I was given no formal serious advice how to write an essay when I was younger. No one mentioned a thesis or a body or conclusion. No one mentioned how to articulate my own voice, nor even how to make the best use of quotes or summaries. Today, I always open my English 1 class by asking students what the word “essay” actually means. Where does the word come from? Why do we call essays “essays?” Even though my students tell me they have been writing essays all through high school, nobody can answer the question. In effect, like me as a young student in England, many young writers know they are doing something but really have no idea what.

The word “essay” comes from the French verb “essayer” which basically means to try. So, you can have the English sentence, “I will essay to jump over this chair,” meaning I will try to jump over this chair (I usually do a bit of acrobatics in class at this point). The great thing about this is that you can’t lose when it comes to an “essay.” The point is not to win an argument because you can’t. There will always be someone who can disprove your point, but also you can’t fail either. As long as you honestly “try” to make an “essay” by really showing the reader what you are thinking and supporting it with evidence then that’s it: you have made an “essay.”

No matter how big your vocabulary or how slick your sentences, a paper that is just a dumping ground for facts will never come alive as an “essay.” It all boils down to really being aware of what you are thinking. Most of my English students tell me that in high school they were told never to put “I” into their papers. Well, in college that is not really going to work because the professor is looking for the opposite: they want to see what you are thinking. The only way to do that is to listen hard to your own thoughts and ideas and to get them down on paper. So, get inside your own head and listen to what you are thinking and then find your voice and get your “I” onto that page.

My teachers in England were more worried about my knowledge of the content than how I was writing that “content”. I should have been taught that my writing and my knowledge were linked and connected. Learning how to write clearly helps you to think clearly and vice versa. Both activities feed each other, so that if you work on one, they both get stronger. In essence, you don’t really know what you are thinking unless you write it down. That’s when you have that lovely moment when you finally understand what you are thinking about. This lesson is actually buried in Alice in Wonderland. Alice at one point asks: “How do I know what I mean until I see what I say?”

When I was finishing my first academic book, Reconsidering Drugs, I had only recently finished my PhD (in 1999) and I thought my writing was fine. Imagine my surprise when the publishers wrote back to me and said they wanted revisions. I learned that the craft of writing is not something to be overlooked. The writing is as equally as important as the content, in fact, maybe even more important. Without honest, clear writing, no amount of clever content will
ever get off the ground. When you write, think about what you are saying, but just as important, think about how you are saying it.

A final anecdote:

When I first came to America I was teaching at a local private university near the Coliseum in downtown Los Angeles. The professor that I was assisting said on the first day of class: “I don’t give a shit what you think…” The students all looked at each other in horror, mumbling about this horrible professor, wondering if this was what they paid thousands of dollars for. When the professor finished his sentence “…as long as you show me that you are thinking,” they all breathed a sigh of relief. Really, he had just made their academic lives both easier and harder at the same time. Now, they really were free to express what they had been unable to say all through high school, but they also had to be open and clear and honest. These young writers had to show us what they thought and how they came to those conclusions. In closing, I would have to agree with the British novelist Virginia Woolf. She said that writing is not for wimps who like to hide behind essays that are just fuzzy fact bags. To write well, be brave, because as she says, “writing is sticking your neck out.”

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