



Robert Brooke

Teaching “Rhetoric: The Essay”

Class Title: “Rhetoric: The Essay”

Course Format: 3 hrs once a week, 15 weeks

Level: Advanced Undergraduate, Graduate Students, Secondary Teachers

Format: currently face-to-face; in 2015, online

Taught: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In American schools, the “essay” is a problematic form. On the one hand, a certain kind of essay is used as the standard for evaluating student competence in writing. In Nebraska where I teach, our schools conduct a Statewide Writing Assessment at Grade 11 (high school juniors), and the mechanism for that assessment is a timed “persuasive essay.” On the other hand, practicing creative and academic writers have for decades explored the essay as a vibrant, open-ended form of writing. The growth in creative nonfiction as an emerging area in creative writing programs is just one indication of this work. We teachers are caught in this gap between the essay as a means of assessment and the essay as an exploratory, thinking form.

Since 2007, I have been exploring this gap in a course for advanced undergraduates, area secondary teachers, and graduate students in English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (the course is scheduled biennially). Called “Rhetoric: The Essay,” this course asks students—as both writers and teachers—to locate themselves in the tensions of the essay. Central to my approach to “Rhetoric: The Essay” are two concepts: (1) the essay is a complex form, with at least four specific variations; (2) “thinking moves” to structure an essay may well be the element all the variations have in common.

The course meets one night a week for three hours for 15 weeks and the approach includes reading a good deal of pedagogical theory surrounding the essay as a practice. (In its 2015 incarnation, this course will be taught online to better serve secondary teachers in greater Nebraska.) Students write several essays, both academic and creative, and we read compelling examples of the same; the teachers in the class develop teaching units. Teachers in my fall 2013 section, for example, implemented new units for their classes at Lincoln North Star High School, Lincoln Lutheran High School, Lincoln East High School, Metro Community College-Omaha, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Several of my undergraduate students published their course essays in the department's undergraduate literary magazine, and one of my graduate students, Darin Jensen, won last year's Robinson Award for the best graduate student essay in the department.

This article presents the course design and main assignment sequences for "Rhetoric: The Essay." My hope is that other teachers of the essay may find some useful ideas for bridging the gaps between assessment and exploration that so characterize contemporary thinking about the form.

Some Pedagogical Theory and the "Life Soundtrack" Assignment

In a handout for the first day of class, I try to articulate two main concepts: *the essay as contested form* and *thinking moves*.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty for teaching the essay in American school systems is that the form is overdetermined. What I mean is that the essay carries so much cultural baggage inside school culture that it's difficult for writers (and teachers) to separate the form from the baggage. Henry Giroux claims in *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* that schools are places of cultural conflict, where teachers & students are surrounded by competing voices arguing

about the purpose of their work together. His claim is especially true of the essay.

Consequently, we need to teach the conflict around the form. If emerging writers are to succeed in writing essays, they need to know that the form itself is at least four distinct things:

- The school essay: A prescriptive form for demonstrating one's mastery over information in an examination—the school “five paragraph essay” with 3-part thesis statement and single paragraphs devoted to each part of the thesis;
- The historical essay: A practice of inquiry, in which a writer poses a question and a line of thinking to follow and writes in search of clarity—the essay as developed in the Elizabethan age and practiced since;
- The academic essay: A professional form (actually several forms) for presenting the results of research through an appropriate “thesis and support” organization—the kind of reader-based essays detailed in the MLA and APA handbooks; and
- The creative nonfiction essay: A kind of creative writing that mixes personal experience, reflective thinking, and expositions of research to ponder questions the writer finds intriguing—the essay as currently published in journals like *Creative Nonfiction* or *Fourth Genre*.

Although the various essay forms do so in different ways, all forms of the essay progress via *thinking moves*, as defined by Dombek and Herndon in *Critical Passages*. Here's how they explain the concept:

The internal structure of advanced essays, both familiar and academic, can be characterized as a progression of ideas, introduced and interwoven as the essay progresses. These introductions and interweavings consist of a number of turning points, surprises, twists—moments when the essay's established thinking is added to, revised, called into question, problematized, or transcended in some way. When professional writers make these turns, they do so with rhetorical emphasis, by shaping sentences and paragraphs that are designed to frame the turn in a rhetorically powerful way, so that it is clear to the reader not only that the writer's thinking is *moving*, but that it is moving in a particular direction. Turns in thinking and the rhetorical shapes that house them, though

distinguishable from one another, occur simultaneously. They organize the essay, guiding readers through a careful choreography that displays each new idea as flowing from those that have come before. We can this double motion, this intersection of powerful thinking and rhetoric, a *thinking move* (34).

The writer poses a topic for inquiry and exposition, then poses one or more ways to conduct that inquiry. The link between topic/inquiry is a “thinking move,” especially when set forth in the writing in a way that guides both writer/reader. So the core teaching practice for the essay may well be the concept of thinking moves. To teach the concept of thinking moves, we need to provide three kinds of support:

- identifying thinking moves in the texts we read;
- generating thinking moves in planning for our writing;
- generating explicit statements of our thinking moves to guide our readers.

In my experience, most writers grasp these concepts fairly intuitively. They’ve written and read (and often taught) a host of “school essays,” and are often in my class because they have a sense of the other meanings of the term “essay.” The “thinking move” idea is often both abstract and compelling when first presented, but becomes clearer after we’ve taken a look at some essays organized around thinking moves different from the “school essay.”

On the first night of class, I use three examples to make the “thinking move” idea practical. Under the guise of introducing model essays for the main creative assignment of the course (the “life soundtrack essay”), I divide class into three groups to identify the “thinking moves” used to structure three sample essays:

- The first scene in “Cousins” by Jo Ann Beard, exploring the trials of growing up female in the Midwest through two girls’ encounters with country music (30-33)
- “Vengeance” by Wayne Kostenbaum, exploring his adult life as a queer intellectual through analysis of his favorite opera songs (from his longer essay “A Pocket Guide to Queer Moments in Opera,” 206-210)
- “The Christmas Music” by Kathleen Norris, exploring the meaning of Christmas jazz in her family’s life (from her book-length collage essay *The Cloister Walk* about the nature of faith and ritual, 81-84)

These three excerpts are all clearly organized, but organized differently from the school essay's thesis-and-support. All three work through a mix of rendering of the writer's personal experience, the articulation of wider cultural themes, and analysis of the chosen musical excerpt. This work leads to the formal presentation of the "life soundtrack" assignment.

At the end of the first night, thus, students have been introduced to the guiding concepts for the course. They've also examined thinking moves in three life soundtrack essays and started thinking about their own life soundtrack essay. In my experience, this combination of material at the opening of class helps sell the course project. Many students tell me these essays are among their favorite of their academic careers. More importantly, the students are ready to think deeply about the thinking required by the various kinds of essays.

Extending the Range: Course Reading and the Application Essay Assignment

For the fifteen weeks of the course, I split the required activities between three important focal points. Some weeks, we emphasize their writing and class time is devoted to small group peer response on the essays in progress. Some weeks, we emphasize the teaching plans of the teachers in the course (I set up enough "Teaching Days" so that pairs of teachers can take an evening themselves). And for five of the fifteen nights, I focus on reading about the essay. In the five weeks devoted to readings I choose for the class, I select pairs of books or sets of essays that speak to a common issue, and ask each student to read one of the selections. In class, the students share their reactions to the reading, first in small groups of those that read the same selection, then in whole class discussion that starts from the insights in small groups. As with the three selections for introducing the life soundtrack essay, this method 1) emphasizes

their active role in the choice of material and responsibility over it, and 2) provides exposure to the full range of ideas in the material for all students.

The readings I used in the 2013 version of the course are listed below.

Week Two: Introduction to the Historical Personal Essay. This week, early in the course, is designed to give students experience with a range of literary personal essays, to ground the course in a common vocabulary. For this purpose, I use Philip Lopate's now canonical anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*. The assigned selections included:

- “Introduction,” Phillip Lopate
- “Of a Monstrous Child,” Michel de Montaigne
- “Dream Children: A Reverie,” Charles Lamb
- “The Death of the Moth,” Virginia Woolf
- “Split at the Root,” Adrienne Rich
- One essay of your choice

Week Four: The School Essay and its Historical Alternatives. This week, also early in the course, provides two extended scholarly rationales for contrasting the school essay with other versions of the essay. Heilker's book (and his follow up CCC essay “Twenty Years In” from 2006) makes the strong case for the exploratory essay in the tradition of Montaigne. Campbell and Latimer's book tackles the realities of the secondary school classroom head on, offering a variety of alternatives to the school essay framed by a critique of the form.

- The Essay, Paul Heilker OR
- Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay, Kimberly Hill Campbell & Kristi Latimer

Week Seven: Braiding Personal Experience and Scholarly Research in the Essay. Now midway through the course, after students have completed at least one draft of an extended essay, the course reading centers on varieties of “thinking moves” in contemporary academic and creative essays. Dombek and Herndon's book explores, through contemporary critical theory, the weaving of types of thinking in contemporary essays. Spigelman's book explicitly addresses the uses of “the personal” in contemporary scholarship throughout English studies.

- Critical Passages, Kristen Dombek and Scott Herndon OR
- Personally Speaking, Spigelman

Week Nine: Book-Length Essays. After the midpoint of the course, we shift from writing our own creative essays to writing critically about the essays of others. The three book-length collections of essays both introduce the students to extended examples of essayists' at work and give them material to choose from for their critical projects. The books selected include two authors who explore material directly related to our Great Plains region (Marquart and Knopp) and a canonical science essayist (Gould). In my 2013 course, two thirds of the class chose to read (and write about) Marquart.

- The Horizontal World, Debra Marquart OR

I Have Landed, Stephen Jay Gould OR
What the River Carries, Lisa Knopp

Week Twelve: The Academic Essay. By week twelve, most students are in the midst of their writing of the critical essay for the course. Hence, the reading selections focus on the work of generating material and orchestrating thinking moves in academic writing. The selections from Linda Christensen's book explore strategies for teaching the academic essay with diverse secondary students. Graff and Berkenstein's selections offer explicit templates for constructing "the moves that matter" in academic work.

- "Writing Essays from Hard Ground" from Teaching For Joy and Justice by Linda Christensen OR
- "Entering the Conversation" from They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing by Gerald Graff and Cathy Berkenstein

The assigned readings for the course, thus, are spread out across the semester, linked to the problems they students are experiencing as they work on their own essays, and set up to offer options for making the academic study of essays their own.

Crucial to the progression of this reading is the second major assignment in the course: the application essay. The application essay invites the students to investigate the craft of a favorite essay quite closely. Most frequently, the advanced undergraduates in the course chose a set of ideas from the assigned readings as their "theoretical concept" for the course and applied those concepts to essays in the collection they read in week nine. The graduate writers drew on their own wider reading in constructing these essays.

Teaching Units

The last major assignment in the course, restricted to the graduate students, is the development of a teaching unit for the essay. In the 2013 version of the class, the graduate students included four local secondary teachers, a community college teacher, and three teachers in the university's first year composition courses. Given these numbers, I was able to assign the teachers, in pairs, to a "teaching day" in the course of the semester. For their teaching days,

they led us through lesson plans they constructed with their students in mind. They were guided in these plans by the general assignment for teaching days/units.

The four pairs of teachers used the teaching days to explore pedagogical projects directly relevant for their classrooms. One pair developed a set of procedures for borrowing narrative techniques in essay writing—a project that led to new material for their English 10 courses. Another pair used the categories of non-traditional argument in Barry Kroll’s “Arguing Differently” to develop a new approach to the “research paper” in secondary English. A third pair led the class, late in the semester, through a protocol for self-conferencing they developed from Peter Elbow’s ideas of “ranking, evaluating, and liking” as forms of judgment. Their presentation addressed head-on the issues of assessment of writing, related to the rubrics in the Statewide Writing Exam.

Each pair of teachers also assigned class a set of readings related to their topic. As the course instructor, I was familiar in advance with most but not all of these readings, but I was happy to include them in the whole class progression. Some of the reading included favorite essays that the teachers used in their classes, from Alice Walker’s widely anthologized “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” to Chuck Klosterman’s “This is Emo,” from Joan Didion’s “Goodbye to All That” (in the Lopate collection for class) to Adrienne Rich’s “Teaching Language in Open Admissions.” The inclusion of this material added another 50 pages reading, on average, to the “teaching day” weeks. But the result was active engagement from the class, with practical teaching issues faced by these teachers in their ongoing classrooms.

Coda

The course design for “Rhetoric: The Essay” thus involves students, as writers and teachers, in active exploration of the essay in its many forms. Central to the work of the course

is first-hand experience writing in several essayistic forms—an experience that allows individual students to form their own judgments about the value and uses of those forms. For the teachers in the class, the course allows a space to address directly their own teaching of the essay, usually from the wider vantage point offered by the many essay forms we address.

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