

Katherine Bomer

THE JOURNEY Is EVERYTHING

*Teaching Essays That Students Want to Write
for People Who Want to Read Them*

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress.
ISBN: 978-0-325-06158-0

Editor: Katie Wood Ray
Production: Vicki Kasabian
Cover and interior designs: Suzanne Heiser
Cover photograph: © Travellinglight/Getty Images
Typesetter: Kim Arney
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
20 19 18 17 16 PAH 1 2 3 4 5

*To my mother-in-law, Joyce,
for all the lives she has lifted on her journey*



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INTRODUCTION

Essay Lights Up the World

I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.

—Joan Didion, "Why I Write"

We should start without any fixed idea where we are going to spend the night, or when we propose to come back; the journey is everything.

—Virginia Woolf, "Montaigne"

In the electric, pulsating world around us, the essay lives a life of abandon, posing questions, speaking truths, fulfilling a need humans have to know what other humans think and wonder so we can feel less alone. Essay lights up the Internet daily, allowing us to reach across the globe to touch the minds and hearts of our fellow human beings in ways unheard of before cyber technology. Essay explores topics about everything in the galaxy, the living and the inanimate. This very moment, as I attempt to live peaceably with my new rescue puppy and teach him manners for his safety and our household's sanity, I reach out to Patricia McConnell's (2009) funny, touching, and thought-provoking essays about canines, to follow her journeys of thinking, and to know that even on the topic of how to build relationships with dogs, there are gray areas and places of uncertainty.

Essay also finds a home in print and digital magazines and journals pertaining to literature, history, music, art, pop culture, nature, medicine, psychology, sociology, and science. Essay fuels photography and film, stand-up comedy, televised current events, and political punditry. And essay appears on the cups and brown paper bags at Chipotle Mexican Grill, inviting us to pause while ingesting the fresh, organic ingredients in their burritos (I don't work for or own stock in Chipotle; I'm just a fan of the food and the company's policies!), like the one I just read by Sheri Fink,



where she asks, “Whom would you chose? When, in the event of an unimaginable catastrophe, we had to ration medical care, whom should we save first?” (2014).

This profoundly deep question and Fink’s lovely answer to it then cause us to drive home or walk back to our offices to search for more essays like this one at the website called Cultivating Thought Author Series (<http://cultivatingthought.com>), curated by novelist Jonathan Safran Foer. This website recently ran a contest for high school students to write essays, and the winning pieces were to be printed on cups and bags and included online, right along with work by Neil Gaiman, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, and other famous writers. Wow. We can look to our burrito restaurants to cultivate thought these days. As Christy Wampole (2013) argued in a much-shared essay on the *New York Times Opinionator* blog, lately, it seems, we face the “essayification of everything”!

These are essays in the wild, unbounded by rules and regulations, and we know that creatures are happier and more fiercely beautiful in the wilderness than confined in a zoo, like Rilke’s poor panther, who loses his vision of the world, grown weary from constantly passing by the “thousand bars” of his cage. Rather than conforming to the cage bars of any formula or template, these essays are driven by curiosity, passion, and the intricacies of thought.

In schools, however, the essay suffers. I am aware of the arguments for the efficacy of teaching what is called academic and argument writing. I’ve been hearing them for decades, ever since I first invited teachers to help their students write what Randy Bomer calls “journey of thought” essays (1995, 178). Over the years, I’ve led workshops and weeklong writing institutes where I’ve plied participants with some of the most moving, humorous, thoughtful pieces of literature ever published. We read essays, and we giggle, we weep, we find ourselves needing to talk about their content. We write our own short essays and laugh and cry all over again. And then people move back out into the world, eager to say *yes!* to essay writing with their students, only to send an email later, telling me their school administrations or their department chairs or their state testing formats won’t allow them to stray from the five-paragraph formula.

In this era of high-stakes accountability, academic writing, which is indeed a rich and viable mode of writing, absolutely worth teaching students to do well, gets funneled down into the five-paragraph formula because it is easy to check for

its requisite parts and assign a score. Tom Newkirk calls this “mechanized literacy,” when to satisfy the human or computer scorers, “writing has to be bent out of recognition to be tested” (2009, 4). Peter Elbow argues that the five-paragraph formula is an “anti-perplexity machine” because there is no room for the untidiness of inquiry or complexity and therefore no energy in the writing (2012, 309).

The preponderance of formulaic writing, traditionally reserved for high school students, now finds its way down to kindergarten, where I’ve seen tiny children dutifully filling in worksheets with sentence starters such as “My favorite ice cream flavor is _____. One reason I love ice cream is that _____.” Practicing this algorithm over and over, from kindergarten on, so the logic goes, will ensure that students’ writing can achieve high scores on state tests, which require little more than a sterile standardization of human thought and composition. The rationale sounds at times like some geometrical shape that bends back on itself forever and ever, always ending up at the same point, at what Alfie Kohn calls (hysterically) “BGUTI,” or “better get used to it,” because kids need it for the next grade, for high school, for college, for career (2015, 42).

English professor Bruce Ballenger burned up the Internet in a lively blog entry titled “Let’s End Thesis Tyranny” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2013), where he calls the thesis a “thug and a bully” that stops his first-year college students’ thinking dead in its tracks. He suggests that perhaps asking deep questions and writing to discover what they think might be a better way for his students to arrive at an essay. Dozens of responses to Ballenger’s blog entry argued defensively for the need to maintain proper thesis-driven essays because, in essence, (1) no one wants (or has the time) to read what students wonder and think, (2) young people need to know this for their other academic work in middle school, high school, and college, and (3) this is the way we’ve always done it; it’s how we all learned to write when we were in school.

To me, the arguments fail to convince that teaching kids, sometimes as early as kindergarten, to produce a one-sentence, conclusive thesis statement in answer to a question they aren’t even asking and then to invent sufficient proof of that statement before they’ve had the opportunity to think and to question, to change their minds, to discover and surprise themselves, will ever help them learn to write well or find their own unique way of looking at the world or turning a phrase. When writing

is taught as a formula, students fail to discover that their writing can truly *engage* readers. And they have little chance to fall in love with writing, to feel how fun it can be, and to see how writing can help them solve problems and figure things out. Teaching writing to a formula loses more writers than it wins.

But that's just my opinion.

And also my thesis statement (!), which I will support throughout this book (it will take more than five paragraphs). Along the way I will suggest helpful ways to teach students how to read and write essays, and, as a bonus, I've included a lovely set of essays composed by some phenomenal, well-known writers with young people in mind.



Why Essay, Why Now?

Whole generations of adults fear writing because they grew up in schools thinking writing means sentence diagrams, penmanship, spelling, and proper placement of that darn thesis statement. Our students deserve better than this. They need essays to help them think in reflective, open-minded ways, to stir their emotions, teach them about life, and move them to want to change the world. And now more than ever, with the hyperattention paid to preparing students for college and careers, young people need practice in finding subjects of interest and passion to write about. They need lessons that show them how to think deeply about these topics and how to write about them in compelling ways.

My dream in this book is to *occupy essay*! I want to reboot the original name of it—*essais*: little attempts, experiments, trials—and bring essay writing back to its exploratory roots. I want to take the noun, *essay*, and convert it to the verb, *essaying*, as Paul Heilker suggests (1996, 180), to describe the trying out we do when we write. When I sit beside students in writing workshops and ask, “What are you working on in your writing?” I hope to hear something like one of my former fifth graders once said: “Well, I’m *essaying* how it’s weird that all us kids are friends and work together in this class, but at lunch, we sit in little groups with our own . . . um . . . colors . . . races? . . . and stuff. And does that mean those are our real friends and not the ones in the class? And why do we do that?”

In this book, I'll ask you to occupy beautiful and brilliant essays, what Robert Atwan calls "the sparkling stuff" featured in his annual Best American Essays series, to create possible models for how to teach essay in ways that will let students discover what they think and want to say. Beginning in Chapter 1, you'll read closely two spectacular examples by Brian Doyle and Dagoberto Gilb just to see and hear and be moved, and to say, "Ah, this. This is it!" Chapter 2 defines explicitly what essay is and is not; then in Chapter 3, I use excerpts from published essays to name specific craft features you can show students. I also suggest how to help students read mentor texts to develop their own definitions of essay.

The chapters in Part 2 of the book will show you how to teach students to develop ideas into essays. We'll explore the writer's notebook as a place to generate, store, and experiment with material (Chapter 4) and then as a place to collect thinking and thickly texture the material to elaborate an essay idea (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 offers strategies for the move from notebooks to first drafts, and then Chapter 7 shows how to help students revise drafts and find a shape and structure without formulas.

As you consider how to teach your students to write essays, I invite you to write along with them because being a writer of your own essay will anchor your understandings and your knowledge of the content and process of writing. You can then teach from "what writers really do," a phrase I borrow from Dorothy Barnhouse and Vicki Vinton, authors of *What Readers Really Do* (2012), who argue so eloquently for teachers to look to our own reading experiences to know how to teach reading. Our authentic experiences "need to serve as our rudder as we navigate through curricula and standards, data and assessments" (46).

In Part 3 of the book, I show how practicing essay writing can indeed lead to powerful and well-written academic writing (Chapter 8), and I explore assessment that honors the essay's open-ended and organic essence (Chapter 9). Finally, in the Afterword, I cap off my argument and sound a clarion call for making time to write essay in schools.