

English Essentials: concept, genesis, and place in the curriculum

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As one of only a very small handful of books that all students are expected to have and use during their two years of study at the Sophia University Junior College Division, *English Essentials: An Academic Skills Handbook* is more than a familiar sight around campus. It is *the* sole text that is shared among all Required English (English I-IV) courses, and the only single text that students are likely to be called upon to consult in courses in each semester from the time they enter the Junior College Division until they graduate. The book was, moreover, produced by faculty of the school with our own students' abilities and needs in mind. The book in this sense plays a uniquely unifying role in the curriculum, but, as a "supplementary" course text, is constrained in how it does so. In the pages that follow, I provide a brief portrait of the general "concept" of the book, as well as of its genesis and usage, with an eye toward what might be in store for its future.

Basic concept of *English Essentials*: what it is, and isn't

As noted in the section of the book's Preface addressed specifically to students, *English Essentials* "covers some of the important skills that we want you [students] to develop in you English studies" at the Junior College Division, including speaking, writing, research, and critical thinking. Further down the page, the section of the Preface written for teachers notes that the book focuses "primarily, but not exclusively, on 'expressive' English skills that we consider important" for all of our students, regardless of their English ability level. The book is thus clearly limited in scope: while it aims to help students acquire some key skills in English – "essentials" in this regard – the bulk of it is devoted to skills that are directly related to students' expressive ability in English.

This is borne out by the major sections of the book – Speaking, Writing, Research, and Critical Thinking – and by the constituent chapters of each, as shown below.

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| Speaking 1. Conversation 2. Speech 3. Presentation 4. Visuals Writing 5. The Writing Process 6. Paragraph Writing 7. Essay Writing | Research 8. Research 9. Note-taking and Citations 10. Plagiarism Critical Thinking 11. Critical Thinking 12. Six Thinking Hats: Applied Critical Thinking |
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While undoubtedly none of the English faculty at the Junior College Division would argue that receptive English skills are non-essential in students' academic careers – indeed, these are all that is currently gauged by the all-important (in Japan) TOEIC test – the book itself does not attempt to offer instruction in, say, key aspects of academic listening or reading non-fiction in English. This was a deliberate choice, both to reflect the emphasis on “expressive ability” (発信する能力) as a key aspect of the identity of the Junior College Division's English program – as stated on the school website and in promotional materials distributed to prospective students – and, for more pragmatic reasons, to make the book more feasible to produce in-house.

Also noted in the Preface to the book is that *English Essentials* is “meant to be a handbook more than a conventional textbook” in the sense that its chapters are devoted primarily to *explaining* key points about certain English skills, and doing so in a fairly compact manner. (See **Figure 1** for a sample page from the book.) On average, each chapter is only eight and a half pages long. The Conversation chapter, for instance, does not set out to reproduce the multitude of issues and objectives that might be covered in a typical textbook aimed at cultivating students' all-around conversational proficiency in English. Instead, it provides students with a manageable, useful set of strategies that they can employ – both inside and outside the classroom – for initiating, maintaining, developing, and closing conversational interactions. Textbooks typically include not only explanation but also tend to allocate much page space to readings, exercises, activities, and so on. *English Essentials* does include some of these, but on the whole the book is weighted toward concise explanation and illustration of key skills. It is in this sense that the book is intended to serve as a “handbook” rather than a typical textbook.

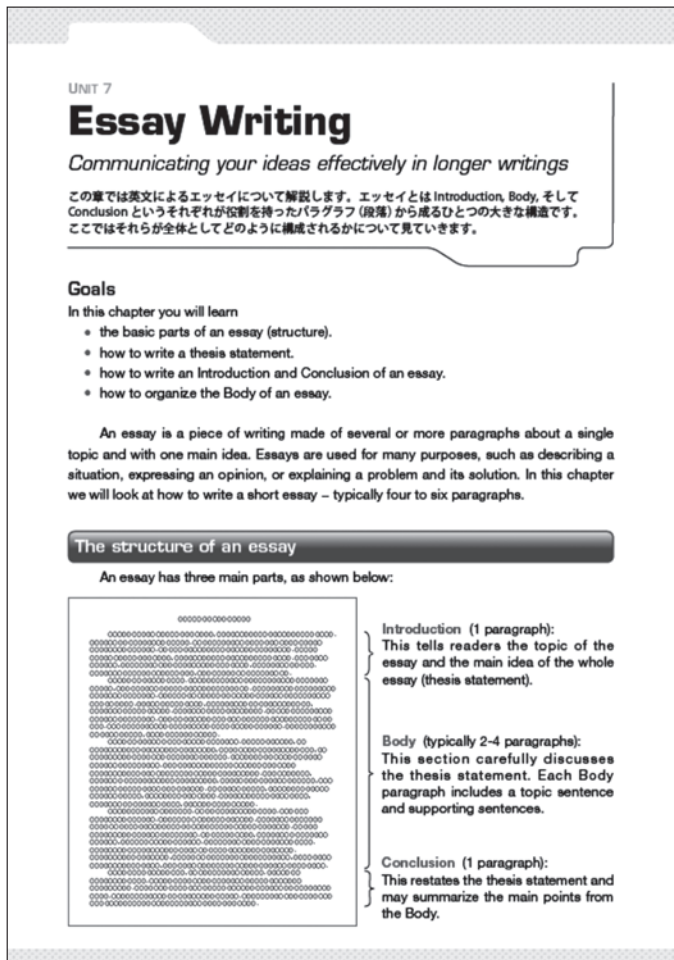


Figure 1. Sample page from *English Essentials*.

Another important aspect of the “concept” of *English Essentials* is that although its twelve chapters are numbered from 1 to 12 in the table of contents, the chapters “were conceived and written as modules, as more-or-less free-standing units that do not need to be taught sequentially,” as the book’s Preface puts it. In some cases, of course, skills covered in one chapter presuppose proficiency in skills covered in another chapter: for instance, the Essay Writing chapter is built on the assumption that students already have an understanding of the fundamentals of paragraph writing, as discussed in the Paragraph Writing chapter. Moreover, there are numerous other linkages between skills covered in the various chapters: e.g., the basics of essay organization (Essay Writing chapter) can prove useful to students working on the organization of an academic

presentation (Presentation chapter). In order to make such linkages explicit and easy to find in the book, a special icon is used at appropriate places within the text to visually direct students to specific chapters or pages where directly relevant information can be found. In this way, the vision was for students to be able to pick up the book and delve into a chapter without necessarily having had to first digest and “master” the content of the chapters preceding it.

Finally, the intended use of the book is an essential aspect of the book. Again, as the Preface puts it: “The book is intended to serve as a skills-oriented supplement to the content-oriented textbooks or other materials that teachers select and use in their Required English courses (English I-IV).” Beginning with the 2011 pilot edition of the book, it has very clearly been presented to English I-IV teachers as a supplement to their primary course materials, one they may use in the way and degree to which they find suitable to their own courses and students. Since 2011, *English Essentials* has thus been listed as a supplementary work (参考書) in the official shared syllabus for English I, II, III, and IV courses.

Genesis of the book

As the Preface of the book indicates, *English Essentials* “was born out of an Educational Innovation Program grant from Sophia School Corporation (Jōchi Gakuin) and the collaborate efforts of the full-time English faculty of the Sophia University Junior College Division.” The Educational Innovation Program grant spanned three years, 2009 to 2011, and was aimed at bolstering the “content-oriented and self-expressive” (内容重視および自己発信型) character of the Junior College Division’s Required English program. The grant application specified various Faculty Development and other activities to be carried out, but the development of *English Essentials* consumed the vast majority of faculty labor under the grant, with twelve full-time English faculty working on the development the book – planning, drafting, revising, proofing, etc. – over those three years. And, particularly for subsidizing the initial printing costs of the book, *English Essentials* consumed the vast majority of the grant budget as well.

It is important to situate the development of the “Innovation Book” – as it was often called until we eventually came up with a title – in relation to a major curriculum change that had taken place a few years prior. Namely, over a two-year period starting in 2007, the current “core” Required English courses (English I-IV) were phased in,

supplanting their predecessors, which were called English Comprehension 1 & 2 and English Expression 1 & 2. In a departure from the overt skills-orientation as suggested by English Expression and English Comprehension, the new Required English courses were to be theme-based and content-oriented, with individual lessons during the semester to be based on materials tied to a general theme for the course, as follows:

English I. Living with others: exploring relationships and life values

English II. Crossing cultures: understanding and respecting others

English III. Social issues in Japan: toward a better community

English IV. Japan and the world: living in an international community

Likewise, the general course goals for English I-IV were formulated so as to reflect this emphasis on content:

- For students to gain an understanding of a wide range of issues in order to become responsible global citizens who embody the spirit of “Women for Others, With Others”
- For students to acquire critical thinking skills
- For students to acquire abilities to understand others and express themselves effectively in English
- For students to acquire knowledge and skills to become autonomous learners of English

Outside of these general course goals, published and made available to students in the official course syllabi, teachers of Required English were told that English I-IV were intended to be “integrated-skills” courses that provide students with a balanced mix of reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills development. Beyond that, it was by and large left up to individual teachers of English I-IV to decide which particular sets of skills would be taught or otherwise developed in their own courses. There was no mandate that, for instance, all teachers of English I should provide instruction in paragraph writing, or that all teachers of English II should provide instruction in presentation skills, in the process of conducting theme-based, content-oriented lessons. It has remained this way since, with the effect of leaving the skills element of Required English less clearly defined than the thematic element.

The development of *English Essentials* can be seen as an effort toward helping to

remedy this seeming imbalance. The book in itself does not provide a “mandate” for how or at what stages in students’ academic careers particular skills are to be taught. Nevertheless, it does provide to teachers and students alike a more distilled, more unified sense of the productive skills that we feel are essential for students to acquire. In a sense, it represents a step toward recuperating some of what was lost in the conceptual shift in the English curriculum from a “skills” orientation to a “content” orientation.

Supplementary usage

As noted above, since 2011 *English Essentials* has been provided to teachers of Required English as a skills-oriented supplement to the textbooks or other materials that they use in their own English I-IV courses. Given the range of English ability levels of students in Required English courses and the proclivities of individual teachers toward teaching some skills rather than others, it is unsurprising – as we have seen from in-house surveys – that there has been variation among teachers about how and how much *English Essentials* gets utilized for any given English I-IV course, or that certain chapters tend to get used more than others.

At the end of the 2012 academic year, for instance, second-year students were surveyed about their usage of the individual *English Essentials* chapters during their four semesters of study at the Junior College Division. Figure 2 shows the results collected from 166 students about their usage of the book in class (not out-of-class autonomous study), with the chapters placed in order of most- to least-heavily used. According to students’ recollections, the three writing-related chapters were most heavily used, with more than 100 students saying that they had used the Paragraph Writing chapter in class at least once and nearly 50 reporting that they had used it three or more times in class. Of course, we might note that approximately one-quarter of the students responded that they either did not use that same chapter at all or do not remember. For seven of the twelve chapters, more than half the students replied that they either did not use the chapter or do not remember.

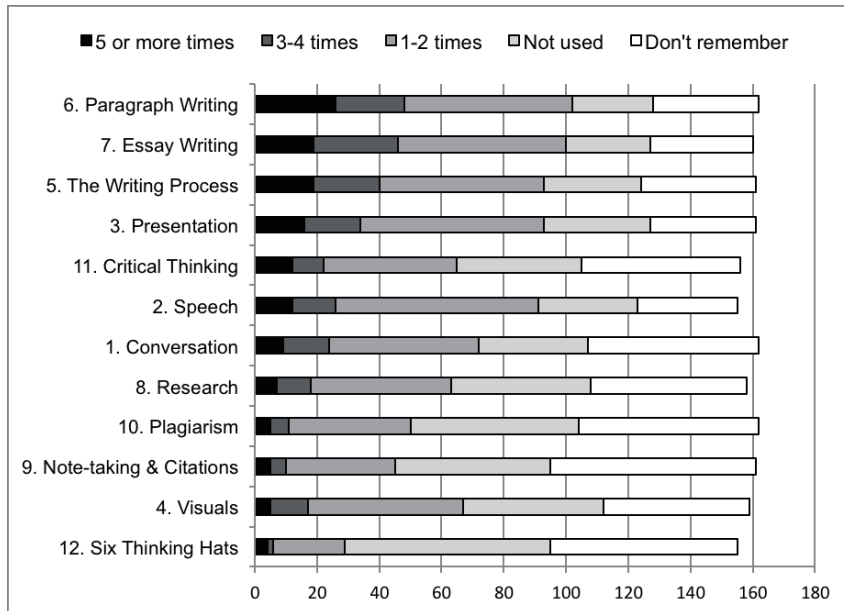


Figure 2. Question: “Over the past two years, which chapters in *English Essentials* have you studied in class with your teacher?” Horizontal axis shows number of students. (Table reformatted using data from Andrade, 2013; not every student provided an answer regarding each chapter.)

In the same survey, another question asked students about their usage of the book out of class; roughly 20% of students reported having used at least one chapter for their own self-study outside of class.

Surely these numbers would be much higher if *English Essentials* were a required text for all English I-IV courses. But even as a supplementary text, with no stringent guidelines to teachers about how the book is to be used, it would seem that the book has been getting a fair amount of use.

Next steps

While the long-term future of *English Essentials* is yet to be determined, at the time of this writing it is undergoing a round of minor revision for the 2014 academic year, when it will again serve as a supplementary text for Required English. For the time being, *English Essentials* will continue to serve as the sole unifying text for English I-IV, but at the same time remain constrained in how it can do so in that there is no uniformly prescribed manner for how the book is to be used, with the result that a number of

chapters may end up not getting the attention they deserve. Most likely, I suspect, the next significant step for *English Essentials* or something else in its place will come with another major reform in the English curriculum.

References

- Andrade, M. (2012). Second-year students' feedback on *English Essentials: An Academic Skills Handbook for SUJCD Students*. Report distributed at the February 5, 2013, English Teachers' Symposium, Sophia University Junior College Division, Hadano, Japan.
- English Essentials: An Academic Skills Handbook*. (2012). Department of English Language, Sophia University Junior College Division. Hadano, Japan.