LIFE WRITING

This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analyzed in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading, or very superficially. Yet it is by such invisible presences that the ‘subject of this memoir’ is tugged this way and that every day of his life; it is they that keep him in position … if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.

– Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”

The scholar Zachary Leader defines “Life writing” as “a range of writing about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed.” In this category he includes “not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings […], marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms[.]” In this course, we will remain mindful of the breadth of Leader’s definition, while concentrating on a few classics of life writing from ancient times to the present day. In exploring different ways of narrating lives, we will reflect both on the factors that shape a self, and on how having a self is or came to seem important.

Required Course Materials (Available for Purchase Online)


I would suggest that you also purchase the following writing guide, which will serve you during our class and beyond:

Course objectives
This writing-intensive summer course will attempt to:

1. Contribute to your “writing toolkit” by focusing on your individual writing process and encouraging you to examine, expand, and reinvent it where useful;
2. Enable you to construct a compelling argument by identifying a problem, making a defensible claim, supporting that claim with evidence and warrants, and successfully communicating a motive for your writing and your broader intellectual endeavors;
3. Allow you to approach writing from a variety of disciplines with confidence and excitement;
4. Cultivate your creativity and empower you as a persuasive, engaging, and lucid writer with a unique voice
5. Develop and complicate your notions of what “life writing” might entail, in ways that enrich your own academic and creative work and allow you to contribute to your intellectual and personal communities.

Assignments and Assessment

Grading Distribution:
Essay 1 (3-4 pages) 15%
Essay 2 (4-5 pages) 25%
Essay 3 (8-10 pages) 30%
(A 1-page research proposal with a working bibliography will be worth 5%; the paper itself will be worth 25%)
Final presentation 15%
Participation 15%
(Attendance and class participation will make up 10% of this. At the beginning of our course, you will set individual writing objectives with and aim to meet them as the semester progresses; you will assess yourself at course’s end for the remaining 5% of the participation grade.)

Due Dates:
Essay 1, draft: Thursday, July 2, 12pm EDT
**Essay 1, final:** Monday, July 6, 12pm EDT
Essay 2, draft: Thursday, July 9, 12pm EDT
**Essay 2, final:** Tuesday July 14, 12pm EDT
Essay 3, prospectus and bibliography: **Thursday, July 16, 11.59pm EDT**
Essay 3, partial draft: Monday, July 23, 12pm EDT
Essay 3, full draft: Thursday, July 23, 12pm EDT
**Essay 3, final:** Tuesday, July 28, 12pm EDT
Oral presentations: Friday, July 31st (in class)

*A note on deadlines:* All assignments will be due at 12pm EDT, with one exception (see italics above). Please note that the deadline for the drafts of Essays 1, 2, and 3 will be extremely strict: due to our compressed schedule, I will aim to have your drafts back to you before start of class the next day. If your paper is not in at 12pm EDT, I will not return it until the weekend, which will significantly cut into your revision time.
Course requirements and policies

1. **Attendance.** Attend all classes. The discussion and workshop elements that are at the center of this course cannot be made up, so attendance is vital. Please be on time. We will take a 5-minute break in the middle of class. I am quite happy for you to eat or drink during class, so long as the item under consumption is not your main source of attention.

2. **Preparation and Participation.** Come to class prepared to discuss the readings and participate in writing exercises and workshops. Make notes on what you read, even if only in the margins. In-class peer revision will provide you with valuable opportunities to give and receive feedback on writing assignments. Aside from the final presentation you will make during our final class, I will also ask you to kick off our discussion of the text in one of our classes. This will be part of your participation grade.

   Class participation gives your classmates access to your thoughts and interpretations, which are likely different from theirs in some way, and this will allow our group to develop the fullest possible understanding of the questions we wish to explore. If you find class participation difficult or uncomfortable, please come see me during office hours so we can discuss some strategies for engagement with your peers that will feel enjoyable and constructive for you.

3. **Remote Learning and Zoom Etiquette:** The live discussion sessions will be held through Zoom. To access live sessions, click "Zoom" on the left side of our class’ Canvas page. Once you click the link, you may be prompted to install a small application necessary for Zoom. Once you do so, you will be taken directly into the Zoom meeting room. You can then use the audio and video settings menu (bottom left corner) to ensure the correct input/output sources are chosen. For more detailed information of Zoom operation, refer to the user guide in the Technical Support page in the "Modules" tab on Canvas. Remember: a headset with microphone is recommended in the live sessions, this will help reduce audio feedback from participants. Additionally, be sure you are in a quiet location for the live sessions allowing you to focus on the discussion.

   Unless your internet connection is struggling, I ask that you keep your camera on. I would also like you to keep yourself unmuted: we are a small class, and we will practice being attentive to each other and trying to keep our class conversation flowing organically. Feel free to mute yourself if there is unexpected noise on your end of the connection; you may also want to use a virtual background on Zoom if this is helpful. I will not be using one, and you may see my dog in the back of the frame. I ask that we all be flexible and respectful of each other as we catch glimpses of each other’s houses or working spaces and home lives: this is life in the pandemic, and we’ll work to adapt together.

4. **Writing.** Each 114 student will produce 15-19 pages of polished writing (not including drafts). This will take the form of three major papers. The sequence of papers teaches the most fundamental skills early in the semester and then refines and augments those skills in more complex essay assignments later in the term. The course will also require the submission of drafts of each paper for workshopping, by peers and with the instructor. Think of drafts as the best possible piece of writing you can do at the time. The stronger the draft, the more helpful will be the feedback you receive. The assignments are as follows:

   **Essay 1: Close Reading Analysis (3-4 pages)**
   The foundational skill of literary analysis—and most other academic writing—is the ability to derive larger meanings from the smallest parts of a text (written, visual, a data set, &c.). The goal of this assignment is
to have you engage a literary work at the level of its language: locating a meaningful problem, articulating a claim that takes a stance on that problem, and analyzing relevant textual details to defend that stance.

**Essay 2: Lens Essay (4-5 pages)**
One of the most productive things you can do as you sharpen your thinking on an issue is enter into conversation with a new perspective or voice. In our second assignment, you will identify the ways in which encounter with one text (keep in mind the broad definition of “text” we used above) amplifies, complicates, deepens, or challenges understanding of another text. We will be using a text as a *lens* for considering another, and for considering our own writing. Thinking of the word “lens” as literal can be quite helpful here: we will be looking *through* the eyes of a new perspective to consider an earlier reading, or *through* the context of an earlier reading to ask questions about a new one.

**Essay 3: Researched Argument (8-10 pages)**
Researched arguments can take several forms. You can write an essay in which you place your reading of a text or your understanding of a problem in conversation with the accounts of a few other scholars. Or you might choose to write a “text in context” style essay in which you relate a text to the culture that produced it or to larger philosophies about one of its themes. Whichever approach you choose, you should construct a *bibliography* of secondary literature to put your own thoughts in conversation with the work of scholars in the field. In this way, the research essay will prepare you for the kind of high-level thinking required by any academic field, and introduce you (or increase your familiarity with) the conventions of academic writing.

**Assignment 4: Life Writing Presentation (5-10 minutes)**
At the end of the course, you will craft a piece of life writing of your own. You may use either the first or the third person to provide an account of a life or a part of a life; you might choose to write a short text, create a video, or curate a collection of letters or other artifacts. Some consideration of the specific subgenre of life writing chosen, as well as the key themes, should be displayed. You will present your contribution to life writing (as a genre, convention, and conversation) to our group in the final class of the semester.

**Expectations**

**Essay Submission**
Please use the standard page setup: 12-point font, 1-inch margins, double-spaced, numbered pages. Papers should be submitted by email to me in MS Word format (please, no pdfs: I’ll be commenting using tracked changes). All assignments are due at noon on the day listed. Late papers will be penalized a third of a letter grade for each day late.

**Academic Honesty**
One of the goals of this course is to help you understand how to use published research – the final product of someone’s hard work – to support your own thinking. Plagiarism, in brief, is the submission of work that contains uncited instances of language and ideas that are not your own. Any instance of plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty, such as unauthorized collaboration, will not be tolerated. If you are unsure about how to cite something, or have any other related doubts, it is better to ask me than to risk intellectual dishonesty. Please also acknowledge any legitimate help you have received on your papers in a footnote – these will most likely be from the Writing Center. Feedback from a friend or classmate also counts! You can consult Yale’s policies on academic honesty here.
Access
If you need some form of accommodation not already provided, have a medical condition, or have any other medically related information that you feel I should know, please inform me immediately either in person after class or, more privately, in an email. Additional information and resources are available at the website of Student Accessibility Services. You can always ask them to contact me directly on your behalf, too.

Email, Office Hours, and Assistance
I will answer emails within 24 hours on weekdays and 48 hours on weekends. As I would expect from anyone, be respectful when corresponding with me, and use your discretion when emailing. I can’t take questions about grades, and if you have a particularly complex question or conundrum it would probably be better to talk it out with me during office hours. And of course, my office hours are there for you to discuss your work.

Writing Support
Yale’s Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning offers a range of assistance to student writers. They are there to support you, and I encourage all of you to make use of their services and expertise. You can sign up for online tutoring at this link. You need to upload a draft through this same scheduler at least 90 minutes before the tutoring session, so that your Writing Partner can read it beforehand. Drop-in session times are: Thursdays 6:30-8pm EDT; Saturdays 1:30-3:00pm EDT; Mondays 11:30am-1:00pm EDT.

Celebrating Diversity
There will be zero tolerance of comments or behaviors intended to threaten, marginalize, or otherwise diminish others: it is our joint responsibility to make our classroom a space where intellectual conflict can occur in a context of curiosity and absolute respect. We will collaborate to make our classroom a “brave space,” meaning a place where people who are differently vulnerable can approach difficult or uncomfortable topics and realities with honesty and sensitivity. For more information on “brave spaces,” click here.

We will work actively on figuring out how to create a class environment that generates lively discussion, allows us all to learn new things, and challenges our preconceptions. Creating the conditions for good exchanges will be an active concern of the course: please respect your peers and their contributions by listening carefully, responding thoughtfully to their interjections, not interrupting unnecessarily, and ensuring that all voices have an opportunity to be heard. Help your peers express their ideas when it seems as if they would benefit from your support; ask for help from your classmates if you are struggling to articulate what you mean. We will aim to be generous, sensitive, and productively critical of each other, and there will always be opportunities during class to consider or discuss how we are working and interacting as a group.
Schedule of Meetings

This schedule is subject to change as we work our way through the semester. All handouts and texts in blue and “Writing Skills Lectures” in yellow will be available on our Canvas Modules Page.

Unit One: What is Life Writing?

**Monday, June 29**

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
- Group Introductions, Course Introduction, and Syllabus Review
- Handout: Introduction to Key Terms
- Handout: Essay 1

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
- Exercise: Close Reading Claims
- Class Discussion: Laura Marcus, “Life Writing”
- Virginia Woolf; “A Sketch of the Past” pp. 3-13 (to May 2, 1939)
- Handout: Reading Scholarly Texts
- Handout: Finding a Good Essay Question (Poorvu Center)

**Wednesday, July 1**

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
- Handout: Discussion Questions
- Discussion: Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” (pp. 3-end)
- Exercise: Summarizing vs Analyzing

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
- Handout: As She Herself Puts It
- Exercise: Staying with a Quote
- Handouts: Working with Quotations 1-3 (Poorvu Center)
- Writing Skills Lecture—Bringing it all together: Strong Body Paragraphs and Their Structure

**Thursday, July 2**

Rough Draft of Essay 1 due, 12pm EDT

**Friday, July 3**

Session 1, 9:00-9:40am
- Discussion: Stephen Spender, “Confessions and Autobiography”
- Exercise: Claims, Sub-claims, Revised Claims
- Handout: Recursive Writing (Poorvu Center)

Session 2: 9:45-10:25am
- Peer Review Workshop, Paper 1 (paragraph-level revision)

Session 3: 10:30-11:15am
- Introduction to Introductions
- Handout: Introductions (Poorvu Center)
- Writing Time and Individual Instructor Consultations
UNIT TWO: Autobiography as Confession

Monday, July 6

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
Setting Our Terms of Discussion
Discussion: Augustine, Confessions, Books I-II
Gary Wills, “The Book’s Genre” (pp. 17-25)

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
Exercise: Placing Sources in Conversation
Handout: They Say, I Say
Handout: Conversation Verbs and Clauses (Poorvu Center)
Handout: Essay 2

Essay 1 (final draft) due, 12pm EDT

Tuesday, July 7

Screening, 8pm EDT
Can You Ever Forgive Me?
(This screening is not mandatory; you may watch the film independently, but as it is not currently available to stream, I hope this will make the film accessible to all students)

Wednesday, July 8

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
Student-led Discussion: Jessica Silbey, “Criminal Performances” (pp. 189-200) and Can You Ever Forgive Me?
Exercise: Developing Transitions
Handout: The Segue in Scholarly Conversations
Handout: Stitching—Signal Words (Poorvu Center)

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
Writing Skills Lecture—Changing the Lens

Thursday, July 9

Rough draft of Essay 2 due, 12pm

Friday, July 10

Session 1, 9:00-9:40am
Student-led Discussion: Kimberly Hall, “Selfies and Self-Writing”
Exercise: Introductions—Setting the Stage and Stakes
Handout: How the Grinch Stole Christmas

Session 2: 9:45-10:25am
Peer Review Workshop, Paper 2 (introductions)

Session 3: 10:30-11:15am
A Glance at Conclusions
Handout: Conclusions (Poorvu Center)
Writing Time and Individual Instructor Consultations
UNIT THREE: Race and Autobiography

**Monday, July 13**

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am  
Midterm Review: Assessing Our Conversations  
Student-led Discussion: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative* (Chapters 1-6)

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am  
Library Visit: Identifying Sources  
Handout: Essay 3  
Handout: Working with Sources (Poorvu Center)

**Tuesday, July 14**  
**Essay 2 (final draft) due, 12pm**

**Wednesday, July 15**

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am  
Student-led Discussion, Frederick Douglass, *Narrative* (to end)  
James Olney, “Slave Narratives, Their Status…”

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am  
Exercise: What Motivates Us?  
Picking A Research Topic and Developing a Proposal  
Handout: Motivating Moves (Poorvu Center)

**Thursday, July 16**  
**Research Proposal and Working Bibliography due, 11:59pm EST**

**Friday, July 17**

Session 1, 9:00-9:40am  
Student-led Discussion: Courtney Thompson, “Tracing the Legacy of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the Black Lives Matter Era”

Session 2: 9:45-10:25am  
Writing Skills Lecture—Establishing Your Voice  
Handout: “And Yet”—Distinguishing What You Say

Session 3: 10:30-11:15am  
Building the Research Paragraph  
Handout: Research Paragraphs (Poorvu Center)  
*Writing Time and Individual Instructor Consultations*
UNIT FOUR: Gender and Life Writing

Monday, July 20

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
Student-led Discussion: Judy Long, “Gender and Genre”
Rachel Cusk, A Life’s Work, Introduction and Chapters 1-3

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
Exercise: Keeping It Complicated—Destabilizing Interlocutors
Handout: “Skeptics May Object”: Planting a Naysayer
Essay 3 (partial draft, with introduction, claim, and at least 3 body paragraphs) due, 12pm EDT

Wednesday, July 22

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
Student-led Discussion: Cusk, A Life’s Work, Chapters 4-8

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
Writing Skills Lecture—Strategies for Revision: Lingering, Deepening, Cutting, and Expanding
Handout: Revising Efficiently and Effectively (Poorvu Center)

Thursday, July 23

Essay 3 (complete draft) due, 12pm EDT

Friday, July 24

Session 1, 9:00-9:40am
Student-led Discussion: Cusk, A Life’s Work (to end)
Cusk, “The Art of Fiction” (Paris Review Interview)

Session 2: 9:45-10:25am
Peer Review Workshop, Paper 3 (structure, transition, claim)

Session 3: 10:30-11:15am
So What? Saying Why It Matters
Handout: Funnel In, Funnel Out
Writing Time and Individual Instructor Consultations
UNIT FIVE: Embodied Life Writing

Monday, July 27

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
  Concision, Clarity, Polish
  Exercise: Lean Prose
  Handout: Lean Prose

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
  Discussion: Mihanovic et al, “From Biography to Osteobiography” (excerpt)
  Handout: Presentation Assignment

Tuesday, July 28

  Essay 3 (final draft) due, 12pm

Wednesday, July 29

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
  Discussion: Roxanne Gay, Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body (selection)

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
  End-of-term Review: Assessing Our Conversations
  What Remains: Life Writing and Ourselves

Friday, July 31

Session 1, 9:00-10:10am
  Presentations, Panel One

Session 2, 10:15-11:15am
  Presentations, Panel Two
  Class Conclusion