

Teal Deer vs. Essay Length

by C. E. Woollen

Ever met the Internet mascot called the "Teal Deer"? He's a cute little fellow, like something out of an animated movie.

Like many Internet meme jokes, it's a joke-within-a-joke. It's a characterization of an obscure set of letters arranged as follows: tl; dr

That stands for "too long; didn't read". It's a snarky deprecation of someone's Internet post offered up for discussion commentary. That's unfortunate, because it's the active proof of all those studies by universities that complain that we're becoming an instant-thrill society. Then we ourselves turn around and shriek histrionics when education bills in Congress don't seem to work.

(Hey! You there, reader #24601! Already thinking of 'Da Deer? Go away. This essay is too long for you. You're a prisoner of your own bad habits. P.S. That number comes from a book that is also FAR too long for you.)

Now then! For the other 24,600 of you, let's see what essay length means from the past through tomorrow.

There's a technique in literary composition called Parallel Construction. You can take two similar *sounding* sentences, each with two parts. Simply state them first. Then by switching the halves of each, it's a near-perfect method of generating cute little epigrams. Try this one:

"You can often get quantity without quality, but it can be difficult to get quality without quantity".

Let's break that down. In what are known as Troll posts, which are at their utter core the most extreme exploration of the rights to free speech, someone posts a mass of words which merges shocking offensiveness with no literary merit whatever. Sure, there are some famous 1-liner trolls, but the more interesting ones are quite long. A few boring ones are utterly debased adult pseudo-stories; some are computer-generated nonsense that would make Edward Lear spin in his grave.

The best of the bunch are almost intelligible, but then collapse into conspiracy diatribes. Unfortunately, that last set seems to be very popular when transferred from print to talk radio.

Trying for quality without quantity leads to insightful little snippets of wisdom, but they fall short of really delivering a complete educational experience. In my opinion, they are more like references to what the reader already knows, but has missed a conceptual link. The quote above is a typical example.

Adding a few sentences gives us the Interesting Comment. It orbits like a satellite in a dependent orbit around the article it is attached to. Someone might point out that the Groklaw site on the Internet is a good place for ordinary readers to learn more about the short news articles on important lawsuits such as Oracle Vs. Google. "Gee, that's nice". Yet by itself it's still too terse. It doesn't *develop* anything.

The essay form truly comes into its own when it has enough room to take the reader past the fortune-cookie platitudes and haul out some new concepts out of the mass of alphabet soup that is the Data Overload World of Tomorrow.

Essays became nearly extinct as a literary form in the Post-WWII paper-based publishing industry. They were too long for the slick magazines, and didn't fit in the Novel dominated bookstore shelves. Fortunately, the Internet revived the Essay to a new Golden Age. Texts of any size can be effortlessly posted, and someone in the Global Community will read it.

Still here? Great! So what does Length mean to us?

Consider legislation. The number one moneymaking trick of Congress Critters is to slide in "riders" into bills. Most Representatives and Senators try hard, but eventually they'll miss one under-rated line in the third draft of a 430-page bill. That one line then proceeds to allow a nice little chunk of funding to someone's home state, or cancels the actual funding behind some initiative, which renders it therefore useless. What happened? Someone should put up a sign - "Teal Deer Crossing!"

Someone once asked me if I could make my essays shorter and more entertaining. I do not agree with that viewpoint. Oh, the Internet is a wonderful, entertaining place. Rather, I would say that the resulting shorter and more entertaining item ... has ceased to be an essay. It could be a Remembrance, Recollection, Adventure, Op-Ed, Editorial, Theory or Column. All of those are wonderful literary forms.

The essay is the longest, most formal exposition of a theme and its implications. They're tiring! However, in our history, it is essays, which sounded the clarion call to change our world, to make our habitat a better place to live. Why essays? Because if the plea for change is too short, it risks becoming authoritarian. "Do ____". ("Why?") "Because I, the Authority, Said So".

The essay gives honest consideration to why other viewpoints existed; it gives the context to bring the reader into the discussion. Then the author develops his opinion that something may not be quite perfect, and there yet may be a better way to do things. If all

goes perfectly, the reader agrees and believes the new message. In contrast, purely authoritarian pronouncements simply foster rebellion. The former USSR embodied this concept in the national rise and fall of an entire country in less than 90 years.

What do you believe in? What do I need to know from you, to fully grasp your message?
That, my friend, takes more than a fortune cookie.