**The Age of the Essay-** Paul Graham

The big difference between a real essay and the things they make you write in school is that a real essay doesn't take a position and then defend it.

And yet this principle is built into the very structure of the things they teach you to write in high school. The topic sentence is your thesis, chosen in advance, the supporting paragraphs the blows you strike in the conflict, and the conclusion-- uh, what is the conclusion? I was never sure about that in high school. It seemed as if we were just supposed to restate what we said in the first paragraph, but in different enough words that no one could tell. Why bother? But when you understand the origins of this sort of "essay," you can see where the conclusion comes from. It's the concluding remarks to the jury.

**Trying**

To understand what a real essay is, we have to reach back into history again, though this time not so far. To Michel de Montaigne, who in 1580 published a book of what he called "essais." He was doing something quite different from what lawyers do, and the difference is embodied in the name. *Essayer* is the French verb meaning "to try" and an *essai* is an attempt. An essay is something you write to try to figure something out.

Figure out what? You don't know yet. And so you can't begin with a thesis, because you don't have one, and may never have one. An essay doesn't begin with a statement, but with a question. In a real essay, you don't take a position and defend it. You notice a door that's ajar, and you open it and walk in to see what's inside.

If all you want to do is figure things out, why do you need to write anything, though? Why not just sit and think? Well, there precisely is Montaigne's great discovery. Expressing ideas helps to form them. Indeed, helps is far too weak a word. Most of what ends up in my essays I only thought of when I sat down to write them. That's why I write them.

In the things you write in school you are, in theory, merely explaining yourself to the reader. In a real essay you're writing for yourself. You're thinking out loud.

But not quite. Just as inviting people over forces you to clean up your apartment, writing something that other people will read forces you to think well. So it does matter to have an audience. The things I've written just for myself are no good. They tend to peter out. When I run into difficulties, I find I conclude with a few vague questions and then drift off to get a cup of tea.

**The River**

Questions aren't enough. An essay has to come up with answers. They don't always, of course. Sometimes you start with a promising question and get nowhere. But those you don't publish. Those are like experiments that get inconclusive results. An essay you publish ought to tell the reader something he didn't already know.

But *what* you tell him doesn't matter, so long as it's interesting. I'm sometimes accused of meandering. In defend-a-position writing that would be a flaw. There you're not concerned with truth. You already know where you're going, and you want to go straight there, blustering through obstacles, and hand-waving your way across swampy ground. But that's not what you're trying to do in an essay. An essay is supposed to be a search for truth. It would be suspicious if it didn't meander.

The Meander (aka Menderes) is a river in Turkey. As you might expect, it winds all over the place. But it doesn't do this out of frivolity. The path it has discovered is the most economical route to the sea. [6]

The river's algorithm is simple. At each step, flow down. For the essayist this translates to: flow interesting. Of all the places to go next, choose the most interesting. One can't have quite as little foresight as a river. I always know generally what I want to write about. But not the specific conclusions I want to reach; from paragraph to paragraph I let the ideas take their course.

This doesn't always work. Sometimes, like a river, one runs up against a wall. Then I do the same thing the river does: backtrack. At one point in this essay I found that after following a certain thread I ran out of ideas. I had to go back seven paragraphs and start over in another direction.

Fundamentally an essay is a train of thought-- but a cleaned-up train of thought, as dialogue is cleaned-up conversation. Real thought, like real conversation, is full of false starts. It would be exhausting to read. You need to cut and fill to emphasize the central thread, like an illustrator inking over a pencil drawing. But don't change so much that you lose the spontaneity of the original.

**Surprise**

So what's interesting? For me, interesting means surprise. Interfaces, as Geoffrey James has said, should follow the principle of least astonishment. A button that looks like it will make a machine stop should make it stop, not speed up. Essays should do the opposite. Essays should aim for maximum surprise.

I was afraid of flying for a long time and could only travel vicariously. When friends came back from faraway places, it wasn't just out of politeness that I asked what they saw. I really wanted to know. And I found the best way to get information out of them was to ask what surprised them. How was the place different from what they expected? This is an extremely useful question. You can ask it of the most unobservant people, and it will extract information they didn't even know they were recording.

Surprises are things that you not only didn't know, but that contradict things you thought you knew. And so they're the most valuable sort of fact you can get. They're like a food that's not merely healthy, but counteracts the unhealthy effects of things you've already eaten.

How do you find surprises? Well, therein lies half the work of essay writing. (The other half is expressing yourself well.) The trick is to use yourself as a proxy for the reader. You should only write about things you've thought about a lot. And anything you come across that surprises you, who've thought about the topic a lot, will probably surprise most readers.

So if you want to write essays, you need two ingredients: a few topics you've thought about a lot, and some ability to ferret out the unexpected.

What should you think about? My guess is that it doesn't matter-- that anything can be interesting if you get deeply enough into it. One possible exception might be things that have deliberately had all the variation sucked out of them, like working in fast food. In retrospect, was there anything interesting about working at Baskin-Robbins? Well, it was interesting how important color was to the customers. Kids a certain age would point into the case and say that they wanted yellow. Did they want French Vanilla or Lemon? They would just look at you blankly. They wanted yellow. And then there was the mystery of why the perennial favorite Pralines 'n' Cream was so appealing. (I think now it was the salt.) And the difference in the way fathers and mothers bought ice cream for their kids: the fathers like benevolent kings bestowing largesse, the mothers harried, giving in to pressure. So, yes, there does seem to be some material even in fast food.

I didn't notice those things at the time, though. At sixteen I was about as observant as a lump of rock. I can see more now in the fragments of memory I preserve of that age than I could see at the time from having it all happening live, right in front of me.

**Observation**

So the ability to ferret out the unexpected must not merely be an inborn one. It must be something you can learn. How do you learn it?

When it comes to surprises, the rich get richer. But (as with wealth) there may be habits of mind that will help the process along. It's good to have a habit of asking questions, especially questions beginning with Why. But not in the random way that three year olds ask why. There are an infinite number of questions. How do you find the fruitful ones?

I find it especially useful to ask why about things that seem wrong. For example, why should there be a connection between humor and misfortune? Why do we find it funny when a character, even one we like, slips on a banana peel? There's a whole essay's worth of surprises there for sure.

I have a hunch you want to pay attention not just to things that seem wrong, but things that seem wrong in a humorous way. I'm always pleased when I see someone laugh as they read a draft of an essay. But why should I be? I'm aiming for good ideas. Why should good ideas be funny? The connection may be surprise. Surprises make us laugh, and surprises are what one wants to deliver.