The Essay as a Genre Compiled—Sybil Priebe, Editor, “TYCA to You”

Teach the essay form, don’t teach the essay form. Teach the essay form as a hidden nugget in some other genre. Marry the essay with another genre and call it a List Essay. Throw the essay into a mosh pit with other genres and call it a multigenre party. “Do what you want, what you want with my body,” sings Lady Gaga… Whoops. Well, you get the point. Before I read the responses from my representatives, I knew that there would be no perfect answer to the questions that were tossed out to the TYCA representatives.

Here’s what the representatives asked the two-year college English teachers in their regions: Is the essay the only genre you teach in your first-year writing course (first-term)? If so, why? If not, what genre(s) (or additional genres) do you teach? Do you think the essay is a relevant genre to teach to today’s college students?

Overall, some instructors feel that the structure of the essay is essential in teaching students to write their thoughts in an organized manner. Other instructors feel the need to move away from the “typical essay” and use the essay’s skeleton format in some other way, some other genre or combination of genres. In my own classes, I use the essay format and style in my medium projects (which are more substantial than journal entries, less substantial than the major projects), so my students get practice, yet it’s not what my course revolves around.

In asking questions about the simple essay genre, we witness the flexibility instructors have in their classes.

TYCA-Southwest Report from Erin O’Neill Armendarez

While the essay is clearly alive and well around the TYCA-SW region in the first-semester writing course, instructors have also assigned a variety of other genres to
prepare students for academic writing, for the workplace, and to meet course and state general education outcomes.

The term *essay* is quite broad, so some respondents clarified their understanding of the term. One Texas instructor explains to his students the origin of the word from the French *essai*, “to try,” and he believes this helps them to “conceptualize the essay differently,” including viewing the essay as an attempt to discover meaning. Another Texas instructor said that “we use the term ‘essay’ quite loosely. . . . In fact, many still adhere to the old familiar 5-paragraph essay, and some still even teach the modes of writing.” One Colorado instructor stated simply, “Essays remain the emphasis due to tradition.”

However the essay is conceptualized and taught, instructors asserted its value for students. One pointed out that “it still teaches them to form a thesis and support it in an organized, coherent manner,” while another instructor, convinced of the importance of the essay for students, wrote that “although the current emphasis on a college degree is to further careers and employment, the process of writing an essay helps clarify a student’s thoughts and beliefs and gives the student a voice. Writing can be a way to respond nonviolently to an opposing viewpoint.” While this instructor also includes assignments in text analysis, self-analysis, and visual rhetoric, she believes the essay is of particular importance given the current political and cultural climate.

While the tendency to teach essays, and even the modes, persists across the region, most campuses have course descriptions and assignments expecting students to acquire skill in close critical reading, analysis of texts, demonstration of information literacy, an awareness of audience, and a development of skill in rhetoric. For example, the Texas state description for the first-semester writing course includes “Focus on writing the academic essay as a vehicle for learning, communicating, and critical analysis.” It also specifically mentions “effective rhetorical choices.” One New Mexico course description says the course “emphasizes text-based essay composition, including critical reading, summary writing, and synthesis,” while another from a different New Mexico campus says the course emphasizes “academic writing, intertextuality, and analysis of rhetorical situation through writing workshop and thematic readings.” A course description from an Oklahoma first-semester composition course tells students, “You will write organized and effective arguments” considering alternative perspectives and using sound logic. The standard course description on Colorado syllabi calls for “the development of critical and logical thinking skills,” in compositions “that stress analytical, evaluative, and persuasive/arguative writing.”

While the nature of assignments may vary widely from section to section of a course, all assignments must fall under the parameters of the course descriptions and must meet course outcomes. Beyond the essay, a variety of other assignments
are required around the region including summaries, blogs, critiques/analyses, letters, short reports, and self-reflective writing.

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**TYCA-West Report from Stephanie Maenhardt**

While most instructors in the TYCA-West region do teach the essay as a core element in their first-year writing courses, it is certainly not the only genre of focus. Most of us balance it with other genres of writing, such as interviews, annotated bibliographies, synthesis, rhetorical analysis, emails, reviews, and so forth.

In an environment, then, where it seems of late that the essay as a genre has fallen out of vogue, with many members of our profession calling for instructors and institutions to step away from what they see as an outdated, dominant form of discourse, we may find ourselves questioning the currency and validity of continuing to teach the essay as an important genre of academic writing.

Brad Waltman of the College of Southern Nevada states that he believes it is necessary for students to “learn essay writing in order to succeed in their future academic classes,” while Anne Canavan of Salt Lake CC commented, “Essays [do] have their place if we are serious about preparing students for academic success.” She continues on, however, to say that “other genres are [also] crucial to help students think about transfer.”

Indeed, while essays certainly do have “their place” in FYC, we must at the same time acknowledge the controversy that surrounds this genre of writing. Alex Arreguin-Carrillo of Mesa CC noted that to even ask whether the essay is the only genre we teach in FYC is a bit of a loaded question. *Essay,* he notes, is “a vague term that does mean something for us in FYC and this could be similar or maybe very different from what it means outside of FYC.”

Acknowledging, as Alex does, that while the skills we teach when assigning an essay are certainly transferrable, the product itself—for example, a rhetorical analysis *essay*—generally has a very specific shelf life that “ends in our classroom.” So, once again, we find ourselves asking whether the essay assignment is still relevant for FYC instructors and students.

One of our four-year representatives to TYCA-West agrees with this idea, noting that it is part of our job as instructors to “help students be successful in all four arenas of life—academic, professional, civic, and personal”—and as such he encourages his students to explore a wide range of genres and media including “blogs, posters, video ads, audio recordings, editorials, reviews, proposals, and more.”

As illustrated by these instructors from around the TYCA-West region, writing is a dynamic act and so, it would logically follow, must be the genres we teach in FYC. While the essay itself might be what Elizabeth Wardle calls a “mutt genre,” something that is “in-house” and specific only to an academic setting, as
Alex Arreguin-Carrillo suggests, even if the essay has “lost its scholarly appeal or has lost its rigor . . . there is [still] much for us as a field to still theorize” about this genre. By teaching the essay in tandem with other more active genres of writing, he asserts, we can create for our students and ourselves a platform for learning how to both “disrupt and engage in these dominant genres.” Is the essay still relevant? Yes, it certainly can be!

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TYCA-Midwest Report from Suzanne Labadie

Multimodal essays, websites, blogs, film, graphic design—these days, even writing instructors acknowledge there are many ways to communicate ideas and opinions. Yet for students entering first-year composition courses, most assignments will be traditional essays: sustained pieces of writing, not blogs or vlogs or infographics. This is certainly true at midwestern two-year colleges, based upon a recent survey of TYCA Midwest members.

Respondents in our region seem to assign more traditional essays with occasional multimodal assignments mixed in. A broad variety of essay genres is represented, however, from the literacy narrative and descriptive essay to the political reflection essay and the traditional research essay. In that vein, Brett Griffiths from Macomb Community College argues the essay “is not a single genre.” She suggests that while a course may culminate with a traditional researched argument, each of the assigned essays is its own genre requiring a unique skill set.

Though the essay arose as a prominent form, one instructor reports on a multigenre group project, including problem/solution posters, a PowerPoint presentation, and the opportunity to reenvision one of these pieces as an essay. I use a variation on this strategy in my own courses, asking students to create multimodal essays from their previous written work.

Despite experiments with form, most agree that the essay’s value lies primarily in its complexity. “First-year composition is as much about thinking as it is about writing, and the discipline of writing an essay requires that students think and try to make sense of some part of their world,” says Jane M. Schreck of Bismarck State College. But those who use multiple genres cite the relevance of these forms. Brian Fischer of Illinois Central College argues that we “owe it to [our] students to prepare them for various ‘texts’” and suggests that other genres can simplify some concepts and serve as “stepping stones” toward more complex assignments. Similarly, Brett Griffiths asserts that “students need better strategies for identifying the kinds of genre moves expected in their future disciplines and professions … styles I can’t hope to anticipate or have the time to teach.”

Overall, most instructors in our region seem to agree with Margot Vance of Illinois Central College when she says, “the essay is still essential for students
to learn and master, though our teaching approaches towards this mastery need to adapt to the times.” This sentiment is confirmed even by more adventurous or experimentally inclined instructors. I think Brian Fischer put it well when he wrote:

The essay’s elemental nature and rigor make it a uniquely powerful learning vehicle. The essay’s expectations and imposed boundaries drive students in a comprehensive task: engage in inquiry, acquire knowledge, make a claim supported by scaffolded implications, all while meeting the world through developing audience awareness. These are universal, lifelong skills.

Long live the essay, we say, but let’s work toward stronger transfer of skills by incorporating new genres and formats where possible.

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**TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis**

During the 2015 CCCC Chair’s address, Adam Banks urged his audience to move beyond the essay as the dominant genre for college composition classrooms:

By the power vested in me for the thirty minutes of this chair’s address, I hereby promote the essay to dominant genre emeritus. I thank you for your loooonng and committed service over more than a century. We still love you. We want you to keep an office on campus and in our thinking, teaching, and writing lives. We will continue to throw wonderful parties and give meaningful awards in your name. And yet, we also acknowledge the rise and promotion of many other activities around which writing and communication can be organized. And we realize that if we are going to fly and find new intellectual spaces and futuristic challenges to meet with our students and each other, we have to leave the comfortable ground we have found with you.

For those of you who might be wondering if I’ve lost my mind at this point, let me state my case this way: the essay is a valuable, even powerful technology that has particular affordances in helping us promote communicative ability, dialogue, and critical thinking. But we have gotten too comfortable relying on those affordances as our writing and communication universe goes through not only intense change, but an ever-increasing tempo of change.

Despite Banks’s exhortation, the essay as genre continues to dominate the composition curricula at two-year colleges, at least according to the instructors that I surveyed in the Northeast. For most, the essay is required by departmental policy or individual administrators. Several respondents either implied or explicitly stated that students were not ready to move beyond the essay or that the essay was a kind of fundamental building block that students needed to master before moving on to other genres:

- Essay is the only genre I teach—it’s a time issue. Learning to write is a skill that requires practice and freshmen don’t have the skill.
The academic essay—and its rigid structure—is something students need to get comfortable writing. Once they can learn to organize effectively, incorporate quotations, defend a thesis, stay in third person, then they can eventually determine when to “break” those rules purposefully and effectively.

I only teach the essay, as I view an essay as a form in which students can think deeply about a single idea, build arguments, and consider perspectives in a manageable space.

The perception of student ability seemed to play a role in limiting courses to the essay genre. One instructor defended his use of the essay because “students come in without much academic writing experience. They may have written one or two research papers in high school. Teaching them how to structure, research, and write different types of academic essays is a practical tool for them to use in their other classes. Learning these skills first semester is more beneficial, I feel, than spending time on other genres.”

A few respondents mentioned assigning other genres, such as “blogging and PowerPoint presentations,” “digital writing,” and “literacy narratives” as more of an unusual type of essay not often assigned by colleagues. One instructor explained that her students “write essays of various lengths, but also do poster presentations, PowerPoints, and sometimes videos. There is always a written component, but it isn’t always a traditional essay. Although essays are still the first and main assignments, I usually teach them how to take their essay content and repackage it into other forms of media, depending on their audience.”

All respondents felt that the essay is a relevant genre to teach to college students. One respondent did express some doubt, acknowledging that “many jobs will never require an actual essay.” Nevertheless, he stated his belief that the essay “is helpful to provide a base for other, more necessary genres.”

Many instructors referenced the work done in other college classes as a reason for keeping the essay. Others cited the future demands of the workplace as a reason: “I think the essay gives students the practice they need in writing organized, coherent, logical and sustained writing. Varied styles of essay (analysis, summaries, arguments, etc.) will be part of the expectations in the workplace.” One instructor felt the essay was necessary, “despite the fact that I will admit that most will not be writing academic essays very often (if at all) after college. However, I believe that the essay helps students master the basic building blocks. Further, it encourages them to develop their ideas thoroughly and coherently and, in doing so, forces them to THINK. The academic essay—as rigid as it is—does encourage/require critical thinking and fosters the ability to argue effectively. Mastering these skills is one of the first steps towards understanding and mastering rhetoric, which could not be more important in today’s world.”

After reflecting on these responses, it becomes evident that essay writing begets more essay writing. One instructor noted the self-fulfilling prophecy of this cycle: “As long as other classes ask students to compose essays, the essay will remain relevant to college students to some degree. However, I don’t think it’s reasonable to focus on essays exclusively, especially in a world with ever-growing genres of
writing. If we want our students to be flexible and successful writers, we need to expose them to new genres and mediums of composing.”

Work Cited


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TYCA-Pacific Coast Report from Sravani Banerjee

In California, we have a three-tier system of public higher education: the University of California system (UC), the California State University system (CSU), and the community college system. Our community college curriculum is based on the stipulations mandated by the CSU and UC systems, where the majority of our students transfer. The General Education (GE) patterns for the CSU and UC explicitly require expository writing in the first-year composition class. Consequently, we are required to teach the essay as the primary genre.

The courses that we usually refer to as English 101/102, or English 1A/1B or 1C, or more generically as Freshman Comp/Critical Thinking, are for the most part two separate courses that fulfill separate areas in the GE pattern. Freshman Comp fulfills the written communication requirement, while the critical thinking course fulfills the critical thinking requirement. Students transferring to the CSU might not ever take the critical thinking course through an English department. In fact, the courses they select might not involve much writing at all, since an argumentative speech class and some philosophy classes also meet the critical thinking (A3) requirement in the CSUGE pattern. In fact, many students never actually take a full “first year” of writing. More accurately they get a “first semester,” and that may be the only baccalaureate essay training they receive. This makes it even more critical that we teach the essay as a genre in a first-year writing course. A one-semester Freshman Comp course may be the only time our students get explicit instruction in thesis-driven writing. When we consider that “acceleration” in various formats is the new pedagogy, students may only get six or eight weeks of essay exposure in a four– to six-year college career.

Although it is also necessary for transfer and included in the Student Learning Outcomes, pedagogically and philosophically, the essay is the most pertinent genre to be taught at a first-year composition level, not specifically the five-paragraph format, but rather the elements of the essay: establishing relevance, stating a main idea, providing supporting reasons and examples, acknowledging opposing reasons,
rebutting opposing reasons, and concluding with a call to action. This format is the basis for much of academic and professional communication including written tests, research projects, customer proposals, and media presentations. Most faculty follow the Student Learning Outcomes, which list developing “sustained expository essays” as the completion goal for first-year writing. The essay is indeed relevant because it is the medium of ideas for newspaper editorials, for opinion pieces, and for exchange of ideas in the academy. Today essays are more relevant than ever because they posit a claim and then give reasons and justification for that claim, a logical approach that seems to be under assault these days due to fake news, socially driven communication, and overheated political rhetoric, so although some faculty might use diverse source material, they focus on reading and writing the essay format because it is essential for academic literacy. The essay form is also relevant across the curriculum. It is imperative for college instructors in all disciplines to use tools that help solidify the ideas of comprehension, composition, and critical thinking.

While some faculty do experiment with a “multimodal” approach that may integrate visual rhetoric and composition and allow for more creativity in assignments such as designing flyers and creating websites and YouTube presentations, they still recognize the importance of the essay in a first-year composition class. Students need to be able to formulate and argue a thesis, and the essay is an appropriate practice for this life skill that transfers to all types of academic and professional writing.

Many thanks to my colleagues Robin Hahn, Sean Stratton, Sterling Warner, Huma Saleem, Brian Gott, Perri Gallagher, Jody Millward, and Bruce Henderson for sharing their ideas about this critical topic.

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TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney

I asked members of TYCA-Pacific Northwest to share their thoughts about teaching the essay genre in first-year composition courses. Twenty-one instructors responded; all of them identified the essay as the predominant genre they assign in first-year composition (FYC). The majority of respondents assign both “research-based” and “personal” essays. Five instructors assign research-based essays only, and one instructor assigns personal essays only.

Faculty agree that as long as one purpose of FYC is to prepare students for college writing, we should teach students how to write essays. Essay writing develops critical thinking skills, including planning, organization, and audience awareness. In an era of social media, sound bites, and tweets, students need the ability to think deeply, and the essay is one of the best ways to gauge a student’s ability to do so. And while it’s true, as one respondent noted, that the essay is a school genre more than a “real-life” genre, there is no “authentic” genre we can assign in FYC unless
we require students to write in public genres.

However, nine of the twenty-one respondents assign other genres in addition to essays, including multimodal writing, collaborative writing, IMRaD-style (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) articles, blogs, visual arguments, annotated bibliographies, summaries, and various types of “public” texts (e.g., pamphlets, infographics, business letters, and magazine articles). These faculty expressed reservations about teaching the essay genre only. Chief among their concerns is that when we limit students to writing essays, we limit our ability to teach the importance of writing for the rhetorical situation. Learning to adjust one’s writing for different audiences, purposes, and genres is more important, according to several respondents, than learning how to write academic essays.

Other respondents said that while the essay may be a relevant genre for students, it is relevant only while students are in college and more relevant for students who transfer to universities than for those who do not. Two respondents also noted that the traditional argumentative essay is unique to Western academic culture; nontraditional students and students from other cultures are often more successful communicating in forms that are less formulaic. All students could benefit from experience with additional genres, if for no other reason than to prevent them from thinking that there is only one way to write. Workplace genres, citizen journalism, project-based proposals to support community development, and genres with visual, multimodal, or other design elements were mentioned as being more useful for students’ futures.

If the faculty who responded to this survey are representative of other faculty in the region, the essay remains the predominant genre taught in FYC at community colleges in the Northwest. However, many instructors believe the writing students do in FYC should not be limited to this single genre.

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