

Major 1: English Prose-I (Unit – 3: Essay)

Q. 1. Meaning and Origin of English Essay.

The essay is a comparatively new form of literature. But its origin is found far back in the writings of Roman writers Cicero and Seneca. They wrote letters and essays in prose. However, the modern form of the essay has come into vogue since 1580.

Many writers have tried to define an essay, but no one has given a satisfactory definition of it.

- i. Dr. Johnson defined it as ‘a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance.’
- ii. For Saintsbury, it is ‘a work of prose art.’
- iii. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as: ‘A composition of moderate length on any particular subject or branch of a subject, originally implying want of finish, but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range.’

The lengthy philosophical essays of John Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and the verse essays of Alexander Pope (“Essay on Criticism”, “Essay on Man”) do not come under these definitions.

Origin:

The Epistles of Roman writers of 1st century AD, Cicero and Seneca, can be called essays. Greek writer Plutarch of 1st century AD also wrote *Moralia*, a collection of moral essays. Therefore, Francis Bacon says: “The word essay is late, but the thing is ancient.”

For the first time, Montaigne wrote systematic and artistic essays in 1580. He was a 16th-century French writer. He wrote personal essays called ‘Essais’, meaning ‘an attempt’ or ‘an experiment’. It was the latest genre in literature at that time. Therefore, Montaigne is considered ‘the Father of Modern Essays’. The English word ‘essay’ came from the French “Essais”. F. Bacon found this French form. And he wrote, for the first time, essays in English. But he tried to write them objectively. Therefore, Bacon is considered ‘the Father of English Essays’.

Thus, we can discuss the meaning and origin of the essay.

Q. 2. Subject of Essay.

An essay has no subject limit. It can be about anything we can see, feel, or believe to be. We can write an essay on any object that is under the sun. We can write an essay on any abstract thing that we imagine. An essay is a brief composition in prose on a particular subject or branch of a subject.

Generally, essays are written subjectively or objectively. In an objective essay, a writer does not attach his emotions to the subject. His views are scientific and impartial. Bacon wrote objective essays. He has given so many examples of others to explain his subject. He talks very little about himself. On the other hand, a writer narrates his personal views, thoughts, emotions, and experiences in the personal essay. Lamb, Hazlitt, etc, wrote personal essays.

According to W.H. Hudson, “The true essay is essentially personal. It belongs to the literature of self-expression.” Perhaps because of this, Charles Lamb’s essays are called “essays par excellence.” He is known as the ‘Prince of Personal Essays’ for his *Essays of Elia*.

Subjects of personal essays may include politics, religion, and society. Charles Lamb’s “Essays of Elia” are classical examples of the personal essay. Examples:

Charles Lamb – “A Bachelor’s Complaint”, “Dissertation upon a Roast Pig”

A.G. Gardiner – “A Fellow-Traveller”

William Hazlitt – “On Going a Journey”, “On Reading Old Books”

Q. 3. Types of Essays.

There are many types of essays. They are categorised by their writing style and the treatment given to the subject. They are;

Aphoristic Essay (Style):

In the Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), Francis Bacon wrote essays for the first time in English. Therefore, he is known as the ‘Father of English Essays.’ His essays are aphoristic in style. They are also impersonal or objective. Aphorism is a style of writing in which short, sharp, and meaningful sentences are used. He rarely uses figurative or literary language. He also avoids superfluous words and phrases.

A well-known example of Bacon’s aphoristic style is: ‘Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.’ From “Of Studies”.

Essays on Character Sketches:

In the early 17th century, character sketches were published in essay form. The main essayists of such essays are Joseph Hall, Sir Thomas Overbury, and John Earle. They imitated the ancient Greek Theophrastus and the Roman Seneca.

These three writers described various imaginary characters — such as the Hypocrite, the Milk Maid, the Affected Traveller, etc. They satirised the hypocrisy of these characters. These essays are still read for their satire and humour. La Bruyère was one of the best character writers in Europe in the 17th century.

Critical Essay:

John Dryden was the most famous English writer in the Restoration age (1660–1700). He introduced a new variety of essay called the critical essay. Its form was similar to Montaigne’s, but its theme was literary criticism.

Dryden wrote such essays separately; moreover, the prefaces to his plays are also considered critical essays. Examples include *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and the *Preface to Fables*.

Critical essays were published more in the Victorian Age (19th century). Writers like M. Arnold, Walter Pater, J.A. Symonds, etc., wrote critical essays. In the 20th century, T.S. Eliot, Ransom, F.R. Leavis, and I.A. Richards also wrote them.

The Periodical and Social Essay:

At the beginning of the 18th century, journals began to be published in England. Essays began to appear after a gap of a particular period. Their subjects were the social issues and manners of the people of the time.

Daniel Defoe is regarded as the first to write such periodical and social essays. His periodical journal was *The Review*. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison are the most famous writers of this form. Steele started *The Tatler* in 1709. In March 1711, Addison and Steele started *The Spectator*. They taught people manners, public behaviour, and what books to read. They also gave instructions for treating lovers, friends, and family. About 555 issues of *The Spectator* were published.

The Reviewers' Magazines:

In the 19th century, a new type of journal emerged. It was the Review. It was closely related to the publication of literary works. They critically evaluated books from the critic's eye. Examples include the *Edinburgh Review* and The *Quarterly Review*. Writers like Southey, Scott, Hazlitt, Macaulay, and Carlyle contributed to it.

Magazines:

Magazines allowed free publication of essays on any subject. The subject can be creative, critical, informative, or entertaining. Examples of magazines are: *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and *London Magazine*.

These magazines popularised personal essays. Contributors included Lockhart, Lamb, Carlyle, Thackeray, and Thomas De Quincey, whose works include "Essay on Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" and "Confessions of an Opium-Eater".

The Personal/Subjective Essay

When essays in the modern sense came into existence, they were personal. Montaigne wrote them first in French. Hence, he is considered the father of subjective/personal essays.

This form was developed in 19th-century England. These essays reveal and exploit the writer's own personality. The narrator of these essays is "I." The writer not only shares experiences but also secrets. The writer often narrates the incidents in the form of a story.

Subjects of personal essays may include politics, religion, and society. Examples:

Charles Lamb – "A Bachelor's Complaint", "Dissertation upon a Roast Pig", and "Dream Children".

Thus, the major types of essays can be explained.

Q. 4. What are the Periodical and Social Essays?

At the beginning of the 18th century, journals began to be published in England. Essays began to appear after a gap of a particular period. Daily, bi-weekly, tri-weekly, weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, annually, etc are examples of periodicals. Their subjects were politics, social issues, and manners of the people of the time.

Daniel Defoe is regarded as the first to write such periodical and social essays. His periodical journal was *The Review*. Richard Steele and Joseph Addison are the most famous writers of this form. Steele started *The Tatler* in 1709.

In March 1711, Addison started *The Spectator* with Steele. About 555 issues of *The Spectator* were published. These essays aimed to “enliven morality with wit”. They taught people manners, public behaviour, and what books to read. They also gave instructions for treating lovers, friends, and family.

Other notable works in this category: Daniel Defoe’s *The Review* (1704)

Addison and Steele’s *The Tatler* (published thrice a week) and *The Spectator* (Sir Roger de Coverley)

Dr. Johnson’s *The Rambler* (1750–52) and *The Idler* (1758–60)

Oliver Goldsmith’s *Citizen of the World*.

Q. 5. The Personal or Subjective Essays.

When essays in the modern sense came into existence, they were personal. Montaigne wrote them first in French. He writes, ‘I am myself the subject of my book.’ Hence, he is considered the father of subjective/personal essays.

This form, later, was developed in 19th-century England. Like Montaigne’s essays, these reveal and exploit the writer’s own personality. The narrator of these essays is “I.” The writer not only shares experiences but also secrets. The writer often narrates the incidents in the form of a story.

According to W.H. Hudson, “The true essay is essentially personal. It belongs to the literature of self-expression.” Perhaps because of this, Charles Lamb’s essays are called “essays par excellence.” He is known as the ‘Prince of Personal Essays’ for his *Essays of Elia*.

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Q. 6. Aphoristic Essay (Style).

In the Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), Francis Bacon wrote essays for the first time in English. Therefore, he is known as the ‘father of English essays.’ His essays are aphoristic in style. They are also impersonal or objective. Aphorism is a style of writing in which short, sharp, and meaningful sentences are used. The subject is treated abruptly and directly without prefaces. He rarely uses figurative or literary language. He also avoids superfluous words and phrases.

Bacon’s essays have a utilitarian approach to the subject.

A well-known example of Bacon’s aphoristic style is:

‘Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.’ “Of Studies”

Other examples of aphoristic sentences are proverbs in any language. However, sometimes such essays are disliked for their brief and rough style.

Q. 7. Major Essayists (From the Elizabethan Age to the Victorian Age)

The origin of the modern essay is in France. Montaigne, a French writer, published such essays in 1580. Afterwards, essays became popular in English. The major English essay writers are:

i) Sir Francis Bacon: Bacon was a great politician, scholar, and writer. He lived in the Age of Queen Elizabeth (1557-1603). He published many essays in 1597 and afterwards. Therefore, he is known as the ‘Father of English Essays’. His style of writing essays was aphoristic. They are also impersonal or objective. Aphorism is a style of writing in which short, sharp, and meaningful sentences are used. The subject is treated abruptly and directly without prefaces. He rarely uses figurative or literary language. He also avoids superfluous words and phrases. Examples of his essays: “Of Studies”, “Of Friendship”, “Of Revenge”, etc.

ii) Joseph Addison: Addison published essays in the 18th century. He popularised the social essays. They were published after a particular gap of period. So, they are also called periodicals. In March 1711, Addison started *The Spectator* with Steele. About 555 issues of *The Spectator* were published. These essays in *The Spectator* aimed to “enliven morality with wit”. They taught people manners, public behaviour, and what books to read. They also gave instructions for treating lovers, friends, and family. The main character in these essays was Sir Roger de Coverley. Richard Steele helped Addison write some of the essays.

iii) Richard Steele: Steele was an Irish writer. He was a friend of Addison. He published social essays. They were published after a particular gap of period. So, they are also called periodicals. Richard Steele is the most famous writer of this form. He started the journal, *The Tatler*, in 1709. Addison helped him write some essays in the journal. They wrote essays on political and social issues. Their essays satirised the follies in manners and morality of the English people. These essays were famous in the coffee-houses and the public library.

iv) Charles Lamb: Charles Lamb published essays at the beginning of 19th century. before that, he wrote poems and a play. He wrote essays in different magazines and journals. He used the pen name, Elia, to write them. Lamb took this name from his colleague. His essays are personal, dealing with his experiences, views, thoughts, and feelings.

According to W.H. Hudson, “The true essay is essentially personal. It belongs to the literature of self-expression.” Perhaps because of this, Charles Lamb’s essays are called “essays par excellence.” He is known as the ‘**Prince of Personal Essays**’ for his *Essays of Elia*. Charles with his sister, Mary, wrote *The Tales from Shakespeare*. Charles Lamb’s “Essays of Elia” are classical examples of the personal essay. Examples: “A Bachelor’s Complaint”, “Dissertation upon a Roast Pig”.

V) William Hazlitt:

Q. 8. Features of an Essay:

1. Length: The length of an essay is neither too short nor too long. It should be moderate, from one page to ten pages. However, Bacon wrote essays of one or two paragraphs, and John Locke wrote book-length essays. From one page to one book.
2. Subject: An essay has no subject limit. It can be about anything we can see, feel, or believe to be. We can write an essay on any object that is under the sun. We can write an essay on any abstract thing that we imagine.
3. Brevity: Essays are generally brief in dealing with the subject. If they incorporate each aspect of the topic, they will take the size of a book. Therefore, too many details are avoided in them. But they give us a sense of completeness. Example, “Of Studies” by Bacon.
4. Structure: Every genre of literature has a fixed structure to write them. But there is no fixed structure for writing an essay. Different writers practised different structures. Therefore, writers find this genre easy to start their writing career.
5. Open-Ended and Reflective: Some essays end without conclusions. They invite the reader to reflect on the topic to find out the solutions. They encourage critical thinking among the readers.