

MISSION

Essays are the foundation of a free-thinking culture

Why essays? When someone asks me, "Why not expand this project to the larger universe of writing?"—fiction, memoir, poetry, journalism, business memos, philosophical treatises, wedding speeches—I send them this page. I get it ... the word essay is terribly unpopular. The coercive nature of our education system made the essay a symbol for transactional, bullshit homework. (A friend told me he'd rather die than write another essay). But actually, when you write to make sense of something that matters to you—to bring light to the fuzzy questions that haunt you—it's an act of cognitive liberty. Essays are more than fodder for the SAT industrial complex, they are the foundation of a free-thinking culture. At risk of sounding bombastic, I think they're our most important form of literature, the key to saving education from the Homework Apocalypse, an antidote to political polarization, and the vaccine for brainrot. The bright side: the Internet has catalyzed a mini golden age for independent writers (as foreseen by Paul Graham in [2004](#)). The reality: there are still challenges in making essays culturally relevant: it's hard to teach composition, hard to combat fear and laziness, hard to find quality on a noisy Internet, and hard to imagine writing's future in the age of superintelligent AI. This project is dedicated towards manifesting the unrealized potential of the essay, through curriculum, software, prizes, and publishing. The dream is to one day host a \$1 million open essay prize. The goal of this page is to share with you my unreasonable excitement for this medium, and hopefully to inspire you to

write, whether it's been a month or a decade. So what makes the essay distinct?

1

DEMOCRACY

Essay writing is folk writing. Most people will never write a 300-page book, but anyone can write one short essay per year, and everyone should.

It's likely that you don't have thousands of spare hours to write that high-concept novel you've been daydreaming about, but you can write an essay and publish it on Substack, today. The essay's brevity makes it a unique form of folk literature. Some of our most important essays come from people who weren't full-time writers: Frank Lloyd Wright was an architect, Carl Sagan an astronomer, John Muir an environmentalist. They didn't write to be writerly, they wrote to make sense of their mind, their culture, and their role in it. Basically anyone can do this. Realistically, 99.5% of citizens will never write a book, but it's feasible to approach a 1:1 ratio of essay readers:writers. You can probably measure a culture's health by its YAEW (Yearly Active Essay Writers). I'm not saying everyone can or should write a classic, I'm saying we can all aim to engage with the practice, because when we externalize our specialized experience and synchronize across silos, it's good for ourselves and good for society.

2

EDUCATION

Fixing writing curriculums is the wedge to fix education. If you inspire kids to write essays on topics they actually care about, you won't have to force them to do homework because they'll become self-driven learners.

It should not be surprising that students are using AI to cheat on their homework. If you forced me to write a doubled-spaced, MLA-cited, 10-page book report on *Tale of Two Cities*—that will only be read by a lone teacher who has a stack of papers on her desk—, I might use ChatGPT too. AI exposed that an education system anchored in extrinsic motivation does not truly work. I did well in school, but I didn't truly care about learning until I started writing, recreationally, in college. Topics that bored me in high school—ancient history, AP statistics, Shakespeare—gained a surprising urgency when they were relevant to an essay that mattered to me. If schools were to change one thing, they should center the K-12 curriculum around a writing practice, one where kids have autonomy: they pick their topics, experiment with form, and publish in a place their friends can read it (suddenly, they will care a lot more). Unlike homework or tests, essays are personal: they mirror the self and are more likely to tap into intrinsic motivation. Enlightenment thinkers knew the power of the essay and the need for mass education, but it was hard to teach, and so a century of kids got stuck with The Five Paragraph Essay, which is more like a medieval legal defense than a process to spark a love of learning. Rethinking how we teach essays could be the wedge to fix the system, our highest leverage move to create a generation of lifelong autodidacts.

SOVEREIGNTY

You are the subject of your essay; you write to see your beliefs, you edit to transcend them.

Essays are different from articles, which typically try to persuade you of some external event, angle, or agenda. The first essayist, Montaigne, said, “I myself am the subject of my [work].” It was conceived as a way to escape the dogmas of churches, the propaganda of governments, and the rigidity of philosophers, and to instead, interrogate what is actually in your own mind, without preconception. An essay starts with a question. The word means, “to attempt,” as in, to put your thoughts on the page to see if they’re worth anything. By externalizing your thoughts, you witness the flimsiness of your own thinking, and use your draft as a springboard to ask sharper questions. After rounds of rewrites and edits, you arrive at an idiosyncratic answer to your question. Most importantly, you are not outsourcing the formation of your worldview to an institution, you derive it yourself. An essay is a proof of thought. This is what “think for yourself” looks like. Free-thinking is not a posture, it takes work, but it’s the cost of ideological sovereignty. As algorithms sort us into tribes and egg us towards civil war, it becomes pretty important to mainstream a medium that leads to critical thinking.

UNITY

The essayist fuses the soul of a memoirist, the rigor of a philosopher, the pen of a poet, the persuasion of a marketer, the research of a journalist, and the imagination of a novelist.

Each genre of writing has its own specialized constraints, but the essay touches on all sides of literature. In a single work you can fuse your detailed life experiences with complex theories of the world, blend experimental prose-poetry with sermonistic appeals, and mix encyclopedic research with the tension of characters. The essay is a sponge: it seems to absorb literary devices from any genre. If you're looking to get exposure to all the fundamentals of writing in one genre, essays are the best starting point. They let you become a writing generalist. Of course, we should still celebrate specialized mediums and specialized essays, but the "unitive essay" might be the highest ideal to strive for, because it succeeds in integrating every corner of the psyche. The philosopher finds a heart, the memoirist finds a grand theory. It's not just about literary unity, but psychological unity.

5

MASTERY

Compared to all other artistic mediums, the essay is the easiest to master.

Most arts have obstacles that prevent people from getting started. If you want to write music, you need to spend years learning chord theory and building finger dexterity. If you want to make a building, you need to spend five years

learning spatial concepts, get licensed, and then somehow acquire millions of dollars for construction. Essays don't have obstacles. Once you're literate, you have all the prerequisites to dive straight into the patterns of composition. Other written forms share this, but the longer a format is, the harder it is to practice through repetition. Essays are repeatable. You can publish daily essays for a few months and learn through iteration and feedback. It is a feasible path for an important meta-skill. Even if superintelligent bots can generate a masterpiece from a click, writing will still matter because it's the friction of creation that makes a master. A master is more than someone who makes great works in their chosen field; their commitment to master something also cultivates a powerful set of virtues: discipline, focus, patience, presence, resilience, discernment. These virtues are transferrable; they let you master anything. We should be less concerned about machine-created masterpieces, and more focused on using AI to help cultivate a generation of masters.

6

REASON

If we can model the objective patterns of great essays into software, we can teach composition at scale.

For centuries, writers have disagreed on if there are any objective features that unite all essays. Many argued that it's a medium of ambiguity, and anarchy; but this lapse in systematic rigor hasn't been helpful. It resulted in a tradition of essays that is fragmented and inaccessible, one that's more appealing to a small group of literature professors than the rest of the world. And, even worse, by avoiding the hard questions on composition, no one has developed

a robust theory for schools to work with, and so they'd had little choice but to default to standardized templates. "The Five Paragraph Essay," is a result of intellectual hubris. The avoidance of reason created a bastard of reason. It's important that we answer "what is an essay, and what makes one great?" The answer isn't in a simple definition, but in a language of interlocked patterns that are anchored in the general constraints of reading. There's a lot to learn from Christopher Alexander here. While every written genre might have its own "pattern language," the essay is the medium with the most overlapping concepts, and also, it's the only medium that's already required for everyone going through school. By mapping out essay patterns and turning them into educational software, it would be the most effective way to teach composition at scale. Writers could upload their drafts, learn their weaknesses through an AI evaluator, and then, pattern-by-pattern, improve their writing and thinking.

7

CREATIVITY

Even though the genre has finite constraints, the essay is formless, making it the medium most-suited for wild experimentation.

In any language, little units combine to make an infinite number of works. From just 12 notes, Debussy wrote "Claire de Lune." From 26 letters we have the volumes of Shakespeare. A composition language for essays works the same; a few non-prescriptive patterns can generate a whole galaxy of possibilities. A beginner's goal is to become fluent; an artist's goal is to transcend the language and be creative. The essay, contrary to being

associated with standardization, is one of our most flexible and experimental modes of writing. It can be long or short, fuse many genres, integrate audio and visuals, and take on a huge variety of forms. There are fragmented essays, lyrical essays, hypertext essays, list essays, and other hybrids that defy categorization. The essay is unique in that it can be general enough to work as an accessible folk medium, yet specific enough to bend to a singular mind.

8

AGENCY

Essays are the written medium best fit for the Internet. As society digitizes, so will opportunities; self-publishing will let you forge a purpose-driven career.

In 2004, Paul Graham said that self-publishing on the Internet would break the hold of gatekeepers and lead to “the golden age of the essay.” He was right. It’s a slow-moving decades-long process, but it’s underway. The fact that a longform writing network like Substack can thrive in an age of hyper-stimulating media is testament to the timeless power of the essay. Substack never uses the E-word, but it does seem that the natural medium of online writing is the essay. Fiction and poetry don’t work as well online because audiences want to understand the person and the perspective behind the stranger they’re reading. Tweets are too short to be substantive. Books are too long to power a media network. Most people these days seem to only have 5-30 minutes of focus anyway, and so shortform creative nonfiction seems to be the medium that’s best suited for our times. If any form of writing will gain relevance in the 21st century, it will be the essay. And unlike the 20th century, anyone can publish. If you publish consistently, get good,

and send a specific signal through the Internet, uncanny opportunities will come your way.

9

EXCELLENCE

The essay is the only medium that could power a worldwide competition that attracts the sharpest minds of our generation.

For a medium to be taken seriously, it needs mechanisms to incentivize and reward high-quality works. These are broken. From the top down, institutions are not surfacing quality. Literary prizes often neglect the essay; this is what caused E.B. White to call essayists the “second-class citizens” of literature. Essay prizes are either too instrumentalized (to serve an institutional agenda) or not rewarding enough (the top “open” essay prize is \$5,000). From the bottom up, the Internet rewards quantity, and so algorithms are being overtaken by hucksters, robots, and slang parrots. You can tell what a culture values by what it incentivizes: consider how there are multiple \$1,000,000 to \$10,000,000 open prizes for scientific achievements, but nothing close to bringing out the best writers among us. If the essay is as important as I’m saying it is, there should be millions of dollars per year in open challenges that get writers to come together and make sense of our times. It’s important that we celebrate “the best.” The essay, given its shortness, is the medium that’s most able to fuel a society-wide competition.

10

CULTURE

An essay anthology done right could be one of the most powerful books a culture can produce.

Essay books are terribly unpopular: the essay section at the world's biggest Barnes & Noble fits within your armspan. You might look to magazines for collections of shortform nonfiction—like *The New Yorker*—but these can easily turn into literary “products” that fit an ideological agenda. However, an essay anthology done right has mainstream potential. If it is undeniably well-crafted and non-ideological, it would be highly shareable. Essay books are unique because in a single sitting you can absorb a full work that contains the max potency of literature. If the essays are well-selected, you'd have a mosaic of 20 different lenses making sense of our cultural circumstance through personal experience. It would help us make sense of our times, while also inspiring a new generation of essay writers (because the reader-to-writer pipeline is slippery).