

THE WRITING OF ESSAYS

The art of the essayist is so simple, so entirely free from canons of criticism, and withal so delightful, that one must needs wonder why all men are not essayists. Perhaps people do not know how easy it is. Or perhaps beginners are misled. Rightly taught it may be learnt in a brief ten minutes or so, what art there is in it. And all the rest is as easy as wandering among woodlands on a bright morning in the spring.

Then sit you down if you would join us, taking paper, pens, and ink; and mark this, your pen is a matter of vital moment. For every pen writes its own sort of essay, and pencils also after their kind. The ink perhaps may have its influence too, and the paper; but paramount is the pen. This, indeed, is the fundamental secret of essay-writing. Wed any man to his proper pen, and the delights of composition and the birth of an essay are assured. Only many of us wander through the earth and never meet with her--futile and lonely men.

And, of all pens, your quill for essays that are literature. There is a subtle informality, a delightful easiness, perhaps even a faint immorality essentially literary, about the quill. The quill is rich in suggestion and quotation. There are quills that would quote you Montaigne and Horace in the hands of a trades-union delegate. And those quirky, idle noises this pen makes are delightful, and would break your easy fluency with wit. All the classical essayists wrote with a quill,

and Addison used the most expensive kind the Government purchased. And the beginning of the inferior essay was the dawn of the cheap steel pen.

The quill nibs they sell to fit into ordinary pen-holders are no true quills at all, lacking dignity, and may even lead you into the New Humour if you trust overmuch to their use. After a proper quill commend me to a stumpy BB pencil; you get less polish and broader effects, but you are still doing good literature. Sometimes the work is close--Mr. George Meredith, for instance, is suspected of a soft pencil--and always it is blunter than quill work and more terse. With a hard pencil no man can write anything but a graceless style--a kind of east wind air it gives--and smile you cannot. So that it is often used for serious articles in the half-crown reviews.

There follows the host of steel pens. That bald, clear, scientific style, all set about with words like "evolution" and "environment," which aims at expressing its meaning with precision and an exemplary economy of words, is done with fine steel nibs--twelve a penny at any stationer's. The J pen to the lady novelist, and the stylograph to the devil--your essayist must not touch the things. So much for the pen. If you cannot write essays easily, that is where the hitch comes in. Get a box of a different kind of pen and begin again, and so on again and again until despair or joy arrests you.

As for a typewriter, you could no more get an essay out of a typewriter

than you could play a sonata upon its keys. No essay was ever written with a typewriter yet, nor ever will be. Besides its impossibility, the suggestion implies a brutal disregard of the division of labour by which we live and move and have our being. If the essayist typewrite, the unemployed typewriter, who is commonly a person of superior education and capacity, might take to essays, and where is your living then? One might as reasonably start at once with the Linotype and print one's wit and humour straight away. And taking the invasion of other trades one step further one might, after an attempt to sell one's own newspaper, even get to the pitch of having to read it oneself. No; even essayists must be reasonable. If its mechanical clitter-clatter did not render composition impossible, the typewriter would still be beneath the honour of a literary man.

Then for the paper. The luxurious, expensive, small-sized cream-laid note is best, since it makes your essay choice and compact; and, failing that, ripped envelopes and the backs of bills. Some men love ruled paper, because they can write athwart the lines, and some take the fly-leaves of their friends' books. But whosoever writes on cheap sermon paper full of hairs should write far away from the woman he loves, lest he offend her ears. It is good, however, for a terse, forcible style.

The ink should be glossy black as it leaves your pen, for polished English. Violet inks lead to sham sentiment, and blue-black to vulgarity. Red ink essays are often good, but usually unfit for publication.

This is as much almost as anyone need know to begin essay writing. Given your proper pen and ink, or pencil and paper, you simply sit down and write the thing. The value of an essay is not its matter, but its mood. You must be comfortable, of course; an easy-chair with arm-rests, slippers, and a book to write upon are usually employed, and you must be fed recently, and your body clothed with ease rather than grandeur. For the rest, do not trouble to stick to your subject, or any subject; and take no thought for the editor or the reader, for your essay should be as spontaneous as the lilies of the field.

So long as you do not begin with a definition you may begin anyhow. An abrupt beginning is much admired, after the fashion of the clown's entry through the chemist's window. Then whack at your reader at once, hit him over the head with the sausages, brisk him up with the poker, bundle him into the wheelbarrow, and so carry him away with you before he knows where you are. You can do what you like with a reader then, if you only keep him nicely on the move. So long as you are happy your reader will be so too. But one law must be observed: an essay, like a dog that wishes to please, must have a lively tail, short but as waggish as possible. Like a rocket, an essay goes only with fizzle and sparks at the end of it. And, know, that to stop writing is the secret of writing an essay; the essay that the public loves dies young.