ENGLISH 120: READING AND WRITING THE MODERN ESSAY
Tuesday/Thursday, 1.00 – 2.15, WLH 012
Instructor: Michaela Bronstein
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Office: LC 403
Drop-in hours: Tuesday 2.30 – 4.00
(Please do e-mail to schedule meetings at any other time.)

Texts:
The Norton Reader, 12th edition (ed. Linda Peterson and John C. Brereton)
Available at Labyrinth Books
Course packet.
At Allegra, 1060 Chapel St.
Works on the schedule in the packet are marked with *; all others are in the Norton Reader.

The Course

When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, “I am going to produce a work of art.” I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. (George Orwell)

This class is designed to offer a sense both of the expansive possibilities of writing and the pragmatic necessities, both what creative nonfiction can do—Orwell’s “aesthetic experience”—and how not to get in your own way doing it—his desire to “get a hearing.” We will see throughout the course that these two strands of purpose never part for long. In this course, contrary to what Orwell says, we do explicitly intend to produce essays that are works of art, and we will focus our discussion of readings and workshop papers to matters of craft, form and style. However, I hope the readings—including those of Orwell himself—will show you the way you can make exposing the lie and bringing out the fact themselves aesthetic experiences. In this course, we learn to write by reading. We will close-read in order to learn search for structural patterns and stylistic effects that you can use in your own work: we will look not for what the essays mean, but for how they persuade, argue, insinuate, and imply.

SCHEDULE

Items appearing on the schedule below in italics with an arrow describe deadlines and workshop procedures for the first assignment fortnight. The same cycle will continue in each following fortnight, unless you see an exception similarly marked.

[September]

Week 0

Th.3 Introductory Class; reading from handout.

ASSIGNMENT 1: INTERPRETING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Write an essay, based on your own experience, of approximately 1200 – 1500 words. You should focus on a single story or event, though this is not a hard-and-fast rule: for instance, a series of vignettes of repeated incidents may seem more effective or interesting to you. You should use this personal experience to make a public point of interest to a wide audience—you are striving to give many people
Week 1

Tu.8 George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”
    David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”
    Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth”

Th.10 Debra Dickerson, “Who Shot Johnny?”
    Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Spaces”
    Andrew Sullivan, “What Is a Homosexual?”
    Patricia Williams, “The Death of the Profane: The Rhetoric of Race and Rights”

→ Fr.11 Draft due (except workshop students), by e-mail and in department box, 3 PM.

Week 2

Tu.15 Joan Didion, “The White Album”*
    F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”*
    Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self”

→ Workshop students: draft due electronically to me; bring 15 copies to distribute to all of us.

Th.17 First Workshop.

→ Non-workshop students: Bring the drafts picked up on Tuesday. Bring two copies to class of your comments (one for me, one for the author) on all three papers, which should be at least 150 words long, be typed, and include the following:
   • what works best in the draft
   • the single most significant improvement and how the writer could accomplish it (i.e., if you feel the beginning of the piece fails to grab the reader’s interest, suggest possible alternative openings). Feel free to suggest language of your own.
   • the date of the workshop and the names of both commenter and writer
You may also write on the draft itself; whether or not you do so, bring your copy of the draft with your name on it to class and return it to the writer after the workshop.

→ Fr.18 Final version of essay, except workshop students, due with draft and my comments, by e-mail and in department box, 3 PM.

ASSIGNMENT 2: PLACE

Write an essay for a broad audience of approximately 1200 – 1500 words that portrays a specific place. You may enrich the portrayal with narrative, dialogue, or history, but the focus should stay on the place rather than any specific incident. Feel free to expand chronologically: over a long stretch of time (a nightclub that used to be a church), or habitual cycles of a place (a particular part of a city or a diner at night and day). We will read examples of travel writing—but see the caveat below about selecting an appropriate place. Many of the requirements of this assignments are related to those of the first: you will want to make your place interesting to someone who has never been there, and your portrayal should stay with your reader. This time, however, you need not make a specific point, but may desire only to produce a vivid, unified impression (which can indeed be the impression of an irresolvable contradiction).

Selecting an appropriate place is the most important decision you will make: in order to make your place interesting to a reader who has never been there, you will need precise detail. A place that you visited once two years ago will be difficult to write about effectively—no matter how vivid your impression of your visit to St. Peter’s in Rome, you probably won’t have enough material to create such
an impression in the reader. A place you have been to many times, or can visit before the assignment is due, is a better choice.

**Week 3**

**Tu.22**  Rachel Carson, “The Marginal World”*
Judith Ortiz Cofer, “More Room”
John Muir, “A Wind-Storm in the Forests”
E. B. White, “Once More to the Lake”

→Assignment 1 workshop students: final draft due, in hard copy and electronically, by classtime. Make sure to include the earlier draft with my comments. Also include a separate folder or envelope including the drafts given to and comments from other class members; if you like, you may write a note to draw my attention to the comments which guided your revision process.

**Th.24**  David Guterson, “Enclosed. Ecyclopedic. Endured: The Mall of America”
John McPhee, “The Woods from Hog Wallow,” from *The Pine Barrens* *
H. L. Mencken, “The Hills of Zion”*
Mary Oliver, “Waste Land: An Elegy”
Edmund Wilson, “The Old Stone House”*

**Week 4**

**Tu.29**  Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia*, excerpts*
Annie Dillard, “Sight into Insight”
Jamaica Kincaid, *A Simple Place*, excerpt*
Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, excerpt*

[October]

**Th.1**  Workshop
Writing Exercise: Introducing cultural criticism.

**ASSIGNMENT 3: CULTURAL CRITICISM**

Write an essay of approximately 1200 – 1500 words commenting on some artifact of modern culture —both “artifact” and “culture” being broadly defined. You will want to make your artifact vivid and interesting to a reader who may never have heard of it, and draw a startling and original conclusion about it—like every assignment for this course, you will be making some form of argument. As with Assignment 2, selection of your aspect of culture will be crucial: you will want something specific and concrete enough for you to make it real for your reader; but you must show how it connects to far broader concerns.

**Week 5**

**Tu.6**  Anthony Burgess, “Is America Falling Apart?”
Malcolm Gladwell, “Listening to Khakis”*, “Java Man”
George Orwell, “The Art of Donald McGill”*

**Th.8**  Mark Greif, “Against Exercise”
John McMurty, “Kill ’Em! Crush ’Em! Eat ’Em Raw!”
Jessica Mitford, “Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain”
Mary Roach, “How to Know If You’re Dead”
**Week 6**

Tu.13  James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”
      Anthony Lane, “The Sound of Music”
      Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”
      (Background reading: Oscar Wilde, “The Preface” to *Dorian Gray*)
      Susan Allen Toth, “Going to the Movies”

Th.15  Workshop.
      Rhetorical Terms (handout).
      Writing Exercise: Introducing argument.

**ASSIGNMENT 4: ARGUMENT**

Write an essay of 1200 – 1500 words that argues against an already published essay—you may choose an essay we have read for this course, but I encourage you to engage with material you’ve encountered on your own. If you do make a choice from outside the course readings, please give me either a photocopy or a URL—and, of course, over the course of your argument, you will want to cite in endnotes any material you marshal to your cause. (Though citing sources is a requirement for all assignments, it is particularly important for this assignment.)

**Week 7**

Tu.20  Anne Fadiman, “The His’er Problem”
      George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”
      William G. Perry, “Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts”
      Katha Pollitt, “Does a Literary Canon Matter?”

Th.22  Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”
      Glorian Steinem, “The Good News: These Are Not the Best Years of your Life”
      William Zinsser, “College Pressures”
      Handout: Rhetorical Terms

**Week 8**

Tu.27  Paul Fussell, “Thank God for the Atom Bomb”
      Willard Gaylin, “What You See is the Real You”

Th.29  Workshop.
      Writing Exercise: Introducing humor.

[November]

**ASSIGNMENT 5: THE USES OF HUMOR AND SATIRE**

Many literary genres—parody, satire, pastiche, travesty—are commonly associated with humor; but humor can appear even in forms it does not define (for instance, a movie review). Write 800 to 1,200 words in a sustained humorous mode that make a point—explicitly or implicitly. You may wish to
comment on an aspect of culture, or a political event. Think about how the humor in your piece constructs and relies upon a particular image of you as the author, and how types of humor (the absurd, the farcical, the ironic) relate to the point you are making.

**Week 9**

Tu.3  Stephen Potter, *Gamesmanship and Lifemanship*, excerpts*  
Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*  
Selection of articles from *The Onion*  
(For comparison: Anthony Lane, “This Is Not a Movie”*)  
*This American Life* 348, Act 1 “Make ’em Laff”  
(starts at minute 4)

Th.5  Woody Allen, “The Whore of Mensa”*  
Anthony Lane, review, “*Pearl Harbor*”*  
Dahlia Lithwick, “Supreme Court Dispatches”*  
James Thurber, “University Days”

**Week 10**

Tu.10  Rodney Rothman, “My Fake Job”*  
Veronica Geng, “Partners” and “More Mathematical Puzzles & Diversions”*  
*This American Life* 61, Act 1 “Opening Night”  
(starts from the beginning)

Th.12  Workshop  
Writing Exercise: Introducing writing about art.

**ASSIGNMENT 6: WHY YOU WRITE: WRITING ON WRITING AND ART**

Write an essay of approximately 1200 – 1500 words that considers some other work or form of creative enterprise and makes some general claim about that work or form. Though you may take one author, or painting, or TV show—or even just the topic of writing a personal essay—as a starting point, the implications should be much broader and encompass—implicitly or explicitly—the societal forces expressed by and/or the social role of the form. At various points throughout this course, we have considered the relationship between the form and content of an essay; this is an opportunity for you to express in the choices you make in tone and structure of your work the aesthetic problems you are discussing.

**Week 11**

Tu.17  George Orwell, “Why I Write”*  
Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision”  
John Updike, “Little Lightnings”  
Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction”*

Th.19  Joseph Conrad, “Henry James”*  
T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”*  
Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, excerpt*
Susan Sontag, “A Century of Cinema”
George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” redux
(review this essay in light of the other readings for today)

Thanksgiving Break

[December]

Week 12

Tu.1  Saul Bellow, “Graven Images”*
      Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook”
      Annie Dillard, The Writing Life, excerpt*
      Nora Ephron, “The Boston Photographs”
      William Faulkner, “Nobel Prize Award Speech”

Th.3  Last workshop and last class meeting.

LAST ASSIGNMENT FOR BOTH WORKSHOP AND NON-WORKSHOP STUDENTS DUE TUESDAY 8 DECEMBER. If you would like the assignment and my comments returned before spring term, include a large self-addressed envelope with enough postage for 4-5 oz. I will also return work in January—I’ll send an e-mail explaining where your revisions will be available.

Fiddly Details and Policies

Assignments

It is rescue work, this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values—the permanence of memory. (Joseph Conrad)

This course requires six papers and six drafts (one for each paper). All deadlines are 3 PM on Fridays, except during your workshop week (see below): the first Friday in each fortnight assignment period for the draft, the second for the final paper. I will grade and comment upon every revision; drafts receive comments only. The drafts should be the best versions of the essay you can imagine yourself writing; they are not placeholders for doing the real work on the paper in the second week of each assignment period—it will not help you if my comments on the drafts point out flaws you already knew were there. Though drafts are not graded, if I feel your first draft is a bad-faith effort, it may impact your final grade (the same is true if your revision seems cursory).

I require BOTH a paper copy AND electronic submission of each paper and draft. If one of these is not on time, your paper is late. If in a given week for some reason you may have difficulty with one or the other, you must talk to me no later than the Thursday class before the deadline. E-mail the papers to me, preferably in .doc format (not .docx) or .pdf. Turn in physical papers to the English Department drop box, outside LC 109. Place all papers in a reusable manila envelope with my name as the address, and yours as the return address. With each final paper include the draft with my comments.

Topic choice: Please avoid repeating topics from assignment to assignment. In other words: if you write one assignment about your summer cross-country bicycle trip, and still find that your muse whispers to you of bicycle-related matters, obtain permission for the topic in advance—no later than the Tuesday class preceding a Friday draft.
Workshops

... decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. (T. S. Eliot)

For one of the assignments, you will have the chance to receive guidance from your peers as well as from me—to get a look at how a larger community of readers responds to your work. Early in the semester you will all be randomly assigned a workshop date—the second Thursday in a given assignment fortnight. Three students on each date will present their work for suggestions. During your workshop fortnight, your deadlines will be somewhat different. In all workshop weeks, the students not presenting are required to present specific typed comments on the workshop readings. Deadlines for your workshop assignment shift from Friday to the following class on Tuesday, both for draft and the revision.

For details, see the schedule.

Grading

The grades of your essays will constitute 85% of your final grade; the other 15% consists of participation. For each fortnight, I will give you a more detailed assignment sheet explaining the expectations of a given essay.

→ On Participation . . .

Participation consists of your appearing in class on time and prepared; it also includes you actually speaking during class and offering helpful written and oral comments to the presenters on workshop days. Each unexcused absence will drop your grade substantially. There will also be very brief writing exercises assigned in class.

I also expect you to come in to my office hours at least once over the course of the semester—if you are unable to go at the drop-in time, please don’t hesitate to e-mail me to arrange an alternate time. It’s useful for me to get a sense of what kind of writing you are most interested in pursuing, so that I can give you more useful feedback.

Lateness and Extensions

I will give you one extension, no questions asked, upon request (except for the draft due for your workshop date). I must receive your request no later than the end of class on the TUESDAY before the deadline. Unless you provide a Dean’s Excuse, late papers will lose 1/3 of a grade per day; late drafts will receive no comments (or minimal comments).

For your one extension, if you wish to use it for a draft, you will shift to the workshop deadlines (again, see the schedule below for details) for both the draft and its following revision; if you use it on the revision only, we can work out a deadline between us.

You may NOT use your extension for the draft due before your workshop date. Failure to submit this draft on time (Tuesday at the beginning of class) will automatically drop your OVERALL grade for the course 1/3 of a letter (i.e., from A- to B+, etc.).

Sources

All writing in this course must be nonfiction: it must be true and verifiable. Keep track of your sources and use endnotes to provide verification for facts—whether the source is a conversation, a photograph, an interview, a book, or something you found somewhere online. I also encourage you to use the endnotes to give me a sense of the specific language of a source to which you’re responding (some assignments may require this)—your endnotes can be more creative and various in form than you might be used to for academic writing.

For further notes on citing sources, see http://www.yale.edu/bass/writing/sources/index.html — especially “Why Cite?”