

Beyoncé's Lemonade as an A+ essay

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Even in an age of quick-bite digital communication, writing skills are key because they can be transferred to any number of other forms, including a song, a sales pitch, or even a profile on a dating site

Long-form essay writing isn't a dying skill. It's just as relevant and important as another complex study on the human condition: Beyoncé's *Lemonade*.

"Maybe I have too broad a definition of an essay, but I think of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* as an A+ essay," says Katherine Acheson, professor of English and the associate dean of arts, undergraduate programs at the University of Waterloo.

Her point is that Beyoncé's album on life as a young woman "is a rich mass of information that is organized in a way that you can't avoid feeling it. You can't avoid knowing more after you've gone through it." And this is the very definition of well-crafted essay writing, and that same clarity and organization of thought is why essay skills remain the cornerstone of a university education.

Even in an age of social media and seemingly minute attention spans, educators insist that essay writing will never go the way of mandatory Latin, despite those students who gripe that they will never have to write an essay in their working life, so why spend so much time on it in university?

The reason is because "an essay belongs in the same category as a sales pitch, or a profile on a dating site, or a map, or a website, or a video game," Dr. Acheson argues. "If an essay is a complex and advanced form of organized information, then mastering the essay will help you do all those different kinds of communication better."

The skills involved in writing a 10-page term paper – critical thinking, clear communication, a careful assessment of information – are important to other forms of communication, such as blogs, project proposals and PowerPoint presentations, educators say.

"An investment in the time and energy into developing mastery of written communication is probably the best thing you can learn at a university," says Sue Laver, director of McGill University's Writing Centre in Montreal, which teaches for-credit courses in writing.

There is a greater emphasis, too, in writing effectively for a larger public, not just for the instructor, since so much of the writing one does in a career now finds its way online and into the public domain. "Failure to be able to communicate clearly and coherently can be very damaging," Dr. Laver adds.

That failure can also make for a worse reader. Writing well goes hand in hand with the ability to read well and to think critically and astutely, Dr. Laver says. "Deep writing fosters deep thinking and deep reading."

At McGill's Writing Centre, students receive verbal feedback given on an MP3 file from lecturers about their writing. The vocal commentary, talking about how to improve a piece of writing, is used to focus on the writing process, rather than just the completed work. "Writing is 99 per cent process and 1 per cent product. We think of writing as the product, but it's not. It's the process," Dr. Laver says.

University lecturers are also asking students to produce a greater variety of writing assignments compared with what was typical a generation ago. Andrea Williams, a lecturer at the University of Toronto, was on a team researching writing assignments in universities across Canada at the undergraduate level, and the study found that students are regularly assigned everything from term papers to research reports to proposals.

"So, the essay is still a really important type of writing, but universities now teach a much greater variety of writing," Dr. Williams says.

Yet, the basics are the same as they've always been. Good essays largely come down to organization and structure, and "you also learn empathy towards your reader. I think that's another key skill," says Brian King, an associate professor who straddles the fields of business strategy and entrepreneurship at the University of Montreal's HEC business school.

Dr. King assigns a variety of assignments to his business students, from one-page to 20-page reports, which all tap into the same skill set. Future business people have to learn to be agile in multiple forms of communication, many of which are constantly changing.

"Storytelling is so critical, and that's what often distinguishes people. It doesn't matter whether you're sending a series of tweets, or you're trying to do your latest marketing campaign. It's about engagement and storytelling," Dr. King says.

"I'm the first to encourage my students to do a quick elevator pitch. I emphasize a lot of presentation skills. But again, I keep coming back to them with this word 'empathy.' If you're going to build a presentation, why don't you put yourself in the shoes of the person who is going to listen to it? And ask yourself, 'Would I want to sit through this presentation?'" Dr. King adds.

Ultimately, though, good writing isn't a skill that ends in university. It is a lifelong process of mastering it in its many changing forms. "Writing is not like learning to ride a bike. It's learning to play an instrument," Dr. Laver says.

Possible Response Questions:

- What is the central point of this essay? Do you agree? Disagree? Explain.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.

- Typed (Try to print your paper BEFORE coming to class)
- MLA Format
- Fifteen (15) line minimum
- NO: you/your/you're
- NO: "I feel...", "I believe...", "In my opinion...", "In conclusion..."
- Underline ONE sentence that you're especially proud of writing.
Then after writing the fifteen lines pertaining to the topic, write an additional sentence or two explaining WHY you feel that one sentence stands out.

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