

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

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*There are three rules for writing a novel.
Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.*
- Somerset Maugham

There is no algorithm for great writing. If there were, we could program computers to churn out epic literature. However, all of us recognize bad writing when we read it and so there are probably a few rules or guidelines for good writing. I will delineate some below.

First and foremost, we must decide on a topic and having decided that, we should collect ideas on that topic. This is the research phase of writing. This research is a combination of two methods. The first method is to gather ideas from external sources, mainly from the writings of others. The other method, which is a bit more difficult, is to bring out ideas from oneself, by the process of reflection. Many find it easier to first gather ideas from external sources and then to reflect on these ideas to distill from them, newer ideas. The gathering of ideas can be a time consuming process and one must determine at the outset, how much time should be devoted to this task. Usually, there is a temptation to collect too much information. Thus, one must be ruthless in putting an end to this phase of information gathering since too much information is often the cause of the disease known as “writer’s block.” Part of this problem is reduced by determining the audience we are writing for. There is no such thing as the general public. A certain amount of facility emerges when we can visualize our reader since that determines the style, tone and choice of words in our writing.

The second step is to begin with the main thesis. This is largely impelled by meditation upon the ideas gathered in the first step and organized in a coherent way. Indeed, reflection can be defined as the conscious, coherent correlation of ideas. Hence writing is a method of meditation and one can argue that it is a very powerful method utilised from time immemorial by the greatest minds of human civilization. Writing can be viewed as a “participation mystique”. It acts as an intermediary through which we understand the external world and commune with the internal.

The thesis should be clear and crisp. In the subordinate paragraphs, it should be substantiated by examples and discussion. Very likely, the examples have been garnered from the preliminary research and the discussion should blossom forth through reflection on these examples.

The final paragraph should summarize the essential ideas and draw some conclusions based on the discussion in the essay. The length of the essay defines the number of examples to be included. Sometimes, it is useful to adopt the Hegelian dialectic method. Hegel’s approach was to examine a thesis, and then its’ opposite which he called the antithesis. After investigating the antipodal viewpoints, one formulates a synthesis that reconciles both in their essential aspects. In this approach, the essay writes itself and so, one can adopt this method, depending upon the circumstance.

In the exercise of gathering facts, arranging and correlating them, the technique of speed writing is effective. Setting aside half an hour and writing non-stop on the topic at hand seems to act as an aphrodisiac that stimulates the creative juices. Usually, a cup of coffee adds further fuel to the exercise. One can average three pages to the cup.

The effort of writing is not easy to invoke. In fact, the word “essay” is derived from the French word, “essayer” which means “to try, to attempt, to make an effort.” The usage of this word in this context can be traced back to the writings of the French philosopher, Montaigne, who published in 1580 a collection of compositions entitled “Essais.” He wrote that the collection is a series of “attempts” to express his personal thoughts and experiences. This usage of the word was again taken up in the same way by Francis Bacon, who in 1597, published his reflections in the form of “Essayes”. Later writers followed this lead and the word came into general circulation.

Writing is a solitary art. It gives us an opportunity to reflect, to understand, to give expression to our thoughts and feelings. It is such a powerful and effective tool that one writer has been quoted as saying, “I don’t know what I am thinking until I write it down.” It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that writing is the royal road to self-knowledge.

After the first draft is complete, it is best to put it aside and return to it again after a day or two and work on it some more to produce a second draft. Only a few gifted individuals like Bertrand Russell have the ability to write a single draft and be done with it. But for the rest of us mortals, rewriting is an important aspect of essay writing. Once the composition is complete, it is good to proofread the piece. This is easier if there is a substantial time gap between the completion and the proofreading. In this way, we can bring greater objectivity to analyse our writing. At the same time, we must remember that too much revision is probably a bad thing. One has to decide, depending on the time factor, how much revision and review is needed.

In summary, it is true that there are no rules for great writing. However, there are some guidelines that, if followed, can simplify the process. These guidelines can be listed as: choosing a topic (and choosing an audience), gathering of facts and correlating these facts into a coherent form. Good writing is both a science and an art. It is a science since we gather ideas and organize them using deductive and inductive reasoning. It is an art because we bring our reflective consciousness to give these facts shape, coherence and interpretation. Invariably, such an arrangement of thought leads to new knowledge, both of the world outside, and the world within our mind.