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Review: “Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think about History” by Jim Cullen

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Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think about History

By Jim Cullen, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017. Pp. 197, Paperback £15.99, ISBN: 978-1-119-11190-0

REVIEWED BY ALEXANDRA HOLMES

Essay writing is eventually what all history comes down to, and yet many of us struggle to coherently put our thoughts down on paper in a manner that is both insightful and interesting. Cullen's *Essaying the Past* manages to encapsulate methods of achieving both, whilst retaining brevity (the slim volume only comes to 197 pages including index). Its helpful structure is designed to make sense read cover-to-cover or to allow the advanced writer to skip the unnecessary sections and find the nugget of wisdom they are seeking. This book was first published in 2009, and has been republished in its third updated edition this year. It is aimed at "high school, college, and graduate-level students," a wide range of academic levels; it is this breadth of intended readership which sets this book apart from other notable works in the field, such as Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, *The Craft of Research* by Wayne C. Booth et al. or *The Elements of Academic Style* by Hayot.¹ This need to be applicable to multiple levels of scholarship prevents *Essaying the Past* from becoming too prescriptive or technical, but this span also means that readers will inevitably find some parts of the book less useful than others and, despite the claim to be a "complete resource" for all levels, it is predominantly aimed at students beginning their foray into academia. However, it is this broad approach which allows Cullen to avoid becoming drearily caught up in overly rigid formulas for writing and focus instead on universally applicable aspects, including a welcome recognition of the importance of style.

Although the book is entitled "how to read, write, and think history," the main focus of the volume is on crafting essays and this is where its strength lies. The first six chapters cover the basics on reading and thinking about history, which will be useful to students starting out in the discipline but much of the content should not be news to anyone doing a degree in the subject. The second part of the book is dedicated to the topic of writing essays, which spans ten chapters. Each chapter is relatively short, giving advice on all the aspects of essay writing in bite-sized chunks. The order of the chapters mirror Cullen's proposed writing process, beginning with how to think about your essay, through to setting the crucial bare

¹ Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research: Fourth ed. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013)).

bones of question, thesis, and motive, the importance of a strong introduction, the necessity of clear signposting with concise but interesting ‘topic sentences,’ the key components of a convincing argument, and the importance of revision. Cullen draws on his own experience as a teacher, identifying the common pitfalls he finds in essays that have been submitted to him over the years, and he mines his past assignments for examples demonstrating his points on how to (and how not to) write. Being given the perspective of an essay marker is a helpful reminder of how others will see your work, and what they are looking for—as Cullen emphasises, knowing one’s audience and tailoring one’s prose to them is a critical part of writing successfully. Aside from the usual aspects of essay-writing that one expects from texts on the topic, such as structure, argument, evidence etc., Cullen also adds an imperative which appears to stem from his years in having to read student essays: don’t be boring. Aside from crafting an essay which covers all the necessary academic requirements, he exhorts readers to consider their text from the perspective of drama—how to consider the rhythm of a paragraph, how to intrigue and draw your audience into the text. This is crucial advice that academics at any level of their career should consider. The final part is a series of appendices, giving a brief breakdown of the steps covered in part II as a checklist and specific issues that Cullen has found students struggle with such as bibliographic formats, proper citation, reliance on dubious websites, and how to tackle different varieties of essay including, conveniently, advice on how to structure a book review.

Cullen’s real strength throughout is his obvious passion for the craft of academic writing and his enthusiasm for helping students discover the same joy. He describes writing as an “ethical act” because it forces the writer to think about someone other than themselves (both the subjects of the history under consideration and the reader). (p.151) For him the process of reading and writing history is “an intense experience that’s emotional, intellectual, and even physical all at once.” (p.60) This book serves not only to provide advice on how to write, but also motivation and insight into why we write, and why writing good history is an important endeavour to undertake. The frequently wry and informal tone prevents the book from becoming dry, although the pop culture references sometimes jar rather than put one at ease. Although much of the advice is aimed at US students, with specific references to US educational practices, the section dedicated to essay writing transcends his target audience. Even at a more advanced level it is useful to be reminded about best practice; his insistence on the importance of revising one’s work and leaving sufficient time for all stages of essay-writing is an admonition that academics at all stages can take to heart. The explicit consideration of one’s ‘motive’ for a piece is also a useful reminder to historians to reflect on why they are interested in a topic and to consider their personal stance towards their work. The need to explain why one’s research is interesting, and placing it in a wider context is also a lesson many essays and articles would benefit from, but Cullen’s repeated insistence on connecting this context to ‘relevant lessons for to-

day' demonstrates the weakness of trying to appeal to too broad an audience. Cullen is not blind to the accusation of ahistoricity here, but rejoins that his aim is "to develop informed, engaged, and active citizens." (p.114) This is all very well, but signposting would be useful here to signal to his younger readers that whilst this may be acceptable in high school, it is not regarded as good academic practice.

However, *Essaying the Past* is overall a rich, informative text with advice that manages to span some, if not quite all, of the needs of students, from those just entering the field of history to those heading towards an academic career in the subject. Cullen succeeds in providing a useful and interesting writing aid for each stage of the essay process, and if at times the advice and examples appear too simplistic, it is worth remembering how many pieces of work, even published ones, could do with paying more attention to seemingly simple ideas such as clarity of prose, defining key concepts, and above all, being interesting.