

ENG 210-001: Writing the Informal Essay

MWF 9am—950am
Spring 2012
University of Cincinnati

Instructor: Hannah Rule
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Course Description: Writers in the 19th and 20th centuries have demonstrated that the informal essay can be aesthetically pleasing and as individualized as a poem or short story. In this course students can learn through reading and writing assignments how to shape the essay for personal expression.

Section Description/Goals: The essay is everywhere, much more pervasive in our culture and literary tradition than simply as an academic exercise. Magazines, periodicals, radio, newspapers, and books throughout history have burst with the informal essay form: essays expressive of personal musings, statements of belief and experience, and commentary on cultural issues and questions. In this course, we will explore a sampling of this long and varied history of the essay, with particular focus on the idea of authorial “voice” in writing. We will read and analyze the essay form, read and produce an essay for NPR’s “This I Believe,” and compose an essay of critique. As we both critique and compose the personal essay over the course of the term, we will experiment with taking up the written word with our physical voices to create multimodal final essay projects.

Required Texts: 1) **PRINTED COPIES** of posted course readings and assignments

Available on Blackboard

2) **Active UC email and Blackboard accounts, checked regularly—**

This is very important especially as informal writing assignments and due dates will be posted here. You should consider our Blackboard site an extension of this syllabus and schedule.

Course Requirements & Expectations

Classroom Expectations—Please be courteous and respectful of everyone, particularly when we are sharing ideas, both written and verbal. Please keep cell phones, laptops, newspapers, work for other courses, and other distractions stowed away during class. Please be on time as habitual tardiness is disruptive. Be prepared everyday to be an active participant as it is your activity—writing, thinking, and speaking—that is the real content of this course. Please be sure also to bring *printed* readings and relevant course materials everyday.

Attendance—*Attendance in this course is mandatory.* Attendance will be taken at each class meeting. **You will have up to five free absences to use at your discretion over the course of the term** (these free days will include days you are ill, have an appointment, are taking a trip, are too tired to come to class, etc.). Only in the case of a university-approved absence (observation of a religious holiday, participation in a university-approved sporting or other event) will you be able to make up missed in-class work, and only with proper and *prior* notification and/or documentation. Any deadline or assignment missed as a result of a free absence *cannot be made up*, unless prior arrangements have been made. Habitual lateness three or more times will count as one absence and if you’re more than 25 minutes late, you’ll be counted absent. Because graded activity will happen during class time, it may be necessary to drop the course should your absences become excessive (6+). Each absence beyond your free five will result in a point deduction at the end of the term (often around 3-5 points per absence).

Late and/or Missing Work Policy—Quite simply: **I don’t accept late work.** If it’s late, it doesn’t earn credit. However, I am aware that “things happen,” things which might prevent you from meeting a deadline. In order to for me to consider accepting something late, you must notify me *prior* to the assignment’s deadline that it will be late and we will then negotiate an alternate due date. Generally I will not accept small assignments at all if they’re late; if a major essay is accepted late, it will incur a point penalty.

Conferences—I **strongly** urge you to take advantage of my regular office hours to discuss your work in the course. In addition to in-person meetings, I am always willing to answer questions/respond to concerns via email.

Formatting—Each assignment may require a different format for submission. You may need to bring a hard copy to class; you may need to submit through Blackboard. I will always make this clear in class, on assignment sheets, and/or on Blackboard. In general though for all assignments, please use MLA style documentation and formatting: e.g. 1-inch margins, reasonable font like Times New Roman, Garamond, Didot, etc., double-spaced, with proper MLA heading, formatting, and documentation.

Plagiarism—Any case of plagiarism can result in an automatic grade of F for the course and a letter in your college file explaining the incident. It is ultimately your responsibility to be sure that you have cited all your work properly and to demonstrate academic honesty. See UC’s academic integrity policies at: http://www.uc.edu/conduct/Academic_Integrity.html

Students with Disabilities—Students with disabilities should present official documentation from the Disabilities Services office during the first two weeks of class so appropriate accommodations can be made.

Writing Center—Located in on the first floor of McMicken, the Writing Center is available to help with any aspect of a writing project, except editing. Take advantage of this resource for any of this course’s major assignments or for writing projects in your other courses. Appointments are recommended; call 513.556.3912.

Assignments/Grades:

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Informal Writing | Throughout the term, you will be assigned short writing assignments related to the unit we’re working on. Sometimes these assignments will ask you to respond to an assigned reading, perform some informal research, prepare a draft for workshop or peer review, read a selection of essays of your choosing and write up a response, etc. Often you’ll bring this writing to class; sometimes you will post your writing to Blackboard Discussion board. Because these assignments come out of the specific pacing of the course, they are not listed in advance on our course schedule . Rather, you will find these assignments announced in class, and then posted on Blackboard Announcements . Informal writing assignments will generally be graded on quality completion, scoring full, half, or zero credit. (No late Informal Writings will be accepted). | 100 points 20% |
| On Voice: Analysis Essay | In this short analysis essay, you will demonstrate how your chosen essayist achieves “authorial voice.” <i>Details for this essay assignment, and all the major assignments can be found on Blackboard under “Syll and Assignments”</i> | 100 points 20% |
| “This I Believe” Essay | After studying this particular form of the personal essay, you will compose your own “This I Believe” essay that fulfills the site’s expectations. | 100 points 20% |
| Essay of Critique | After searching for inspiration, this longer and more open-ended personal essay assignment asks you to take up one longstanding purpose of the essay: to critique or comment upon something current—a practice, a trend, an issue—in culture. | 100 points 20% |
| Multimodal Essay and Rationale | Working with either your This I Believe essay or your essay of critique, for this final project, you will turn your written essay into a multimodal essay (using voice, images, video, etc) and produce a rationale that explains and justifies the design. | 100 points 20% |

TOTAL: 500 points

Grades follow university’s standard 10/100-point scale:

94-100=A; 93-90=A-; 87-89=B+; 86-83=B; 82-80=B-; 79-77=C+; 76-73=C; 72-70=C-;
69-67=D+; 66-63=D; 62-60=D-; 59 or below=F

Readings and Major Due Dates Schedule

ENG 210

- *****This schedule may change over the quarter; please be sure you are looking at the most recent version*****
- Readings are due **ON THE DAY** they are listed
- **REMEMBER THAT INFORMAL WRITINGS ARE NOT POSTED ON THIS SCHEDULE: SEE Bb ANNOUNCEMENTS**
- You can expect typically one to two informal writing assignments per week; rarely will you have three assignments

| UNIT ONE: <i>What is the Essay? What is Voice?</i> | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Week 1 | Mon. Mar 26 | Wed. 28 Read: Van Doren and Wells | Fri. 30 |
| Week 2 | Mon. Apr 2 Read: Sedaris and Twain (for Sedaris, read the text transcript first, then listen to the recording) | Wed. 4 Read: Vonnegut and Williams | Fri. 6 |
| Week 3 | Mon. 9 Read: Lamott and Mairs | Wed. 11 | Fri. 13 |
| UNIT TWO: <i>This I Believe—The Study of Form and Voice</i> | | | |
| Week 4 | Mon. 16 Analysis Essay due—hard-copy, in-class | Wed. 18 Read: “About TIB,” “Enough is More than Plenty,” “Finding Out” | Fri. 20 |
| Week 5 | Mon. 23 Read: Lopate | Wed. 25 | Fri. 27 |
| Week 6 | Mon. 30 | Wed. May 2 | Fri. 4 |
| UNIT THREE: <i>ON/OF Writing the Essay</i> | | | |
| Week 7 | Mon. 7 TIB Essay due—hard-copy, in-class | Wed. 9 | Fri. 11 Read: Johnson and Defoe |
| Week 8 | Mon. 14 | Wed. 16 Read: Carr | Fri. 18 |
| Week 9 | Mon. 21 | Wed. 23 | Fri. 25 Essay of Critique due—hard-copy, in-class |
| Week 10 | Mon. 28 Memorial Day—No class | Wed. 30 | Fri. June 1 |

Exam Week: June 2—7; we will NOT meet in class this week

FINAL MULTIMODAL PROJECTS and RATIONALES due to the Course Wiki (or other means TBA):

9pm, Tuesday, June 5

On Voice: Analysis Essay

ENG 210-01 Writing the Informal Essay

Assignment Description

100 points

750—1000 words

Due: Monday, April 16th—hard-copy, in-class

In this approximately 3-4 page analysis essay (750—1000 words), you will investigate how an essayist uses language to create a sense of “authorial voice” in their writing. Focusing on elements of word choice, syntax, address, repetition, paragraphing, formality/informality, approach to the subject, and many other stylistic features, you will demonstrate how elements work together to create an overall sense of the author’s ‘voice.’ This essay should demonstrate not only your ability to identify stylistic elements at work, but also—from the course readings, activities, and discussions—explain how you understand the often difficult concept of “voice in writing.”

The focus of analysis needs to be one of the six essays we’ve read in the first unit: Sedaris, Twain, Williams, Vonnegut, Lamott, or Mairs. If appropriate and manageable, you may wish to design your analysis as a comparison of two essays. But remember that you only have 1000 words and that especially the longer essays may be too difficult to compare in this amount of words. Moreover, you should be thoughtful about which essays you compare—have reasons in mind (and maybe state them in your essay) for why comparing them is particularly illustrative. In class, we will practice this kind of analysis as well as discuss, informally research, and critique individuals’ takes on what “voice in writing” actually is.

Criteria for Evaluation

A strong analysis essay will...

- Have a central idea or “thesis” that the essay is working to support
 - (For this essay, you might think of the thesis idea as an “overall” statement/description of the authorial voice)
- State and exemplify stylistic features of the essay, using textual evidence
- Show how features work together to create an overall sense of voice
- Follow general essay conventions: have effective introduction, conclusion, coherent body paragraphs, transitions, etc.
- Be readable: revised, edited, generally free from grammatical and spelling errors
- Follow MLA formatting and citation style, including a Works Cited page (see Bb for a bibliography)

“This I Believe” Essay

ENG 210-01 Writing the Informal Essay

Assignment Description

100 points

350—500 words

Due: Monday, May 7th—hard-copy, in-class

After extensive study of its form and conventions, this assignment asks you to compose your own “This I Believe” essay, suitable for submission to the site. As we will discover, this essay is an exercise in brevity, storytelling, and quick connection-building with the audience. So while the essay is short, you may discover that it’s the most difficult to write! As with the other essays, we will spend a lot of time studying samples of this form of writing and work as a class to determine how this mini-genre works. Ultimately though, as for choosing a topic and other authorial choices, you have full control of the content of your essay. The only restrictions here are to fulfill the requirements of “This I Believe”—find their criteria posted on Blackboard under “Web Resources.”

To choose a direction for your essay, feel free to read around more than is required on the TIB site. You might choose a category of essays and read around in them to get inspiration. I suggest that you do a lot of freewriting and brainstorming as you develop this essay to make sure you’ve got a clear point of belief and a story to tell that can open it up to an audience. I also suggest that you have people in your life read and respond to the content—remember that the audience for a TIB essay is simply EVERYONE, so a friend or family member should have no trouble connecting to the content and style of your piece.

Criteria for Evaluation

A strong “This I Believe” essay will...

- **FOLLOW THE CRITERIA OF THE SITE ITSELF:** see Bb “Web Resources” for TIB Guidelines
- Be engaging, thoughtful, focused, personal
- Be readable: revised, edited, generally free from grammatical and spelling errors
- Follow MLA formatting style

*** You may choose to develop this essay into a multimodal essay for the final project ***

You may be asked to bring a draft of this essay into class for a workshop or peer-review (will count as Informal Writing grade)

Essay of Critique or Comment

ENG 210-01 Writing the Informal Essay

Assignment Description

100 points

Due: Friday, May 25th—hard-copy, in-class

One of the most common uses of the essay form is to comment on or critique something in society. Johnson wonders about the increase in books and authorship, Defoe describes the virtues of providing education for women, Carr questions if the Internet is making him stupid. Countless other essayists take up and reflect upon common practices: on walking, sleeping, coffee houses, exercising, conversation, slang, and the state of youth, among others. For this assignment, you will take on this oldest of uses for the essay, writing 3-5 page essay of comment or critique that describes and “wonders about” some current practice or part of our current cultural life.

As we have with other essay assignments, we will read samples of this kind of essay and do brainstorming exercises to help develop a focus for your essay of comment. We will look through lists of essay titles, taking note of the convention of these kinds of essays to use On or Of in their titles (e.g. On Walking, Of the Summer Holiday, “On Corporate Bodies”). We’ll consider how essayists approach their topic, how they take up an angle of vision, how they become persuasive without being insistent, and we’ll study the structure of their commentary. You will use all of these insights as you craft your own essay.

Criteria for Evaluation

In this way some of the criteria for this essay will be negotiated in class.

But generally, a strong essay of critique will...

- Have a central idea or “thesis” that the essay is working to support;
- Will have a clear focus on a practice or entity we deal with in culture today
(e.g. On the Posting of Pictures on Facebook, Of Twitter, Of the Right to Attend University, On the Use of the Cell Phone in Public Places, On the 24-hr News Media, ETC.)
- Follow general essay conventions: have effective introduction, conclusion, coherent body paragraphs, transitions, etc.
- Be readable: revised, edited, generally free from grammatical and spelling errors
- Follow MLA formatting style

*** You may choose to develop this essay into a multimodal essay for the final project ***

You may be asked to bring a draft of this essay into class for a workshop or peer-review (will count as Informal Writing grade)

Multimodal Essay and Rationale

ENG 210-01 Writing the Informal Essay

Revised Assignment Description

100 points

Due: Tuesday, June 5th, 9pm—posted to Course Wiki (or elsewhere TBA)

As we've been studying the use of voice in writing—including thinking about how a writer's *literal voice* can change our interpretation and understanding of an essay—this final, creative, multimedia essay project asks you to turn either your TIB essay or your essay of comment into **an audio, or audio-visual essay**. The kinds of projects you produce, and the tools you use to produce them, will vary, in some measure depending on what kinds of tools you're comfortable using. No matter the media you choose, **every project should perform a reading of your essay** and from there you have a lot of choices: add music, editing, images, film, animation, photos, etc. You might create an audio-only essay, where you only use voice and maybe mix in other sounds and music tracks; you might choose to film a reading of your essay, splicing in other images, you may wish to create a PowerPoint slide show with audio and save it as a YouTube video. You can experiment with iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. If you're uncomfortable with editing or using these technologies, consider staging a live performance of your essay: you might read it at an open mic, stage it for a group of your friends and videorecord it, or arrange with me to perform it for the class.

The overall goal is to blend *VOICE* with other media to enhance the depth and impact of your essay.

As you select the essay you want to voice, you should consider too **revising** the chosen essay based on instructor feedback and more importantly what you think needs improvement for the purposes of voicing it.

Because there is openness in this project, we'll spend class time pooling resources and helping each other find digital tools for this project (Audacity, for example, is free audio recording and editing software). To help with the development your projects, you will be asked early on to produce a **quick proposal for the project**.

It's important to remember that I don't have expectations for a certain kind of polished product. There is no disadvantage for not having a lot of expertise in video or sound editing or other technological skills. Rather, use whatever technology (or use your body in performance!) to enhance the delivery of your chosen essay.

In addition to the multimodal essay itself, you will also produce a 350—500 word **rationale** for your project, **explaining what goals and purposes you had in the design choices you made and the effects you hope these elements have, as well as describing your problems and successes in working in whatever digital medium you did**. This rationale will be due when you turn in your projects during exam week, likely to a Wiki or some other collaborative digital space.

Criteria for Evaluation

A successful multimodal essay will...

- Be creative, engaging, and make an impact on its audience
- Use *voice* in a compelling and interesting way
- Demonstrate effort
- Be partnered with a thoughtful rationale that explains the thought behind the elements in the project (e.g. as the essay nears an exciting close, I decided to quicken the pace that I was reading. I hoped the audience would hear me as frantic and breathless to add to the excitement I was describing)