

English 2890, Sem 101: Creative Nonfiction: Exploring the Personal Essay

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Office hours: MW 3:30–4:30 and by appt.

Course Description

In Exploring the Personal Essay, we will read and write personal essays, exploring the various possibilities within the genre: the memoir essay and the contemplative essay, among others. We will explore the power of image and specific detail, the uses and limits of persona, and the boundary between public and private. Reading will include David Sedaris, James Baldwin, Annie Dillard, Virginia Woolf, Jamaica Kincaid, and others; we will also pay close attention to the students' writing. Working through drafts, students will develop fuller skill at criticism and revision.

Required Texts

The Art of the Personal Essay. Ed. Phillip Lopate. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.

Moore, Dinty. *Crafting the Personal Essay*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2010.

Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction. Eds. Lex Williford and Michael Martone. New York: Touchstone, 2007.

Course Goals

This course requires that you demonstrate competency in the following:

- crafting personal essays in a variety of styles;
- preparing clean, well-edited writing;
- revising, editing, and proofreading your writing through multiple drafts;
- offering substantive, constructive feedback for your peers' writing;
- performing close readings of complex texts;
- adopting and adapting the styles of published writers.

Writing Assignments

Essays—Students will write six essays this semester, with the option to revise three (Essays Three through Five) for the final portfolio. Below are brief descriptions of each essay, with fuller guidelines to come.

- *Essay One* (minimum three full pages): Write the first draft of an essay you've always wanted to write. What subject matter or experience matters deeply to you? The essay may take any form you like and be about anything you like, with one exception: you may not write about how or why you can't come up with an essay topic.
- *Essay Two* (minimum four full pages): Write a memoir essay that centers on an event or conflict in your life. Use one of the essays we've read as a model. On a separate page, explain what aspect(s) of the model you chose to emulate.

- *Essay Three* (minimum five full pages): Two options: 1) Write a memoir essay that centers around an event or conflict in your life; OR 2) Write a contemplative essay, taking an essay we've read as a model. If you write a contemplative essay, explain what aspect(s) of the model you chose to emulate.
- *Essay Four* (minimum five full pages): Write an essay that explores your educational and/or reading/writing experience, along the lines of George Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys" or Adam Hochschild's "World on a Hilltop."
- *Essay Five* (minimum six full pages): Write an essay for which you use an alternative form (by alternative form I mean an abecedarian like Moore's "Son of Mr. Green Jeans," an unique construction as in Biss' "Pain Scale," or a second-person direct address as in Kincaid's "A Small Place").
- *Essay Six* (minimum eight full pages): Write an essay about the personal essay and your relationship to it, using Levine's "The Essayist Is Sorry for Your Loss" as a model and/or jumping-off point.

In-Class Writing—Students should expect in-class writing assignments daily. These include freewriting assignments and quizzes about the reading.

Peer Review/Workshop—For most essays, students will read and comment on the work of their classmates. The most important written material students will produce in this process, other than your own revision, will be constructive commentary.

Response Assignments—I will assign short homework writing assignments; these will consist of both creative and analytical approaches. These must be typed and printed out.

A Note about Public Domain—With the exception of a few freewriting exercises, all student writing may be read by and shared among all members of the class. That means most work students produce can be reproduced for other classroom use (i.e. examples and workshop).

Reading Assignments

One cannot write well without learning to read well. With that in mind, we will have reading assignments almost every day. These are crucial to our discussion, so read carefully and thoroughly. We will have reading quizzes to accompany the reading.

Conferences

I require that each student meet with me twice for a conference; I will schedule these conferences later this semester. Also, please consider office hours an extension of class time. I am there to answer any questions you have.

Participation and Attendance

Though I will lecture sometimes, most classroom time will be devoted to students' thoughts and ideas. With that in mind, participation is crucial. In my experience, one can learn only when one takes an active role in the exchange of ideas. If you are not comfortable speaking in class,

please let me know as soon as possible so we can discuss an alternative approach to your participation grade.

If a student misses more than five class meetings, he/she *cannot pass this class*. If you do miss a meeting, it is *the student's responsibility* to find out what he/she missed by contacting another student, not the instructor.

Grading

The final grade breaks down as follows:

Final portfolio (Essays 1–6)	60%
In-class writing, peer review, response assignments	33%
Participation	7%

The final portfolio will consist of the six essays you write for this course. The three revised essays (Three, Four, and Five) will weigh more heavily in the final grade. My goal is for grading to be transparent. If you feel I am grading your work in an unclear or unfair manner, please let me know as soon as you can so we can discuss it.

Please note that an A is excellent, a B is good, a C is average, a D is below average, and an F is poor. One does not earn an A simply by working hard; my baseline assumption is that everyone in the class works hard.

University Policies and Regulations

Students with Disabilities—In compliance with Cornell University policy and equal access laws, we are available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for students with disabilities. Requests for academic accommodations are to be made during the first three weeks of the semester, except in unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students are encouraged to register with Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for appropriate accommodations.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism—All the work you submit for this course must have been written for this course and not another, and it must originate with you in form and content with all contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged. Please familiarize yourself with Cornell's Academic Integrity Code, which is distributed to students in the *Policy Notebook*. You can download the code, along with *Acknowledging the Work of Others*, at <theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/pdfs/AIAckWorkRev90620.pdf>.

Schedule

WEEK 1

Wednesday, 1/22 Course Introduction

Friday, 1/24 Read Dillard, "Living Like Weasels" (Scribner 148–51), Doyle, "Leap" (165–6), Moore, "The Gentle Art of the Personal Essay" (*Crafting* 4–6), and Moore, "Red Light, Green Light" (*Crafting* 214–8)

WEEK 2

Monday, 1/27 Read Didion, "In Bed" (Lopate 689–692), Kooser, "Small Rooms in Time" (Scribner 275–279) and Moore, "The Personal (Not Private) Essay" (*Crafting* 7–25)

Wednesday, 1/29 **Essay One Due**

Friday, 1/31 Read Levy, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" (Scribner 290–298) and Moore, "Writing the Memoir Essay" (*Crafting* 26–37)

WEEK 3

Monday, 2/3 Read Earley, "Somehow Form a Family" (Scribner 167–175), Didion, "Goodbye to All That" (Lopate 681–688), and Moore, "Of Conflict" (*Crafting* 99–112)

Wednesday, 2/5 Read Fletcher, "The Beautiful City of Tirzah" (Scribner, 190–200); Essay Two draft due

Friday, 2/7 **Essay Two due**

WEEK 4

Monday, 2/10 Read Woolf, "The Death of the Moth" (Lopate 265–268), Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up" (Lopate 520–532), and Moore, "The Woolf and the Moth" (*Crafting* 38–50)

Wednesday, 2/12 Read Norris, "Celibate Passion" (Scribner 396–400), Hazlitt, "On the Pleasure of Hating" (Lopate 189–197), and Moore, "Writing the Contemplative Essay" (*Crafting* 51–58)

Friday, 2/14 Read Purpura, "Glaciology" (online), Dillard, "Seeing" (Lopate 693–707) and Moore, "Pursuing Mental Rabbits" (*Crafting* 75–91)

WEEK 5

Monday, 2/17 **No class—February Break**

Wednesday, 2/19 Read Skloot, "A Measure of Acceptance" (Scribner 473–483) and Essay Three draft due

Friday, 2/21 **Essay Three due**

WEEK 6

Monday, 2/24 Read Orwell, "Such, Such Were the Joys" (Lopate 269–304) and Moore, "Who Am I Today?" (*Crafting* 139–151)

Wednesday, 2/26 Read Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" (Lopate 587–603)

Friday, 2/28 Read McCarthy, "My Confession" (Lopate 555–576)

WEEK 7

Monday, 3/3 Read Montaigne, "Of Books" (46–56) and Cary, "Black Ice" (pdf online)
 Wednesday, 3/5 Read Hochschild, "World on a Hilltop" (Scribner 242–256)
 Friday, 3/7 Read Fuentes, "How I Started to Write" (Lopate 432–453)

WEEK 8

Monday, 3/10 Read Rich, "Split at the Root" (Lopate 640–656)
 Wednesday, 3/12 Essay Four draft due
 Friday, 3/14 **Essay Four due**

WEEK 9

Monday, 3/17 Read Biss, "The Pain Scale" (Scribner 28–42) and Moore, "Write What You Wish You Knew" (*Crafting* 172–185)
 Wednesday, 3/19 Read Moore, "Son of Mr. Green Jeans" (Scribner 389–395)
 Friday, 3/21 Read Kincaid, "A Small Place" (Scribner 257–264), Van Meter, "If You Knew Then What I Know Now" (Scribner 520–524) and Moore, "On Becoming an Excellent Rewriter" (*Crafting* 219–225)

WEEK 10

Monday, 3/24 Read McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens" (Scribner 370–380)
 Wednesday, 3/26 Read Cooper, "Burl's" (Scribner 132–140)
 Friday, 3/28 Read Williams, "Hawk" (Scribner 542–547) and Essay Five draft due

WEEK 11 – **No class; Spring Break**

WEEK 12

Monday, 4/7 Read TBA
 Wednesday, 4/9 **Essay Five due**
 Friday, 4/11 Read Levine, "The Essayist Is Sorry for Your Loss" (Scribner 280–289)

WEEK 13

Monday, 4/14 Read Doty, "Return to Sender" (Scribner 152–164)
 Wednesday, 4/16 Read Sedaris, "Repeat After Me" (Scribner 443–451)
 Friday, 4/18 Read Hemley, "Reading History to My Mother" (Scribner 231–241)

WEEK 14

Monday, 4/21 Read Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil" (Lopate 58–114)
 Wednesday, 4/23 Read Barthelme, "Not-Knowing" (pdf online)
 Friday, 4/25 Read Sontag, "On Style" (pdf online)

WEEK 15

Monday, 4/28 Read Orwell, "Why I Write" (pdf online)
 Wednesday, 4/30 Revisions
 Friday, 5/2 Revisions

WEEK 16

Monday, 5/5

Revisions

Wednesday, 5/7

Essay Six due; Course Evaluations

Exam period TBA: Portfolio due