

The art of the essay



The Art of the Essay It is the fall of 2008, and a 14 year old kid is sitting in his Freshman Introductory English class. Classes essentially just started and like always, the new freshmen are still giddy in the excitement of a new school with new classes. Kids walk around with their class schedules in their back pockets, stopping and investigating the potential of each and every one of their friends' list of classes. Freshman English, Freshman Science, Algebra I, World History, and Fundamentals of Technology run rampant among their schedules. The kids are still learning each others' names, as they are all from a choice of five different neighboring towns. Some kids talk with their friends about how you have " much more freedom" as a high school student than you do in middle school, others about recent successes on the football/soccer/cross country team, as it is that time of the year. Many kids, myself included, are pumped about the fact that we finally get to wear our own school's color when playing football, instead of playing on one of the recreation teams, as there were no middle school football teams. It is safe to say that most freshmen at WA were full of emotions; anxiety, anticipation, and excitement among them. However, a month into a Freshman English class, I had lost most of these feelings. The two feelings I remember most about this particular class are hopefulness and boredom. I was hopeful that each 84 minute class would end (soon) without having to go home and write a paper after football practice. Word on the streets was that they made you write huge, long, drawn-out papers in high school. I was also very bored. Learning about Shakespeare as a freshman was just not what I was looking for. At that point in my life, I would much rather have eaten a can of (vile) pickled beets than read some Shakespeare. Our first writing assignment, as the teacher put it, would be a " simple and fun" one. I'm not going to speak

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for my classmates on this one, but when a teacher says something is gonna be “ simple" or “ fun" or “ simple and fun, " I can't help but grit my teeth and ask Him for forgiveness. A ninth-grade teacher's idea of fun is typically not along the same lines as that of a ninth-grade student's. Fun to me at this time would have included, but was not limited to, riding fourwheelers, playing football on the soccer field, riding my bike with my friends, playing Xbox, and so on. Our idea of fun to a ninth-grade English teacher? Write a five-page narrative on a memorable experience in your life and what it meant to you and what you took from it. I thought to myself as I received the rubric and outline, “ What the heck am I gonna write about? " It took me a day or two to successfully brainstorm an idea; I actually began to write about one topic at first and decided to scrap it because I just didn't have enough memory of the situation. But when this thought crossed my mind, something in my head clicked. I was going to write a narrative on a dramatic football game we had won earlier in this season. The game, in retrospect, felt like it came straight out of a movie. It was a really hot day; I remember writing about the bus ride to the field, and the pre-game warm-ups. At first, the game looked like it would be a blowout. They got up on us 14-0 early. It was at this point that our fate looked bleak. However, we stayed with it and tied it up. I ended up scoring a kick-return touchdown and a receiving touchdown, while in the last few minutes of the game, one of my best friends (throughout middle and high school and still today) took the ball right out of the opposing running back's hands and made a beeline for the end zone. The touchdown pretty much sealed the victory, as we went up 27-26 with very little time to go. As you may already be able to tell, it was a memorable game for me, as I can still give you a quarter-by-quarter recap of the game. I

believe this made the paper, I hate to say it, “ simple and fun. ” I wrote between five and six pages about the game, which was plenty long enough. I described every minute detail as I remembered it, every feeling I remembered that took place during the game. I wrote that the game taught me to never give up, and that if everyone on the team really plays to win, anything can happen. I also wrote that the thing I took out of the game was the everlasting image of my buddy legitimately running full speed at their running back, and in the blink of an eye, perhaps even quicker, the ball was in his hands and he was running for a touchdown, myself running directly behind him the whole way, arms in the air, yelling. I believe because the memory was (and still is) so vivid in my mind, the words practically fell out of my hippocampus into the paper. This made writing the paper fun because I sort of 'relived' the game as I wrote it. I would say this paper was one of my best throughout my four years in high school. It seemed as though everything I wrote was pure gold. Apparently, my teacher liked the paper too, as I received an A. You just can't go wrong with “ simple and fun. ”

Essaying Through a Narrative As I stated earlier, I did end up receiving a very good grade on my narrative. Throughout writing the paper, this had been my objective, to write an A-worthy piece of work. Although my main goal was to achieve a good grade, I believe that the greater accomplishment in my writing was what I took out of the paper. The way I wrapped up the paper in the end showed how our team's unwillingness to give in and succumb to their early lead kept us in the game. When we were all distraught and out of place, we somehow kept our heads and rallied together to come back and win. This is what I believe I learned from writing this paper, because before writing the paper, I just remembered the game being memorable and fun for

it's face value. But after writing through the game's key moments, I realized the diversity we had overcome. I learned more about the game in this writing exercise than I could have by just telling someone about it. Thomas Recchio says, " As Graham Good argues in *The Observing Self*, 'The essay is an act of personal witness. The essay is at once the inscription of a self and the description of an object' (1988, 23)" (281). Essentially, in essaying, the writer and, in my case, the experience, " define and transform themselves reciprocally, aspects of each becoming understood in relation to the other (Good 1988, 8)" (281). After writing an essay on the game, I now understand fully what I took out of it, and how it changed my way of thinking about sports. This game, which happened over four years ago, taught me that no matter how bad your situation is during a game, if everyone has a winning attitude, anything is possible. It is safe to say that my writing experience as a high school freshman was very closely related to what Recchio believes is " essaying. " I wrote about a topic I was very interested in, and in writing about it, my relation to the topic changed. In a sense, my writing experience was a learning experience, which Recchio argues is sometimes not allowed by the standard five paragraph essay. Unfortunately, throughout the rest of my high school career, the five paragraph essay was expected by my teachers, which may or may not have stunted my growth in writing. I can easily say that in my writing, I was truly essaying. In Thomas Recchio's *On the Critical Necessity of Essaying*, Recchio tries to define the essay and encourage his way of " essaying, " while discussing how the standard five paragraph essay is often a detriment to learning. Recchio writes, " Reflecting a critical orientation toward self and other, the essay, as both attitude and writing practice, is Janus-faced; it looks inward and outward simultaneously,

implicitly and/or explicitly registering the relationship between the person writing and the context of the writing"(284). In my own words, I'd say Recchio believes the essay changes the relationship between the writer and the topic. He believes that while the writer can put what they want into an essay, they can also take something out of it. Recchio also believes that their needs to be some critical aspect to writing. He says, " If the fundamental goal of freshman writing courses is to empower students as critical thinkers through writing, critical about their objects of study and about themselves, we need to invite them not just to look but to think, not simply to perceive but to probe, not to accept but to question, all qualities of the essay as a record of the mind at work" (288). Recchio believes that writers will learn by questioning and probing deeper to find things out for themselves. By having a critical orientation towards a topic, the writer can challenge authority and make an opinion for themselves. To Recchio, this is a 'critical necessity' in learning and furthering knowledge about a topic. In addition, Recchio outlines what he believes essaying is not. Recchio writes, "'In the essay,' he argues, 'it would seem that [the] key rule is that there be a thesis which the essay proves" (1971, 631). He characterizes that key rule as the '[formal] tyranny of essay writing,' a tyranny that 'is based on the need of those who are in control to make the appearance of the expression confirm a desired idea of which there is no doubt' (1971, 631, my italics). Skepticism, uncertainty, openness to possibility have no place in such a form" (284). It is clear that Recchio is against the typical five paragraph essay in which the rule is the writer must prove a thesis. Recchio would rather see qualities incorporated in an essay such as skepticism, uncertainty, and openness to possibility. I believe that my essaying was very closely related to what

Recchio's ideas reflect. My work did not have any thesis, and I was not trying to prove anything. My essay was written, and as I recalled my experience, I expressed what I felt and this reflected what I learned from it. I believe Recchio's approach is extremely valid, mainly because my experience with writing in his way got me an A. One benefit of Recchio's writing style is that the writer can learn about the topic while they learn more about themselves. Another benefit is that the writer gains the ability to challenge an authority and develop their own opinion of a topic as opposed to conforming to society's standards. The only shortcoming of the Recchio essay is that there is limited form. There is no thesis to be proven, and it doesn't have to be five paragraphs. In a society where we constantly search for answers and desire form, Recchio's writing style lacks rigidity and structure. However, I believe that from a gaining knowledge point of view, Recchio's essay is far more advantageous than the typical, rigid, five paragraph essay.

Works Cited
Recchio, Thomas. "On the Critical Necessity of 'Essaying.'" *Resources for Teaching Ways of Reading*, Eighth Edition. Eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2007. 281-291. Print