.

4. A good essay stays with its subject.

A good essay explores a major theme, perhaps from several angles and perhaps with subthemes. It shows the writer thinking, thinking, thinking. It may develop some thoughts only to reject them. Even so, it is finally about one subject. When you are checking over your last drafts, make sure everything contributes to the matter at hand. Don't wander into interesting but inconsequential details. If, for example, you are writing about how the kings in Shakespeare's history plays claim the right to rule, don't wander off into a general plot summary of the plays that will dilute your main topic. Don't, for example, digress to tell us how poetic Richard II is or how much Shakespeare was influenced by Thomas More when he wrote about women. These ideas, interesting as they are, have nothing to do with your topic.

Digression in a rough draft may help you clarify a topic, for when you put words on paper, you may be the sort of writer who wanders all over the place, sniffing out a topic. But by the time you write your final draft, you should have decided what you want to say and be able to take your

reader directly to it. Look at each sentence, each paragraph, to be sure it suits your purpose. If it doesn't, cut it out—no matter how much you may like it.

5. A good essay rests on solid evidence.

Not long ago I read an essay that compared the 1960s with the 1980s. It made some points that seemed more or less correct. The 1960s were much more sexually free than the 1980s when AIDS became a frightening possibility to those who had many sexual partners. The 1960s featured a great deal of protest on campus; the 1980s were calmer. So it went.

But not once in this essay did the writer quote a text from the 1960s or the 1980s. Not once did he compare films from the two decades. Nor had he tried to look at the art of both those periods. He cited no statistics of any kind. He wrote as if he had only to make a generalization and we would accept it because it was a truth everybody agreed on.

In fact, most generalizations we make about reality are flawed. When we look closely at the evidence, we find that all of it does not conform to received opinion. One of the most important parts of your education will be learn to question generalizations—to decide where they come from, why people make them, and who profits by them. If you keep your mind fixed on the specific, on evidence, you will have the authority to question those generalizations because you have some evidence to support your opinion.

Here is a generalization I have often heard: "Latin should be required of all students who want to write because people who know Latin write English better than people who do not." But how do we know that people who know Latin write English better than people who do not? Has somebody tested the writing ability of those who know Latin and those who do not? Are journals published by classics scholars better-written than journals published by English scholars? If we had such a test, and if somebody made a study of the scholarly writing in classics journals and in English journals, we might have some evidence. But without evidence, we have only sound and fury.

One of the best habits you can develop as a writer is to provide a specific example to support every generalization or opinion you put in an essay. My best students pour factual information into their writing. Reading their papers is a continual encounter with the real world—the world of people and places, objects and events.

But all of us who teach run into papers—sometimes on big topics like abortion, drugs, capital punishment, homosexuality, religion, or whatever—written by people who seem to think no one else has ever written on these topics. Most university libraries now have their catalogs on-line and available on computer monitors throughout the library buildings. In many libraries you can type a subject like "abortion" into the computer

and find articles written about it for the past three or four years in both academic and popular journals. In this computer age, the first obligation of a writer considering a topic is to look into the library's computerized catalog to see what sources are available. (In checking my own library's on-line service, I discovered 2476 articles on the subject "abortion" published in the past four years.) When you write, remember that others have thought about the same subject, that their thoughts are out there in libraries, and that you can find them with just a little effort.

What is evidence? I discuss the matter at greater length in Chapter Four, "Making Arguments." But here are some rapid answers to the question.

Experience

Your experience counts as evidence if it relates to the topic at hand. If you write about violence in the public schools of America and you happen to have attended a school where kids brought knives and pistols to class, your experience is evidence. So is the experience of others that you may read about in newspapers or magazines. The epidemic of violence in the schools has been written about frequently in recent times.

Experience does not happen just with the body; it happens with the mind. Every book and article you have read is part of your experience. Some other course you have taken may provide evidence for any course where you have to write an essay. When I am teaching Shakespeare's history plays and a student brings in something he or she has read in a history course or a psychology course or a course in philosophy or economics or religion, I leap and dance for joy.

One reason for trying to find a topic to write about as soon as you get an assignment is that you will start viewing everything in your reading and in your personal experience as possible evidence for your essay. I happen to be writing a book about Martin Luther as I am writing this book. I can't go into an art museum now without thinking about the differences in religious art before Luther's time (in the sixteenth century) and afterward. I can't read *Hamlet* without thinking about Luther's views on predestination and without recalling that Hamlet presumably attended Luther's University of Wittenberg—and naturally I have to consider the inconvenient facts that given the supposed dating of the action of the play, Hamlet was at Wittenberg before Luther was born and centuries before the university was founded.

Samuel Johnson told James Boswell in the eighteenth century, "Depend on it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Most writers will not be hanged in two weeks, but the name "deadline" maintains its somewhat macabre connotation. Knowing that a deadline lies ahead should make us focus

our thoughts from every source on the writing we will hand over to readers.

Statistics

Medical statistics show that cigarette smokers are much more likely to die of lung cancer and heart disease than are nonsmokers. Baseball statistics show that left-handed batters are more successful against right-handed pitchers than against left-handed pitchers. American students score much lower on average than their Asian counterparts when they take generalized tests in mathematics but much higher when they are tested for self-esteem.

Statistical data must be interpreted fairly and intelligently; someone has said that statistics don't lie but that liars use statistics. Even so, statistics represent evidence, and they can strengthen your essay. My student who compared the 1960s and the 1980s could have strengthened his paper immeasurably by comparing some statistics from the two periods.

Quotations

If you interpret a literary or historical or scientific text, you must quote from it, providing the exact words that will help us to hear a voice or catch a tone.

Vladimir Nabokov, teacher and author of many novels, including *Lolita*, used to tell his students to begin their study of a novel or story by noting *exactly what the writer said*. This close reading, this intense preoccupation with exactitude, should guide the careful writer in the search for evidence. Study the text, and see exactly what it says. Quote from it to prove your point.

But be careful. Nothing is quite as tedious as the long essay that is hardly more than a quotation. Long block quotations can be especially annoying. They break the rhythm of style in the essay where they are set. The writer who uses them may assume that they can stand by themselves without interpretation, but readers may find them obscure. Sometimes, of course, we must all use block quotations. An example is this book. Since it is a descriptive account of American writing, I could not make my points without giving block quotations of writing that has something to teach us.

But in other kinds of writing, block quotations should be used sparingly. And always provide an interpretation to fit them securely into the topic of your essay. Don't use them just to fill up space.

It is far better to quote a sentence or even a phrase that will give the precise flavor of a writer's work that you are trying to convey. Too often a block quotation contains much more than the essay writer wants to convey, and the reader gets lost. If you quote a sentence or a phrase, readers can get the point and follow you.

A caution: Never accept a quotation as the final authority for an argument merely because the speaker is a well-known figure. Suppose a noted male chauvinist declares, "Males are doomed to extinction unless they band together, go off to the woods, beat drums, and utter primal screams to recover the virility that feminist rhetoric has taken away from them." Nonsense is nonsense, and a quotation from a book of nonsense is no proof that men should buy drums and head for the woods. Quotations from well-known people should be put to the test of common sense and bolstered by evidence before being accepted as proof of anything.

Quote for one of the following reasons:

1. Your source has said something in a striking and memorable way that fits your argument. "Nothing but honey is sweeter than money," Ben Franklin wrote in *Poor Richard's Almanack*.
2. The quotation confirms a point you have argued or will argue in your essay.

Political renegade Pat Buchanan raised his umbrella against the gray, damp sky last week as he surveyed the line of guests filing into the White House for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony. "The last roll call," he said.

He was right. There were 250 members of the power establishment of 12 years and earlier, and they flocked and laughed together, even as workers nearby hammered together the inaugural stands for the installation of Bill Clinton. An era ended with more than a tinge of sadness for its creators, yet cheer lingered from the exhilaration of such a journey.⁹

3. You wish to tell what the quotation means.

"Is social work now a profession?" a didactic 1930 essay anxiously queried in the *Survey*, Paul Kellogg's journal of social service reform. "Yes," replied author Hazel Newton, a social worker who had become general manager of the Cooperative Workrooms in Boston. And, she added, through the medium of her fictionalized "Miss Case-Worker" named "Jane," professionalism meant they were "going scientific." Social workers like Jane were learning to beware of "putting too much of one's own prejudices, sentiments, loves and hates, into one's job." Against an old-fashioned, voluntary Lady Bountiful, Newton celebrated the "scientific" Miss Case-Worker, an "objective" social investigator. Because objectivity and rationality were conventionally associated with male professional culture, however, the scientific model created its own tensions for female social workers.¹⁰

In the above article, the writer considers the significance of the quotations at the time they were made.

Authorities

A renowned medical researcher is an authority on blood cholesterol. If he says cholesterol is not as dangerous to the heart as most medical

scientists think, you can use his comment as evidence. But it not conclusive evidence. The opinion of an authority is only another opinion, respected because we assume that the authority has done something worthy of respect. Authorities can be wrong; they often are. It is best to mention an authority only after you have given other evidence that supports the position you and the authority take.

And remember that an authority in one field is not necessarily an authority in another. Not long ago I looked through a book by a prominent lawyer who argued against Charles Darwin's hypothesis of biological evolution. The lawyer was doubtless intelligent and a fine lawyer, but I was not at all convinced that he had any scientific competence to denounce Darwin. Every working biologist I know of accepts Darwin's fundamental tenet of evolution by natural selection. When a working scientist denounces Darwin, I will take the matter seriously.

6. A good essay considers evidence that may seem to contradict the writer's argument.

If you write on a controversial subject, you must consider contrary evidence and interpretations different from your own. Careless or dishonest writers ignore contrary evidence. They imagine they will weaken their case if they mention the arguments on the other side of the issue. The reader who discovers such a deceit quickly loses respect for the writer.

Every year thousands of writers in college courses argue important issues without considering contrary evidence and often without acknowledging that any contrary evidence exists. Important controversial issues seldom have all the good guys on one side and all the bad guys on the other. Papers that assume such a moral division convince only the naïve; they do not change the minds of those in the thoughtful audience who are looking for guidance, the very audience you should be trying to persuade. If you write as if every opponent is a knave or a fool, fair-minded readers will dismiss you and your work.

One of the greatest writing problems my students face is within themselves. They want to believe that knowledge is a seamless garment, that all its parts fit so closely together that there is no room for disagreement among honest people. They want to pretend that they know everything. But knowledge is seldom so tidy, and it is never complete. Knowledge comes in pieces with rough edges and holes, and some pieces are always missing. Honest writers admit the difficulties.

Even concession can be a powerful argument. Concede the truth of contrary evidence when you believe it is true. You may argue that it does not damage your case. Or you may argue that it has been misinterpreted by your foes.

Never be too proud or too frightened to make a concession. To concede a point gives the appearance of fair-mindedness and confi-

dence—an appearance valuable in persuasive essays. Strategic concession has been recognized since the orators of ancient Greece as a major strength in both speaking and writing. A writer might include in an essay the following concession:

Yes, I concede that the bottle bill will be a pain to all of us. We can't toss the bottles out anymore. We will have to pay more for Cokes and beer. We will have to haul bottles back to stores to collect our deposit. The bottle bill will cost all of us more time and money than we like if it is enacted into law.

Such a concession clears the way for the writer to come back with a stronger argument for the essay's position.

But the bottle bill may save some money, too—money now spent in cleaning up the litter tossed along our streets and highways, money spent in repairing the damage done to tires and sometimes to bare feet by broken glass. The experience of other states with bottle laws is that litter is dramatically reduced when people have some financial incentive to return bottles to the store rather than toss them away when they are empty. Once people experience the cleaner environment, they may well decide that it is worth the little extra time and money the bottle bill costs them.

Those who argue vehemently and blindly for a cause sound like fanatics. Only fanatics listen to fanatics. Your aim should be to attract another kind of reader.

7. A good essay is written with its audience in mind.

Remember your audience, the readers you want to like your work. We have already posed some important questions about audience. What do your readers know? What do you share with them? What will interest them? How can you win their respect?

Share your writing with friends. Ask them to tell you what it said to them, what they think you are trying to say. Don't ask them, "What do you think about this?" Most of them will say, "I like it." Friends are like that; they sometimes lie to make you feel good. When you ask them to tell you what they think you have said, you put a different obligation on them, and you may learn much more about your prose. If they can't tell you what you've said, you need to revise some more.

Most professional writers share their work with somebody. An acquaintance of mine says he writes for about five women he knows—all of them critical but tolerant. I write for my editor, who has worked with me for more than twenty years. She is a woman of taste and intelligence, not afraid to ask questions, not afraid to tell me she doesn't know what I'm trying to say or that she doesn't know why I'm saying this or that. I believe that if I can interest her, others will be interested, too.

Writing for an audience does not mean a hypocritical effort to please

at any price. You have your own opinions, your knowledge, your ambitions for your writing. Express them to please and persuade people you know. You can take pride in making someone you admire say, "I like this; you have convinced me."

My editor is a good human being who loves to read. She will not let me insult people or make sweeping generalizations. She will not let me be silly or vague or bad-tempered. Writers writing about things they care about may make all these errors in early drafts. My editor marks them with a strong blue pencil; I know what she is likely to mark, and I keep her in mind as I write, trying to avoid the flaws that irritate her. I do not always succeed. But she is my audience, the kind of person I want to read my work, and my sense of her as a person makes my writing better than it would be without her.

Respect your audience. Make your audience respect you. Wayne C. Booth, a noted authority on writing, has said that every piece of writing has an "implied author," someone your readers find standing behind the words on the page. Your implied author may not be the person you want to be. Some inexperienced writers think they are being bold and superior when they adopt a slangy style of writing only to discover that their readers find them arrogant and shallow. To reach the widest audience, your own implied author should be sincere, humane, convincing, tolerant, interested, fair-minded, and honest, showing confidence in the intelligence and fair-mindedness of the readers. A little humor always helps.

Don't be cute or silly, but be lively. Write naturally. Use simple words rather than complicated ones—unless your thoughts can be expressed only with complicated words. Don't qualify statements too much; don't sound wishy-washy. Write as if you like your readers and trust them to have good sense. Don't show off; don't condescend. Be honest and forthright, simple and direct.

8. A good essay makes internal connections.

A good essay will march step by step to its destination. Each step will be clearly marked; it will depend on what has gone before, and it will lead gracefully to what comes afterward. Good transitions are essential to good writing; your readers need to be able to follow the development of your subject, and transitions help them see the relation of the parts to the whole. As I said earlier in this book, good transitions are like the yellow arrows painted on the road to show a bicycling group where it needs to turn to stay on route to the goal.

The verbal signs of such transitions are words such as *because*, *furthermore*, *therefore*, *thus*, *but*, *and*, and *nevertheless*. You seldom write these words to make the transitions, but you may imply them in various ways. In a good piece of writing, a reader senses the connections and uses them to move easily from one part of the essay to the next.

Here again, a good essay resembles a good story. In telling a story, we

construct a chain of cause and effect. We say, "This happened; and because of it, the next thing happened; and because of that next thing, another thing happened." Or else we say simply that one thing happened after another. Were we to leave out a step, the rest of the story would be confusing or incomprehensible or simply dull. Leave the wolf out of "Little Red Riding Hood," for example, and you're left with a little girl who goes through the woods, delivers some cakes to her grandmother, and comes home again. It's as dull as watching a pig sleep. Good fiction involves a connected series of tension-building episodes beginning with the first and going forward to resolution at the end.

A good essay proceeds in much the same way. The essayist may say something like this: "A is true. Because A is true, B is also true. Because A and B are true, C is also true." Sometimes the connections are more tentative. "A is true. If A is true, B may also be true. If A and B are true, C may also be true." Whether the connections are certain or tentative, they exist, and they hold the parts of the good essay together. One thought leads clearly to the next. Readers are not left wondering how the writer got here from there or why the writer is telling them this. Good writers read and reread their work carefully. When you read an essay you have written, look at every paragraph. Be sure that each paragraph flows smoothly out of the paragraph that comes before it. You do not have to have transitional words such as *therefore* or *furthermore*. But you should be able to see where they are implied so that one part of your essay clearly leads to the next.

9. A good essay is well-integrated; it does not drift without clear purpose from item to item.

It is not a plot summary. This point is related to the requirement that an essay have a single guiding purpose and that it be clear throughout. Find ways to subordinate your evidence to categories that allow you to unite your data under a major theme. Make a distinction between major points and minor ones.

Frequently, my students give me what I call the "museum-tour essay." They are the guides; I am the visitor. "Here is an impressionist painting by Renoir," they say. "And here is one by Manet. And look! Here is one by Monet. And look there—a painting by Pissaro."

The "museum tour" may a plot summary of a literary text. The summary may be loosely united by a broad and general idea. The idea may be so obvious that no one needs to write about it.

Macbeth shows the dangers of ambition. Macbeth is ambitious until the witches tell him he will be king and that from his friend Banquo a long line of kings will come. Macbeth then resolves to kill Duncan, the lawful king, and he does, driven by his wife who is also ambitious. But he cannot stop with Duncan; he must also try to kill Banquo and Banquo's son

because having fulfilled one part of the prophecy, he is eager to keep the other part from coming true. His ambition drives him to try to destroy all his enemies, and so he has the family of Macduff also killed.

All of this is true, but anyone can read the play and see that it is true. To make an essay on *Macbeth* interesting, you must find some organizing principle that will help you integrate these various facts. You should not merely lead your readers from the beginning of the play to the end, pointing out interesting facts along the way. Remember that a good story—like a good essay—works toward a climax where everything we have been told comes together in some sort of resolution. It is not merely a collection of interesting facts; the facts are organized by the climax, the resolution, by the goal that makes you tell the story.

If you write about *Macbeth*, you may write about *conscience*, the human sense of right and wrong. And here you find something interesting: Macbeth starts with a tender conscience but becomes harder and harder as the play goes along. At first, Lady Macbeth seems the stronger of the two, but her bad conscience overwhelms her, and she is finally driven to madness and death by her guilty dreams. Here is a question worth a paper: What do these opposite reactions mean?

The question provides the possibility of real analysis. The word *analysis* means that something is broken down into its parts and put together in a different form. If we analyze water in a laboratory, we discover that it is composed of two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen, and, in its natural state, various other materials, such as microbes, earth, and various "impurities." When we analyze a text, we break it down into various ideas that will help us understand what makes it work; and once the work is broken down, we use it in a different form. So here is a tip to help you judge your own work to see if you are giving just a plot summary, or "museum tour." Beware if you find yourself following this pattern: The essay begins with the beginning of your story or document; the middle of the essay is about the middle of your document; the end of the essay is about the end of your document. It is not impossible to write a good essay following that pattern, but it is rare. I suggest that you try always to make the form of your essay different from the form of the document you are writing about.

10. A good essay is mechanically and grammatically correct and looks neat on the page.

Telling a writer to use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling is like telling a pianist to hit the right notes. You can make lots of errors when you are writing drafts; we all do. But you must care enough about your work to proofread it before you turn it over to the audience for whom it is intended.

The mechanical conventions of writing have developed historically,

sometimes without much logic. English spelling seems especially illogical, and whether you spell well or not has nothing to do with your basic intelligence. Some people are bad spellers, and all that means is that they are bad spellers.

Even so, the mechanical conventions are essential symbols of communication, and you must observe them. Otherwise readers will struggle with your prose. If you do not observe the conventions, most readers will suppose you are careless, illiterate, or even stupid. They may also suppose you don't care enough about them to want to give them your best effort.

Learn to use a keyboard and a computer. If you do not know how to type, learn. Learn to compose at the keyboard. Mark up your early drafts. But when your work goes out to your readers, it should be neat, clean, and correct. If you do not respect your own work, others will not respect it either.

Ask your friends to correct your work. I've been responsible for some strong friendships among my first-year students when they were paired off and had to proofread each other's work. Use the dictionary and the spelling checker on your computer's word-processing program. I keep by my keyboard the *Instant Spelling Dictionary* published by Career Publishing of Mundelein, Illinois. It contains 25,000 words without definitions. I can flip through it quickly to discover if I have spelled *dilettante* correctly. I also have a dictionary within reach at every desk and table where I work at home or in my office. Think of your readers. Misspelled words, bad punctuation, the odd use of quotation marks—all make reading hard. Observing the conventions is a form of courtesy.

11. A good essay concludes swiftly and gracefully.

Conclusions are difficult, and many writers have trouble with them. You can conclude in many ways, but almost always your final paragraphs should reflect some of the thoughts presented in your first paragraphs. An essay is like a snake biting its tail; at the end it always comes back to its beginning. Here is the first paragraph of an essay by Lewis Thomas called "To Err Is Human." Note that it does what a good beginning should do—it creates tension about the topic the writer is going to pursue.

Everyone must have had at least one personal experience with a computer error by this time. Bank balances are suddenly reported to have jumped from \$379 into the millions, appeals for charitable contributions are mailed over and over to people with crazy-sounding names at your address, department stores send the wrong bills, utility companies write that they're turning everything off, that sort of thing.¹¹

Now, here is the end of Thomas's essay. Notice that the last paragraph picks up some of the thoughts from the first. We can read these two

paragraphs and have a pretty good idea what the essay is about and about its general message.

We should have this in mind as we become dependent on more complex computers for the arrangement of our affairs. Give the computers their heads, I say; let them go their way. If we can learn to do this, turning our heads to one side and wincing while the work proceeds, the possibilities for the future of mankind, and computerkind, are limitless. Your average good computer can make calculations in an instant which would take a lifetime of slide rules for any of us. Think of what we could gain from the near infinity of precise, machine-made miscomputation which is now so easily within our grasp. We could begin the solving of some of our hardest problems. How, for instance, should we go about organizing ourselves for social living on a planetary scale now that we have become, as a plain fact of life, a single community? We can assume, as a working hypothesis, that all the right ways of doing this are unworkable. What we need, then, for moving ahead, is a set of wrong alternatives much longer and more interesting than the short list of mistaken courses that any of us can think up right now. We need, in fact, an infinite list, and when it is printed out we need the computer to turn on itself and select, at random, the next way to go. If it is a big enough mistake, we could find ourselves on a new level, stunned, out in the clear, ready to move again.¹²

From this beginning and ending, we can tell that Thomas finds something positive in computer error. Mistakes with computers are common, and he finds that they open a way to progress. How? We have to read the rest of the essay—the part between the beginning and the end—to find out. Even so, we find the gist of his argument in the first and last paragraphs.

Like Thomas, you may end by drawing some conclusions suggested by the argument you have presented in the rest of your essay. The whole essay adds up to the conclusion you present at the end. The last paragraph is like the sum of a column of figures you might add. It is the total of all the points you have made so far.

Quotations make good conclusions, just as they make good beginnings. When a quotation stands at the start of an essay, it demands to be explained by what comes after it. When a quotation stands at the end of an essay, it reflects the conclusion the essay has made, sometimes summing it up.

It is not good to introduce important new ideas or information in a conclusion. Your readers will feel cheated when you do not develop these new thoughts. And you should always avoid the blueprint ending, just as you should avoid the blueprint beginning.

I have shown that little girls who carry baskets of cakes into woods where lurk big, bad wolves are likely to come to a bad end.



Concluding Remarks on the Essay

We take for granted our amazing ability to recognize different forms of literature when we read them. We know a poem when we see one; we know we are reading fictional prose or a play when we read these texts. We may not know whether the fictional prose is a short story or a novel if we read one page at random from the whole. But we know we are reading fiction unless the author has made a deliberate attempt to deceive us into supposing that he or she is writing about truth. (George Orwell never shot an elephant, although he wrote a celebrated account of this supposed deed; and he never helped hang a condemned prisoner in Burma, although he also claimed to have done so.) Fiction usually tells us by its form that it is fiction.

We also know quickly when we are reading nonfiction, even if we pick up a piece and start in the middle without having any idea as to the title or the author. We may not know whether it is an essay or a book, but we know that the author intends to make us think we are reading something “real” or “true.”

The essay belongs to the general family of nonfiction. But it relies on fictional techniques in that like a good story it begins with something out of order and attempts to explain or fix the problem. Readers begin essays with certain expectations. If they do not find these expectations fulfilled, they stop reading. I have tried to summarize these expectations in this chapter. Check your own essay against my list and see if they conform to it. If not, think your essay through again to be sure your deviation is worth the risk you run when you deny readers the fulfillment of their expectations.

The essay will be useful to you throughout life as you write memos, business letters, reports, and articles. Develop the habit of studying essays you find enjoyable. Check the advice in this chapter by studying any essay you like to see how it is put together. As you become more aware of the habits of good writers, you will develop these habits yourself. Your prose will reflect what you read. Be a good reader, and you will not need this or any textbook to help you write well.