An Essay

Since the first three chapters in your book have essays as language samples, it becomes necessary to give a brief description of what constitutes an essay. An essay is a very important form of written communication aimed at persuasion, imparting information, entertainment, or just expressing what the writer thinks about a particular topic. It is about something (that is, it has a topic). Through it the writer expresses his opinion about the topic (the central idea or thesis). The writer supports his thesis with facts, reasons or examples (the supporting details).

The writer of an essay usually starts with an introductory part, which may consist of one or more paragraphs and often includes a sentence which states the thesis/the central idea of the essay. Then comes the main body, usually consisting of several paragraphs, which explains or supports the thesis with some evidence. An essay usually ends with a concluding paragraph that sums the essay writer's arguments and brings the essay to a logical end. The conclusion may even contain some message or suggestions for the reader.

Let me illustrate this with the help of the first essay in your book.

The first essay in your book is the one written by George Bernard Shaw entitled "**How Wealth Accumulates and Men Decay**". The essay is about capitalism (the topic). But what does the author think about capitalism? He thinks that capitalism has lead to the degradation of human beings in terms of increasing our helplessness and ignorance, and in terms of leading to the accumulation of wealth (in just a few classes of our society). This much is evident from the title and the very first line of the essay (and the fact that the author had socialist leanings). It is necessary to mention here that the title of the essay has been taken from a poem written in 1770 by Oliver Goldsmith. The poem is about how that ideal way of life, the rural way of life, was destroyed by the exodus of people to the urban centres in search of jobs as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

So much for the thesis of the essay; but how does the author support it in the essay. Well, he first takes the example of pin making. He describes how pin making has "progressed" over time. The first pin makers had to buy the material required for making pins, shape it into pins and then sell it; that is, they must have been pretty knowledgeable about the right material needed to make pins and its right price, the process of pin making itself, and the price the finished product would fetch in the market. Then came the time when Adam Smith (a famous economist) said with pride that it took eighteen men to make a single pin, each man doing a tiny bit of the job and passing the pin to the next man. It increased the rate of pin manufacture and pins became cheap, but at what cost? Each man in this pin making chain knew his and only his bit. None of them was skilful and knowledgeable enough to make the whole pin (to say nothing of the knowledge of the buying and the selling processes). Thus they were far from being as accomplished and skilful as the earlier pin makers; hence the degradation and decay. Finally, there came an age when working men were replaced by machines and pins came to be made in hundreds of millions. Now-a-days only those who design the machines know anything about pin manufacture; the workers involved need not be, in author's own words, "one-tenth so intelligent and

skilful and accomplished as the old pin maker". What is the gain in all this so called progress? Pins are cheaper than ever; in fact, so cheap that a single pin has almost no value.

The author supports his thesis by a second example: that of making of clothes. He says that the whole process of making clothes was done in the country by the men and women of the household. They not only sheared the sheep, they spun the wool into threads and weaved those threads into woolen fabric and sewed that woolen fabric into a garment ready to wear. Thus, they knew shearing, spinning, weaving and sewing. These days, if we gave any one a sheep and asked them to make a dress, not only would they be unable to even begin doing it, they would not even be aware of any connection between sheep and clothes.

Shaw begins the concluding paragraph of the essay by saying that the capitalist system has caused things to be made and done on an enormous scale, which on the surface seems a good thing. What most of us don't see immediately is that it has done so at the cost of making human beings excessively helpless (dependent on manufacturing machines, a small number of people who either design these machines or buy them) and ignorant of how things are made and done (as explained above). That is not all; it misleads people into believing that it has spread education and enlightenment when it has done the opposite. Those people who, in the author's opinion, have escaped the ill effects of the capitalist system because of their remoteness from the so called centres of civilization, such as, Eskimos, are much more intelligent and resourceful than the people who live in these 'centres of civilization'. And if the so called civilized people did not fill their heads with all 'the romantic nonsense' contained in films and novels, they would die of the sheer disuse of their mental faculties. The author concludes by saying that this 'nonsense' keeps their minds in an active condition, but, like marijuana, removes them from the reality of the world.

The author even suggests a remedy for the above described situation, but not in the concluding paragraph, as is usual. He does so in the fourth paragraph. He says that going back to the old ways is not the solution of the above mentioned problems. But an equal distribution of the time saved by the modern machinery among all the people of the world so that they may find time for higher creative and intellectual pursuits is something that should certainly be done.

Prepared by Shahid Yousuf Gilkar