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**English S120E:**  
**Reading and Writing the Modern Essay**  
Summer 2025  
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.*

**Introduction:**

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. In published works and in your not-*yet*-published work.

**Our Practice and Policies:**

The assigned essays in this course provide an opportunity for you to notice how closely you are reading. Did you have an emotional, intellectual, political, or spiritual (to name some possibilities) reaction to the essay, and if “yes,” how did the author’s use of language, structure, tone, etc. elicit this response? For example: can you name and comment on a technique an author employed? suggest a revision to the piece? rewrite a sentence or paragraph? identify what’s “working” in the essay? This is what we’re after, rather than a summary of the essay.

Our online writing workshop will operate as a virtual version of the classic 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!

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

### 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.

Late revisions will be penalized one half of a letter grade per day.

Students in YSS are not permitted to miss more than one class meeting. You may only miss a class if you experience illness or injury. Please email me in advance if you know you must miss a class.

**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; a B range grade in English 120 is totally respectable!

Writing Assignments:

**Submitting written work**

Format: Please format essays in 12-point font, double space, number pages and use one-inch margins. **All essays need a heading (your name, course name, my name, the date) and a title. Please submit essays in Microsoft Word and send them to both instructors via email ([jessie.hill@yale.edu](mailto:jessie.hill@yale.edu) and [christopher.mcgowan@yale.edu](mailto:christopher.mcgowan@yale.edu)).**

**UNIT ONE: Interpreting Personal Experience**

Write a 1,300-1,500-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. Use your narration and interpretation of the event (and perhaps a reflection on your own role) to make a larger point that is relevant to the general reader. 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 1,300 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 no more than 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 1,100-1,300 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 26: Introduction\***

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

Phillip Lopate, “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character”

Zadie Smith, “Joy”

Langston Hughes, “Salvation” (CM)

Melissa Febos, “Kettle Holes”

*\*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 28: Personal Experience**

James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

Chang Rae-Lee, “Magical Dinners”

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

Geeta Kothari, “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?”

##### **Thurs, May 29: 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, May 30: Personal Experience**

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

Yiyun Li, "To Speak is to Blunder"  
Colm Tóibín, "In LA"  
Cathy Park Hong, "Bad English"  
Anne Lamott "Shitty First Drafts"

**Mon, June 2: WORKSHOP**

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

**Wednesday, June 4: Place**

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, "Bad Dream"  
Joey Franklin, "Working at Wendy's"  
Joan Didion, "Goodbye To All That"  
William Zinsser, "Writing about Places," OWW 116-31.

**Friday, June 6: Place**

Carina del Valle Schorske, "The Ladder Up"  
Annie Dillard, "Life on the Rocks: The Galapagos"  
Richard Rodriguez, "Late Victorians"  
Meghan O'Gieblyn, "Midwestworld"

**Monday, June 9: WORKSHOP**

**Wed, June 11: Cultural Criticism**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail"  
David Foster Wallace, "On Shipping Out"  
Atul Gawande "When Doctors Make Mistakes"  
Leslie Jamison, "Mark My Words. Maybe" (CM)

**Fri, June 13: Cultural Criticism**

James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues"  
Jia Tolentino, "The I in the Internet"  
Sarah Nicole Prickett, "Why *Spring Breakers*..."

**Mon, June 16: WORKSHOP**

**Wed, June 18: Humor**

"Humor," OWW 207-30  
Patricia Pearson "History: The Customer Reviews"

Pitchfork: Music a 10  
Samantha Irby, “My Taste is Basic”

**Fri, June 20: Humor**

Roxane Gay, “To Scratch, Claw, or Grope Clumsily or Frantically”  
David Sedaris “Me Talk Pretty One Day”  
Mike Birbiglia, “Some Ways That I’m Ok Dying”

**Mon, June 23: WORKSHOP**

**Wed, June 25: 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.”

### English S120 - Schedule Overview

<b>M May 26:</b> Intro class	Tue s	<b>W May 28:</b> Personal experience readings	<b>Th May 29:</b> 1-2-p. personal experience nugget due by noon	<b>F May 30:</b> Personal experien ce readings	Sa t	<b>Su June 1:</b> personal experience essay due by noon
<b>M Jun 2:</b> WORKSHOP (personal experience) +place start		<b>W June 4:</b> Place readings	<b>Th June 5:</b> <b>Final draft essay #1 due by noon</b>	<b>F June 6:</b> Place readin gs		<b>Su June 8:</b> place essay due by noon
<b>M June 9:</b> WORKSHOP (Place) +cultural criticism start		<b>W June 11:</b> Cultural criticism readings	<b>Th June 12:</b> <b>Final draft essay #2 due by noon</b>	<b>F June 13:</b> Cultur al criticis m readin		Su June 15: Cultural crit essay due by noon
<b>M June 16:</b> WORKSH OP (Cultural Criticism) +Humor <i>start</i>		<b>W June 18:</b> Humor Readings	<b>Th June 19:</b> <b>Final draft essay #3 due by noon</b>	<b>F June 20:</b> Humor readin gs		<b>Su June 22:</b> Humor essay due by noon
<b>M June 23:</b> WORKSHOP (Humor)		<b>W June 25:</b> CLASS READINGS	<b>Th June 26:</b> <b>Final draft essay #4 due by noon</b>	<b>F June 27:</b>  NO CLASS		