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English S120E: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay

Summer 2018
MWF, 10-11:30 (EST)

ENGL S120 is an intensive course designed for students who are confident readers and writers of English – students who already write fluently and correctly and want to hone techniques in a range of nonfiction genres. It is recommended that students who have not completed an introductory college-level writing course take ENGL S114 instead.

In this course, students will examine modern prose with two goals--to become shrewd readers who can identify successful writing styles, strategies and structures, and then build with those elements in their own writing. This we will call “close reading for craft,” a method by which students hone their own writing and workshop the writing of their classmates by emulating the triumphs of professional writers. Students will write essays each week which are clear, compelling and purposeful.

A note on how to read for the class: Reading for craft means we’re interested in the “how” more 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 summer to see what makes the trees rustle and shine as they do. In published works and in your not-*yet*-published work.

The logistics of this seminar will be somewhat unusual, and more than a bit experimental. English 120 is a classic Yale course that depends upon the repeated rhythm of writing and rewriting, as well as the give-and-take of seminar discussion. To recreate that experience in the compressed schedule of the summer session can be challenging; to recreate that experience online requires even more care. Our online writing workshop will operate not as a MOOC, but as a virtual version of that classic collegiate seminar, with its own sense of close-knit community, individualized attention, and personal challenge.

To make this happen, all of us need to do our parts. You must join the class for each meeting actively ready to discuss the reading, prepared to share your writing and to

comment on others' pieces with enthusiasm. You absolutely must use the course packet or print out all the pieces (first is expedient); because our computer screens will be our virtual classroom, they cannot also be our reading machines. Besides, you will need to mark up your readings extensively as you study them.

Required readings:

-Course packet (available at Tyco Copy Center, 262 Elm St, by Davenport College). Ask for the "Hill English S120" course packet.

-Zinsser, William, "On Writing Well," (any edition), Yale Bookstore

Overview of Essays:

You will write four essays, each of which will be written in two stages: a first draft and a final copy. Drafts will not receive grades, though we will comment on them in detail. Each essay's focus will correspond to the reading unit—**personal experience, profile, humor and cultural criticism**. Every Sunday by noon you will turn in your drafts to me and Prof. Ledingham by email.

Instructions for workshops:

Mondays are workshop days. We will hear from each writer about the experience of writing the essay and a reading aloud of a favorite passage and one which feels problematic (where peer edits could be particularly helpful). We'll be asking these questions:

- Which elements work best? Where is the writing most active, crisp, evocative, and how? Focus on structure, diction and audience.
- What are suggestions on improving the work in progress. Where should the writer focus the revision?

Please print out the ones designated for that week's workshop and read them carefully with marked edits. You'll write a cover letter of a page in which you do three things: 1. Note the positives, what is working well in the essay, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make specific suggestions.

Everyone's final drafts will be due on **Thursdays by noon.**

Grading:

Participation 20%

Essays 20% each. While essays 1-4 will count equally, there is (hopefully!) a cumulative effect to the quality of your work over the term. That is, our readings, discussions and workshops should provide lift as we go. All of your submissions should be polished; your fourth essay will likely be better than your first. Toward this end, your presence and participation are critical. Absence, lateness and distraction can significantly affect your overall grade in English S120.

This course will adhere to two general policies of the English Department:

1. an A grade will be reserved for work that is prize-worthy

2. any section should, normally, produce no more than 50% A/A- grades
There will likely be A grades in this course, but a grade of B is one of which you can be proud.

Note on Academic Honesty:

Yale's Writing Center defines plagiarism as "the use of another's work, words, or ideas without attribution. The word 'plagiarism' comes from the Latin word for 'kidnapper' and is considered a form of theft, a breach of honesty in the academic community. Plagiarizers suffer serious consequences in Yale College—including suspension or expulsion from school."

Writing Assignments:

UNIT ONE: Interpreting Personal Experience

Write a 1,200-1,500 word essay that uses a moment, episode, or experience in your life to make a public point. That is to say, your essay should use personal reflection to address a larger social issue or problem, and even influence the way your reader thinks or acts. Remember that all essays should be written as if for a wide audience and should be non-fiction and verifiable.

UNIT TWO: Portraying a Person

Write an essay of 1,200 to 1,500 words that creates a portrait of a person. Like the essays we read in this genre, this piece should be vivid, precise, and engaging, and should leave your reader with a strong impression of the person and his or her significance in a larger context. You will conduct an interview which will allow you to use actual quotations and anecdotes. Your job here is to make this person – who should *not* be a classmate or family member – interesting to a reader who doesn't know him or her. No creative embellishments here; strictly nonfiction.

UNIT THREE: Cultural Criticism

Write an essay of 1,200 to 1,500 words that analyzes and comments on some aspect of contemporary culture. Both "aspect" and "culture" may be broadly defined. It could be a cultural phenomenon or a moral issue. Make your artifact vivid and interesting to a reader who may know nothing about it and make an argument about what it reveals about some portion of contemporary culture.

UNIT FOUR: Humor

Write a humorous essay of 1000 words that makes a public point – explicitly or implicitly, sharply or softly. Your essay should employ one of the modes of comedy we have studied in this unit (i.e. satire, parody, travesty). You could satirize a public figure or a cultural object. As you select your subject ask yourself what broader point you wish to make. Don't be trivial or silly – we all know Bachelorette is an easy target of derision – your aim is to be edgy and surprising. We're going for LOL.

Readings:

Monday, July 2: Introduction

“Nonfiction as Literature” *On Writing Well* 95-100

George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”

Langston Hughes, “Salvation”

Joan Didion “On Keeping a Notebook”

*Parts of all of these essays will be discussed on the first day. Please read them in their entirety before class has met, **marking them up in hardcopy.***

Wed, July 4: Personal Experience

Joan Didion, “On Going Home”

Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again”

Michael Warner: “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood”

Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me”

Ariel Levy, “Thanksgiving in Mongolia”

Thurs, July 5: Personal Experience Nugget Due by Noon

This is a 1-2 p. kernel of your personal experience essay-in-progress. You should seek to include a short description of the event or experience you will focus on describing, as well as an explanation of the public point you wish to use it to make. Be thoughtful and deliberate about the choices you make about style and tone, as well.

Fri, July 6: Personal Experience

“Writing about Yourself: The Memoir,” *OWW* 132-46

Yiyun Lee, “To Speak is to Blunder”

Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self”

Jenni Diski: “Diary: In New Zealand”

E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake”

Mon, July 9: WORKSHOP

WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your classmates’ essays, with written edits. See Workshop instructions.

Wed July 11: Profile

“Writing about People: The Interview,” *OWW* 100-15”

Lauren Slater: “Dr. Daedalus”

Ann Patchett, “The Face of Pain”

David Foster Wallace, “Federer as Religious Experience”

Joan Didion, second chapter of *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Fri, July 13: Profile

Toni Morrison, “Strangers”

Emily Nussbaum, "It's Different for Girls"
Zadie Smith, "The House that Hova Built"
Barack Obama, "Eulogy for Clementa Pinckney"
Ariel Levy, "Ali Wong's Radical Raunch"

Mon, July 16: WORKSHOP

Wed, July 18: Cultural Criticism

Wesley Morris: "The Cost of Being Savage in a Supposedly Civilized World"
Henry Louis Gates Jr., "In the Kitchen"
Malcolm Gladwell: "The Ketchup Conundrum"
Nathan Heller: "California Screaming" and "The Big Uneasy"

Fri, July 20: Cultural Criticism

Jessica Mitford, "Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain"
William Deresiewicz, "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education"
Atul Gawande, "When Doctors Make Mistakes"
David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster"

Mon, July 23: WORKSHOP

Wed, July 25: Humor

"Humor," *OWW* 207-30
David Sedaris, "You Can't Kill the Rooster," from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*
Zev Borow, "A Guide to Summer Sun Protection"
John Kenney, "We Are the One Percent," "Pitchfork" and "Frito Lay"
Molly Ivins, "Get a Knife, Get a Dog, but Get Rid of Guns"
Ian Frazier, "Dating your Mom"

Fri, July 27: Humor

David Sedaris, "What I Learned"
Ethan Kuperberg, "Even More Uber Options," "Realistic TV Ratings," "Missed Connections for A-Holes,"
Clive James, "A Blizzard of Tiny Kisses"
Steven Colbert, "Correspondents' Dinner"
Samantha Bee, "Syrian Refugees, Part I"

Mon, July 30: WORKSHOP

Wed, August 1: CLASS READING and guest visit

ASSIGNMENT: Prepare a portfolio of your four revised essays written for this course. Feel free to polish and revise them even beyond your "final" drafts. Select your two favorite passages, each of about a page in length, to prepare for reading aloud. Make sure that they make sense out of context, and can stand alone; you may need to think about how to introduce or conclude them differently.

Practice reading them aloud. Do you want to make changes? Feel free to do so. Practice reading them aloud again, and keep practicing until you feel comfortable. We look forward to hearing everyone's pieces performed!

English 120 - Schedule Overview

M Jul 2: Intro class	T	W Jul 4: Personal experience readings	Th Jul 5: 1-2-p. personal experience nugget due by noon	F Jul 6: Personal experience readings	Sat	Su Jul 8: personal experience essay due by noon
M Jul 9: WORKSHOP (personal experience) + profile start	T Jul 10: (optional meetings for non- workshopped students)	W Jul 11: Profile readings	Th Jul 12: Final draft essay #1 due by noon	F Jul 13: Profile readings		Su Jul 15: profile essay due by noon
M July 16: WORKSHOP (Profile) +cultural criticism start	T Jul 17: (optional meetings for non- workshopped students)	W Jul 18: Cultural criticism readings	Th Jul 19: Final draft essay #2 due by noon	F Jul 20: Cultural criticism readings		Su Jul 22: cultural criticism essay due by noon
M Jul 23: WORKSHOP (Cultural Crit) +humor start	T Jul 24: (optional meetings for non- workshopped students)	W Jul 25: Humor readings	Th Jul 26: Final draft essay #3 due by noon	F Jul 27: Humor readings		Su Jul 29: humor essay due by noon
M July 30: WORKSHOP (Humor)	T July 31: (optional meetings for non- workshopped students)	W Aug 1: Guest visit from Ethan Kuperberg!	Th Aug 2: Final draft essay #4 due by noon	F Aug 3: NO CLASS		