

[Home](#)

exploratory essay

Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms

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An *exploratory essay* is a short work of [nonfiction](#) in which a writer works through a problem or examines an idea or experience, without necessarily attempting to back up a [claim](#) or support a [thesis](#). In the tradition of the *Essays* of Montaigne (1533-1592), an exploratory essay tends to be speculative, ruminative, and digressive.

William Zeiger has characterized the exploratory essay as *open*: "[I]t is easy to see that [expository composition](#)—writing whose great virtue is to confine the reader to a single, unambiguous line of thought—is *closed*, in the sense of permitting, ideally, only one valid interpretation. An 'exploratory' essay, on the other hand, is an open work of nonfiction [prose](#). It cultivates [ambiguity](#) and complexity to allow more than one reading or response to the work." ("The Exploratory Essay: Enfranchising the Spirit of Enquiry in College Composition." *College English*, 1985)

Examples of Exploratory Essays

Here are some exploratory essays by famous authors:

["The Battle of the Ants," by Henry David Thoreau](#)

["How It Feels to Be Colored Me," by Zora Neale Hurston](#)

["Naturalization," by Charles Dudley Warner](#)

["New Year's Eve," by Charles Lamb](#)

["Street Haunting: A London Adventure," by Virginia Woolf](#)

Examples and Observations:

"The *expository essay* tries to prove all of its contentions, while the ***exploratory essay*** prefers to probe connections. Exploring links between personal life, cultural patterns, and the natural world, this essay leaves space for readers to

reflect on their own experience, and invites them into a conversation..."

(James J. Farrell, *The Nature of College*. Milkweed, 2010)

"I have in mind a student writing whose model is Montaigne or Byron or DeQuincey or Kenneth Burke or Tom Wolfe...The writing is informed by associational thinking, a repertory of harlequin changes, by the resolution that resolution itself is anathema. This writer writes to see what happens."

(William A. Covino, *The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric*. Boynton/Cook, 1988)

Montaigne on the Origin of the *Essays*

"Recently I retired to my estates, determined to devote myself as far as I could to spending what little life I have left quietly and privately; it seemed to me then that the greatest favour I could do for my mind was to leave it in total idleness, caring for itself, concerned only with itself, calmly thinking of itself. I hoped it could do that more easily from then on since with the passage of time it had grown mature and put on weight.

"But I find—

Variam semper dant otia mentis

[Idleness always produces fickle changes of mind]*

—that, on the contrary, it bolted off like a runaway horse, taking far more trouble over itself than it ever did over anyone else; it gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order or fitness, that, so as to contemplate at my ease their oddness and their strangeness, I began to keep a record of them, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself."

(Michel de Montaigne, "On Idleness." *The Complete Essays*, trans. by M.A. Screech. Penguin, 1991)

*Note: Montaigne's terms are the technical ones of melancholy madness.

Characteristics of the Exploratory Essay

"In the quotation from Montaigne [above], we have several of the characteristics of the **exploratory essay**: First, it is *personal in subject matter*, finding its topic in a subject that is of deep interest to the writer. Second, it is *personal in approach*, revealing aspects of the writer as the subject at hand illuminates them. The justification for this personal approach rests in part on the assumption that all people are similar; Montaigne implies that, if we look honestly and deeply into any person, we will find truths appropriate to all people. Each of us is humankind in miniature. Third, notice *the extended use of figurative language* (in this case the **simile** comparing his mind to a runaway horse). Such language is also characteristic of the exploratory essay."

(Steven M. Strang, *Writing Exploratory Essays: From Personal to Persuasive*. McGraw-Hill, 1995)