INTRODUCTION

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What Are Essays?

The term "essay" is related to the now-archaic verb *to essay*, which means to test something, to determine its composition (as in a metal), to discover the nature of something. The first essays were written by the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne, and published in 1580. Montaigne claimed no expertise in any area; in fact, he made a virtue of having a normal intellect and temperament. Though he was well-read and had a curious mind, he boasted no specialized knowledge in any field. His genius was to apply common sense, a tolerant attitude, and a reflective mind to the issues of his day, as he *essayed* topics as disparate as drunkenness, cannibals, and coaches. Often, all he intended to do was explore a subject, to examine it from fresh angles, to see what he might discover.

In England in the early 1600s, just about the time of the *Mayflower*, Sir Francis Bacon popularized Montaigne's form, and he brought to the genre the same respect for simple observation that he inaugurated in his new "scientific method" of reasoning. Good essayists, like good scientists, scrub all residue of cant from their eyes. They do not judge the world according to tradition and the (dubious) wisdom of the ages. The scientist, for example, does not look at

the Bible or Greek philosophers to learn the laws of nature: she looks at nature. Likewise, the early essayists looked at nearly everything in the human world, and by applying common sense rather than received opinion, they made surprising discoveries—for instance, that South American "savages" were less brutal and in some ways more civilized than Europeans.

The tradition of the common intellect or common sense is still vital in modern essays. David Sedaris, for example, tells stories from his perspective as a somewhat average, middle-class, middle-aged American, but his experiences are rendered with uncommon equanimity. Thomas Lynch is an undertaker, so he confronts death far more often than most people, but he is no philosopher and he is no theologian. He observes death and ruminates on the meaning of life with the same tools that you and I might use. These traditional essayists take readers on journeys of discovery—sometimes of unexplored territory, sometimes of familiar territory approached from a refreshing angle, almost always hoping to open readers up to new ways of thinking about themselves and the world they live in.

Some modern essays make a great deal out of the writers' own experiences, telling anecdotes from their lives that illustrate some larger theme that affects us all. Bret Lott, for example, explores the nature of sin and atonement through a seemingly innocuous dustup between him and his sons. Eudora Welty celebrates the sensory delight of childhood. Maya Angelou ponders the conjunction of race and schooling while telling the story of her own graduation. These autobiographical or **personal** essays use many of the devices of fiction, and you can read them almost the way you'd read a short story. Many have plots—stories with conflicts and resolutions—just like fiction, and because of this resemblance some people refer to them as literary essays. But typically their themes or "meanings" are more overt than you'd expect in modern fiction. They have a more obvious purpose than short stories, which generally don't announce any kind of subject or theme to be explored. Essays, by comparison, usually undertake a pretty overt exploration of their particular subject, whether it's the nature of art (Annie Dillard) or of college (James Thurber) or anything else.

Roughly a third of the selections in this volume are largely autobiographical or exploratory, and so fall into the category of personal

essays. The other two-thirds of this book are made up of **rhetorical** essays. These have a definite, easily recognized persuasive purpose: they either want readers to change their minds about something, or they want readers to change what they do. Some rhetorical essays are **political**, attempting to alter the course of history by persuading people to take (or refrain from taking) action. For example, Martin Luther King's Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" tried to convince moderate whites all over America that they should march arm in arm with African Americans against racists like Bull Connor, who was Birmingham's commissioner of public safety in the early 1960s.

Other persuasive essays do not try to get their readers to do anything specific—such as join the civil rights movement—as much as they attempt to change minds and attitudes. These might be called **opinion** essays because they deal more with opinions than actions. They might criticize the state of marriage in America (Judy Brady) or complain about public apathy (William F. Buckley). Some, such as Molly Ivins's essay, were first printed in the opinion-editorial (or "op-ed") section of newspapers.

These categories (exploratory, personal, political, and opinion) are not carved in stone. An opinion essay might be partially autobiographical. An exploratory essay might use the kind of logical argument you'd expect from a political speech. It is not so important that you can fit an essay into one of these categories. Ultimately, the categories are not that important. What is important is that you determine what the writer was trying to do with his or her essay.

How to Read Essays

You need to determine what you think the writer was trying to accomplish with his or her essay if you're going to analyze and evaluate it successfully. Was the writer trying to get people to do something? If so, who was his audience? What was he trying to get them to do? Or was the writer exploring a subject, perhaps in a tentative way, without really trying to prove anything at all? The key to reading any essay is to first figure out what the writer was trying to accomplish. It makes no sense to judge the logic of a personal essay—there might be little logic in it at all, but that would not be a defect. Likewise, if you read an opinion essay to open yourself up

to new ways of thinking, to begin your discussion of a topic, the writer might have failed: she might have wanted to close off your opinions, narrow them down to one opinion in particular—her own. If you decide that an essay is trying to persuade you to do something or to think something, you need to be cautious. You need to be skeptical. Be on your guard. You don't want to be fooled. You don't want to be taken in by a weak or unsound argument. To properly read persuasive essays, you need to know how to argue yourself.

Knowing how to argue is particularly important in a democracy. In our society we argue about nearly everything in the public sphere—who should be president, how our schools should be run; whether we should ban smoking in restaurants. As you study political and opinion essays, you'll learn how to change the minds and behavior of people, and how others try to change your behavior and opinion. That is the essence of rhetoric, the tricks of the trade, so to speak, the tools of persuasion. They are power tools and are dangerous in the wrong hands. They are easily abused. People like Adolf Hitler and Osama bin Laden do not rule by terror alone. They were (and are) skilled in the arts of persuasion. By learning these rhetorical arts, you'll protect yourself against demagoguery. And you'll learn how to make sound decisions for your own opinions and actions, which is just as important. You'll learn how to convince others to agree with you and do what you think they ought to do.

Rhetoric, or the art of persuasion, comprises some sophisticated skills, so the bulk of this section deals with argumentation. It applies mostly (though not exclusively) to the political and opinion essays. (At the end, there's a note on how to read those essays that don't try to persuade readers, the personal essays.)

Like all arts, rhetoric involves various techniques that have proved to be effective over the years. No doubt natural talent helps the great orators and writers, but even Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. had to practice their art. Lincoln honed his skills in courtrooms and in legislatures, while King practiced from the pulpit. They might not have known the names of the argument forms discussed below, for many a great artist learns not from books but by imitation. But all great persuaders, no matter the level of their formal training in rhetoric, use these argument forms.

This section is divided into three parts that correspond to each type of argument: **logical**, **ethical**, and **pathetic**. The terminology may seem fairly esoteric, but learning these terms and what they mean can help you analyze an argument—that is, break it down into its parts. And only by analyzing an argument can you evaluate it. Ultimately, evaluation should be your goal in reading not only these essays but any essay. Essays often delight us, and certainly they can be read purely for the sake of enjoyment. No doubt there is pleasure in getting swept up on the wave of emotion propelled by a good rhetorician or in succumbing to the awe inspired by a noble speaker. But reading critically means carefully and artfully evaluating an argument before surrendering to anyone's opinion or bending your actions to someone's will.

So when you read essays you must be active. Fill the margins of your book with your own reactions, observations, objections, and approvals. Enter into a dialogue with the essayist. Your marginal notes will go a long way toward revealing just what strategies the essayist is using to persuade you. If the pages of this book are clean by the end of your course, you're reading too passively.

Learning to recognize valid and true arguments, and learning to resist manipulative rhetoric, takes time and hard work. You might find yourself referring back to these pages again and again before you've mastered the art of reading essays. Logical arguments are particularly difficult to analyze, especially in the often-disguised forms in which essays present them. So do not be discouraged by fitful starts and early confusion. Keep at it.

Logical Arguments

Everyone uses logic everyday. When you were in high school, you argued with your parents about whether you should be allowed to go on that overnight trip to the beach. Now when you decide whether you should go to a party or study one evening, you'll argue the matter over in your mind, just as you'll argue with friends about whether one movie is better than another, and you'll argue in your history class about what caused World War I. So you know how to argue. What you're going to learn here is what you've already been doing intuitively. But once you understand what you've been doing,

once you learn how to handle the tools of rhetoric, you'll construct better arguments, and you'll be much better at identifying someone else's bad argument.

The political essays in this volume use logic more than the others. A political essay must meet a high standard of logic and evidence, because it's very hard to get people to do things they are not inclined to do. People will not change how they act unless the arguments for doing so are compelling and reasonable. Political essays, then, are excellent models to use in constructing your own logical arguments, especially the kind of writing you'll most likely be asked to do in school. Most academic writing puts a high premium on logic.

Logical arguments fall into one of two types, deductive or inductive. Roughly speaking, deductive arguments are top-down: they present general principles from which they draw a conclusion. Inductive arguments are bottom-up: they offer many examples and from these abstract a conclusion of general application.

Deduction

A deductive argument might look like this:

> Men are tall.
> Bob is a man.
> Therefore, Bob is tall.

This is the simplest type of deductive argument. Notice that the argument has three parts. The first is a statement of general applicability: "Men are tall." Rhetoricians call this the **major premise.** It applies to all things within a particular category—in this case, the category "men." The second statement, "Bob is a man," is the **minor premise.** It asserts something about a particular case, not a general category. The **conclusion** follows logically: "Bob is tall." Because Bob falls into the category "men," and because all people in that category are tall, Bob must be tall. If the conclusion follows logically from the premises, the argument is **valid.**

But a valid argument is not necessarily **sound.** It must pass another test, what we might call the **truth** test: *Do you agree with all of the premises?* In the example above, you probably objected to the major premise, "Men are tall," because you know that not all men are tall. Some men, in fact, are short. The argument might be valid (the conclusion logically follows the premises), but it is **unsound** because it is based on a **false premise.** In real life and in real arguments, very few major premises are absolutely true, so most arguments use a few qualifiers. For example, we could fix this argument with these qualifiers: "*Most* men are tall, and Bob is a man, so Bob is *probably* tall." But it would be more persuasive to change the premises altogether: "A height of six feet is tall, and Bob is six feet one inch, so Bob is tall."

When someone tries to persuade you with a deductive argument, you should break it down into its elements. Figure out what the premises and conclusion are. Only then can you properly evaluate the argument's **truth** and **validity.** Consider this famous example of deductive reasoning:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . . The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. . . . We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.

Thomas Jefferson proposes many major premises: All men are created equal; men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; governments exist to protect these rights; governments derive their legitimacy from the people; if a government is not doing its job, the people can abolish it. These statements are categorical. The first few assert truths about men in general; the others assert truths about governments in general. Jefferson expects his au-

dience to share his belief in these truths. He calls them "self-evident" and offers no evidence or further argument to prove them. If you are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe these "truths."

Jefferson's minor premise, like all minor premises, considers a specific case: the government of Great Britain is not doing its job of securing the unalienable rights of its colonial subjects in America. To put it succinctly: King George III is a tyrant. Conclusions are usually pretty easy to identify. Any statement that you could rephrase with "therefore" in front of it is a conclusion. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson explicitly announces his conclusion in his last paragraph:

> We, THEREFORE . . . solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; [etc.]

In most arguments, the conclusions won't be so obvious.

It will take some practice before you can recognize these different parts of deductive arguments, especially major and minor premises. Any statement you can rephrase with "because" in front of it is a premise:

> *Because* "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of [the peoples' inalienable rights], it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it";
> and
> *Because* King George III is destructive of American rights
> Therefore we "these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES."

You will notice that I rephrased some of Jefferson's minor premise as I analyzed his argument; that is okay; it is often very helpful to paraphrase, so long as you retain the substance of the writer's words. The hardest part of evaluating deductive arguments is what we've just done for Jefferson's argument: analysis, or breaking down into parts.

Once you've properly analyzed the argument, it is relatively easy to **evaluate** it. First, apply the truth test: *Do you agree with the premises?* In our example, you would ask yourself, *Do I think that people should overthrow governments that don't secure their rights?* and *Do I agree that King George's government was destructive of the rights of the American colonists?* If you agree with a premise, you consider it to be **true**; if you disagree with it, you consider it to be **false**. If you identify a false premise, look to see if the writer has added a supporting argument to change your mind about that premise. For example, Jefferson clearly suspected that his readers would not agree with his minor premise, *King George is a tyrant.* So he inserted a lot of supporting evidence. Actually, the bulk of the Declaration of Independence consists of this evidence, the long list of grievances against King George. Jefferson calculated that the weight of this list would persuade his skeptical readers to agree with his minor premise, that King George's government was destructive of American rights.

If, after considering all supporting arguments, you still regard a premise as false, then you judge the argument to be unsound. If you accept the premises, then the next stop is to decide whether the argument is valid.

Philosophers use complex tests to evaluate an argument's validity, but for the purposes of rhetoric we do not need to be so precise. You can trust your own common sense to evaluate most of the arguments you'll encounter in this book and in your life. I've found with my own students that if you simply ask yourself, *Does the conclusion follow logically from the premises?* more often than not you'll judge correctly. If the answer is yes, then the argument is valid; if the answer is no, the argument is invalid. Finally, if you both agree with the premises and think the conclusion logically follows those premises, you judge the argument to be sound.

Sometimes writers leave one of their premises out. This is a common and accepted rhetorical practice, and such arguments are called **enthymemes**. For example, a few paragraphs above I reasoned that if you are a citizen of the United States, you probably believe the "self-evident" truths that Jefferson listed in the Declaration of Independence. My reasoning is a deductive argument. The minor premise is this: *You are a citizen of the United States.* (If you are not a U.S. citizen, then the premise is obviously false, but let's suppose that the minor premise is true.)

The conclusion is: *You probably believe in the self-evident "truths" espoused by the Declaration of Independence.*

I left it to you to figure out that the major premise is something like this: *Americans are raised to believe that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, etc.* The fully analyzed argument would unfold like this:

> *Because* Americans are taught to believe all men are created equal, etc.; and *because* you are an American;
> *therefore,* you probably believe the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence.

As in any deductive argument, you have to lay out the pieces before you can evaluate the whole. The only difference in this case was that we had to supply the unstated major premise. Consequently, you'll never decide an enthymeme is invalid—because *you* supply the premise that will logically lead to the conclusion. You're really only testing for truth: *do you agree with the premises, both stated and unstated?*

Once you've stated that suppressed premise for yourself, you can decide whether you think it is reasonable or not, and then you can decide whether the conclusion follows logically. But you need to state the suppressed premise before you can assess the argument.

Induction

Induction, bottom-up reasoning, is easier to grasp than deduction. It is based on this idea: If you look at a lot of specific cases, you can reasonably infer the general principle that governs them all. Rather than starting with a categorical statement, as in deduction, you use particular examples to lead you to a statement of general applicability. For example, an inductive argument might go like this:

> Kobe is tall. Shaquille is tall. Dirk is tall. Tim is tall. Carmelo is tall. Therefore, all men are tall.

The first thing you might notice is that this argument is not very strong. While Kobe, Shaquille, Dirk, Tim, and Carmelo might all be tall (let's suppose that we agree they are), that does not mean that *all* men are tall.

Usually you can't look at every case within a category, so a generalization is almost always an estimate. The conclusion is not going to be *definitely* true or false, but *probably* true or false. For example, proving the conclusion "Men are tall" by looking at every case is impossible. That would mean determining the height of every man on the planet. But we can take a sample of those men and draw a reasonable conclusion. Before you accept the reasonableness of any conclusion, however, you should be sure that the sample is **sufficiently large, accurate,** and **representative.**

In the inductive argument above, the sample is accurate: All the men I named are tall. But the sample is neither sufficiently large nor representative. (These two criteria often go together.) I took my sample from the National Basketball Association—clearly not representative—and I only included five men. My sample is far too narrow and small to represent men in general. A better sample would include many men selected randomly from the total population rather from the select groups you might find on basketball courts.

The Declaration of Independence is a good example of an inductive argument. Jefferson's minor premise was, to paraphrase, "King George III is a tyrant." Jefferson thought that his audience might not take this statement as self-evident, so he listed twenty-six examples of George's tyranny, from "He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good" to "He has excited domestic insurrections among us . . ." Let's see whether we are justified in inferring George III's tyranny from this sample.

Is the list accurate? If Jefferson had invented some grievances, we could dismiss the argument for being inaccurate. But they seem to be accurate enough. Is it sufficiently large? If he had listed only three or four, we might conclude that such examples constituted mistakes by the government rather than tyranny. But Jefferson has listed enough to impress most readers. Is the sample representative? If all twenty-six grievances dealt with abuses of one part of the government's powers—say, the impeding of immigration to America—they would not be representative. But the grievances touch on so many aspects of government—taxation, the support and control of the army, the judiciary, trade, immigration, etc.—that the sample's

scope seems sufficiently wide. This long list of grievances, then, offers pretty persuasive support for his inductive argument. We describe such arguments as **strong.**

Note that Jefferson concludes with an assertion that is the minor premise of his deductive argument. You will find that writers commonly mix their arguments in this way. Very rarely do you find a single argument without other arguments supporting it somehow. Real-life arguments can get pretty confusing and complex. Actually, I chose the Declaration of Independence as an example because it's fairly straightforward. Jefferson was trained in rhetoric, and he laid out his argument quite clearly. Most arguments, even those you'll find in this book, are less carefully and skillfully constructed. Your task as a difficult-to-persuade, skeptical reader is to unravel those complexities and lay them out clearly so you can evaluate them.

Ethical Arguments

Ethos is the writer's or speaker's self-presentation, especially her moral standing. Within the course of a speech, certain cues will help an audience form a picture of the speaker's character. How the speaker dresses, how she carries herself on the podium, the tenor of her voice, her gestures, what she says about herself, how she treats her opponents—all contribute to the audience's view of her character. A high school student applying for a job at Wal-Mart shouldn't show up in elephant jeans sliding down his boxer shorts. Most employers would interpret such clothes as disrespectful of authority. Probably, they'd expect the high school student to be unreliable and, perhaps, even surly to customers. A candidate for the U.S. Senate who is addressing a meeting of dock workers probably does not want to come dressed like an executive because it might seem to her audience that her interests are those of management, not labor. Dress, posture, vocal tone, gestures, and the like are tools of rhetoric: They help us persuade. We call these tools **ethical arguments.**

Writers cannot persuade with the visual or aural cues that a speaker can use, because a reader cannot see or hear the writer. Even so, whether you're aware of it or not, every essay produces a picture of the writer. Personal essays, as you might expect, often do so explicitly, and opinion essays depend on such self-presentation. For example, Brent Staples presents himself to the readers of *Ms.* magazine as "a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken." This self-portrait contributes to our sense of injustice when white women assume that this six-foot, bearded, bushy-haired black man is a mugger. Even his diction convinces us that Staples is an educated, respectable, unthreatening citizen. Consider this passage:

> I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. . . . I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her goodnight.

Robbers do not *bid* people goodnight. Similarly, by whistling "sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*" when he walks down streets at night, Staples convinces white women that he is, like themselves, a cultured member of society, and so he's hardly likely to attack them.

Staples's essay would be much less persuasive to his white readers if he presented himself as an enraged victim of racism. This is not to say that he was never enraged. In fact, he admits that he "learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal." He smothers his rage because to expose it would alienate and perhaps frighten his readers. So Staples writes in calm prose that is at times dispassionate and often funny. He comes across as a thoughtful, reasonable, likeable person. He might lose a bit of urgency in that self-presentation, but white readers are more likely to trust his story and share his sense of injustice. Instead of feeling accused, the readers of *Ms.* will identify with Staples.

Even essays that rely largely on logical arguments use ethical arguments as well. For example, Thomas Jefferson was careful to give readers a picture of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence. The very first sentence admits that "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that [a people overthrowing their government] should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." In that sentence, Jefferson presents the American rebels as reflective men eager to win the approval of other governments, even monarchies, like France, who might otherwise view the rebellion as a sign of anarchy. They are not anti-authority rabble rousers,

whose enthusiasm might threaten the governments of other nations. The style of the Declaration of Independence does the same thing: No maddened anarchist would begin such a declaration with a calm subordinate clause, "When in the Course of human events . . . " The signers of the Declaration of Independence present themselves as slow-to-act, prudent men who "are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms [of government] to which they are accustomed."

When you're evaluating someone's ethical argument, you should ask yourself questions like these:

- What authority does the writer claim?
- Does she know more about the subject than I do?
- Why should I listen to what she has to say?
- How does the writer's personal testimony affect her arguments?
- Is the writer trustworthy?
- Is she reasonable?
- Do I like the writer? Would I be happy to meet and talk with her?

The headnotes to each essay might help you answer some of these questions, and some famous writers can count on their celebrity to contribute to their ethos. But the writer who makes good use of ethos will answer these questions in the essay itself.

The good writer will also establish connections between herself and the reader. Any rhetorical situation presumes a division between writer and reader. Otherwise, there would be no need for persuasion. So a writer needs to give a reader a sense that the two of them are, despite their differences of opinion on particular issues, part of one community working toward a common goal. When you evaluate a writer's ethos, you should ask yourself whether she's established that common ground with you, and you should decide whether she is sincere.

Pathetic Arguments

Pathos refers to the emotional state of the audience. It includes their senses of pity and loathing, fear and delight, happiness and

sadness, and all the emotions that can be excited by words. When you read you should be wary of your emotions. This is not to say that you should disregard them altogether. Rather, you should learn to recognize and evaluate **pathetic arguments** by asking yourself,

- At what point in the essay did I feel anger, outrage, relief, affection, and so forth?
- How did the writer elicit these emotions from me?
- Are these emotional appeals fair, or are they dishonest?

You might wonder what I mean by *honesty* when I talk of emotions. What's the difference between an honest and a dishonest emotion? Take, for example, Martin Luther King's explanation of the effects of prejudice on his young daughter:

> you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people. . . . —then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

He elicits our sympathy with the father and the child so powerfully that we are tempted to suspend judgment and accept whatever proposition will end this girl's suffering. A dishonest use of pathos would ask us to do just that: substitute emotion for logic. A dispassionate evaluation might lead us to dismiss King's appeal because it is a tearjerker. After all, anyone who has a child knows that sympathy for a child's tears cannot be allowed to overcome judgment or children would eat nothing but candy. King surrounds his heartrending story with dispassionate, logical arguments, so his audience need not be swayed solely by feeling. Pathos should complement logic, not replace it.

It would also be dishonest to single out an unusual, emotionally

provocative case in an attempt to sway rather than persuade. Take the example of a convicted felon who, after serving a few years in prison, is released on parole only to commit a bloody murder. Assume that this case is highly unusual: that 99 percent of convicts are successfully rehabilitated in prison, and that criminals convicted of violent crimes are rarely paroled. It would be dishonest for a candidate for district attorney to use photographs of the smiling victim or tearful interviews with the victim's parents to attack the incumbent. Such a strategy would stir up voters' emotions while not indicating just how miniscule the risk to public safety really is.

Be cautious. Be sure that when your emotions are triggered reason is not left behind. There is no formula by which you can do this. You must make yourself aware of emotional appeals and then simply use your common sense. With that caution raised, let me add that, as writers, emotions are sometimes our best aid. The vignette about King's daughter justly engages sympathy and arouses outrage; perhaps King could not over-come his readers' long-held prejudices without jerking a few tears.

A Note on Reading Personal Essays

Personal essays are often inductive because they use the method of **example**. Consider Amy Tan's essay on writing, which argues that a plain, conversational writing style is better than a learned, somewhat sophisticated writing style. I say the essay **argues** for this conclusion, but it does not lay out much in the way of logical reasoning. The argument consists of one example: Amy Tan's own experience. Once she herself started writing in a style that an unsophisticated speaker of English (her mother) could understand, Tan's career as a writer took off.

If we were to evaluate this "argument," we would apply the tests of an inductive argument. More than likely, we would decide that the argument is weak because the evidence, while accurate, is not sufficiently large and it may or may not be representative: we would probably want to see a few more cases before we could accept Tan's experience as typical of successful writers. The evidence that Tan presents us is entirely **anecdotal**: a single case, often rendered in compelling, sometimes emotionally charged language. Rhetoricians

warn against being swayed by anecdotal evidence. A political candidate might make much of a "welfare queen," a lurid example of an able-bodied woman bilking working taxpayers to finance her life of leisure. But sensible voters would ask: is her case typical? is this just an outlandish, extreme example of a very unusual case? or does our public policy encourage and enable a lot of "welfare queens"? does this single anecdote fairly represent the other cases that our politician has not described? Anecdotal arguments are weak inductive arguments.

Since personal essays are often anecdotal, they usually exploit pathetic arguments. More often than not, you'll find that personal essayists appeal to your emotions—perhaps making us laugh (David Sedaris), sometimes cutting us with the razor-sharp edge of compassion (Lott). They also make ethical arguments, because personal essays depend so much on the writer's experience. Their success or failure depends, to a large degree, on whether we like the author, whether we trust the voice telling us this particular anecdote.

But it is unfair, really, to evaluate personal essays along the lines of argument. If we asked Amy Tan what she meant to do in the essay, she probably would deny any attempt to prove that a simpler style of writing is better than a sophisticated style. Possibly, she would claim to be doing no more than offering readers the benefit of her own experiences. Probably, she did not have an overt persuasive intention when she sat down to write. An opinion columnist has an overt persuasive intention. George Will, for example, wants college graduates to stop thinking about "values" and, instead, cultivate "virtues." We can evaluate his logical, ethical, and pathetic arguments to see whether we should adopt his opinion. But Eudora Welty does not have such an obvious purpose. What does she want us to think when we finish reading "Listening"? It is hard to say.

Writers of personal essays generally do not try to change our behavior or even to change our minds on some issue of public policy (a significant exception is N. Scott Momaday, who makes a definite claim in his essay). Their intentions usually are more difficult to identify, sometimes much deeper than opinion. By adopting the writer's perspective, readers are often asked to follow the writer along a path of exploratory thought or experience to a surprising conclusion. Often, they use the acid of common sense to dissolve

traditional prejudices. They tempt us to see a familiar issue from an unfamiliar angle—the nature of art, for example, as manifest in the work of a stunt pilot (in Annie Dillard's essay).

How, then, should we read personal essays? Go ahead and identify their arguments—whether they are inductive, ethical, or pathetic—and even evaluate those. But your evaluations should not be the end of your reading. Nor should they be the end of your discussions. At some point, you should drop the caution you're supposed to adopt when confronted by arguments. Give yourself over to the writer's perspective, at least for a little while. Read the personal essays almost as you read fiction, suspending your disbelief, even losing yourself in the stories they relate.

Personal essays invite readers to pursue subjects themselves. Compare the anecdotal experience of the writers against your own experience and against the experiences of your classmates. Should you expand the scope of your own current perspective? Have you been too narrow and derivative in the way you've thought about the world? Have you been too dependent on grooves of thought cut for you by your parents or by teachers or by the pressures of society? Think about these things. Discuss them. Personal essays are successful not when they confirm you in a settled conclusion, but when they inspire you to further exploration.

Conclusion

With the tools of rhetoric, you should be able to analyze any essay, examine its parts, and evaluate its soundness and its strength. But you should also read these essays with an eye to their literary or aesthetic features. We have chosen these selections not only for their exemplary arguments and their historical value, but also for their beauty. There is a lot of good writing in these pages. Even the most formal, documentary prose, like that of the Declaration of Independence, resonates with a power only beauty can supply.

Abraham Lincoln closes his first inaugural address with these ringing words:

> The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

This quotation distinguishes itself by its stateliness, dignity, beauty. Not every essay attempts stateliness. But each does strive for aesthetic effect. Without such effects we'd find reading essays a dreary business. So while you'll need to analyze the arguments these essays contain, don't forget to enjoy them.

Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

Benjamin Banneker, the son of former slaves, was a farmer, astronomer, mathematician, surveyor, and author. In 1791 he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, framer of the Declaration of Independence and secretary of state to President George Washington. Read the following excerpt from the letter and write an essay that analyzes how Banneker uses rhetorical strategies to argue against slavery.

Sir, suffer[1] me to recall to your mind that time in which the arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude, look back I entreat you on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed; reflect on that time in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the conflict and you cannot but be led to a serious and grateful sense of your miraculous and providential preservation; you cannot but acknowledge that the present freedom and tranquility which you enjoy you have mercifully received and that it is the pecular blessing of Heaven.

This sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a state of slavery and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition, it was now, sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publickly held forth this true and valuable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Here, sir, was a time in which your tender feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great valuation of liberty and the free possession of those blessings to which you were entitled by nature; but, sir, how pitiable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind and of his equal and impartial distribution of those rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act which you professedly detested in others with respect to yourselves.

Sir, I suppose that your knowledge of the situation of my brethren is too extensive to need a recital here; neither shall I presume to prescribe methods by which they may be relieved, otherwise than by recommending to you and all others to wean yourselves from those narrow prejudices which you have imbibed with respect to them and as Job[2] proposed to his friends, "put your souls in their souls stead," thus shall your hearts be enlarged with kindness and benevolence towards them, and thus shall you need neither the direction of myself or others, in what manner to proceed herein.

[1] allow

[2] In the Bible, Job is a righteous man who endures much suffering.