

When "Good Enough" Writing Isn't Good Enough  
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Phillip Lopate defines the essay as "an enactment in the creation of the self." Working with my American Literature students, most of whom are *not* English majors, I encouraged them to write what I call intellectual essays, which I define as a hybrid of the academic essay and the personal essay. This tends to be confusing at first and requires a little guidance. Sometimes a lot of guidance.

I responded to my students' first essays this past weekend. Although I had a couple that hit the mark, most fell into familiar academic traps. Sometimes students managed to include personal information but they still wrote in a very objective academic voice. These essays sound kind of like the autobiography of a robot. Lynn Bloom might have called them "good enough" essays—technically proficient, sufficiently organized, devoid of mechanical errors, but lifeless. Each one sounding more or less like the other.

Commonly, these essays begin with a broad generalization like, "Racism has been a problem since the founding of the country," "All mothers love their children," or "Everyone wants to find their one true love." These statements are either so obvious that they can't possibly be denied, so broad that they can't possibly be true, or so clichéd that they can't possibly be accurate. These are followed by a five-paragraph-esque list of claims, and then a declarative thesis so absolute that it leaves no reason to continue reading the rest of the essay.

So we turn to mentor texts. Here are a few I used: "The End of the College Essay" by Rebecca Schuman in *Slate*, a critique of the essay and an argument for oral exams; "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling" by Paul Zak in *The Harvard Business Review*, a report on neuroscience research on the brain's penchant for narrative; "Our (Bare) Shelves, Our Selves" by Teddy Wayne in *The New York Times*, a comparative study of artifactual and digital literacies; "All Alike" by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, a study of the science of snowflakes; and "Joyas Voladoras" by Brian Doyle in *The American Scholar*, partly a study of the cardiovascular systems of hummingbirds, blue whales, and other animals.

These are very different essays, but what all of them have in common is that, although they involve academic research, they are written for a popular audience of non-academics.

As a class, we began by looking at leads. Let me just share the opening sentences of each essay.

"Everybody in college hates papers."

"It is quiet and dark. The theater is hushed."

“When I was 13, in the early 1990s, I dug through my parents’ cache of vinyl records from the ’60s and ’70s. We still had a phonograph, so I played some of them, concentrating on the Beatles. Their bigger hits were inescapably familiar, but a number of their songs were new to me.”

“It’s been cold out. *Really* cold, not just normal New York, scarf-and-overcoat December cold but Canadian cold, Arctic cold—the kind of cold that insinuates its way through window frames, and whispers under doors, and chills even perpetually overheated New York apartments.”

“Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird’s heart beats ten times a second. A hummingbird’s heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird’s heart is a lot of the hummingbird. *Joyas voladoras*, flying jewels, the first white explorers in the Americas called them, and the white men had never seen such creatures, for hummingbirds came into the world only in the Americas, nowhere else in the universe, more than three hundred species of them whirring and zooming and nectaring in hummer time zones nine times removed from ours, their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests.”

From here we talked about what we see—or, better yet, what we hear—in these openings. In the most general sense, what we hear is personal voice.

Other than Teddy Wayne’s piece, none of these leads conveys personal information. In fact, though each of these essays uses the first person point of view, most contain little to no personal information. Even Wayne’s essay, after the personal anecdote in the lead, makes no further mention of his personal life. But each essay displays exceptional personal voice. Each presents intellectual information—even scientific research—but in a familiar tone and with a creative, even playful, presentation.

Then I say, “Get the idea? Let’s see what we can do with paper number two.”