**Reading and Writing the Modern Essay**

English 120 (21358)

Section 3 M W 2:30-3:45

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In this course, students will examine modern nonfiction with two goals—to become shrewd readers who can identify successful writing styles, strategies and structures, and then to develop as writers capable of incorporating those elements into their own writing. Students will be asked to do more than mimic and impersonate the greats, but to cull from great writing the skills needed to surpass in their own work that which is merely derivative of what came before it. Together we will notice aspects of the essays that we might miss on our own, and we’ll each bring our own unique sensibilities to the task of figuring out what works, and how and why it works. Good writing is born out of attentive reading and lively conversation, so come to every class prepared to share your critical perspective.

This course will train you to read as a writer and to use the strategies of professional writers in your own work. We will practice “close reading for craft,” attending to persona, point of view, and voice; problems and questions; coherence, connection, and concision; defamiliarization; and public significance in the essays we read. Our collective analysis of exemplary writing is the heart of the course. Reading for craft means we’re interested more in the “how” than the “what.” Breaking down elements of style and narrative requires us to stay focused on authorial intent rather than content. We may admire the forest but we’re crawling down into the root system this semester to see what makes the trees rustle and shine as they do—in published works and in your not-yet-published work.

Required readings (available at the Yale Bookstore and from online booksellers):

Linda Peterson et al., *The Norton Reader* (14th edition). Referred to as *NR*.

David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*. Hereafter DFW.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

*Readings not in these three texts will be distributed as handouts or posted on Classes. Please be sure to print, annotate, and bring copies to class!*

**Essays:**

You will write five essays, each of which will be written in two stages: a first draft and a final copy. Drafts will not receive grades, though I will comment on them in detail. Each essay’s focus will correspond to the reading unit—personal experience, place, profile, cultural criticism, and polemic. Essay drafts will be due on Fridays by 7:00 pm. Please submit your essays to me via email, as a Word document. For the weeks in which your essay will be workshopped in class, please see the specific workshop instructions.

**Unit One: Interpreting Personal Experience**

Write an essay (1,200-1,500 words) based on your own personal experience. Your essay should focus on a single story or event and should seek to make a single and public point. While your nonfiction essay will be about your personal experience, it should seek to affect the way your readers think or act. Remember that this is nonfiction: your essay should be verifiable, true, and directed toward a wide audience—not a narrow group of friends or classmates.

W 1/18

Langston Hughes, “Salvation,” *NR* 947-948

F 1/20

Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook,” *NR* 487-493

George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant” *NR*750-755

Lars Eighner, “On Dumpster Diving,” *NR* 55-63

W 1/25

Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” *NR* 42-44

James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” 251-260

Brent Staples, “Black Men in Public Space,” *NR* 267-269

M 1/30

David Foster Wallace, “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” DFW

William Deresiewicz, “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education,” *American Scholar*

Nancy Mairs, “On Being a Cripple,” *NR* 64-73

W 2/1 [all reading for today is on Classes V2]

Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That”

James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

Annie Dillard, “Total Eclipse”

M 2/6

David Foster Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” DFW

W 2/8

**Workshop #1**

**Unit Two: Writing About Place**

Write an essay (1,200-1,500 words) for a wide audience that describes a specific place and explores its significance. Like most of the essays we will read in this unit, your essay should focus on a single place, although you may want to enrich your portrait with characterization, dialogue, historical background, or personal reflection. In other words, you should include whatever you think will give your reader the most vivid sense of the place. Note that “place” here is broadly defined. It can be a city or a stretch of woods, but it can also be a shopping mall, a library, or a café. I recommend picking somewhere you know very well or, better yet, somewhere local that you can visit (and re-visit) while gathering material for your essay. As with your personal essay, you need to grab and hold your readers’ attention, but in this essay there won’t necessarily be an argument. Instead, think about creating a unified impression of a place and overcoming the tendency of your readers’ minds to wander by making your place unceasingly interesting. Lastly, remember that you are writing non-fiction; all details must be true and verifiable.

M 2/13

E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake,” *NR* 158-163

Leslie Jamison, “Indigenous to the Hood,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*

David Guterson, “Enclosed. Encyclopedic. Endured: The Mall of America,” *NR*

W 2/15

Jhumpa Lahiri, “Rhode Island,” *NR* 141-151

Ian Frazier, “Take the F,” *NR* 151-158

David Foster Wallace, “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” DFW

M 2/20

Joan Didion, “On Going Home,” *NR* 1-3

Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again,” *NR* 3-11

Joey Franklin, “Working at Wendy’s,” *NR* 80

Alison Bechdel, from Fun Home, *NR* 12-34

W 2/22

**Workshop #2**

**Unit Three: Portraying a Person**

Write an essay (1,200-1,500 words) for a wide audience that profiles a person who is NOT 1) yourself 2) a fellow Yale student or 3) a romantic partner past or present. Your profile should present your subject in a vivid and unified way and should include some direct quotation. This means you will need to conduct at least one interview, during which you take notes and record observations. Lastly, remember that you are writing non-fiction; all details must be true and verifiable.

M 2/27

David Foster Wallace, “Federer as Religious Experience,” Classes v2

Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence,” *NR* 87-97

Tom Wolfe, “Yeager,” *NR* 114-123

W 3/1

David James Duncan, “The Mickey Mantle Koan,” *NR* 104

Virginia Woolf, “Ellen Terry,” 124

Rebecca Skloot, “The Woman in the Photograph,” *NR* 862

M 3/6

Annie Dillard, “from An American Childhood,” *NR* 98

Ariel Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’ Wife,” *The Atlantic*

DeNeen Brown, “Six-Pack Abs at Age 74,” *NR* 334

W 3/8

**Workshop #3**

**Spring Break**

**Unit 4 Cultural criticism**

Write an essay (1,200-1,500 words) for a wide audience that makes a comment on some artifact of modern culture. “Culture” is broadly defined, as the essays we will read in this unit suggest. Each of these essays achieves at least two purposes, and so must yours: 1) Present the cultural artifact in a way that is clear and interesting to a reader who may know nothing about it. 2) Draw a fresh and interesting conclusion from your presentation. Lastly, remember that you are writing non-fiction; all details must be true and verifiable.

M 3/27

David Foster Wallace, “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” DFW

David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” DFW

W 3/29

Virginia Woolf, “In Search of a Room of One’s Own,” *NR* 904-914

Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” *NR* 806-819

David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster,” *NR* 697-708

M 4/3

Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *NR* 572-580

Jessica Mitford, “Beyond the Formaldehyde Curtain,” *NR* 238-244

William Deresiewicz, “Solitude and Leadership,” *The American Scholar*

W 4/5

Annie Leonard, “The Story of Bottled Water,” *NR* 200-13

Bill McKibben, “The Case for Single-Child Families, *NR* 223-231

Tom Bissell, “Extra Lives: Why Video Game Matter,” *NR* 214-222

Jane McGonigal, “Be a Gamer, Save the World,” *NR* 396-399

M 4/10

Michael Pollan, “An Animal’s Place,” *NR* 681-696

Susan Sontag, “A Century of Cinema,” 927-934

David Foster Wallace, “The (As It Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*,” classes v2

W 4/12

**Workshop #4**

**Unit Five: Polemic**

Write an essay (1,200-1,500 words) for a wide audience arguing in favor of an idea that is not commonly accepted. Your argument should be both controversial and significant. A good essay will challenge what readers think they know in some way. Lastly, remember that you are writing non-fiction; all details must be true and verifiable.

M 4/17

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

W 4/19

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *NR* 510

David Foster Wallace, “Tense Present,” online

M 4/24

David Foster Wallace, “Greatly Exaggerated,” DFW

Samuel Loncar, “Science Versus Religion and Other Modern Myths,” *Marginalia Review*

William Deresiewicz, “In Defense of Facts,” *The Atlantic*

W 4/26

**Workshop #5**

**One-extension policy**

Except for drafts due for workshop, each of you is entitled to one extension, on request. Please save it for when you need it. If you want to postpone handing in a draft or paper, you should ask for your extension no later than the last class meeting preceding the deadline. Late drafts that have not been granted an extension will receive no comments (or very few). Late papers that have not been granted an extension will automatically be lowered by one third of a grade per day (e.g., from B+ to B, B to B-, and so on). (These penalties do not apply, of course, to late work accompanied by a dean's excuse.)

**Seeking Help Outside of Class**

This course is designed to encourage you to see yourself as part of a community of writers. Successful papers are those that engage confidently and naturally with their readers, and to that end you may find it helpful to find real readers to listen to or read drafts. You are therefore invited to make use of the many resources available at Yale. In addition to meeting with me (during my office hours or during scheduled meetings outside my office hours), I urge you also to work with the residential-college writing tutors or with the peer writing partners at the Yale College Writing Center.

**In–Class Policies**

Laptops and other electronic devices are not permitted during class discussion with the exception of workshop days. In-class use of personal devices for any purpose other than furthering our discussion undermines the spirit of our class community.

**Workshop Policies**

Each student will have an essay workshopped once during the semester.

Workshops take place on Wednesday class meetings, according to a schedule that we’ll finalize during the second week of class. Sign-ups for workshop dates will be finalized during the second week of class. Those who are not being workshopped that week are expected to read and comment on essays prior to the workshop date. Workshoppers are expected to comment on the drafts of the other authors, but are not required to comment on their own papers. Detailed instructions will be provided in a hand-out.

**Course Requirements**

1. Five essays including draft and revised versions submitted on time to me by email.  
2. Complete all readings and come to class ready to discuss them intelligently.

3. Attendance and active participation. More than two unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your grade. More than four unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

**About sources and acknowledgements:**

Append to each draft and revision a “process letter” in which you:

1. Acknowledge your debts to our course-packet writers.
2. Either:
   1. Acknowledge your debts to anyone (other than me) who has read and commented on your essay. Be specific. (For example, much of this syllabus has come, directly or indirectly, from other syllabi written by 120 staff. And Andrew Ehrgood and Kim Shirkhani have both given me extensive feedback on this version.

or

* 1. Reproduce the following sentence (verbatim):

*Neither this draft nor any earlier draft has been edited by anyone other than me, nor has anyone else reviewed it to provide me with suggestions to improve it.*

1. Discuss your goals for the draft you submitted.
2. Discuss the challenges (large and small, global and local) that you encountered in drafting the essay. In what ways did your responses to those challenges feel like victories?  And what are your hopes for a next version?
3. Discuss surprise and delight: In what ways did you surprise and delight yourself while drafting the essay? In what ways do you hope to have surprised and delighted your readers?

These letters don't have to be long—a few hundred words should do.

**Grades**

Your final grade will be based primarily on your five revisions, which are worth 18% each. Your first drafts will not be graded, but I will consider the total effort that has gone into the essay—both the draft and the revision—when grading the final version. Participation will account for 10% of your final grade.

**About *A*’s:** By longstanding agreement among English 120 faculty, it is our policy that:

1. “the grade of A should be reserved for only those papers that the instructor would consider nominating for a departmental writing prize”; and

2. “more than 50% of A/A- grades in any one section is excessive. Unless an instructor thinks that a particular section is so exceptional when compared to others he or she has taught at Yale in the past that it merits a higher percentage of A/A- final grades, the instructor should take 50% in that range as a rule of thumb.”