

# English S120E: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay

Summer 2017

MWF, 10-11:30 (EST)



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## Required Texts:

Goldthwaite, et al., *The Norton Reader*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed.

Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

This course is designed to explore many forms of prose writing, from personal experience to public argument to humor. Because extensive and thoughtful reading is the basis for good writing, we will read and analyze a large number of essays to serve as examples for the pieces you will write in the course. Each of your essays will exist in two versions: a first draft (not really a “draft,” but a best attempt), and a final. We will workshop first drafts together, and, by this important process of reading and discussing our writing, learn to teach each other to become better writers.

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 is already difficult: to recreate that experience online is unprecedented. 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 print out the pieces that are not in the *Norton Reader*; 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 (see Notebook Assignment, Day One).

The newness of it all will no doubt require some flexibility from everyone, but it is important at the outset to realize that **deadlines are firm**: the five summer weeks go by so fast that if you miss any deadline you will fall impossibly behind.

### **Note on the Schedule (see also *Schedule Overview*, p. 9):**

The schedule of English 120 revolves around the rhythm established by our *writing workshops*, the heart of the course.

**Every Sunday by noon**, you will be turning in your draft assignments. Please print out the ones designated for that week's workshop, and read them carefully, marking them up as you would any other essay you read for this course. For each essay, write a covering letter of about one page in which you make sure to do three things: 1. Note what is working well in the essay you have read, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make concrete suggestions for improvement.

In the **Monday workshop**, we will first hear from each writer about the experience of writing the essay: the inspiration, the process, what came easily, what is still a problem. The writer will read aloud a favorite (or a specially problematic) passage from the essay. Then we will have a wide-ranging critical and constructive discussion, intended to help the writer improve the essay as much as possible. Everything will be on the table and open for reconsideration, from the essay's structure, to its voice, to its public point. The writer will come away with a lot of (sometimes conflicting) suggestions, and many covering letters full of advice.

Those writers whose essays have not been workshopped will also be revising extensively each week, on the basis of short individual meetings and their own developing sense of editorial self-judgment. Everyone's final drafts will be due on **Thursdays by noon**.

Our final class meeting will be a shared reading of choice material from all the writing done over the course of the seminar. You will have the chance to revise your work as a collection to produce a final complete portfolio of all of your essays. From this, you will select two passages (of about 250 words each) for reading aloud, passages that you feel best represent your work in complementary or contrasting ways.

## **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."<sup>1</sup>

## **Note on Grading**

Participation	20%
Essays	20% each (with adjustments made for improvement)

Everyone's active participation is essential to the success of this course. Any absence will accordingly have a serious negative effect on your grade.

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

I'm sure that there will be many A grades in this course, but I also want to emphasize that a grade of B is one of which you can be proud.

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<sup>1</sup> "What is Plagiarism?" *Yale College Website*. Yale University. Web. 26 June 2016.  
<http://ctl.yale.edu/writing/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism/what-plagiarism>

## READINGS:

### **M May 29: Introduction**

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

George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant,” *Norton Reader* [NR] 750-55

Thomas Jefferson, “Declaration of Independence,” NR 773-79

Bruce Shapiro, “One Violent Crime”

Ellen House, “August”

Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook,” NR 487-93

Excerpts from *Writers’ Notebooks*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Journals*

Dorothy Wordsworth, from *Grasmere Journals*

Sei Shonagon, from *Pillow Book*

Henry James, from *Notebooks*

Woody Allen, *Selections from the Allen Notebooks*

NOTEBOOK ASSIGNMENT: 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 a hardcopy**. This is very important—we will be conducting class online, so you will always need a hard copy of your text to consult during class. Please also bring to class a **sewn-in composition notebook** (i.e., not a spiral or looseleaf notebook) that you will use for keeping notes during this course. **Whenever you read an essay for this course**, in addition to marking it up (underlining interesting passages, circling troublesome or exciting words, writing questions or thoughts in the margins), choose your favorite passage from it to copy into your notebook. A “passage” may be just one sentence, but also may be more. Feel free also to use your English 120 notebook to jot down ideas, record your observations of the world around you, and copy passages of prose that you admire from reading that you do outside of the course.

### **W May 31: Personal Experience**

“Principles,” OWW 3-48

“Levels of Style” from *Prose Style*, 3-15

Fred Robinson, “History of English and its Practical Uses”

Joan Didion, “On Going Home,” NR 1-3

Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again,” NR 3-11

Alison Bechdel, from “Family Home,” NR 12-34

Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” NR 42-5

Frederick Douglass, “Learning to Read” NR 404-08

Eudora Welty, “Clamorous to Learn” NR 409-14

Benjamin Franklin, “Learning to Write” NR 484-87

Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," NR 801-03

STYLE ASSIGNMENT: In reading through these essays, please pick out one good example of each style: low, middle, and high. Write these in your notebook, providing a simple citation to the source. Choose words in the sentence that seem to define the style and look these up in a good dictionary such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*: what is the etymology of the word? Is it Germanic (or Old English)? French, Latin, or something else?

**Th 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.

**F June 2: Personal Experience**

"Methods," OWW 49-91

"Writing about Yourself: The Memoir," OWW 132-46

Maya Angelou, "Graduation," NR 45-55

Lars Eighner, "On Dumpster Diving," NR 55-64

Alice Walker, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," NR 74-80

Joey Franklin, "Working at Wendy's," NR 80-86

Nancy Mairs, "On Being a Cripple," NR 64-74

Jhumpa Lahiri, "Rhode Island," NR 142-51

Ian Frazier, "Take the F," NR 151-58

E.B. White, "Once More to the Lake," NR 158-63

**M June 5: WORKSHOP**

Essays to be Workshopped

WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your colleagues' essays, marking them up carefully with attention to matters both large and small. For each essay, write a covering letter of about one page in which you make sure to do three things: 1. Note what is working well in the essay you have read, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make concrete suggestions for improvement.

**W June 7: Profile**

"Writing about People: The Interview," OWW 100-15

Scott Russell Sanders, "Under the Influence," NR 87-97

Annie Dillard, from *An American Childhood*, NR 98-103

Tom Wolfe, "Yeager," NR 114-24  
Virginia Woolf, "Ellen Terry," NR 124-29  
Susan Orlean, "Squashed"  
Ian Frazier, "Typewriter Man"  
Irina Dumitrescu, "My Father and the Wine"  
David Foster Wallace, "Federer as Religious Experience"

#### **F June 9: Profile**

Toni Morrison, "Strangers," NR 129-32  
Judith Ortiz Cofer, "More Room," NR 132-35  
N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain," NR 136-42  
Fred Vogelstein, "And Then Steve Said, 'Let There Be an iPhone'," NR 617-28  
Rebecca Skloot, "The Woman in the Photograph," NR 862-67  
Walt Whitman, "Death of Abraham Lincoln,"  
Barack Obama, "Eulogy for Clementa Pinckney," NR 949-55

#### **M June 12: WORKSHOP**

Essays to be Workshopped

WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your colleagues' essays, marking them up carefully with attention to matters both large and small. For each essay, write a covering letter of about one page in which you make sure to do three things: 1. Note what is working well in the essay you have read, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make concrete suggestions for improvement.

#### **W June 14: Cultural Criticism**

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," NR 510-20  
Ben Lerner, "Contest of Words"  
Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," NR 722-35  
Virginia Woolf, "In Search of A Room of One's Own," NR 904-15  
Henry Louis Gates Jr., "In the Kitchen," NR 245-51  
Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," NR 806-19  
Annie Leonard, "The Story of Bottled Water: A Footnoted and Annotated Script," NR 200-13  
Adam Gopnik, "Christopher Michael-Martinez's Father Gets It Right," *New Yorker*, May 5, 2014  
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2014/05/christopher-michael-martinezs-father-gets-it-right.html>

[Place holder for something very timely, possibly about the election]

**F June 16: Cultural Criticism**

Chief Seattle, "Letter to President Pierce, 1855," NR 543-44

Debra Dickerson, "Who Shot Johnny?" NR 270-73

Anna Quindlen, "Stuff is Not Salvation," NR 378-80

Jo-Ann Pilardi, "Immigration Problem is About Us, Not Them," NR 386-88

Brent Staples, "Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A's," NR 388-90

Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" NR 572-81

Atul Gawande, "When Doctors Make Mistakes," NR 652-70

David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" NR 697-709

**M June 19: WORKSHOP**

Essays to be Workshopped

WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your colleagues' essays, marking them up carefully with attention to matters both large and small. For each essay, write a covering letter of about one page in which you make sure to do three things: 1. Note what is working well in the essay you have read, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make concrete suggestions for improvement.

**W June 21: Humor**

"Humor," OWW 207-30

David Sedaris, "You Can't Kill the Rooster," from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*

Bill Bryson, "Chapter One," from *Notes from a Small Island*

Dan Barry, "Back When a Chocolate Puck Tasted, Guiltily, Like America," NR 307-10

Molly Ivins, "Get a Knife, Get a Dog, but Get Rid of Guns," NR 384-86

Zain Khalid, "The Universally Electable Vice-Presidential Candidate"

Karen Chee, "Why I'm Not Voting"

[place holder for something timely from Borowitz or Collins]

**F June 23: Humor**

Mark Twain, "Advice to Youth," NR 637-39

Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"

David Sedaris, "What I Learned"

Mary Schmich, "Wear Sunscreen"

Garrison Keillor, "U.S. Still on Top, Says Rest of the World"

John Oliver, "Stadiums"

Larry Wilmore, "No Relief for Haiti"  
Steven Colbert, "Correspondents' Dinner"  
Samantha Bee, "Syrian Refugees, Part I"

## **M June 26: WORKSHOP**

Essays to be Workshopped

WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENT: Read your colleagues' essays, marking them up carefully with attention to matters both large and small. For each essay, write a covering letter of about one page in which you make sure to do three things: 1. Note what is working well in the essay you have read, 2. Note what could be improved, and 3. Make concrete suggestions for improvement.

## **W June 28: Writing for the Ear**

"The Sound of the Sentence," from *Prose Style*, 125-37

"The Writer's Voice," from *Prose Style*, 204-22

"The Sound of Your Voice," from *On Writing Well*, 231-40

Keillor, "How to Write a Letter"

LIPOGRAM ASSIGNMENT: Write 250 words without using the letter "e." This is an unnatural constraint, obviously, and one that is especially difficult to manage in English. But even while you are laboring under this torturous and arbitrary limit, try to construct prose that is good for listening. Your awareness of what you are doing should produce positive results, even if that awareness is oriented towards an artificial and seemingly silly rule.

## **F June 30: 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!



## **Major Assignments:**

### **Essay #1. Interpreting Personal Experience**

Write an essay, based on personal experience, of approximately 1,500 words. Like most of the essays we will be reading in this genre, and like other essays in the beginning of the *Norton Reader*, this essay should focus on a single story or event in your life. Most successful introspective essays seek to make a public point; that is, they seek through personal reflection to address a larger social issue or problem—and you should try to do this in your essay. It is easy to write a strictly personal essay that would make the mistake of not reaching a wide audience, or not pushing much beyond the obvious, and you want to consider your audience to reach beyond your friends and classmates. Choose a significant event.

### **Essay #2. Portraying a Person**

Write an essay for a wide audience, of about 1,500 words, that creates a portrait of a person. Like the essays we will be reading in this genre, your portrayal should put the person in a larger context, a context which may also allow you to bring your observations to a broader level of interest. I highly recommend conducting an interview, which allows you to take actual quotations and make keener on-hand descriptions, but I do not insist that you do so. You may wish to conduct more than one interview, as your thoughts develop. You probably do not want to interview a classmate, or even a family member, unless there is something especially interesting to gain in doing so. MOST important: make the person interesting to a reader who knows nothing about you. Make your portrayal unified, directed toward a single impression that will stay with your reader. Again, this is strictly non-fiction.

### **Essay #3. Cultural Criticism and Political Argument**

This essay is on some aspect of modern culture or a current moral or political issue. Like the others, it should be directed toward a wide audience, and should be approximately 1,500 to 2,500 words. “Culture” is a broadly defined term, as the various assigned essays suggest. Your essay may address any cultural phenomenon or moral issue worthy of attention. It may be more useful to find things worthy of “negative” criticism, rather than appreciation. If you chose a contemporary political or moral issue, you may wish to take on some published argumentative essay. Any current writing would be fair game, but you don't want it to be so obviously weak as to trivialize your counter-argument. In this essay especially, you will want to document any direct sources with footnotes.

### **Essay #4. Humor**

In approximately 1000 words, write a humorous essay that makes a public point—explicitly or implicitly, sharply or softly. You may wish to model your essay on one of the readings for this section, which will suggest a wide range of possible topics to you. In preparation, you might try to find cultural objects or public figures that you want to satirize. As you select your materials, think about what point you might make with them. Humor is inherently risky, but you can avoid at least one pitfall from the start. It is trivial to make an already-silly object, like a horoscope or reality television, seem silly—and like all of the writing you've done for this course, your essay should be anything but trivial. This final essay will be an exercise in delivery and perception, so you should share your work with as many people as you can. Your revisions should be based on your audience's reaction. If your audience does not laugh out loud (or, if you're writing irony, at least respond audibly), you should probably revise.

## Schedule Overview

<b>M May 29:</b> Intro class	T	<b>W May 31:</b> Personal experience readings (style assignment)	<b>Th June 1:</b> 1-2p. personal experience nugget due by noon	<b>F June 2:</b> Personal experience readings	Sat	<b>Su June 4:</b> 4-p. personal experience essay due by noon
<b>M June 5:</b> WORKSHOP (personal experience)	<b>T June 6:</b> (Meetings for non-workshopped students)	<b>W June 7:</b> Profile readings	<b>Th June 8:</b> Final draft essay #1 due by noon	<b>F June 9:</b> Profile readings		<b>Su June 11:</b> 4-p. profile essay due by noon
<b>M June 12:</b> WORKSHOP (profile)	<b>T June 13:</b> (Meetings for non-workshopped students)	<b>W June 14:</b> Cultural criticism readings	<b>Th June 15:</b> Final draft essay #2 due by noon	<b>F June 16:</b> Cultural criticism readings		<b>June 18:</b> 4-p. cultural criticism essay due by noon
<b>M June 19:</b> WORKSHOP (cultural criticism)	<b>T June 20:</b> (Meetings for non-workshopped students)	<b>W June 21:</b> Humor readings	<b>Th June 22:</b> Final draft essay #3 due by noon	<b>F June 23:</b> Humor readings		<b>Su June 25:</b> 4-p. humor essay due by noon
<b>M June 26:</b> WORKSHOP (humor)	<b>T June 27:</b> (Meetings for non-workshopped students)	<b>W June 28:</b> Writing for the Ear (lipogram assignment)	<b>Th June 29:</b> Final draft essay #4 due by noon	<b>F June 30:</b> CLASS READING, with revisions of portfolio		