

On Beautiful Writing

In an essay that I wrote in middle school—it was about Edgar Allen Poe and the heart story, I think—I included a paragraph that rhymed.

I was very proud of it, because the paragraph was about Allen Poe’s song-like writing style, and the paragraph was song-like itself—lyrical, if you will.

I was very proud of it, and turned it in, and expected high praise, but what I didn’t expect was two big red lines, crossed over each other in an X, right over the page.

I tried to read it aloud to the teacher—listen to how it sounds in the mouth! Listen to how it feels! How it makes you feel!—because to me, essay writing became a thing of beauty when I [allegro] could write in rhyme, and write-in time into my words, because I thought they sounded best fast. And then those two big red lines crossed over each other in the shape of an X told me “no”.

The plink of writing ferociously fast and high and the plonk of standing still—taking your time—makes me feel so... something. But then I am told to be more structured, specific, and clear in my writing, as that is what academic writing requires; but it isn’t what is beautiful.

“The distillation of ideas, the musicality of language.” I don’t want the bubbling specifics, or the babbling nuances, or the gurgling detailed explanations—I want the rapid rushing flux of the *feelings* of ideas.

Because I don’t remember the literary allusions discussed in the—I remember now, *The Tell-Tale Heart*—but I do remember how rhyming that paragraph made me feel.

*Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar,
such as no later king or man ever equaled!
Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,
examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly.
Is not (even the core of) the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick,
and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?
One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the open area(?)
of the Ishtar Temple,
three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it (the wall) encloses.
Find the copper tablet box,
open the ... of its lock of bronze,
undo the fastening of its secret opening.
Take and read out from the lapis lazuli tablet
how Gilgamesh went through every hardship.¹*

¹ Babylonians, The Ancient. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Akkadia, somewhere between 2750 and 2500 BCE), Tablet I.

Human beings, despite scientifically being classified as animals, are decidedly different creatures from the rest of the kingdom. The most basic differing factor is the human brain, which places us leagues ahead of the competition (intellectually). Historian Yuval Noah Harari says that the primary reason our brains make us superior is that they give us the ability to “talk about entire kinds of entities that they [we] have never seen, touched or smelled”: the ability to tell stories.²

Harari goes on to explain that stories (he uses stories, fictions, and myths interchangeably) that we hold in our collective consciousness are the reasons we can band together into larger groups, beyond simple tribes. Stories, in short, are the building blocks of civilization.

The first stories, as you might assume, were purely spoken—humans have been telling them for around 70,000 years (according to Harari), but writing only dates back to around 5000 years ago. As such, the first written stories were ones that were transcribed from oral tradition, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha*, the *Iliad*, and the oldest piece of literature we know of, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, has been around for at least 4000 years, but the version most known was written around the 12th century by an entirely different civilization.³

All four of the works cited above have in common that they are orally poetic—lyrical, even—but for very practical purposes: poetry is easier to remember.

It is so for two reasons: first, rhythm and repetition make long stories easier to remember, and second, poetry is more interesting. It’s easier to auditorily capture an audience if what you’re saying sounds exciting to listen to, and oral poetry achieves just that.

² Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind* (Penguin Random House: London, 2011), 27.

³ Andrews, Evan. *What is the oldest known piece of literature?* (History.com, August 22, 2018).

I love how *italicization* makes me feel; how underlining makes me feel; how semicolons, and commas—and overused em dashes—make me *feel*.

I guess it's because of how I read—how I speak writing to myself. When I read, I am a great performer, in a hall of thousands, reading from a script—and that script is my essay, or my research paper, or my short story, and the grammar is my stage direction.

I speak writing because writing is meant to be spoken, to yourself, to others, whispered in your head, or shouted to a crowd. I give my words voice, my grammar voice, my punctuation voice—I work to give my writing purpose beyond the Merriam-Webster.

Lyrical writing is supercharged writing; it is expression in its purest form, to me, at least; it can be stream of consciousness, it can be poetry disguised as prose, it can be including an essay on ancient literature in the middle of your essay; my writing can be a million things, and that is why I love it—but my writing should be something that can be read aloud, that can be shared, that can be spoken exactly as I had intended it to be.

There's something magical, I think, about being bonded to somebody you've never met by something that neither of you can see, touch, or smell.

END

Bibliography

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Penguin Random House, 2011.

Harari's book outlines the story of how humans developed from hunter-gatherers to apex predators that we are today. His book is clearly organized to explain different crucial developments in our history, moving all the way from the first stories to the scientific revolution.

Declaring a book to be "A Brief History of Humankind" is a lofty claim, but Harari delivers. Through witty, simple prose, perfectly chosen anecdotes, and clear explanations, Harari makes the story of humankind's development through the ages accessible to the average reader.

The book's opening chapters provided me the inspiration for this essay; by logically outlining the importance of storytelling to our development as a species, Harari's text provided me a way to ground this essay in—for lack of a better phrase—a reality that mattered.

Babylonians, The Ancient. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Somewhere between 2750 and 2500 BCE.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest work of literature we know of. It was passed down orally for thousands of years, and while it was written down several times along the way,

the most commonly accepted version is the one written by the Ancient Babylonians during the 12th century.

What can be said about the oldest story we know of? It features a classic hero's journey story, telling the tale of King Gilgamesh who fought monsters and rubbed shoulders with Gods in the pursuit of the key to immortality—a truly riveting read.

I chose this work because I thought it would make for a powerful inclusion in conjunction with my mini-essay in the middle of this work; the style of the passage (and the epic as a whole) is that of oral poetry, and having the oldest and ostensibly one of the most important works of literature in human history in my preferred style of writing lends credence to my choice.

Andrews, Evan. *What is the oldest known piece of literature?* History.com, August 22, 2018.

In this short article, Andrews quickly outlines *The Epic of Gilgamesh* for the reader. He discusses the history of Mesopotamian literature and of the story itself, and also discusses the events which take place in the story.

The article gives a layperson the context they need to understand the basics of the epic and of how it came to be. It is clearly written and includes several interesting references to other Mesopotamian stories.

This work gave me the background I felt was necessary for me to have to write about *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is why I decided to cite it.

“On Beautiful Writing” is a lyrical essay about how lyrical essays are my preferred type of writing. The essay also speaks to my propensity to include lyrical elements in other works, such as regular academic writing, and explains why I do so. I chose to include two different formats in this lyrical essay: two sections written with more free form prose about a personal experience and a section written more traditionally, that still includes lyrical elements, sandwiched between. I also included a fourth section: an excerpt from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the first and fourth sections (free form, personal prose), I purposefully used “incorrect” sentence structure and overused punctuation marks to make my essay feel closer to actual poetic speech. I chose to include the passage from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* before my more traditionally-written essay section as an introduction as to what was to come—in the traditional section, I cite historian Yuval Noah Harari’s argument that stories are the building blocks of civilization, and explain that because the first stories were written in the style of oral poetry—which can be a form of lyrical essay writing—these formats are deeply important who we are as people. I pulled Harari’s argument from his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind*, which served as the inspiration for this essay. In reading Harari’s book, I was struck by the importance he assigned stories, and began thinking about how stories are important to us. From there, I began thinking about language, and how language is important—this assignment provided the final missing puzzle piece, and I realized that lyrical writing was my preferred style. I arranged my text with blank pages in between sections to better signal my intent in splitting them up. But it was mostly an admittedly silly aesthetic choice; I like how each section has its own page. During our peer review section, the most helpful feedback I received was to make my sentence structure even more free form and to include even more of my “voice” in my writing. I also added some fun details such as *italicizing* and underlining the words “italicizing” and “underlining”.