

## ROBERT WRIGHT : TIPS ON ESSAY WRITING

### Like, I hate writing these %&#\* things

Maybe, but essay-writing, like the writing of poetry, fiction and other forms of prose, is a time-honoured pursuit, and it's not supposed to be easy! Historically, essayists have not only changed the way people have viewed the world; some, like eighteenth century writer Thomas Paine, author of the revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1775), have literally changed the world. Although some contemporary writers continue to bring distinction to the genre (see, for example, *Arguably* by the late Christopher Hitchens) in the twenty-first century the essay has for the most part been relegated to the university community, where it remains the quintessential vehicle for the expression of scholarly argument.

Essay-writing is a literary genre unto itself, which means that it has its own formal traditions, conventions and codes. An essay cannot, therefore, be confused with any other literary work (including a poem, a short story, an epic narrative or a letter to your sweetie). Good essay-writing is contingent on the acquisition - and ultimately the mastery - of the formal elements that distinguish the genre.

### Yo, what it is?

An essay is, at bottom, *an argument* - nothing more, nothing less. It has only one purpose, and that is to persuade readers that the author's *thesis* (another word for *argument*) follows logically and conclusively from the available *evidence*. Unlike many other literary forms, an essay is never merely *narrative* (or descriptive). Rather, it is always analytical, and it always articulates an explicit point of view. An essay should contain only as much narrative detail as is necessary to set up and elucidate the central argument, never straying from the central objective, namely to convince the reader of the worth of the author's claim about her/his subject.

In the humanities, student essays are never judged (or graded) on the quality of the ideas themselves but, rather, on the relationship of the *thesis* to the *evidence*.

### Where to begin?

Because essay-writing is a formal genre, it is essential to your career as a university-level essayist that you familiarize yourself with the basics. If you have not done much essay-writing in the past (e.g. if you are coming from a discipline in which essays do not figure prominently) or if you just don't feel confident about your skills, I would urge you strongly to consult an essay-writing style guide.

As for specifics, those little improvements that seem to make all the difference in student essays, I invite you to peruse the following:

### **1. Shaping your thesis**

If you are having trouble fine-tuning your thesis, I suggest that you employ the one-question method (not to be confused with Chuck Berry's equally useful *13-Question Method*): ask a single question at every stage in the preparation of your essay and it will not only frame your analysis but prevent you from getting sidetracked in irrelevant culs-de-sacs. Instead of writing on "The War of 1812," for example, you might ask "Why Do the Americans Still Think They Won the War of 1812?", thus rendering a massive, book-length study into a manageable, essay-length analysis with an explicit (and provocative) statement of purpose.

### **2. Structure**

An essay, like a brontosaurus, should have a beginning, a middle and an end. There are, of course, many ways of organizing an essay, and I would encourage you to find your own "voice" as an essayist (and to avoid rigid formulas). This said, every essay should provide

- a) an explicit statement of the author's thesis somewhere in the introduction;
- b) a clear line of argument, supported by evidence; and
- c) a conclusion that summarizes your contribution to knowledge.

Writing an essay is like driving a tour bus: you have to know where you are going before you set out. A good essay, therefore, will begin with a good outline.

### **3. Verbs**

a. The first rule of great writing in virtually any genre, excepting users' manuals, is to use strong verbs in the place of weak modifiers (adverbs and adjectives). For example, instead of "The boy walks slowly" (which contains a weak verb and a weak modifier) try "The boy ambles" or "The boy staggers" or "The boy saunters."

b. All sentences must contain verbs. Thus, in the case of the following example -

The man was tall. Very tall.

- the second "sentence" contains no verb and is, therefore, not a sentence at all. (This grammatical error is now quite common in print journalism and fiction.)

c. Do not use nouns as verbs, notably “party,” “evidence,” “impact,” etc..

#### **4. Pagination**

All pages, excepting the first (and the title page, if there is one), should be paginated (numbered).

#### **5. Contractions**

There shall be no contractions (e.g. “don’t,” “can’t,” “doesn’t”) in essays. Use “do not,” “cannot,” “does not.”

#### **6. Semi-colon [ ; ]**

This is a much-abused little stylistic nugget (not least because so many journalists and popular authors have forgotten how to use it). Like all punctuation in university-level essays, it is well to know how to use the semi-colon before actually doing so. In case of doubt, use the patented Wright Rule of Substitution: if a period works in its place, you have used the semi-colon correctly. If it does not, you are probably in trouble.

#### **7. Colon [ : ]**

In case of doubt, use the colon sparingly, to set up lists or excerpts.

#### **8. Em Dash [ - ]**

This, like the semi-colon, has been subjected to scandalous abuse. Use the patented Wright Rule of Substitution: if a comma works in the place of your em dash, you are safe.

#### **9. Hyphen [ - ]**

Apart from words which are hyphenated to accommodate the right margin of a printed page, there is a specific and important use to which hyphens tend to be put in ordinary literary composition. Hyphens are used between words which together form adjectives. For example, it is the hyphen in the term “French-Canadian” that signifies it as a modifier and not a noun, making it easy to distinguish between a French Canadian (i.e. a person) and a French-Canadian tradition.

## 10. Apostrophe [ ' ]

Once the simplest and most useful of punctuation marks, the apostrophe is now a catastrophe. Use it to designate possessive forms, in the singular and the plural, but not in the case of pronouns, e.g. Dick's cat (singular), the Smiths' house (plural), its driveway (pronoun). (Since there shall be no contractions in essay, "it's" will not appear, nor will "its'," which is not a word.)

## 11. Journal-isms

Among the many writing techniques now promulgated by journalists, I would urge you to avoid the following:

- a. the lazy (and usually redundant) phrase "in terms of," as in the sentence: "The sky is blue in terms of colour."
- b. the use of "1800s" when you really mean "nineteenth century." ("The 1800s," like "the 1820s" or "the 1830s," refers to a decade, not a century.)
- c. as noted above, the use of nouns as verbs.
- d. the use of the present tense when speaking of the past, e.g. "The presidential motorcade is making its way through Dallas. Lee Harvey Oswald is drinking a coke in the book depository...."

## 12. Proof-reading

As yo can plainly sea, using computer spell-checking lather than goo old-fashioned proof-reading can can produce all kinds problems.

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