

As context for our course, read A.J. Abrams' discussion of the essay and its role¹:
Essay*—Any brief composition in prose that undertakes to discuss a matter, express a point of view, or persuade us to accept a thesis on any subject whatever. The essay differs from a “treatise” or “dissertation” in its lack of pretension to be a systematic and complete exposition, and in being addressed to a general rather than a specialized audience; as a consequence, the essay discusses its subject in non-technical fashion, and often with a liberal use of such devices as anecdote, striking illustration, and humor to augment its appeal.

A useful distinction is that between the formal and informal essay. The **formal essay** is relatively impersonal: the author writes as an authority, or at least as highly knowledgeable, on the subject and expounds it in an ordered and thorough fashion. Examples will be found among the serious articles on current topics and issues in any of the magazines addressed to a thoughtful audience—Harper’s Commentary, Scientific American, and so on. In the **informal essay** (or “familiar” or “personal essay”), the author assumes a tone of intimacy with his audience, tends to be concerned with everyday things rather than with public affairs or specialized topics, and writes in a relaxed, self-revelatory, and often whimsical fashion. Accessible modern examples are to be found in *The New Yorker*.

The Greeks, Theophrastus and Plutarch, and the Romans, Cicero and Seneca, wrote essays long before the genre was given its standard name by Montaigne’s great French *Essais* in 1580. The title signifies “attempts,” and was meant to indicate the tentative and unsystematic nature of Montaigne’s discussions, in contrast to formal and technical treatises on the same subjects. Francis Bacon, late in the sixteenth century, inaugurated the English use of the term in his own series of *Essays*, most of which are short comments on subjects such as “Of Truth,” “Of Adversity,” “Of Marriage and the Single Life.” Alexander Pope adopted the term for his expository compositions in verse, the *Essay on Criticism* and *the Essay on Man*, but the verse essay had had few exponents after the eighteenth century. Addison and Steele’s *Tattler* and *Spectator*, with their many successors, gave to the prose essay its standard modern vehicle, the literary periodical (earlier essays had been published in books). In the early nineteenth century the founding of new types of magazines, and their steady proliferation, gave great impetus to the writing of essays, and made them a major department of literature. This was the age when Hazlitt, De Quincey, and Charles Lamb brought the essay—and especially the personal essay—to a level that has remained unsurpassed. In our own time the many periodicals pour out scores of essays every week. Most of them are formal in type; George Orwell, E. M. Forster, James Thurber, and E. B. White, however, are excellent modern practitioners of the informal essay.

Exposition: a setting forth of the meaning or purpose (as of a writing); discourse or an example of it designed to convey information or explain what is difficult to understand.²

¹ *The Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd edition, M. J. Abrams, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston), 1959, 1971, p. 54.

² From *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition.