

Read Chapters 1, 2, and 11

Chapter Preview

After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- Identify types of essays and their elements
- Identify an essay's topic and thesis
- Analyze essays
- Write a successful paper about an essay, using a writing process that moves from first annotations to final draft

The word **essay**  entered the English language in 1597, when Francis Bacon called a small book of ten short prose pieces *Essays*. Bacon borrowed the word from Michel de Montaigne, a French writer who in 1580 had published some short prose pieces under the title *Essais*—that is, “testings,” or “attempts,” from the French verb *essayer*, “to try.” Montaigne’s title indicated that his graceful and personal jottings—the fruit of pleasant study and meditation—were not fully thought-out treatises but, rather, sketches that could be amplified and amended.

If you keep a journal or write a blog, you are working in Montaigne’s tradition. You jot down your

Elements of Essays

The Essayist's Persona

Many of the essays that give readers the most pleasure are, like entries in a journal, reflective. An essay of this kind sets forth the writer's attitudes or states of mind—the writer's **persona** ⓘ —and the reader's interest in the essay is almost entirely in the way the writer sees things. It's not so much *what* the writer sees and says as *how* the writer says what he or she sees. Even in essays that are narrative—essays that recount events, such as a bit of biography—our interest is more in the essayists' *responses* to the events than in the events themselves. When we read an essay, we might respond, “So that's how it feels to be you” and “Tell me more about the way you see things.” The bit of history is less important than the memorable presence of the writer.

Voice

When you read an essay in this chapter or in a later chapter, try to imagine the person who wrote it, the kind of person who seems to be speaking it. Then, slowly reread the essay, noticing *how* the writer conveyed this personality or persona, or **voice** ⓘ (even while he or

Voice

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Let's take a simple, familiar example of words that establish a persona. Lincoln begins the *Gettysburg Address* with "Four score and seven years ago. . . ." He might have said "Eighty-seven years ago," but the language would have lacked the biblical echo, and the persona would then have been that of an ordinary person rather than that of a man who has about him something of the tone of an Old Testament prophet. This religious tone of "four score and seven years ago" was entirely fitting because

- President Lincoln was speaking at the dedication of a cemetery for "these hallowed dead," and
- he was urging the members of his audience to give all of their energies to ensure that the dead men had not died in vain.

By such devices as the choice of words, the length of sentences, and the sorts of evidence offered, an author can sound to the reader solemn, agitated, witty, genial, or severe. If you are familiar with the famous *I Have a Dream* speech by Martin Luther King Jr., you may recall that he begins the piece (originally it was a speech, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on the one-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation) with these words: "Five score years ago. . . ." King is deliberately echoing Lincoln's words, partly in tribute to Lincoln, but also to help establish himself as the spiritual descendant of Lincoln and, further back, of the founders of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Tone

Only by reading closely can we hear in the mind's ear the writer's **tone**  —friendly, bitter, indignant, or ironic (characterized by wry understatement or overstatement). Perhaps you have heard the line from Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902): "When you call me that, smile!" Words spoken with a smile mean something different from the same words forced through clenched teeth. But, while speakers can communicate—or guide the responses of their audience—by body language, gestures, facial expressions, and changes in tone of voice, writers have only words on paper.

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As a writer, you are learning control of tone when you learn to take pains in your choice of words, in the way you arrange sentences, and even in the punctuation marks that you may find yourself changing in your final draft. These skills will pay off doubly if you apply them to your reading by putting yourself in the place of the writer whose work you are reading.

As a reader, you must make an effort to “hear” the writer’s tone as part of the meaning that the words communicate. Skimming is not adequate for that task. Thinking carefully about the works in this book means, first of all, reading them carefully, listening for the sound of the speaking voice so that you can respond to the persona that the author presents.

Consider the following paragraph from the middle of “Black Men and Public Space,” a short essay by Brent Staples. Staples is speaking of growing up in a tough neighborhood. Of course, the paragraph is only a short example; the tone depends, finally, on the entire essay, which will follow.

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Consider the following paragraph from the middle of “Black Men and Public Space,” a short essay by Brent Staples. Staples is speaking of growing up in a tough neighborhood. Of course, the paragraph is only a short example; the tone depends, finally, on the entire essay, which will follow.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really—a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties—all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor.

Judging only from these few lines, what do we know about Staples? Perhaps you will agree that we can probably say something along these lines:

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- He is relatively quiet and gentle. We sense this, not simply because he tells us that he was “timid,” but because (at least, in this passage) he does not raise his voice either in denunciation of white society for creating a system that produces black violence or in denunciation of those blacks during his youth who engaged in violence.
- He is perceptive; he sees that the “tough guys,” despite the fact that some were in their twenties, were babies; their bravado was infantile and destructive.
- He speaks with authority; he is giving a firsthand report.
- He doesn’t claim to be especially shrewd; he modestly says that he may have “unconsciously” adopted the behavior that enabled him to survive.
- In saying that he is a “survivor,” he displays a bit of wry humor. The usual image of a survivor is a guy in a Banana Republic outfit gripping a knife, someone who has survived a dog-eat-dog world by being tougher than the others. But Staples says almost comically that he is a “survivor” who is “timid.”

If your responses to the paragraph are somewhat different, list them and try to explain them in a few sentences.

Topic and Thesis

Although we have emphasized the importance of the essayist's personality, essayists also make a point. They have selected a topic, the subject or issue that they want to address. They have a thesis or an argument, and an argument implies taking a specific viewpoint about that topic. In reading an essay, then, try to identify the topic. The topic of "Do-It-Yourself Brain Surgery" cannot really be about brain surgery; it must be about do-it-yourself books, and the attitude will probably be one of amused contempt for such books. Even an essay that is largely narrative, like Brent Staples's recounting a personal experience or a bit of history, will probably have an attitude toward the event that is being narrated. It is that attitude—the interpretation of the event rather than the event itself—that may be the real topic of the essay.

It's time to look at Staples's essay. At the end of this chapter, you will find a writer's portfolio that presents a student's note taking on the essay and her summary paper on the essay.



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Brent Staples

Brent Staples, born in 1951 in Chester, Pennsylvania, received a BA degree from Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania, and a PhD from the University of Chicago. After working as a journalist in Chicago, he joined the *New York Times* in 1985, and he is now on the newspaper's editorial board, where he writes on politics and culture. His essay was first published in *Ms.* magazine in 1986 and was reprinted in a slightly revised form—the form we give here—in *Harper's* in 1987.

Black Men and Public Space

My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her late twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflamatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands

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the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds, she disappeared into a cross street.

That was more than a decade ago. I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold one to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that fol-

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ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians—particularly women—and me. And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk*, thunk, thunk, thunk of the driver—black, white, male, or female—hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people crossing to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasanties with policemen, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals *before* there is

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screen out troublesome individuals before there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-on-one street encounters. Elsewhere—in SoHo, for example, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky—things can get very taut indeed.

- 5 After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live, I often see women who fear the worst from me. They seem to have set their faces on neutral, and with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier-style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

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ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really—a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties—all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor.

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The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night.

10 Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby

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as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police officers hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

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And on late-evening constitutionals I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

[1987]



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Joining the Conversation: Critical Thinking and Writing

1. In a paragraph or two, set forth what you take to be Staples's purpose in "Black Men and Public Space." Do you think he was writing chiefly to clarify ideas for himself—for instance, to explore how he came to discover the "alienation that comes of being ever the suspect"? Or was he writing to assist blacks? Or to assist whites? Or something else? (You may conclude that none of these suggestions are relevant.)
2. The success of a narrative as a piece of writing often depends on the reader's willingness to identify with the narrator. From an examination of "Black Men and Public Space," what explanations can you give for your willingness (or unwillingness) to identify yourself with Staples? (Probably you will want to say something about his persona as you sense it from the essay.) In a five-hundred-word essay explaining your position, very briefly summarize Staples's essay and

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suggestions are relevant.)

2. The success of a narrative as a piece of writing often depends on the reader's willingness to identify with the narrator. From an examination of "Black Men and Public Space," what explanations can you give for your willingness (or unwillingness) to identify yourself with Staples? (Probably you will want to say something about his persona as you sense it from the essay.) In a five-hundred-word essay explaining your position, very briefly summarize Staples's essay and state his thesis.
3. Have *you* ever unintentionally altered public space? You may recall an experience in which, as a child, your mere presence caused adults to alter their behavior—for instance, to stop quarreling.

After a session of brainstorming in which you produce some possible topics, you'll want to try to settle on one. After you have chosen a topic and produced a first draft, if you are not satisfied with your first paragraph—if you feel that it is not likely to grab

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chosen a topic and produced a first draft, if you are not satisfied with your first paragraph—if you feel that it is not likely to grab and hold the reader's attention—you may want to imitate the strategy that Staples adopted for his first paragraph.

4. If you have ever been in the position of one of Staples's "victims," that is, if you have ever shown fear or suspicion of someone who, it turned out, meant you no harm (or if you can imagine being in that position), write an essay from the "victim's" point of view. Explain what happened, what you did and thought. Did you think at the time about the feelings of the person you avoided or fled from? Has reading Staples's essay prompted further reflections on your experience? (Suggested length: 750 words.)

✓CHECKLIST: Getting Ideas for Writing about Essays

Persona and Tone

- What sort of persona does the writer create?

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- What sort of persona does the writer create? Authoritative? Tentative? Wise-guy? Something else?
- How does the writer create this persona? (Does the writer use colloquial language, formal language, or technical language? Short sentences or long ones? Personal anecdotes? Quotations from authorities?)
- What is the tone of the essay? Is it, for example, solemn, or playful? Is the tone consistent? If not, how do the shifts affect your understanding of the writer's point or your identification of the writer's persona? Who is the audience?

Kind of Essay

- What kind of essay is it? Is it chiefly a presentation of facts (an exposition, a report, a history)? A meditation? Or is it chiefly an argument? If it is an argument, what persuasive devices does the writer use? Logic? Appeals to the emotion? (Probably the essay draws on several kinds of writing, but which kind is it primarily? How are the other kinds related to the main kind?) What

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writing, but which kind is it primarily? How are the other kinds related to the main kind?) What is the overall purpose of the essay?

- What does the essay seem to add up to? If the essay is chiefly meditative or speculative, how much emphasis is placed on the persona? That is, if the essay is a sort of thinking-out-loud, is your interest chiefly in the announced or ostensible topic or in the writer's mood and personality? If the essay is chiefly a presentation of facts, does it also have a larger implication? If it narrates a happening (history), does the reader draw an inference—find a meaning—in the happening? If the essay is chiefly an argument, what is the thesis? How is the thesis supported? (Is it supported, for example, by induction, deduction, analogy, or emotional appeal?) Do you accept the assumptions (explicit and implicit)?

Structure

- Is the title appropriate? Propose a better title, if possible.
- Did the opening paragraph interest you? Why,

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Structure

- Is the title appropriate? Propose a better title, if possible.
- Did the opening paragraph interest you? Why, or why not? Did the essay continue more or less as expected, or did it turn out to be different from what you anticipated?
- Prepare an outline of the essay. What effect does the writer seem to be aiming at by using this structure?

Value

- What is especially good (or bad) about the essay? Is it logically persuasive? Or entertaining? Or does it introduce an engaging persona? Or (if it is a narrative) does it tell a story effectively, using (where appropriate) description, dialogue, and commentary, and somehow make you feel that this story is worth reporting?
- Does the writer seem to hold values that you share? Or cannot share? Explain.
- Do you think that most readers will share your response. or do you think that. for some reason