

# Personal Essays

# The origins of the form..



The original 'essai' was popularised by French writer Michel de Montaigne. The French word 'essai' translates as 'attempt' and for de Montaigne this form was simply his attempt to discuss, in an informal manner, a topic of interest. His essays were short, subjective pieces that he wrote like a letter or conversation - he claimed that he felt compelled to write essays after the death of a close friend left him with no one to converse with about issues that interested him. de Montaigne's conversational style, loose structure and subjectivity continue to influence the personal essay to this day.

# The essay today...

Essayists continue to write and publish today, often being published in newspaper, magazines or special interest journals. Interestingly, much of the popular media that we read today reflects the style, intent and mood of the original essay.

Contemporary forms of writing that are heavily influenced by the personal essay are: memoirs, feature articles, editorials and travel stories. Often the writers themselves class these forms as 'essays'. It can be argued that one equivalent of a personal essay is the blog post.

# The purpose of the personal essay...

As with most literature, one might say that the goals of the personal essay is to target the heart, mind and imagination of the reader. Essayists use a variety of language devices to target each of these.

When you plan and write your essay, you should ask yourself the following:

- What ideas do I want my reader to be considering? **(mind)**
- What emotions do I wish to evoke in my reader? **(heart)**
- What do I want me reader to imagine? **(imagination)**

# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'HEART'

## Emotive language:

'I had fallen into a chair, weakly snivelling.'

'The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.'

## Hyperbole:

'You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs.'

One of the purposes of the essay is to incite passion and feeling in the hearts of the readers about a particular issue.



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'HEART'

## **False modesty:**

'In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people - the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me.'

## **Modality:**

'The point is that the pleasures of spring are available to everybody, and cost nothing.'

'



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'MIND'

## **Sentence structure:**

Simple - 'His yells rang through the house.'

Compound - 'The gods are jealous, and when you have good fortune you should conceal it.'

Complex - 'I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who has been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving.'

*Quick quiz: identify dependent clause, independent clause, embedded clause in the complex sentence.*

**Personal essays are personal, and this means they can focus on a subjective position, however, they also contain objective detail to support arguments.**



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'MIND'

## **Narrative point of view:**

'If you look up 'tea' in the first cookery book that comes to hand you will probably find that it is unmentioned; or at most you will find a few lines of sketchy instructions which give no ruling on several of the most important points.' (first-person singular)

'Your home might be far from perfect, but at least it was a place ruled by love rather than by fear...' (second-person)

'After the sorts of winters we have had to endure recently, the spring does seem miraculous, because it has become gradually harder and harder to believe that it is actually going to happen.' (first-person plural)





# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'MIND'

## Rhetorical questions:

'But it is wicked, is it not, to hate your benefactors?'

'Why is it considered vulgar to drink out of your saucer, for instance?'

'If a man cannot enjoy the return of spring, why should he be happy in a labour-saving Utopia?'



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'MIND'

**Voice:** *'Never use the passive where you can use the active.'* - Orwell

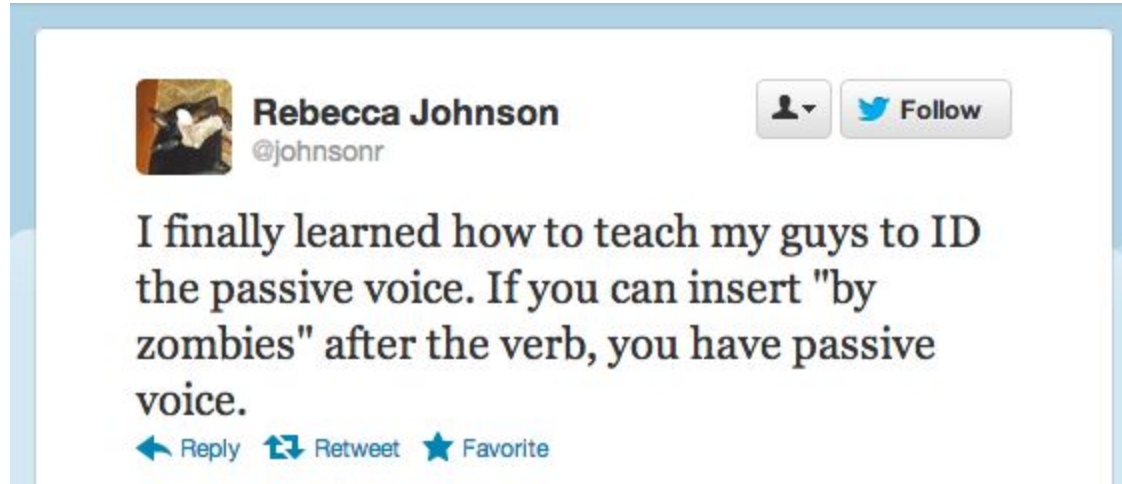
The passive voice **emphasises the person or object receiving the action** (ex: The car is bought by Tim.). The active voice, in contrast, **emphasises the person or object performing the action** (ex: Tim bought the car).

'The warders had formed in a rough circle round the gallows.' (active)

'A mistake was made by the cotton growers.' (passive)



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'MIND'



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'IMAGINATION'

## Simile:

'It comes seeping in everywhere, like one of those new poison gases which pass through all filters.'

## Imagery:

'His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large.'

Orwell argued that you must 'Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.' Originality and freshness are key!



# LANGUAGE FEATURES THAT TARGET THE 'IMAGINATION'

## **Descriptive language:**

'Down in the square the sooty privets have turned bright green, the leaves are thickening on the chestnut trees, the daffodils are out, the wallflowers are budding, the policeman's tunic looks positively a pleasant shade of blue, the fishmonger greets his customers with a smile, and even the sparrows are quite a different colour, having felt the balminess of the air and nerved themselves to take a bath, their first since last September.'

## **Metaphor:**

'They form pleasant patches in one's memory, quiet corners where the mind can browse at odd moments, but they hardly pretend to have anything to do with real life.'



# How to structure a personal essay...

**Introduction:** may outline the topic or main ideas of the essay, but it may also just hint at these.

‘Before the swallow, before the daffodil, and not much later than the snowdrop, the common toad salutes the coming of spring after his own fashion, which is to emerge from a hole in the ground, where he has lain buried since the previous autumn, and crawl as rapidly as possible towards the nearest suitable patch of water. Something — some kind of shudder in the earth, or perhaps merely a rise of a few degrees in the temperature — has told him that it is time to wake up: though a few toads appear to sleep the clock round and miss out a year from time to time — at any rate, I have more than once dug them up, alive and apparently well, in the middle of the summer.’

(Some Thoughts on the Common Toad, Orwell)

# How to structure a personal essay...

**Body paragraphs:** can be rambling and unfocused, but sometimes they are very tightly structured and make a concise, logical argument.

‘Then there are the various sauces peculiar to England. For instance, bread sauce, horse-radish sauce, mint sauce and apple sauce; not to mention redcurrant jelly, which is excellent with mutton as well as with hare, and various kinds of sweet pickle, which we seem to have in greater profusion than most countries.’

(In Defence of British Cooking, Orwell)

# How to structure a personal essay...

**Conclusion:** nearly always leaves the reader wanting to continue reading, or to start asking questions of the writer.

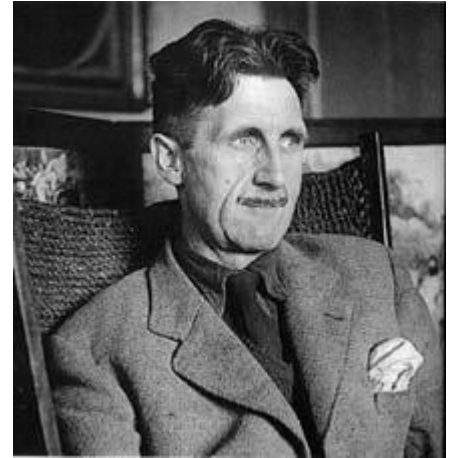
‘The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.’

(Some Thoughts on the Common Toad, Orwell)



# A master essayist...

George Orwell is most famous for his two satirical novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948). Many people don't know that Orwell was a journalist and essayist before he wrote these two novels. Between 1931 and 1949, Orwell wrote and published personal essays in a variety of newspapers and magazines. The topics of these essays varied widely from politics to popular culture to everyday activities like making a good cup of tea. Orwell's humour, wit and clarity of observation and language make him a wonderful essayist for young writers to study.



# TASK

1. Sit in your project team.
2. Quietly read the Orwell essay you have been given.
3. As you read, highlight examples of where Orwell used language devices to target the heart, the mind and the imagination.
4. Discuss the essay with your team, making sure everyone understands:
  - a. The topic of the essay (meaning)
  - b. Orwell's attitude towards this topic (his purpose)
  - c. Language devices used to target the heart, mind and imagination of the reader (how meaning is shaped)
5. Join with the other four teams who have the same essay as you. Discuss your answers to the above.
6. Create a slide on this slide show which includes your agreed responses to '4' plus a list of 5-10 writing tips you have learnt from Orwell's essay (e.g. Open with a dramatic sentence - *The Lion and the Unicorn*)
7. Choose people to present your writing tips to the two classes

# Murray-Darling Personal Essay

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2019/03/06/where-indigenous-voice-murray-darling-crisis>

6 MAR 2019 - 4:57PM

## Where is the Indigenous voice in the Murray-Darling crisis?



IMAGE

VIDEO

AUDIO