Instructor: Shifra Sharlin

Email: [shifra.sharlin@yale.edu](mailto:shifra.sharlin@yale.edu)

Sec. 10: M,W 11:35 – 12:50 LC209

Office hours: M. 3-5 & very gladly by appointment

Office: LC 412

Reading the Modern Essay in English 120

This course is based on two simple premises: better readers are better writers and many readers working together make the best writers. Our joint project will be two-fold: to identify essay strategies as readers and to use them as writers. Together we will be “reading for craft” as Professor Fred Strebeigh puts it. The essay is a capacious genre, encompassing a huge array of styles, rhetorical strategies, and topics. We will be reading as large a variety as possible so that for every assignment you’ll have many models and, by the end of the semester, you’ll have had the chance to write five different essay types. The course will train you to be a more savvy reader, to notice the tricks writers use to beguile their readers, that is, to understand, in the words of Professor Fred Strebeigh once again, both “the wow and the how.” You’ll walk away from this course with the tools to become a savvy reader and writer of any genre.

Some questions we will be asking:

-- What would you like to steal from this essay? Why?

-- What sentence or paragraph wowed you? How?

-- What was the consequential point the essay made? How?

-- What strategy did you learn from this essay?

-- What was your emotional response to this essay? How did the writer provoke this response?

**Course texts and materials:**

Two course packets (available at Tyco Copy Center, 262 Elm Street – a few steps west of the corner of York and Elm).

During shopping period, ask for “Sharlin (Eng. 120) course packet I.” Order and pay for the course packet one day; pick it up the next.

After shopping period, there is another course packet for the rest of the semester.

One required books (available at Yale Bookstore and also, at a much reduced price, on alibris.com):

*Norton Reader* [NR] (13th edition—FULL edition)*,* Peterson, et.al.

Doing the Work for the Modern Essay:A Week-by-Week Schedule

This schedule will probably change to adapt to student needs and preferences.

NR – Norton Reader CP – Course Packet

**Unit One: Events**

The first writing assignment is a classic personal essay because it focuses on the writer’s life. At the center of this essay will be a single, autobiographical event. One of the challenges of this essay is to use a personal event to make a public point. It is crucial to pose a problem or question or create a tension, which the essay will explore. Blend narrative and commentary. In common with all of the essays we will be reading and writing in this course, this essay should also aim to change the reader’s mind about something consequential. Length: 1200-1500 words NO MORE

**Week 1**

W. 1/18 E.B. White “Once More to the Lake”

F. 1/20 George Orwell,“Shooting an Elephant” [NR]

Joan Didion, “On Going Home” [NR]

Jane Smiley, “Belly, Dancing…” [NR]

**Week 2**

M 1/23 Phillip Lopate ”Getting a Cat” [CP]

Meghan Daum, “Difference-Maker” [CP)

Max Beerbohm “A Memory of a Midnight Express” [CP]

Mako Yoshikawa “Secrets of the Sun” [CP]

W. 1/25 Langston Hughes “Salvation” [NR]

Michael Warner, “Tongues Untied, Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood” [CP]

🡪 Essay One Draft Due: Sun. 1/29 @ midnght in dropbox E120.lastname.E1D.doc/.docx + process letter in same document.

**Week 3**

M 1/30 Michel de Montaigne, “On Giving the Lie” [CP]

Virginia Woolf, “Montaigne” [CP]

Cynthia Ozick, “She – Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body” [CP]

🡪 Workshoppers, Essay One Draft. Bring paper copies for whole class

W 2/1 Workshop

**🡪** Bring to class. Comments --as two copies, one for the writer and one for the instructor--to the workshop class. Comments also may be written--legibly, please--on the draft itself. In any event, the commenter's name should be written on the draft, which will be returned to the writer after the workshop. There are more suggestions in important course information

🡪 Sun. 2/5 @ midnight Essay One Final Due: in dropbox E120.lastname.E1F.doc/.docx process letter optional

Workshoppers Final due M. 2/6 @ 5pm?

**Unit Two: Things (aka Cultural Commentary)**

This essayuses a thing to make a public point, this time about some fraction of our culture, broadly defined. This thing should be an object that you can observe closely. As our essays have shown, details – especially surprising ones -- make observations interesting. This unit’s assigned readings offer a particularly wide range of things that can offer insights about many aspects of our culture. Length: 1200-1500 words

**Week 4**

M 1/6 Alberto Alvaro Rios, “Green Card” [NR]

Rebecca Solnit, “Locked Horns” [NR]

Megan Daum, ”Carpet Is Mungers” [CP]

W 2/8 Virginia Woolf, “Death of the Moth” [NR]

M.F.K. Fisher, “Potato Chips

**Week 5**

M. 2/14 Richard Selzer, “The Knife” [CP]

Natalia Ginzburg, “Worn-Out Shoes,” [CP]

Geoff Dyer, “What Will Survive Us” [CP]

W. 2/15 Roland Barthes, “Toys” [NR]

Fred Strebeigh, “The Wheels of Freedom: Bicycles in China [NR]

🡪 Sun 2/19 @ midnight Essay Two Draft Due E120.lastname.E2D + process letter in same document in dropbox

**Time to order the book you will be writing about in Essay Three?**

**Week 6**

M. 2/20 Workshop

W. 2/22 Start Essay Three (see below)

Adam Gopnik, “Dog Story: How Did the Dog Become Our Master” [CP]

Allegra Goodman, “Pemberley Previsited” [NR]

🡪 For workshop comments, see Essay One

🡪 Sun. 2/26@midnight Final Essay Two Due E120.lastname.E2F.doc or docx. Process letter optional

**🡪** Mon. 2/27@5pm Workshoppers Final Essay Due

**Unit Three: Books**

In this essay a book will be the focus – or perhaps it is more accurate to say the starting point -- because the essay will ultimately make a public point beyond a reading of the book. It may be a book you have already read. It could be a childhood favorite or a book that you have read for a college course with the proviso that the essay should not address how the book has shaped your understanding of its subject matter. Do not only write about the book from memory. Have a copy of the book when you write the essay. The assigned readings show a wonderful variety of thoughtful ways to make use of a book in order to -- as Professor Andrew Ehrgood has put it, “write an essay whose function is corrective – an essay that allows you to work against a plausible and consequential misunderstanding about something that matters.” In this essay, your reading of the book will be central to that work of correction. Length 1200-1500 words.

**Week 7**

M. 2/27 William Gass, “The Doomed and Their Sinking” [CP]

James Boyd White, “The Rhythms of Hope and Disappointment …” [CP]

Briallen Hopper, “On Spinsters” [CP]

W. 3/1 Clifford Thompson, “Mingus, Marcus and Me” [CP]

Rivka Galchen, “How Would Ulysses Be Received Today?” [CP]

Nicholson Baker, “The Charms of Wikipedia” [NR]

**🡪** Sun. 3/5 @ 5pm All drafts due including workshoppers. E120.lastname.E3D.doc or .docx + process letter in same document

**Week 8**

M 3/6 Workshop

W 3/8 **Introduction to the archive. BASS L01**

**🡪** Call **i**n documents for study at MSSA. They should be in by the weekend or before. Write 200 words on what you find interesting in them. Due. Mon, 3/27@midnight

3/10 – 3-26 NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

S 3/12 Final Essay Three Due: E120.lastname.E3F.doc/docx. Process letter optional

**Essay Four: Place**

This essay requires archival research about a place. Please note that this unit is longer than usual because archival research is a non-linear process. You never know what you will find. You will need time both for the disappointment of dead ends and the thrill of serendipity. The archive has limited hours. You will not be able to access all documents online. You cannot leave this research to the last minute. There is a research report due in the second week in order to give you a deadline to help you get started.

Research Report

One of the goals of this report is to force you to get started and to experience some of the challenges and rewards of archival research. This report will be due on Wednesday, November 9. Do not begin it on Monday!

The report can take two forms:

1. Write a response to three documents that thinks about how the document could be useful in your final paper. What does it tell us about the people who used the building? What can it teach us about the world in which they lived? What details of the document fascinate, amuse, delight or bewilder? Why?

2. Writing done before and after two research sessions. Before a research session, write down what you hope to find and what questions you want answered. Why? After a research session, write about what you have found and what new questions need to be answered.

Length 500-800 words. Due Monday, November 7. Please bring one paper copy to class and post.

**Week 9**

M 3/27 Richard Preston, “Climbing the Redwoods” [CP]

Joan Didion, “The Sea Coast of Despair” [CP]

John McPhee “The Woods From Hog Wallow” [CP}

**🡪200 words on your documents (Interesting? Puzzling? Delightful?) @midnight**

W 3/29 Jhumpa Lahiri, “Rhode Island” [NR]

Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Spaces” [NR]

Margo Jefferson, “Death Wish in Negroland” [CP]

**Week 10**

M. 4/3 Richard Rodriguez, “Late Victorians” [CP]

**🡪 Research Report bring to class and post after class. E120.lastname.E4.RR**

W 4/5 David Guterson, “Enclosed, Encyclopedic, Endured: The Mall of America [NR]

Terry Tempest Williams, “The Clan of One-Breasted Women” [NR]

**🡪** Sunday, 3/9@midnight Essay Four Draft E120.lastname.E4D + process letter in document

**Week 11**

M. 4/10 Henry Gates, “In the Kitchen” [NR]

E. B. White, “Once More to the Lake” [NR]

**🡪** Workshoppers, please bring paper copies of your draft.

W. 4/12 WORKSHOP

**🡪** Comments as directed in Essay One

**🡪** Sunday, 4/16 @ midnight. E120.lastname.E4F

**Unit Five: Action**

This essay will be a meditation on something you do. It can also take the form of directions as in the Eighner and Keillor essays. Some modern essays are structured by the essayist’s thought process. The reader follows the essayist on a journey of reflection that might not lead to a conclusion in the conventional sense, but nonetheless leaves a unified impression in the mind of the reader. Further, this kind of essay will nevertheless correct a consequential misunderstanding if only in the movement from certainty to doubt. Montaigne remarked, “If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions…” The reflective essay realizes the etymological origins of the essay genre.

Choose some activity and reflect on what it means to you. Choose something you have not written about before. The success of this essay also depends on the felicitous choice of detail. The assigned readings offer a variety of examples of the wow and the how of the meditative essay. Length: 1200-1500 words.

**Week 12**

M 4/17 Garrison Keillor, “How to Write a Letter” [NR]

Lars Eighner, “On Dumpster Diving” [NR]

Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook” [NR]

Phillip Lopate, “My Drawer” [CP]

W 4/19 Max Beerbohm, “Hosts and Guests” [CP]

Anne Fadiman, “Night Owl” [NR]

Natalia Ginzburg, “He and I” [CP]

**🡪 Sunday, 4/23@midnight Essay Five Draft E120.lastname.E5D + process letter in document**

**Week 13**

M 4/24 Workshop Commenters, see Essay One

W 4/26 Workshop

**🡪 Wednesday, 5/3@5pm E120.**lastname.E5F due in dropbox

**VERY IMPORTANT COURSE INFORMATION**

Reading Modern Essays: Norton Reader (NR) & Course Packet (CP)

Bring paper copy, same edition as the rest of the class. In other words, use the course packet and *The Norton Reader, 13th Edition, Full.* You will probably be able to find most if not all of the essays online, but please do not use them. We need to be on the same page – literally – and we need to be able to mark up the paper copy. **Please bring the paper copy – not an electronic version -- of the essays to class.**

Talking About the Modern Essay

I want to talk to you about your writing. In my experience, face-to-face conversations are essential to improvement. Come see me during office hours or make an appointment. I am requiring two meetings a semester, preferably one towards the beginning of the semester. Stop by or sign up!

Writing the Modern Essay

In this class, you’ll write five 1,200-1,500 word essays in five units. You’ll work on each essay in three stages:

1. Write a draft. It should be as polished as possible. The draft should be typed, proofread and close to the required length for the final version. The better the draft, the better my comments. The drafts will not be graded. Some students will have their drafts workshopped in class (see below). Please include a process letter with your draft in the same document. (see below).

2. Workshop. All students, whether or not their papers are being workshopped, gain from a discussion about how best to implement which craft lessons where, how, when, and why. A workshop slows down the writing process in the same way that close reading slows down the reading process. It is great for noticing and pondering the many decisions and choices writers have to make when putting words on paper. **The workshop supplies the bridge between reading for craft and writing with it.**

3. Revise your rough draft based on my comments, those of your classmates, and others (see below for campus resources).

**+ process letter**:

1. Acknowledge your debts – to writers in the Norton Reader or the course-packet, as well as anyone (other than me) who has read and commented on your essay. Be specific.
2. Discuss the goals for the draft you submitted
3. Discuss the challenges (large and small, global and local) that you encountered in drafting your essay. In what way did your responses to those challenges feel like victories? What are your hopes for your next version?
4. 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.

Formatting:

Format should be 12 pt, double spaced, with one-inch margins. Include a footer with the page numbers, your last name, and the assignment. Put word count at the top of the first page of your essay. Please name the document “E120.yourlastname.assignmentname.” Use the following format for assignment name: E1D, E1F, E2D, E2F, etc.

Submitting:

**Submit electronic copy of your assignments. Please upload all assignments to your v2 drop box. Please bring paper copies when you meet with me.**

Workshopping the Modern Essay in English 120

At the heart of our course are workshops in which several students present their work to the class for written and oral suggestions. The workshop embodies essential lessons of this course: that the writer should be aware of his or her audience, and that writing is a process of continual refinement of ideas and their expression. **Failure to attend any workshop and deliver writing in advance of the workshop will hurt your grade. Failure to attend a workshop in which you are scheduled to present will severely damage your grade.**

Workshop procedure:

For workshop students: Bring stapled copies of your essay for your classmates and me to class on the Monday before your workshop. Please upload a copy of your draft to the v2 drop box also.

Other students: Be sure that you have a copy of each of the drafts to be workshopped. Before the Wednesday workshop, it is your responsibility to carefully read and thoughtfully comment on each draft separately. Please type comments (minimum 150 words) concerning each draft.

What kind of comments? Your comments should not be aiming to improve the grammatical correctness of the essay. We writing teachers call those “lower order” concerns. While they are important – and I will comment on them – you can offer something more important to your classmates: a peer’s thoughtful response. What kind of comments help you? We’ll discuss this in class. Do please be specific. (“Good job!” is not useful.)Sometimes it is helpful simply to let the writer know what you think the essay is about. Suggestions for changes can be helpful, but not always. It is always encouraging to know what a reader loved. It is a sign of a respect to be honest and specific in telling a writer what you thought did not work.

Please bring two copies of your comments to class on the day of the workshop, one for the writer and one for me in addition to uploading a copy to the v2 drop box – all in one file! Name that one file E120.lastname.essaynumber.C. The commenter’s name should be written on the draft and returned to the writer. Comments are never anonymous. Additional comments also may be written, legibly, on the draft itself.

**Footnotes in the Modern Essay in English 120**

**Every essay must contain at least one footnote.** Footnotes are important for giving credit where credit is due (and avoiding plagiarism), but they also give a text depth by showing its connections to ongoing conversations. For some readers, footnotes are the equivalent of gossip, the hidden backstory behind (or should that be beneath?) the text. They are, in truth, the sub-text. Of course, you should credit actual sources used and quoted, but also credit conversations with friends or instructors (other than me), comments in the workshop, and readings that inspired your ideas or where your reader can go to pursue a line of inquiry. The Essay Four on place will have the most footnotes, or at least the most conventional footnotes, but the other essays will also benefit from them. Here are some guidelines, which I have taken from Professor Fred Strebeigh.[[1]](#footnote-1)

All writing in this course must be nonfiction; it must be true and verifiable. As you gather information, keep track of its sources. When you submit drafts and revisions, use endnotes to identify where factual information came from: interviews, books, articles, conversations, photographs, and more.

Citation Information:

For a discussion of the use of sources, please see: Yale College Writing Center, "Using Sources" <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources> (visited 8/21/2012). That site gives much fine conceptual guidance as well as practical information, including <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/special-demands-internet-sources>:

The general form of a citation from an Internet source is: Author’s name. Title of Document. Title of Website. Sponsor of Website. Date of Document. Date of Access. URL. “Here's a typical endnote format that has been adapted from a useful handbook, *Online! A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources*, by Andrew Harnack and Eugene Kleppinger (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 94: "1. Malcolm Gladwell, "Listening to Khakis," *New Yorker*, 7/28/97, <http://www.gladwell.com/1997/1997\_07\_27\_a\_khaki.htm> (visited 8/21/2012)."

**MAJOR COMMENT**: For work in this course, endnotes to internet sources must ALSO contain something not usually asked for in academic notation: In addition to the citation (typified by the one above to Gladwell), **include all the key phrasing** on which you have based your argument. Internet sources make easy the cutting and pasting of such evidence. Within the passages that you include, please find a way to emphasize KEY PHRASING (perhaps with capital letters). If you state that Gladwell mentions colors in his article about khakis, for example, you might follow the citation above with the following passage and KEY PHRASING: "We were in a conference room at Levi's Plaza, in downtown San Francisco, a REDbrick building decorated (appropriately enough) in KHAKI like earth TONES, with the team members-Chris Shipman, Iwan Thomis, and Tanyia Kandohla-forming an impromptu critical panel. Shipman, who had thick BLACK glasses . . . ."

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Plagiarism is the uncredited use of someone else’s ideas or words. I will treat cases of academic dishonesty in accordance with the policies of Yale College.

**Grading the Modern Essay in English 120**

Attendance and Participation:

Attend all classes. Please be on time. The discussion and workshop elements that are essential to this course cannot be made up, so attendance is vital. Your written and spoken responses to your classmates’ drafts are also an important part of your participation, as are your reading responses.

You may miss one class during the semester for any reason.  (The one exception:  you must attend all workshops.)  Just email me before class to let me know you will be using your excused absence; you don’t need to tell me why.  Please use this absence wisely. If you use it for a frivolous reason at the beginning of the semester, you won’t have it when you might be tired or over-scheduled towards the end.

You may also miss class if you are observing a religious holiday, or in documented cases of illness or emergency (i.e. with a Dean’s authorization for late submission of work).  Again, email me in advance to let me know you are unable to attend.  You will be responsible for completing the reading and any written assignments for days you are absent. An unexcused absence will lower your grade as will being late more than twice.

**You will not receive a separate participation grade, but your participation may affect your final grade.**

One-Extension Policy:

With the exception of drafts due at your workshop (for obvious reasons), you are allowed one extension without penalty over the course of the semester. Request this extension no later than one day before the essay is due. Each student is entitled to one two-day extension, for a first or final draft. Please use this extension, like your absence, wisely. If you use it to go to a concert, you won’t have it when you are feeling under the weather.

Late drafts that have not been granted an extension, will receive few or no comments

Late final drafts will be lowered by one partial grade per day that they’re late (B to B-, and so on). These penalties do not apply to late work accompanied by a dean’s excuse.

Grading:

Your final grade will be based on your revised essays. Each essay is worth 20% of the final grade. 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. **A’s on essays are very hard to get.** They are reserved for papers that I would consider nominating for departmental writing prizes. A-’s are also quite hard to get. A B+ is an excellent grade in 120, as indeed it is in life. Grading is not an ideal system, but it gives you a sense of how your writing compares to other 120 writing. 120 instructors strive to ensure that grading standards are consistent across sections. Overall, about half of all 120 students get final grades in the A range, and about half get final grades in the B range. My job is to hold the bar high. English 120 is only the beginning of your writing life.

I love seeing how, time after time, students surprise themselves with their writing. The more you can immerse yourself in the writing process, revel in the generous and constructive editorial advice you'll get from me and your classmates, and cultivate a healthy detachment about grades (this is easier said than done, I know!), the more you will get out of the class.

Writing Tutors:

Yale offers excellent resources to help you with your writing. The Writing Center is a great place to start. The Writing Center is located at 35 Broadway (entrance in the back, off of York St around Toad’s) and offers a drop-in service staffed by undergraduate and graduate students who can offer valuable help at all stages of the writing process. The Writing Center is open 3-5 and 7-9 Sun-Thurs and 3-5 on Fri. These writing tutors are exceptionally good at improving the work of those who go to them.

Bass Writing Tutors, based in the residential colleges, are another wonderful resource for longer term one-on-one help. Writing Partners (Yale college students or graduate students) offer drop-in help five nights a week. You can schedule an appointment for either of these at <http://www.yale.edu/bass/tutoring/partners>.

Your colleges also have fantastic writing tutors. Yale devotes enormous resources to helping you develop as writers. Use them!

**NO ELECTRONICS, PLEASE.**

1. In fact, this syllabus is full of phrases I have lifted from other English 120 instructors. I was tempted to credit every single phrase I “borrowed,” if only to give you a sense of the generous, dedicated, creative, and smart community of English 120 instructors. I was in the throes of a kind of ecstasy of influence (see Jonathan Lethem) as I was putting this syllabus together. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the inspiring syllabi of Fred Strebeigh, Andrew Ehrgood, Alfred Guy, David Gorin, Richard Deming, Thomas Hopkins, Craig Fehrman, Thomas Heisel, Elyse Graham, Cathy Sufro, and Briallen Hopper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)