English S120E:
Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Summer 2023
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 consider ENGL S114 first.

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.

Our online writing workshop will operate as a virtual version of the 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. If you are able to print essays, please do, so you can mark them up. It's hard to make our computer screens our reading machines in class. If you absolutely can’t print, then take notes as you read, and have them with you in class.

Required readings:

- Links to course readings are on Canvas. All readings will be digital, though if you have a printer available it’s better to read and annotate on paper!


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, place, cultural criticism and humor. Every Sunday by noon you will turn in your drafts to me and Prof. McGowan 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?

Carefully read and edit the pieces designated for that week’s workshop. 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
**Writing Assignments:**

**UNIT ONE: Interpreting Personal Experience**
Write a 1,200-1,500 word essay that presents a single event or episode as vividly as possible to make a public point. That is to say, your essay should use personal reflection to affect how your readers think or act. Remember that all essays should be written as if for a wide audience and should be non-fiction and true.

**UNIT TWO: Writing about Places**
Write an essay of 1,250 to 1,500 words portraying a place of importance to you. The essay should be vivid, precise, engaging, and capable of leaving the reader with a unified impression of the place and its significance. You should guide the reader to an understanding of this place through your selection of details and tone. You’re probably better off thinking small or specific – stretch of beach or woods, a restaurant or building (an entire state or country would be tough). Don’t assume your audience is familiar with it, or you. And feel free to use data, history, real dialogue and sensory details to make it come alive.

**UNIT THREE: Cultural Criticism**
Write an essay of 1,200 to 1,500 words that investigates 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 subject vivid and interesting to a reader who may know nothing about it; and make a fresh argument about what it reveals about some portion of contemporary culture.

**UNIT FOUR: Humor**
Write a humorous essay of 1000-1300 words that says something about modern life. You may want to model it on one of the essays we read: a personal essay that highlights the absurd or troubling in an everyday situation; a parody (or travesty) of a cultural artifact; or an ironic essay that serves as social commentary. 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. NOTE: This time, your essay does not have to be true and verifiable. But it should be based on something true.

**Readings:**
**Monday, May 29: Introduction***
“Nonfiction as Literature” *On Writing Well* 95-100
Nancy Mairs, “On Bring a Cripple”
Langston Hughes, “Salvation” (CM)
Jean Chen Ho, “Every Year He Texts Me: ‘I Love You’

*Parts of all of these essays will be discussed on the first day. Please read them in their entirety before class has met, and make notes.*
Wed, May 31: Personal Experience
Joan Didion, “On Going Home”
Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Space”
Valeria Luiselli, “Forty Questions”
Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me”
Geeta Kothari, “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?”

Thurs, June 1: 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, June 2: Personal Experience
“Writing about Yourself: The Memoir,” OW’W 132-46
Yiyun Li, “To Speak is to Blunder”
Zadie Smith, “Sweet Charity” (CM)
Cathy Park Hong, “Bad English”
Anne Lamott “Shitty First Drafts”

Mon, June 5: WORKSHOP
WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your classmates’ essays, with written edits. See Workshop instructions.

Wednesday, June 7: Place
Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, “Bad Dream”
Joey Franklin, “Working at Wendy’s”
E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake”
Jhumpa Lahiri, “Rhode Island”

Friday, June 9: Place
James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”
Teju Cole: Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s Stranger in the Village”
Eula Biss: “Goodbye to All That”
N. Scott Momaday, “The Way to Rainy Mountain” (CM)

Monday, June 12: WORKSHOP

Wed, June 14: Cultural Criticism
Wesley Morris: “My Mustache, Mysel”
Jesse McCarthy, “Notes on Trap” (CM)
Jennifer Weiner, “Madonna’s New Face is a Brilliant Provocation”
Vicky Osterweil, “Game Boys”
Fri, June 16: Cultural Criticism
Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The First White President”
Rachel Syme, “Feeling Better Now”
Leslie Jamison, “Mark My Words. Maybe”

Mon, June 19: WORKSHOP

Wed, June 21: Humor
“Humor,” OWW 207-30
Shannon Reed, “Every Episode of Television Show Written by Julian Fellowes”
Pat Kelly, “TED Talk” digg.com/video/ted-talk-parody
The Onion, “Frito Lay”

Fri, June 23: Humor
Colin Nissan, “It’s Decorative Gourd Season, Motherfuckers”
Roxane Gay, “To Scratch, Claw, or Gropes Clumsily or Frantically”
Zach Zimmerman, “Other Digital Passports to Reduce Your Risk to Society”
Mike Birbiglia, “Some Ways That I’m Ok Dying”

Mon, June 26: WORKSHOP

Wed, June 28: CLASS READING
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!

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.”
| M May 29: Intro class | Tues | W May 31: Personal experience readings | Th June 1: 1-2-p. personal experience nugget due by noon | F June 2: Personal experience readings | Sat | Su June 4: personal experience essay due by noon |
| M Jun 5: WORKSHOP (personal experience) + place start | W June 7: Place readings | Th June 8: Final draft essay #1 due by noon | F June 9: Place readings | Su June 11: place essay due by noon |
| M June 12: WORKSHOP (Place) + cultural criticism start | W June 14: Cultural criticism readings | Th June 15: Final draft essay #2 due by noon | F June 16: NO CLASS |
| M June 19: Cultural criticism readings AND cultural criticism essay due by 5PM | W June 21: WORKSHOP (CC) and Humor Readings | F June 23: Humor readings and Final draft essay #3 due by 5:00pm | Su June 25: Humor essay due by noon |
| M June 26: WORKSHOP (Humor) | W June 28: CLASS READINGS | Th June 29: Final draft essay #4 due by noon | F June 30: NO CLASS |