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On Essay Writing: How I Learned to Stop Dreading the Essay

The essay, as a form of writing, is quite versatile, but also feels constrictive in the moment. Throughout highschool, the essay was something I never struggled with but saw more as an obligation or a chore than anything else. I can sit down and write an essay about mostly anything, given the proper information, but when I want to write about something I really do care about, what I want to do outgrows the typical essay format. My introduction to essays was a bullet point list of structural rules with very few examples of essays that used these rules in an interesting way—*in this essay I will discuss*—ad nauseam. For the longest time, this was my only idea of essays. It was only after I left high school that I began to consider the essay as a malleable artistic form. Looking through the works of my favorite authors, I found their essays and realized the potential within essay writing outside of bland assignments and recitations.

My problem with how I was taught essay writing lies in the lack of breadth. The persuasive essays would have the same tone as the informative essays, and the entertaining essays were indistinguishable as well. I suppose what I was looking for in an essay was something that would affect me in the way other forms of writing did. Of course, essays are far different from novels and poems, with different traditions and purposes, but generally I look for the same enjoyment of reading and taking something away from the text across all forms. If somebody writes an essay about a subject which they care about their audience engaging with, it shows, and the essays I encountered in high school did not have this trait. The essays we produced never had this energy either because of how both we, the students, and the teachers saw

essays: as work. Fortunately, I had been an avid reader for a while and still had curiosity about essay writing despite the slog of my English classes. All it took were a few essays that solidified what I look for and what I avoid in essay writing.

For a while, my favorite essay has been “Against Interpretation” by Susan Sontag. I feel that the essay touched on something I subconsciously felt about art for most of my life. Although I believe that there is a time and place for interpretation—and Sontag touches upon this—Sontag provides a strong argument for viewing artwork as it is, for experiencing art instead of taking it apart. It reminds me of the Billy Collins poem about introducing poetry to students when they only want a literal meaning. Sontag says, “The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.” The way the essay is structured also opened my eyes to the possibilities of the essay; instead of a copy-paste five-paragraph template, it is laid out in numbered sections, reminding me more of a long-form poem than an essay. It also helps that Sontag manages to command my attention for every segment. She is simply a great writer, building onto her argument via references to art history and subtle shining moments of prose which elevate the essay. Because of Sontag, I now know that art doesn’t have to be solely didactic and neither do essays.

The field of essay writing is vastly different than how I thought it was a few years ago. I know now that essays can be fluid and expressive and are not simply an assignment to finish. As a younger person, first impressions can shape how one views something until they have a second experience. Now that I have left these assumptions behind me due to my own exploration into literature, I can take essays apart just as I would with other media, and I can learn what makes an

them work. I am excited to continue to learn about essay writing and be further exposed to what can be done within the format.

Works Cited

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966.