Saving the Essay: An Apologetics for Essay Writing in Theatre and Beyond

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Abstract. This Note from the Field argues for the need to both retain and reapproach the essay as pedagogical tool in theatre studies, particularly within the larger context of the emergence of generative AI. By tracing the historiographic roots of the essay as a technology of thought and exploring current studies on students' challenges with essay writing, I suggest a series of strategies that will enable theatre educators to reclaim the essay's pedagogical purpose in light of the recent advances in artificial intelligence.

In December 2022, *The Atlantic* published "The College Essay is Dead" (Marche), citing the advent of the generative AI program Chat GPT as the death knell of the essay within higher education. Despite this alarmist reaction, the development of generative AI is simply the latest in a perennial debate on the value of the academic essay. In fact, much like theatre itself, scholars, journalists, and critics have long been proclaiming the impending death of the essay: in 2018, three years before the AI revolution, educational blogger Viktor James posted "Academic Essays Suck. It's a Dated, Useless Practice That's Failing Society"; two years earlier in 2016, scholar Yiannis Gabriel defined the essay as an "endangered species" (244); while as early as 2003, education scholar Richard Andrews published "The End of the Essay?" wherein he refers to the essay as the subject of common critiques such as being "stultifying" and "patriarchal" (119). Yet the purported demise of the essay has an even longer genealogy: in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to the Essay*, the editors note that between 1890 and 1940, the essay was repeatedly described as "barely surviving," "disappearing," and "passing away" (Wittman and Kindley 5). It seems that this collective eulogy for the essay is a rhetorical tradition stemming at least over a century, which suggests that despite the prognostications of writers at *The Atlantic*, the essay may not be as close to dying as critics are wont to believe. If anything, the essay is ripe to be reapproached, reunderstood, and reinvented to serve educators and students alike in the light of the AI revolution; in Andrews's words, the essay's persistent "longevity is a result of its flexibility, its ability to adapt to different functions" (126).

In his *Forbes* response to the *Atlantic* article, educational consultant Christopher Rim states: "If we cannot articulate the *reason* that the college essay has been the cornerstone of education in the humanities, it is impossible to determine whether it will be helped or hurt as we reach new horizons of technological advancement." As scholars and educators in theatre, we have the opportunity to consider both how the essay has *performed* within the historiography of the humanities as a whole and if and how it should continue to perform within our discipline. The essay, I argue, performs beyond the narrow framework in which it is conceived in educational settings. The essay—from its etymological roots in Latin and French meaning to "try," "attempt," "sift," and "winnow"—deploys writing toward persuasion (Rosenberg et al. 219–20). Such persuasion can manifest through argumentation, personal experience, the collection of data, or a combination of methods. Through this lens, the essay is not waning in its relevance but expanding: in addition to blogs and tweets, we can characterize journalistic articles, cover letters, emails, YouTube videos, TEDTalks, webinars, Instagram captions, and even TikToks as essayistic to the extent that they attempt to persuade—"try," "sift," "winnow"—an audience of ideas on any given topic.

As my own persuasive attempt, this essay seeks to argue for the continued relevance of the essay as a form and for the rehabilitation of essay writing within theatre education through engagement with the technological advancements that AI has brought to the practice of writing. By situating current essay writing practices—and their challenges—within the larger historiographic context of the development of the essay, I approach the essay foremost as a technology, one that has performed toward different ends at different times. With the rise of the Information Age in the twenty-first century, I believe the essay and its use within higher education is facing a new era of renewed importance in developing students' ability to discern and analyze unprecedented levels of information from which they will construct frameworks of knowledge and meaning-making, as both scholars and artists, thinkers, and performers.

Looking Back: A Brief Historiography of the Essay

The essay constitutes a particular technology of communication; culturally contingent and emergent, the essay presented a rupture from preexisting modes of written communication. While sixteenth-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne is popularly attributed with incepting the essay as a form, its genealogy traces earlier in the Renaissance to the art of rhetoric and oratory. The main practices of language and writing education in early Renaissance grammar schools were centered on translation, imitation, and memorization based on the model of classical rhetoric. The essay emerged in the late sixteenth century in reaction to the formality and formulism of these rhetorical modes enabled by the invention of the printing press that promulgated widespread literacy for the first time in Europe. As the so-called "father of the essay" (Rosenberg et al. 220), Montaigne's intervention was the deliberate "suspension of rhetorical formality" in favor of the freedom of an "unofficial discourse" (Womack 43). A far cry from the impersonal third person often prescribed to students today, Montaigne's essays were defined by their use of the first person: in his own words, Montaigne strove "to appear in my simple, natural and everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray" (23). Departing from the Latinate tradition of logical proofs of argumentation, Montaigne initiated the essay as a new mode of writing that is "personal, idiosyncratic, and expressive" (Andrews 118).

In the English tradition following Montaigne, the essay was popularized by the work of Francis Bacon in 1597. While stylistically less personal and self-reflective than Montaigne, Bacon characterized his essays as "counsels" that tackled large, philosophical topics, such as "truth" or "love," in a more approachable form than its treatment by previous philosophers; his prose was characterized by concision and methodical argumentation (Rosenberg et al. 221). Drawing on the models provided by Montaigne and Bacon, the essay had become the de facto mode of writing within educational training by the early nineteenth century. However, its utility was tied to hierarchical class structures and cultural capital within industrializing Europe; in this framework, "the essay is to be analytic up to a point, but it is not to subject the text to the inhuman mechanical analysis of the professional scholar; rather, it is to express the cultivated response of a man of taste" (Womack 44). In this way, the essay functioned more broadly as discourse rather than scholarship; its educational function served to equip students for membership in the bourgeois sphere of the rising middle class by imbuing them with cultural literacy and capital that would gain them admission into bourgeois institutions and discourses. The legacies of this utility for essay writing continue to be invoked as justifications for the ongoing use of the essay as having intrinsic, humanistic merit, or in the words of philosophy professors Bob Fischer and Nathan Nobis in their 2019 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "Writing is an ethical activity, and becoming a better writer can make you a better person."

The essay functioned as a vehicle for performing cultural capital throughout the nineteenth century-European education until the development of the exam system, which inaugurated the role of the essay we are most familiar with today: as a means of assessment. In Britain, the demands of

Victorian-era industrialization and imperialism led to a crisis in middle-class education that was solved by adopting the public examination system in the 1850s. While standardized exams have been problematized in recent years as a flawed and biased method of student assessment (Kohn; Au; Cunningham), their inception in the mid-nineteenth century was viewed as a revolutionary turn toward meritocracy, providing new opportunities for the middle class to pursue employment in the civil service. The essay was especially deemed the appropriate task for assessment due to its flexibility and relative informality, with its "intended openness" offering "the examiner a transparent window through which we can see the quality of the candidate's mind" (Womack 45–46). With this turn toward the essay, educational curriculum quickly adapted to prepare prospective exam candidates for increasingly socially mobile careers in the civil service, notably converting the essay's prior legacy for free thought and informality into a regimented prescription for bureaucratic potential. When Harvard University adopted the essay as part of its entrance exam in 1874, over fifty percent of candidates for admission failed the essay portion—demonstrating that the challenges of essay writing are longstanding within US higher education (Richardson). It is this function of assessment and competition that continues to haunt the essay 150 years later, evidenced by the current discourse on the essay's declining relevance. However, as Andrews contends, the essay's longevity and persistence over the past four centuries testifies to "its ability to adapt to different functions" (126)—from its origins as a tool of self-portrayal and reflection, to a mode of cultural capital, to a tool of institutional assessment. Rather than signaling the end of the essay's utility, I would suggest that the current crisis on the future of the essay demonstrates the need to reevaluate the essay and adapt its function to the needs of the students of today.

Where We Are Now: Trials and Tribulations for Student Writers

Recent studies show that the majority of college students struggle to define what an essay is or identify its persuasive purpose. In Gisela Consolación Quintero's 2018 survey of undergraduate education majors, 8% cited the essay's purpose as "giv[ing] your opinion," another 8% said "to inform," 12% stated "to collect information," 30% said to "summar[ize]" or "paraphras[e]," 19% said "to make a critique" but subsequently struggled to define "critique," and a final 19% stated "to express or portray ideas" (135).[1] As Quintero notes, while all of these elements may characterize aspects of essay writing, the noted absence of students identifying the centrality of a thesis in defining an essay indicates that even students in the field of education are unable to explain the purpose of an essay as a medium of persuasion. Of these students, 37% attributed their difficulties with essay writing to their own to "carelessness or lack of interest" (137). In a parallel study, 57% of students could not offer a definition of "critical evaluation," deferring instead to concepts of "summarizing" or relating personal anecdotes in their essay writing (Campbell et al. 457).

Students can hardly be blamed for their disinterest in essay writing if they foundationally do not understand its purpose or utility as a means of both self-expression and persuasion. A key contributing factor to this is students' lack of familiarity with the genre. While tasked with producing well-written, thesis-driven essays, most undergraduates are not assigned essays to read; instead theatre course syllabi are often populated with primary texts like plays and dramatic theory texts and/or secondary texts like textbooks.[2] The majority of students seem relatively unaware of the deleterious effect this lack of exposure to scholarly essays has on their ability to produce coherent essays themselves: When asked to identify their main difficulties in writing, only 15% of the subjects in Quintero's 2018 study attributed it to a lack of reading. Instead, a majority of students (62%) attributed their writing difficulties to issues of spelling and grammar, indicating that both students—and many educators—reduce good writing to merely the absence of discrete language rather than the presence of a thesis and argument (136). Despite this focus on avoiding spelling and grammar mistakes, data produced by the College Board's National Commission on Writing shows that "more than 50 percent of first-year college students are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors" ("Writing is the Key").

In my own experience teaching undergraduate theatre students across various institutions (community college, an R1 public research university, and a private faith-based university), these statistical observations are patently manifest. Across courses such as Introduction to Theatre, Theatre History, Dramatic Literature, and Dramatic Theory, my students routinely struggle to form a thesis or build an argument. Having noticed this pattern, I have instituted a survey in my academic theatre classes where students self-report the challenges they feel are the largest obstacles to their writing success. In my most recent use of the survey in fall 2024, 65% of my undergraduate theatre majors identified structuring an argument as their biggest challenge, with another 40% ranking generating a thesis as the second greatest difficulty.[3] Interestingly, nearly all my students indicated they had already fulfilled their university writing requirement, and 70% reported having written more than five essays during their first year of undergraduate education. This data suggests that even students who have received college writing instruction and have had significant practice writing essays still felt insecure about their ability to form theses and an argument, which was reflected in the quality of work I received as their instructor. I believe this is the result of both students and educators not understanding the purpose of essays within higher education today; students struggle to understand what an essay is for, and teachers are at a loss to justify a writing genre that is seen as increasingly disconnected from building "real world" skills. Both students and instructors approach essays merely as an inherited form of assessment, one that has become tautological within the humanities: the purpose of essay writing is to be graded, and grades are issued to assess one's essay writing skills.

Some apologists for the essay have attempted to defend the pedagogical utility of the essay by citing the critical thinking skills that essay writing cultivates in students. They employ familiar justifications for the essay such as its capacity to teach students how to argue and to communicate with authority (Adams) and to "gain research skills" or to help "demonstrate your intelligence" ("11 Reasons Why"). While these claims have truth to them, they are insufficient in addressing students' attitudinal challenges in their essay writing—their self-reported "carelessness and lack of interest." In guiding students toward the "active construction of meaning as opposed to the memorisation and reproduction of accumulated material" (Campbell et al. 450), teachers of essay writing must foreground the utility of the essay as a genre as a means of equipping students to build their own knowledge formations and lean to construct meaning—and, perhaps more importantly, explicate to students why such skills are essential for their future.

Looking Ahead: Reclaiming the Essay as a Technology of Thought

Students in higher education today are navigating an unprecedented amount of information facilitated by the digital revolution. Far from reducing the need for writing, digital technology and the internet have expanded daily writing practice into every facet of both our professional and personal lives. Communications that were once the purview of the telephone are now executed by email and text. The demand for online content is ever growing and the modes by which textual media is consumed are proliferating at an exponential rate. With this has come the democratization of information, yielding liberation from the authoritative gatekeepers of knowledge of the past but also ushering in a new era of disinformation. The rise of "fake news," "alternative facts," and erroneous AI-produced writing—and their social and political repercussions—demands that educators must leverage the essay to equip the next generation to both sift and winnow, to try and attempt the ideas that will shape our modern reality. It is our responsibility to equip students with the tools to navigate and process information and to become knowledge producers within the digital world they inhabit.

The essay is singularly poised to equip students to navigate the complexities of the Information Age. As a literary technology of argumentation and persuasion, the mastery of essay writing skills enables students to both discern and produce sound arguments in support of evidenced claims. To achieve this, I have outlined some steps toward reclaiming and leveraging the essay for this new

generation of digital natives, thereby addressing the attitudinal challenges students cite as their biggest obstacle to essay writing.

1. **We need to communicate a new purpose for the essay.** Previous rationales for the utility of the essay in higher education have reached their terminus; as a method for competitive assessment or a means to develop cultural capital, the essay has become obsolete. Educators have a variety of resources and technologies to assess students, while students now have expanded access knowledge via Wikis, YouTubes, and open access courses to develop cultural capital. Educators should embrace the utility of the essay in building critical thinking and argumentation skills and, more importantly, communicate these to students in terms of clear stakes of relevance. Exercises that demonstrate how argumentation and persuasion are prevalent across everyday forms of writing—cover letters, promotion requests, text threads—will go far in illuminating how these skills are not rarefied but instead provide a competitive edge in the information economy. For example, an exercise I developed that yields good results consists of analyzing an X (formerly Twitter) thread—usually a series of posts that make an argument about a timely and/or controversial issue—in terms of its engagement with thesis, argument, evidence, and rebuttals. The project would expose students to the connections between the essay and forms of discourse they are more familiar with across social media. This point can be furthered by the contemporary discourse of cancel culture: For posts that have received pushback or "cancellation," what did their authors not anticipate in their argument? What counterarguments or alternative interpretations were overlooked? How could something as seemingly mundane as a social media thread be rewritten to more effectively argue its thesis and anticipate conflicting viewpoints? In using this exercise, I have found that students—who are deeply familiar with the forms of debate and argument that occur on social media—are able to connect familiar writing practice to constructing an argumentative essay. This enables them to engage with essay writing assignments with a renewed sense of intentionality and utility: developing their persuasive skills through the essay that then can be applied to a range of other forms of persuasive writing.
2. **We need to reapproach reading.** As noted earlier, today's students are not regularly exposed to reading essays. In many cases, the only essays they have read are their own. However, there is a wealth of essays that can be scaled in terms of difficulty to introduce students to the form and help them identify effective essay writing. Many of the canonical literary examples of the essay—such as those by Ben Jonson, George Orwell, or E. B. White—are known for their idiosyncratic departure from the form rather than their exemplifying it. A text like Sarah Ruhl's *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write* provides short pithy proto-essays that are both engaging to read and provide a clear thesis. These are engaging for theatre students who already know and love Ruhl's work as a playwright. Scaling such readings across an academic term—beginning with contemporary examples like long-form journalism pieces in *The Atlantic* or think pieces within theatre studies, like those published in *HowlRound*—before introducing them to accessible pieces of secondary scholarship, like Michelle Liu Carriger's "No 'Thing to Wear,'" will help introduce students to essays in a way that acclimates them to the form more effectively. Asking students to reverse outline essays of this caliber is an effective way to engage students in considering how arguments are constructed and structured.
3. **We need to revive the essay as an "attempt."** From its etymology, the "essay" literally connotes an attempt. However, approaches to teaching essay writing often burden students with producing multiple essays within a single semester or quarter. Educators need to incorporate drafting to a higher degree to teach students not only how to hone their arguments over time but also how to edit their own work. As a recent study has shown, the majority of writing in the contemporary workplace involves "multi-modal editing" (Lauer and Brumberger 637) rather than pure composition. This means that students need to be prepared with the

skills to reappraise their work multiple times, incorporating feedback from others, and addressing possible counterpoints. In the environment of the "responsive workplace" (637), collaborative writing skills are as important as being able to write clearly for specific audiences and purposes. Educators can explore incorporating collaborative writing projects in which students produce writing collectively, involving multiple drafts and clear instruction for developing editing skills. One possible model could involve having students produce multiple drafts of the same essay over the course of a quarter, framing it as a project brief rather than a one-off essay assignment. Additionally, educators could use the essay to reverse engineer the production of other forms of communicative media; rather than having the essay constitute the final assignment of a course, the essay and its development through multiple drafts and editing could be deployed as a penultimate task. Students then would be responsible for finding a means of communicating their argument in a form of their choice such as a TEDTalk, op-ed piece, long form journalism, YouTube video, or podcast. This approach would help bridge the essay as a tool of argumentation toward a final product that communicates to a larger audience.

4. **We need to understand and teach with AI.** Returning to the starting point of this essay, within the latest crisis to essay writing in the form of generative AI, educators need to learn about the promises and pitfalls of generative AI and develop methods to constructively teach in partnership with this new technology. Universities and their administrators are scrambling to develop policy and protocol for the use of AI and there is an increasing wealth of material for students and educators on how to productively use AI to produce better essays rather than rendering them obsolete. Students are leading the way in exploring the range of uses for AI in support of essay writing, and it is incumbent upon educators and university administrators to educate themselves in order to stay at the forefront of this evolving technology. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s most read article in 2023 was a student-written essay titled "I'm a Student. You Have No Idea How Much We're Using ChatGPT," which is eye-opening in its detailing of how AI technology can be used not only in generating writing but in outlining a paper, summarizing sources, and generating theses (Terry). In the *Wired* article "Don't Want Students to Rely on ChatGPT? Have Them Use It," C. W. Howell models how he integrated AI into his teaching by having his students use generative AI to produce an essay in response to an assigned prompt and then have them grade it. In his words:

> I had anticipated that many of the essays would have errors, but I did not expect that all of them would. Many students expressed shock and dismay upon learning the AI could fabricate bogus information, including page numbers for nonexistent books and articles. Some were confused, simultaneously awed and disappointed. Others expressed concern about the way overreliance on such technology could induce laziness or spur disinformation and fake news. Closer to the bone were fears that this technology could take people's jobs.

Howell's pedagogical experiment proved to students—and himself—the limitations of ChatGPT in ways much more effective than simply banning its use. Following Howell's example, educators should familiarize themselves with the increasing number of AI tools used to help writing, not only to discover their pitfalls but to determine their potential uses in aiding students (and ourselves as scholars) in producing quality writing. For myself, explorations into new AI tools led me to *Elicit*, a site that produces AI-generated summaries of scholarly sources. To my surprise, and reluctant delight, the search engine found sources that my previous queries on JSTOR, ProjectMUSE, and Google Scholar hadn't by effectively reading the sources and providing an AI-generated snapshot of the contents. Tools like *Elicit* will be equipping the scholars of tomorrow and hold the potential to be the latest game-changer in making sources accessible beyond the confines of institutional database subscriptions.

These initial suggestions will hopefully spark other innovative approaches to renovating essay writing within higher education. Far from being obsolete, the essay as communicative technology is undergoing yet another transformation. Throughout its ongoing evolution, the essay has served distinct purposes in distinct contexts: from liberating writers and thinkers from the confines of classical rhetoric, to cultivating cultural capital, to providing a lens for competitive assessment for the burgeoning middle class of the last 150 years. In our current moment, the essay stands to be transformed again, drawing on its multifaceted past to imbue students of the next generation with the ability to critically navigate the Information Age and contribute to knowledge formation. The essay may one day truly become an outdated technology—but that day is not today.

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Notes

1. As Quintero notes, only one student (representing 4% of total responses) came close to accurately identifying the purpose of the essay.
2. "Students are not familiar with this type of text; therefore they do not know what an essay is. . . . They use means of connection inappropriately and they do not know how to give a thematic sequence and coherence to the text" (Quintero 132–33).
3. Students were allowed to choose multiple challenges from a list of four options (determining a thesis, finding evidence to support an argument, building/structuring that argument, and spelling and grammar) or to write in their own.

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