

The Art of the Essay

When you write an essay for class, you are taking part in a literary tradition that goes back hundreds of years. In classroom writing, the essay may have many rules governing its structure and topic, but in the literary world, essays come in all shapes and sizes, accommodate any topic, and can be found in books, magazines, and daily newspapers.

First Attempts

An **essay** is a short work of nonfiction that offers a writer's opinion on a particular subject. The length can vary greatly. Some are personal, while others are coldly factual. The essay originated with the 16th-century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who first introduced the form when he published a collection of writings entitled *Essais*, a French word meaning "attempts." English writers began using the form, and eventually it became commonplace.

Two masters of the American essay in the 19th century were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These writers used the form to express their philosophies and personal views on a variety of topics, from the ideal lifestyle to the beauty of nature. Using notes he recorded in his journals, Emerson created essays that gave his ideas structure and refined his concepts. In turn they became the cornerstone of **transcendentalism**, a literary and philosophical movement that emphasized individualism and intuition as a means to understanding reality. Among Thoreau's works is a series of essays, entitled *Walden*, in which he describes his experience of living out the ideals of individualism at Walden Pond (see page 372).

Emerson and Thoreau laid the groundwork for the American essay. Since then, numerous writers have gained reputations as respected authors of the form, including H. L. Mencken, Ernest Hemingway, E. B. White, Joan Didion, and Amy Tan.

The Craft of Expressing Ideas

Essays generally fall into one of two traditions. **Formal essays** explore topics in a serious and organized manner. **Informal essays** adopt a more casual tone and may include humor and unconventional topics. These essays are often more personal in nature. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (see page 362) is a formal essay, whereas Thoreau's *Walden* essays are more informal.

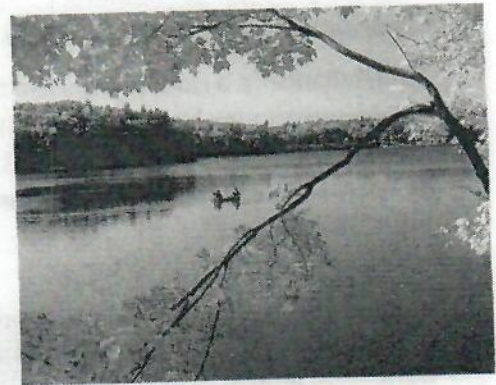


SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.2

Use information from the text to answer questions or to state the main idea or provide relevant details.



Thoreau's Walden Pond today, located just outside Concord, Massachusetts.

Whether the essay's purpose is to be **persuasive, expository, descriptive,** or **narrative**, essayists typically rely on these elements to express their ideas:

- **Organization** is the arrangement of the main ideas and supporting details. Some essays may be narratives that read like a story, while others may follow a strict pattern of organization, such as **cause-and-effect** or **compare-and-contrast**.
- **Supporting details** include facts, opinions, reasons, sensory details, anecdotes, and examples that support the **main idea**, the most important idea about a topic.
- **Diction** is the way a writer uses and arranges language. Some writers use simple and casual words and sentences that may create a personal voice. Others are more formal, using elevated language and complex sentence structures.
- **Tone** is the expression of a writer's attitude toward a subject and may be described as serious, humorous, sarcastic, and so on. The writer's diction and details will provide clues to his or her tone.

"Self-Reliance" is a carefully constructed argument in the form of an essay. Emerson organizes his ideas step by step, leading the reader to the conclusion he wants them to reach—an understanding of his philosophy of individualism. Note Emerson's **opinions**, **abstract language**, and formal **tone** in this passage from "Self-Reliance":

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Close Read

What ideas does Emerson introduce in this sentence? Paraphrase his ideas in your own words.

Thoreau, on the other hand, takes a more personal and informal approach in *Walden*. Even though his **sentence structure** is complicated and lengthy, the **language** is simple, and the **details** are concrete.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence day, or the fourth of July 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Close Read

Note the **diction** and **details** in this passage. What do they reveal about Thoreau's **tone**?