

Martin Compton

Claire Gordon

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The renaissance of the essay

In the age of AI, has long-form writing in higher education reached a dead end? Martin Compton and Claire Gordon discuss the unique aspects of the essay and introduce a manifesto to revitalise it.

You can read the [Manifesto for the essay in the age of AI](#) via the link. You can find more of the LSE Impact Blog's coverage of how generative AI is reshaping higher education and research [here](#).

In many disciplines in higher education, the essay has long been the place where students show what they have learned by describing, substantiating and synthesising the content of their lectures and reading lists. At the same time, we have also long recognised the importance for student learning of moving beyond a focus on content and articulating more precisely what our students will be learning.

In rapidly changing societies experiencing continuous technological innovation, we should focus on developing the skills and attitudes that prepare our students to be effective citizens, and flexible and adaptable enough to enter a changing world of work. Of course, content remains important (it's what makes a disciplinary focus), but how to access it, engage with it and use it needs more emphasis in curricula.



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questions



This is not a new challenge, but AI tools are prompting those of us who work in higher education to revisit foundational questions: What is good education? How can we design approaches to teaching, learning and assessment to ensure we are educating our students to be ethical and effective members of society with disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise, and the appropriate mix of knowledge, skills and attitudes? How can we partner with students in this endeavour? And, what is the purpose of the essay?

Exploring the essay

The idea of the essay dates to at least Montaigne's *Essais*, published in 1580. The roots of different forms of argumentation and reflective writing stretch back further. In higher education, the essay became increasingly the norm in the UK and US during the 19th and 20th century. The idea of an 'attempt' or 'testing' an idea is etymologically embedded in the word, yet too often we lose sight of this when using essays as assessments. Today, the essay and other long form writing are still considered intrinsic to the pedagogy of certain disciplines. But the essay has become a problem as well as an opportunity for the university.

So, in June 2024, a group of academics from King's College London, the London School of Economics and Political Science as well as the University of Sydney and Richmond American University came together to explore the future of the essay in the age of AI and devise principles for its continued role in learning and assessment – a manifesto, if you will.

Problems and opportunities

There are several problems with the essay. First, the shiny essay, the product itself, becomes a proxy for the learning. We too easily value the edifice that is the essay over the process of producing it. We have neglected to reflect on the purpose of setting essays; instead going through the motions of measuring the presence of the 'right' amount of information and a 'sufficient' amount of scholarship. We ostensibly define these things in guidelines and marking criteria, but these can simultaneously (and perhaps even contradictorily) reduce the essay to an expected formula. If we genuinely value the processes and learning involved, shouldn't we be elevating and assessing the essay-writing process as much as, or alongside, the final product?

Second, the essay as a concept is **notoriously hard to define**, and is often **disciplinary specific**. The understanding of what makes a good essay is too often simply expected of students, **privileging**

those who have certain forms of cultural capital and have been educated within a culture with the same tacit understanding of an essay. Those without this assumed knowledge are often left to catch up and fill in the gaps themselves.



The essay is highly valued for good reason – it's seen as an opportunity to develop critical skills intrinsic to the core identity of certain disciplines



Despite these issues and, indeed, with explicit consideration of them, the essay can remain a critical component in education. The essay is highly valued for good reason – it's seen as an opportunity to develop critical skills intrinsic to the core identity of certain disciplines. The expression of critical thought, the exploration of a single idea, the synthesis of others, the weaving together of multiple perspectives on a single idea or a point, the summation of different thinking through scholarship and reading around the subject and the building of an argument. How to share that value? Even pre ChatGPT, one of the reasons we had such a problem in the sector with essay mills is that we did too little work on these cognitive and metacognitive aspects of essay writing.

If large language models can, with iteration and the right prompts, produce a **passable essay** (and they will inevitably get better at doing this), we need to reappraise the essay. Clearly, any teacher who with a single ChatGPT prompt generates an essay that would achieve an acceptable pass on an undergraduate assessment probably needs to look at how they have framed their question as well as the design of the assessment. Ideally, they would do some of this in partnership with their students – in the manifesto we encourage open discussions between students and educators about the purpose of essays and AI integration.

Rejuvenating the essay

So how do we rejuvenate the essay? A renaissance of the essay requires a focus on the processes of reflection, research and writing, emphasising the different elements that make up the essay as much as the output. This approach sees assessment not simply as the final evaluation or testing of learning but an integral part of the learning process itself. Any renaissance of the essay

necessitates an acceptance that, just as in other forms of academic writing, the essay is something that iterates over time, it is something that improves with feedback from peers and reviewers. The most important learning often comes from the mistakes we make along the way, something we as teachers and students alike should learn to value.



The revitalisation of the essay calls on us to define exactly what disciplinary or interdisciplinary skills and attitudes we are expecting our students to be developing



While valuing both the process and product of essay writing, we should also ask ourselves whether we really need as much writing as many of us have in our current assessment diets. Some educational cultures, such as **Germany** and **Norway**, and certain disciplines, such as **medicine** and **the arts**, embrace and even privilege **oral methods of assessment**. The revitalisation of the essay calls on us to define exactly what disciplinary or interdisciplinary skills and attitudes we are expecting our students to be developing. And then we need to consider the essay alongside other methods of assessment, which are potentially more innovative, more creative, involve multimedia and are not simply taken as a given borne out of tradition.

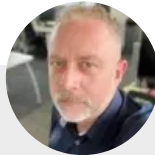
Generative AI is disruptive, complex, controversial and in so many ways unknowable. While we must take seriously the many valid concerns surrounding the current hype, we also have a responsibility to support our students (and colleagues) to become adept at using these tools. As they evolve and become less visible, human/AI hybrid writing seems an inevitable consequence in many disciplines and professional roles. Making opportunities to support students in effective, critical and ethical use of these tools will support their wider information, digital and AI critical literacies.

We offer this **manifesto** as a provocation for debate and discussion, a set of principles to use as a starting point for the review of assessment on your modules and programmes and to enable you, your peers and your students to reconsider the place of the essay and other long form writing in learning and assessment in your discipline. The essay's true value lies not in its final form, but in the critical thinking journey it represents.

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About the author



Martin Compton

Martin Compton is College Lead for AI and Innovation in Education at King's College London.



Claire Gordon

Claire Gordon is Director of the Eden Centre for Education Enhancement at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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