History 1301: History of the Essay  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:25-2:40, White Hall B06, Fall 2015

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Office Hours: McGraw 350, Tues. 2:45-4:30, and by appointment.

NOTE: SOME OF THE EARLIEST READINGS FOR THIS COURSE ARE IN THE XEROX PACKET, AVAILABLE AT THE UPS STORE IN COLLEGETOWN, AT 407 COLLEGE AVE.  PLEASE GO TO THE STORE AS SOON AS YOU CAN, ESPECIALLY SINCE THEY MIGHT RUN OUT OF PACKETS, IN WHICH CASE THERE WILL BE A 24-HOUR WAIT WHILE THEY PRINT NEW ONES.  Whenever we will be discussing a reading from the packet, please bring it to class.

The analytical essay seems to be the basic form of nonfiction writing—but why? And how did it come to be seen this way? Why don’t you learn to write prose poems in college, or memos, or just elaborate lists? Or are those also essays? How has the essay varied across time and cultures? How has its form been influenced by historical forces, and how did essayists become shapers of their historical moments? Can essays be divided into different categories? The word “essay” just means an attempt, so this course will be experimental and exploratory, analyzing many different essay traditions, and pausing occasionally to dwell on key writers (Montaigne, Woolf, and Baldwin) and to analyze them in their historical context. And of course you will be expected to make several attempts at creative essay-writing.

Requirements: All readings listed on the syllabus; Active participation in all discussions; Attendance at all sessions; All papers listed on the syllabus. Please contact me immediately (in advance, whenever possible) about any session you have to miss.  

About Papers: Each will have its own assignment sheet and will be discussed in class. In fairness to the class as a whole, please don’t request extensions except under extreme circumstances.

PLEASE NOTE: I have a no-electronic-devices policy in the classroom.

Grading: This is a reading- and writing-intensive course. They key to its success is your active engagement and participation, and your grades will be assigned accordingly. Late papers will be marked down by half a grade for every day they’re late.

Overall participation will determine 25% of your final grade. Papers #1 and #6 are each worth 5% of your final grade. Papers #2, 3, 4, and 5 are worth 10% each. The final portfolio is worth 25%.

Please understand: regardless of these percentages, it is impossible to pass this course without turning in all the required assignments. In other words, it is not acceptable to skip a paper and
simply take a “zero” on it. Out of fairness to everyone in the class, you must complete all the
papers (even if they’re late), or you will receive a failing grade for the semester. Also, any case
of plagiarism will automatically receive a failing grade and may result in a failing grade for the
entire semester.

**Learning Goals:** To be frank, I hope that this course will make you somewhat skeptical
of things like learning goals. American culture, especially within our educational system,
is skewed toward a goal orientation, but an orientation toward process ought to be just as
important. Humanities courses, in particular, may be strongest when they remind you
that learning ought to be a constant, lifelong process—that being educated entails the
gaining of a deeper understanding of your ignorance. An overemphasis on goals can
make education feel like a rote, schematic exercise designed to impart one single, correct
answer, whereas at the heart of the humanities are lively debates over multiple possible
interpretations. Certainly, a course like this should help you become a more precise,
effective, and creative writer and should give you a visceral sense of the contingency and
contradictions of history, through its exploration of the ways in which the essay genre has
both changed and stayed the same over time. More important, though, is the course’s
emphasis on sustained thinking and on the power of an engaged and experimental
approach to the world.

**A few paper guidelines (to be supplemented by a separate handout on writing):**
-- The most common academic problem at Cornell is plagiarism. Please make sure that you are
well informed on this issue. Use citations whenever necessary; follow an established citation
format; and be consistent in the format you choose. Always leave yourself plenty of time to
complete assignments. And don’t rely too heavily on the internet. Wikipedia is generally not an
acceptable resource for the purposes of this class. If you ever have any questions about citations,
talk to me or a librarian. Please visit the library’s webpage and check out the link to “citation
management,” which will also give you the university’s full academic integrity policy.
-- Always number your pages.
-- On the first page, include your name, my name, the name and number of the course, the name
and number of the assignment, the date, and the title of your paper. Use a title that actually
means something.
-- Always double-space your papers and leave one-inch margins.
-- Make sure your paper is not too long or too short.
-- PROOFREAD. Leave yourself plenty of time to read and revise your work. Even better, trade
papers with a classmate and get his/her comments and corrections. DO NOT RELY SOLELY
ON A COMPUTER’S SPELLING/GRAMMAR CHECK. Your paper grades WILL be affected
by stylistic problems such as spelling and grammar errors.
-- I prefer two-sided printing/copying, if possible.

**WEEKLY TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS:**
Note: Readings are listed under the sessions when they will be discussed—but you’ll want
to start them well in advance.
Week One.
Tuesday, August 25. Introductions and Assumptions.

Thursday, August 27. First Attempts.
--Diane Glancy, “Sun Dance” (handout)
--Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations” (handout)

Week Two.
Tuesday, September 1. 1st essay due. Personal essay #1.
No reading.

Thursday, September 3. Two types?
--John D’Agata, “To the Reader,” plus “The List of Ziusudra” (packet)
--“Roundtable: The History of the Essay” (packet)
--Daniel Mendelsohn, “Geographies” (packet)
--Leslie Jamison, “The Empathy Exams” (packet)

Week Three.
Tuesday, September 8. On Writing.
--Christopher Lasch, Plain Style, 45-92.
--Verlyn Klinkenborg, Several Short Sentences about Writing, Prologue plus 3-55.

Thursday, September 10. Montagne.
--“Of Books” and “Of a Monstrous Child” (in Lopate, 46-58)

Week Four.
Tuesday, September 15. Montaigne: Historical Context.
--Sarah Bakewell, excerpts from How to Live; or, A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer (packet)

Thursday, September 17. More Montaigne.
--“On Some Verses of Virgil” (in Lopate, 58-112)

Week Five.
Tuesday, September 22. 2nd essay due. Historical Analysis #1.
--Klinkenborg, 150-169.

--Charles Lamb, “A Chapter on Ears” (in Lopate)
--William Hazlitt, “On the Pleasure of Hating” (Lopate)
--Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting” and “The Death of the Moth” (Lopate)
Week Six.
--Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (in Lopate)
--E.B. White, “The Ring of Time” (Lopate)
--Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root” (Lopate)

Thursday, October 1. The Evolution of the Personal Essay.
--Phillip Lopate, “Against Joie de Vivre” (in Lopate)
--Gayle Pemberton, “Do He Have Your Number, Mr. Jeffrey?” (Lopate)
--Richard Rodriguez, “Late Victorians” (Lopate)

Week Seven.
Tuesday, October 6. 3rd essay due. Personal essay #2.
--Klinkenborg, 55-100.

Thursday, October 8. Conferences/Possible library session.

Week Eight.
Tuesday, October 13. NO CLASS—FALL BREAK.

Thursday, October 15. The Art of Fact: Origins.
(all readings in Kerrane and Yagoda)
--Daniel Defoe, excerpt from The True and Genuine Account…
--Charles Dickens, “The Great Tasmania’s Cargo”
--Walt Whitman, excerpt from Specimen Days
--Jack London, excerpt from The People of the Abyss

Week Nine.
Tuesday, October 20. The Art of Fact: 20th Century.
(all readings in Kerrane and Yagoda)
--Martha Gellhorn, “The Third Winter”
--George Orwell, “The Spike”
--Marvel Cooke, excerpt from “The Bronx Slave Market”
--Truman Capote, excerpt from In Cold Blood

Thursday, October 22. The Evolution of Literary Journalism.
(all readings in Kerrane and Yagoda)
--Joan Didion, “Los Angeles Notebook”
--Hunter S. Thompson, excerpt from “The Scum Also Rises”
--Rosemary Mahoney, excerpt from Whoredom in Kimmage
--Svetlana Alexiyevich, excerpt from Boys in Zinc
Week Ten.
Tuesday, October 27. 4th essay due. Historical Analysis #2.
--David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster” (packet)

Thursday, October 29. Conferences.

Week Eleven.
Tuesday, November 3. Woolf.
--Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (entire)

Thursday, November 5. Woolf: Historical Context.
--Christine Froula, excerpts from Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde: War, Civilization, Modernity (packet)

Week Twelve.
Tuesday, November 10. 5th essay due. Historical Analysis #3.
--Klinkenborg, 100-149.

--Civil Rights and the Promise of Equality (entire).

Week Thirteen.
Tuesday, November 17. Baldwin.
--Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (entire)

--Lawrie Balfour, excerpt from The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy (packet)

Week Fourteen.
Tuesday, November 24. 6th essay due. Experiment!
--Susan Griffin, “Red Shoes” (packet)
--Dinty W. Moore, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” (packet)

Thursday, November 26. NO CLASS—HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

Week Fifteen.
Tuesday, December 1. Two types? Creative nonfiction?
--Rebecca Solnit, “Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable” (packet)
--Teju Cole, “Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s ‘Stranger in the Village’” (packet)
Thursday, December 3. Finale.
--Final Portfolio due in class.

Purchasing Books
I've ordered all of the books NOT at the Cornell Store but rather at Ithaca's only independent (and cooperatively owned) bookstore, Buffalo Street Books. Store details:

The books are already in stock at the store, and you are welcome to shop there whenever you'd like. **But also please note that you can have the books delivered to you at the third meeting of this class, on Tuesday, September 1st, at 1:25pm, in White Hall B06.** To have the books delivered in class, all you have to do is go to the store’s website and place your order. There is no delivery charge, and NO TAX. Here’s the appropriate link:
http://www.buffalostreetbooks.com/#!/students/cuiy

It’s fine to pursue used copies, but please try to get the right edition of each book, since we'll be referring to the text fairly frequently in class, and I’d like everyone to have the same pagination if possible. These books will also be available on the Cornell library system as “networked resources” or on 2-hour reserve at Uris Library; for the most part, I was able to put the correct edition on reserve, though in some cases it was not available. **Please bring the actual book to class when we are scheduled to discuss it. If you read a book on reserve, then please bring precise notes with you to class.**

The complete list of books for the course is below. Again, the course number is History 1301, and you can order any or all of these titles for delivery.

--Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*
--Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*
--Civil Rights and the Promise of Equality (pub. by GILES)
--Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt edition)
--James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon edition)
--Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style*
--Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences about Writing*