INTRODUCTION

The writing of essays is not as dramatic a feature of undergraduate life as is the writing of final examinations, but it is quite as characteristic. This should occasion no surprise, since the essay and the examination are variations on a single theme. Both are tests of the student's knowledge and, more important, of his ability to educate himself.

A student's final grade in each of the several courses which constitute his year's work is normally determined by combining the mark obtained at a final examination with his term mark in the subject. The relative weight assigned to examination and to term mark varies from university to university, from department to department, and from year to year; sometimes the two are equated (add the two marks and divide by two), often (particularly in honours courses) the final examination receives the greater emphasis, occasionally (for example, in science courses which emphasize laboratory work) the term mark takes precedence. In all cases, however, the term mark is important, and the student's success—viewing success in the most practical of terms—depends to a considerable extent on the mark achieved before he enters the examination hall. The term mark normally incorporates the results of one or two class tests, but in science subjects it is principally based on laboratory reports and in arts subjects on essay assignments. In all subjects in the humanities, in most subjects in the social sciences, and in some subjects in the sciences, the student is assigned two to four essays during the academic year. It is not unusual for an undergraduate to write as many as fifteen essays between October and April.

Since essay assignments vary from subject to subject and, indeed, within the same subject, it is not possible to define the undergraduate essay rigorously. Usually an adjective must be attached: descriptive, critical, expository, argumentative. Even the noun varies: report, research paper, book review, term paper. The variations, however, are superficial rather than profound. All assignments mentioned have three things in common: they are of a certain length (1,000 to 2,000 words); they require that evidence be presented to support the judgments given; and they are all ultimately judged on the success
with which the student is able to demonstrate his knowledge of the subject. The latter two factors remind us of the essential similarity of essay (or laboratory report) and final examination. In the last analysis, the successful examination answer is the one which convinces the examiner that the student knows his work; the only way in which the student can convince the examiner of this is by marshalling evidence from his storehouse of knowledge which is relevant to the question asked. In the examination hall, the student has to state his case briefly and without reference to his sources; in writing his essay, he has as much time to prepare his case as he wishes to devote and as many resources to turn to as he wishes to examine. Inevitably the essay will be the more rigorously judged—but it will be judged according to the same criteria.

It has often been said that the perfect educational situation (the perfect university, if you will) was Mark Hopkins at one end of a log and the student at the other—the professor and student in intimate discussion. The situation is ideal if it can be assumed that the student has spent a good deal of time in the library before he sits down at his end of the log. Human beings seldom attain the ideal. This particular ideal—education through close association of master and apprentice—is in especial jeopardy in the twentieth century. As university enrolments steadily increase, the prospect for close association between professor and student becomes increasingly remote. Classes are large (too large, often, for questions from the floor), professors are much occupied with committee work and administration, students with part-time employment and the thousand demands of life in an industrialized society. An hour which might have been devoted to discussion may now be spent daily by both professor and student in the physical task of going to the university and returning home.

The essay provides the best opportunity to close the gap. For the half-hour required to read and criticize the essay, the professor gives the student his undivided attention. Ideally—and often this is provided for—professor and student meet together to discuss the essay after it has been graded; here is a real meeting of minds. The essay, then, is not a routine exercise, a chore for the student to write, a chore for the professor to read. It is, if properly approached by both parties, education in the truest sense.
II

It is not possible to teach a student to write a good essay. It is possible for a student to learn how to achieve this result. All that the teacher can do is, first, to provide the materials needed for the student to educate himself and, second, to demonstrate a likely approach. We educate ourselves.

The authors of The Undergraduate Essay accept these truths as self-evident. In Part I, a collection of seven essays, they provide the materials needed—complete essays which can be analysed with a view to determining the principles underlying the effective essay. Reading these essays, the student can ask himself why each is effective or why it is not, and he can find the answers: he can discover how the essay has been organized, how the paragraphs are linked, how the sentences have been drawn together into logical units called paragraphs, how the choice of word or phrase enables the writer to express the idea with precision and grace, how punctuation can be used to achieve different effects. The kind of analysis required is demonstrated in Part II. Here the authors identify the principles which govern sound planning, effective paragraph and sentence structure, apt diction, and functional punctuation by referring to specific essays, specific paragraphs, and specific sentences included in Part I. The chapter on “Planning,” for example, is based on an analysis of the organization of one of the seven essays, Dr. Roberts’ “A New Disease.” The authors show how “A New Disease” is organized, they identify the principles which Dr. Roberts has followed while writing her essay, and they suggest that these principles are observed in all effective essays. In this chapter the authors have not submitted the other essays of Part I to the same analysis, and it is possible that their generalizations are unsound—one swallow does not make a summer. The authors are thoroughly convinced, however, that their generalizations are valid; they have analysed dozens of effective essays and found that the organization of “A New Disease” is typical. But the student should investigate the matter himself. He should examine the organization of “The Canadian Dilemma” or “The Universities and the State” and find out whether the generalizations are in fact valid. Similarly, he should test the
principles proposed in the chapters on Paragraph, Sentence, Diction, and Punctuation by analysing other paragraphs and sentences than those selected by the authors in arguing their case. The ideal reader of this book is the student who reads each of the specimen essays six times—once in connection with each of the first six chapters.

The final chapter of Part II, "The Conventions of Scholarship," is of a different order than its predecessors. It is informational. It explains the facts of life about scholarly writing, and it gives advice about such practical matters as the physical appearance of the manuscript, the use of sources, and the conventional form of footnotes and bibliography.

Finally, some comments on the essays chosen for inclusion in Part I. "A Study of Hamlet's Soliloquies" is a genuine and unedited undergraduate essay; Mr. Frame was a freshman when he wrote it. Mr. Frame's essay is on a topic drawn from the humanities; "The Canadian Dilemma" and "A New Disease" deal with a topic drawn from the social sciences and the sciences respectively. These three essays are approximately 1,500 words in length, the average length of the undergraduate essay. "The Abbey's Needs" (also 1,500 words in length) is included chiefly as a reminder that most essays are arguments; Mr. Laird wants one million pounds sterling, and his essay is an attempt to convince people that this money must be provided. The remaining essays are longer (4,000 to 5,500 words); the increased length provides opportunity for the treatment of more complex material. Peter Winch's "The Universities and the State" is a tightly reasoned argument involving philosophic concepts. Professor Smith's "Refining Fire" is at once a convincing answer to a most difficult question (Why read poetry?) and a demonstration of how quotations can be used to support an argument. Professor Knox's essay is a fine example of how to handle a great mass of material without loss of control—he refers to no less than thirty-two critics and scholars in his 4,000 word survey.

A comparison of the short with the longer essays will reveal no fundamental difference. The principles which govern Dr. Roberts in the organization of her material also govern Professor Knox in the organization of his. Professor Smith's paragraphs are effective for the same reasons that Mr. Henn's are effective. Mr. Winch's punctuation is in accord with that used by Mr. Laird and Mr. Frame. Nor would a difference appear were we to compare the 1,500 word essay
with a 10,000 word essay or a 50,000 word book. The principles identified here as those which govern the effective undergraduate essay are precisely the principles which govern effective prose composition in any form.
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