

## **Defining Essays Based On Purposes and Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a review of the contemporary features and challenges of essay-writing. Currently, this genre has not been clearly defined, and can be considered as ‘ambiguous’: it can cover from a short to a long piece of writing, including a research paper or a thesis, depending on the discipline and the institution setting an essay for students at a particular level. Thus, this article defines an essay in a context that could be distinguished from other papers based on its purpose and the particular context. The significance of this distinction is to have a common concept of essays across different disciplines. Thus, when instructors talk about essays or when they assign students to write them, the latter can understand and be able to write the required piece of work without having to ask for guidelines or about the expectations from instructors.

### **I. Introduction**

Contemporary essays are not clearly defined; the term is loosely used and includes a diversity of definitions and forms, depending on the interpretations and understandings of academics in different disciplines and different institutions. Currently, essays in some disciplines have a broad scope that overlaps with other types of papers, such as research (journal) articles, theses, or reports (together hereinafter referred to as ‘research papers’ or Research Papers *sensu lato*). As a consequence, essays are considered as an ‘ambiguous’ genre in contemporary academic writing.

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The purpose of the present paper is to review the contemporary understanding and features of essays that are being used and discussed, and to further define them in a context that differentiates them from the various categories of research papers. The significance of this distinction is to have a common concept of essays across the disciplines, and to provide a clear picture of what is expected when writing an essay in order to avoid such a confusion as today.

## **II. Contemporary Features and Challenges of Essays**

Contemporary essays have a number of features, especially the definitions and forms that are being discussed but are not unanimous among academics. Currently, the definitions and forms of essays depend on interpretations and understandings of scholars in each discipline. A number of scholars have tried to define them for their own particular purposes, while others do not.

An essay is mostly considered to be a short piece of writing or article about a topic (Kane, 2000; Bailey, 2006). It is a collection or group of paragraphs describing a central idea or a single topic (Kane, 2000; Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; McLean, 2012; Folse *et al.*, 2014). Topics of essays can be speculative, factual, emotional, reflective, personal, or objective, *etc.*, depending on what the writer wants to write or has been assigned to write (Folse *et al.*, 2014; Kane, 2000; Starkey, 2004).

An essay, especially the short one, is written with a simple structure and no complicated subdivisions: namely an Introduction, the Body and a Conclusion. The Introduction gives an background overview of the topic (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Oshima and Hogue, 2007; Folse *et al.*, 2014). The Body describes the topic, including explaining any points of debate or other arguments, in detail *via* one or more of a wide range of techniques such as narration, description, explanation, comparing and contrasting and other forms of analysis and so on (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Oshima and Hogue, 2007; Shields, 2010; Folse *et al.*, 2014; Gugin, 2014). The Conclusion gives a review of the major points discussed, together with wrapping-up arguments where appropriate (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Oshima and Hogue, 2007; Folse *et al.*, 2014), including raising the significance and implication in a general construct. Introduction and Conclusion consume approximately 10 percent each respectively, while the rest remains in Body (Shields, 2010).

The length of an essay assignment may be limited by the counts of words or paragraphs. These can vary depending on the type of the assignment and topic. Some essays can be made in a few hundred words while others can be in thousand words (Starkey, 2004). Some scholars suggest an essay can be written up to 5,000 words (Peck and Coyle, 2005; Bailey, 2006). Besides this, it can also be written based on the number of paragraphs. At present, there are different suggestions on the number of paragraphs in an essay. Some academics suggest that an essay can be written in five paragraphs (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Folse *et al.*, 2014), while others suggest it can be written in up to eight paragraphs (Peck and Coyle, 2005).

Currently, a five-paragraph essay seems to be a standard for writing in practice for assignments at many institutions (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Folse *et al.*, 2014; Tardy and Jwa, 2016). A number of scholars support this because it is easy to form and find the structural argument and good for students to follow (Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, and Fry, 2003; Smith, 2006; Schwartz, 2014). However others do not, considering it to be ‘tyrannical’, being not flexible for students who must blindly follow the ‘straitjacket’ of the imposed structural organization (Foley, 1989; Nunnally, 1991; Wesley, 2000; Brannon *et al.*, 2008; Campbell and Latimer, 2012). Therefore, there is a growing movement to go beyond this convention (Campbell and Latimer, 2012; Gray, 2014; Punyaratabandhu *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, a number of scholars do not want to clearly define what an ‘essay’ is or the form(s) it should take. They think that to do so is misleading in contemporary academic writing (Coffin *et al.*, 2005; Hyland and Shaw, 2016). It is difficult to say what an essay is specifically referred to (Department of English Language and Literature, 2014), and it is a mistake to define this term clearly (Kane, 2000). Furthermore, the looseness of this term also makes it easy for the writer to set their own standards (Kane, 2000). The situation will depend on the nature of the topic: whether it is a general discussion, a critical review, or an exposition, *etc.* (Coffin *et al.*, 2005).

The lack of a clear definition poses a challenge of categorizing a writing assignment for students, especially at college or university level in a number of disciplines. With some instructors, it is difficult to classify whether the writing assignment as an essay or a research

paper; thus, it often gives rise to using both terms as if they were synonymous (Carroll, 2002; Greetham, 2008; Graves *et al.*, 2010; Graves and White, 2016). Graves *et al.* (2010, p. 299; cited in Graves and White, 2016, p. 304) examined 485 assignments in a college of liberal arts. They found that the instructors classified them as ‘essays/papers’ in 31% of the cases. In this sense, the researchers assumed the instructors were ‘idiosyncratic’ in naming the writing assignments for students in their coursework.

Difficulties in distinguishing between essays and papers are caused by different understandings of the term ‘essay’ in each discipline. In some disciplines, an essay has broad scope that can cover the features of theses or research papers. Reading various writing guidelines from a number of these disciplines showcases this. For example, the writing guideline of the School of Management majoring in Political Science (University of Tampere in Finland) states that ‘[a]n essay is thesis-like’ (Anon, 2013: p. 2); and, elsewhere in Europe, the writing guide of the Faculty of Arts (2017, p. 1) at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) notes that ‘[i]f you choose your MA *memoire* [thesis] in literature, it will also take the form of an essay’.

Likewise, Bailey (2006, p. 49), using the term ‘longer essay’, describes its structure as the same as a research paper, to include a literature review, experimental set-up, methods, findings/results, case study, and discussion. The writing guide of Rice *et al.* (2012, p. 1) states that, at the Dept. of History at the University of Canterbury (New Zealand), ‘the academic essay is a much more complex beast, requiring the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and a bibliography. It is a *formal academic communication*, rather like an article in a scholarly journal’. Similarly, the guideline of the Department of English Language and Literature (2014, p. 7) at King’s College London advises their students to model their essays on the ones that are published in academic journals.

The features of these essays are the same as those of the present broad category of ‘research papers’. They require a specific problem and associated arguments, supported by academic sources as references (Durant and Fabb, 2005; Irvin, 2010; Eunson, 2012; Rice *et al.*, 2012; Anon, 2013; Faculty of Arts, 2017). These, in general, are the main features of ‘research papers’, but are also required features of contemporary essays for these disciplines in these

institutions. In this sense, the expected features of contemporary essays there are similar to those of theses and research articles that are published in academic journals.

Summing up from this review, we can see that the interpretation of what constitutes an acceptable ‘essay’ is broad, varying amongst contemporary academics. Different interpretations and understandings of essays lead to considering this genre ‘ambiguous.’ Currently, essays can cover from short to long pieces of writing, which include research papers and theses in some disciplines. Reading from some contexts, the term ‘essay’ can simply mean ‘writing,’ ‘text,’ or ‘article’ in contemporary writing.

### **III. Defining an Essay Based on Purpose and Context**

However, this article tries to differentiate essays from research papers in a context to avoid such a confusion. The first part of this section will seek to establish a distinction between an essay and ‘research papers’ and so define and explain the main differences between these. Thereafter, it will focus on the types and features of essay writing as defined in this paper.

#### **1. Differences between Essays and Research Papers *sensu lato***

As noted in the Introduction, ‘research papers’ here represent a broad (and ambiguous) category comprising investigative journal papers, theses and other documents on specific topics, which can be theoretical or applied research. Typically they are the product of evidence-based research focusing on a specific issue and conducted in order to find evidence for and against their arguments and analyze it in an objective manner.

In general, for writing ‘research papers’, researchers need to formulate a new argument in a proposed research issue, or else look for new evidence to support one or other side in an existing debate. In each case, the specific topic is different from but adds to previous studies. Then, researchers need to justify their choice of topic with supporting arguments and follow up with evidence based on specific research methods. In the end, ‘research papers’ are expected to report new findings, with objective conclusions related to the original choice of the specific topic. This is the core value of ‘research papers’.

On the other hand, in the present context, essays are kinds of opinion-based writings or papers. The features of essays are derived from the original meaning of the term. The term ‘essay’ originates from Latin and old French language which means ‘to test,’ ‘to try,’ or ‘to

make an attempt'.<sup>2</sup> Based on this meaning, we can understand the 'purpose' of an essay is to 'test' someone's knowledge, or someone 'tries' or 'makes an attempt' to express his or her knowledge or understanding (opinions, points of views, reviews) over something, especially a (assigned) topic.

Thus, essays contain the often personal, subjective opinions of the essay-takers or writers on the (assigned) topic. These are the substantial component of essay writing, often leading to personal assertions or rhetoric in which some lack proof. Essay-takers or writers make a conclusion by wrapping up their arguments, reaffirming the raised question, and reassessing the (assigned) topic without the expectation of rigorous support for their conclusions.

In short, an essay is a reflective piece of writing in which it is substantially composed of author-based opinions on a subject. This is the core value of essays.

## **2. Types of Essay Writing**

This section will describe the main features of three types of writing that are considered as essays as defined above: (1) the exam essay, (2) the assignment essay, and (3) the 'attempt-to-explain' essay.

*i. Exam Essay* The exam essay is a type of writing test during an examination or other competition test. It is a kind of short writing that has a time limit. Sometimes it is called 'timed essay'. The amount of time depends on the assignor of the test.

In general, the exam essay is written as a simple article (as mentioned above) without a concrete division of structure. Essay-takers write it based on their understanding in response to the assigned topic. They can raise some arguments and evidence from the literature and their personal experience for support, but they cannot find or put references in their writing unless it is an open-book exam. They can make a conclusion by wrapping up their arguments, reaffirming the raised question, and reassessing the assigned topic.

Today, the types of exam essay writing are commonly used. For instance, composition writing at general education schools follows the format of exam essay-writing. College

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/essay> (accessed April 3, 2019); Rice *et al.* (2012: 1); Department of English Language and Literature (2014: 6).

entrance essay exams or college freshman essay-writing also use this type of writing. Likewise, other scholarship or competition tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, *etc.* are likewise. These are the format of exam essay as defined in this paper.

**ii. *Assignment Essay*** This is a writing assignment in the student's own time, especially at college or university level. The assignment essay has the following features.

It is a writing task, which is part of coursework. Its main purpose is to assess students' understanding of the course objectives, and also to help students to work independently to increase the depth of their knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. Topics are usually assigned by the course instructors within their course scope and objectives. Thus, students can write them in compliance with these.

Students can write the assignment essay in two ways. First, if the assignment essay is a short one, students can write it without the clear division of structure, as the exam essay. However, if it is a longer one, they should write it with a clear structure. In this sense, students need to divide the structures of the assignment essay into several sections based upon their arguments.

The assignment essay, although it may require limited research and supporting references, is often based on the personal points of view (opinions, views, or reviews) regarding the assigned topic. Students raise arguments based upon the assigned topic and support them by some evidence, mainly from literature reviews or other general sources of information. Students make a conclusion, similar to those of the exam essay. In this sense, the assignment essay is considered as secondary research in order to increase students' knowledge and understanding of the researched subject related to the course objectives and scope.

**iii. *'Attempt-to-Explain' Essay*** A variant on this is 'attempt-to-explain' essay-writing. Writers describe their understandings of a particular subject of their own choice and express their opinions of it. There are two ways to do so. First, the writer makes a first attempt to explain a subject, if it has never been explained before. Second, the writer can attempt to explain a subject which has already been explained, but the current writer adds something new to it. In this sense, it is primary research, which is original and makes a contribution to

the field, if compared with the assignment essay. However, it differentiates it from ‘research papers’, as it is based upon the author’s opinion without sufficient supporting evidence.

In this type of writing, the writers express their understanding of a subject. They can assert or raise their arguments in it, but they may not be able to justify them in some cases. In this case, this article considers these only as ‘hypotheses’ which can be contested and verified or otherwise later. This type of writing can also include a piece of opinion writing, commentary, or editorial in newspapers as well as a lengthy reflective writing as books or treatises.

In short, essays are opinion-based writings or papers, regardless of their length. Opinions and assertions of the writers, resulting in rhetoric without proof, dominate most aspects in essay writing. These are main features of the essays defined in this paper.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

In conclusion, contemporary essays are not unanimously defined and specifically referred to. Currently, the term ‘essay’ is loosely used with definitions and forms depending on the interpretations and understanding of academics in each discipline and at particular institutions. Thus, this leads to considering this genre as ‘ambiguous’, broadly covering from a short to a long piece of writing, overlapping with the features of research papers *sensu lato* such as research (journal) articles, theses, or reports in a number of disciplines.

To avoid this, this paper tries to define the essay in a narrow sense that could be different from ‘research papers’ mainly based on its purpose and context. The purpose of an essay, as defined here, is an attempt to express personal points of view (opinions, views, or reviews) in response to a topic (assigned or otherwise). The substantial composition of essays is the author’s opinion base, resulting in rhetoric which lacks some proof in some arguments. Thus essays are reflective writing.

On the other hand, research papers are evidence-based papers. The evidence is from conducting a detailed investigation of a proposed research issue. In general, research papers focus on the objective inquiry of that proposed issue. The writers of research papers need to formulate a new argument, which is different from or adding to, previous studies. Then, they need to justify their argument objectively by using specific research methods and

supporting evidence, rather than author-opinion base. Thus, in the end, such a research paper produces a new result or finding (a new conclusion or resolution) to a proposed research issue, which contributes to resolving existing problem or knowledge.

In short, essays are author opinion-value base, in which some assertions lack proofs while research papers are objective evidence-value base, in which arguments must be justified. Thus, an essay will become a research paper as defined in this article when their assertions or arguments are supported by evidence. Therefore writing essays provides more freedom of expression to the writers than does that of research papers. In this sense, essay writing is considered as the foundation for research paper writing.

For the current practice, to avoid such a confusion, this paper suggests that some disciplines using the term 'essay' for a piece of work which overlaps with what is defined as a 'research paper' in this article should call it a research paper, rather than an essay. The significance of this distinction is to have a common concept and terminology across disciplines and institutions. Thus, when talking about essays or when assigning students to write essays, they can understand and write them without asking instructors about their expectations.

Furthermore, such a distinction is also easy to achieve the objectives of the coursework and degree program. For the coursework, instructors can assign the writing tasks as essays or research papers (primary or secondary), or both at the same time with different criteria and expectations, in order to evaluate students' understanding of, and beyond, the course objective. Whilst (primary) research papers, especially theses, are used as final criteria for evaluating students' capacity and degree award from the study program.

The author's suggestion is flexible and an invitation for further discussion about this genre. Scholars in any discipline who find the distinction and suggestion in this paper useful and acceptable can put them into practice, while others who do not can continue to use it as the present-day concepts.

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