

Becoming a Great Essayist

Course Guidebook

Professor Jennifer Cognard-Black
St. Mary's College of Maryland



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Dr. Jennifer Cognard-Black is a Professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland, a public liberal arts college, where she has taught since 2000. A liberal arts student herself, Dr. Cognard-Black graduated summa cum laude from Nebraska Wesleyan University with a dual degree in Music and English. She

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Dr. Cognard-Black's publications are extensive and eclectic, reflecting her intellectual background as both a writer and a literary critic. Her critical work spans Victorian visuality and technologies of communication, theories of the letter and the machine, images of women in the media, the literatures of food, women novelists, feminist rhetorics, and writing theory and practice. In turn, her short stories and essays often grapple with issues of betrayal and the body. She has collaborated with a number of visual artists, including photographers and painters, and has had this work exhibited at galleries in New York and Philadelphia. Dr. Cognard-Black is also working with an art historian on an exhibition of portraits of American women writers and is writing her first novel, one inspired by the secret life of the first woman ever to win the Pulitzer Prize, Edith Wharton.

Twice, Dr. Cognard-Black has received the most prestigious teaching award at her institution—the Faculty Student Life Award, selected by the students

themselves—and she has been given Mellon Foundation grants on three different occasions to support her course development and experiential learning initiatives. Nebraska Wesleyan University has named her a Distinguished Alumnus and an Outstanding Graduate. Dr. Cognard-Black has also been an artist-in-residence at the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, the Sandy Spring Museum, and the Iowa Writers' House.

Dr. Cognard-Black is the author of *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* and a coeditor of three collections. The first is a volume of previously unpublished letters on female authorship, *Kindred Hands: Letters on Writing by British and American Women Authors, 1865–1935*; another is an anthology of poetry, fiction, and essays that all include recipes, *Books That Cook: The Making of a Literary Meal*. The final one is a collection of creative nonfiction essays by women writers, *From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines*, winner of a gold medal in the national 2016 Independent Publisher Book Awards contest. She has published her essays and short fiction in a number of journals, ranging from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to *Another Chicago Magazine*. She is also a contributor to *Ms.* magazine and a member of its Committee of Scholars, a reviews editor for the journal *Literary Mama*, and part of the advisory board to the University of Nevada's Cultural Ecologies of Food book series. Dr. Cognard-Black has written about recipes as a powerful means of storytelling for *The Huffington Post* and the University of Maryland's *Faculty Voice*, and she appeared on *The Kojo Nnamdi Show* on NPR in Washington DC to talk about recipes as containers of individual and national memory. ■

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Becoming a Great Essayist

Scope:

Too often, the essay is thought of as nothing more than a classroom assignment—a piece that makes a claim, defines a concept, or compares and contrasts two ideas. Yet the essay is a form of writing that far exceeds any schoolroom task. As this course demonstrates, essays contain multitudes. They are whole worlds distilled. Since the 16th century, European and North American writers have adopted the essay to mount arguments, record memories, make observations, spread gossip, experiment with language, and see the world anew. Given this range, the essay can take on many forms and express many moods. Essays might be poetic or analytic. They may be civic-minded or introspective. Essays often draw on historical texts, lived experience, or personal reflections. And they have the potential to make readers chuckle or weep, gasp or recoil, or nod their heads in recognition. In fact, the original etymology of the word “essay” speaks to the elasticity of the genre; “essay” comes from the Old French *essai*, meaning an attempt or a trial. And the essay is just that: a thought experiment.

In this course, you'll be introduced to some of the greatest essayists of the ages, beginning with Michel de Montaigne and his 1580 collection *Les Essais*, which invented and popularized the essay as a literary genre. You'll also learn about many of Montaigne's successors, such as the 18th-century British wits Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, who circulated their essays of manners in highly popular and slightly scandalous periodicals, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. A century later, on the other side of the Atlantic, the philosopher-poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote some of the first essays on nature and the environment, while Rainer Maria Rilke, the Austrian poet, used personal letters as a kind of intimate essay form to discuss what it means to be an artist. In turn, at the beginning of the 20th century, women began to make the essay their own. Virginia Woolf's episodic pieces have a dreamlike quality to them, whereas Mary McCarthy's are sharply observant and self-scrutinizing.

This course also spends a good deal of time examining the work of living essayists—modern maestros of the form. These lectures delve into fascinating and resonant pieces by eminent essayists hailing from diverse backgrounds, such as Naomi Shihab Nye, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, Barbara Kingsolver, Patricia Hampl, David Sedaris, Michael Pollan, Jeanette Winterson, David Owen, M. F. K. Fisher, and Maya Angelou. We'll also explore experimental writers who are currently exploding and remaking the essay for their readers, including Joy Castro, Dinty Moore, Ellen Meloy, John D'Agata, Maureen Stanton, Debra Marquart, Michael P. Branch, and Tanehsi Coates. Finally, to see behind the curtain of the writing process, we'll look at examples of works in progress written by student essayists, as well as a number of pieces, both published and in draft form, by the professor.

Collectively, these writers and their work serve as models for you to learn effective rhetorical principles that cut across all good essays. Starting with Aristotle's belief that writers are most convincing when they forge a strong *ethos*, or credibility, built on the twin appeals of reason and emotion—or *logos* and *pathos*—this course demonstrates again and again how excellent essayists use similar rhetorical strategies to make their points. First and foremost, all essayists tell the truth, and they do so through a compelling first-person voice. Put simply, every essay is a true story, well-told, written by the person who lived, witnessed, or thought deeply about an experience. And these basic qualities explain why, regardless of form or tone, readers tend to find essayists credible: What essayists say comes directly from their own experience and thoughts, or what Aristotle calls "artistic proofs"—evidence that arises out of the writers themselves. In turn, essayists further support their claims with "inartistic proofs," or those that come from reading and research. The first half of these lectures, then, demonstrates how writers synthesize such artistic and inartistic proofs into a sure-fire method for crafting successful essays. Through a series of structured writing exercises, this method is one that you will learn to adopt and apply to any type of essay.

The second half of this course examines various essay types, from personal to public essays to those that are argumentative, lyrical, historic, or humorous. Indeed, essays can take nearly any form: travel writing, nature writing, portraits of famous people, public intellectual pieces, critical reviews, polemics, and countless other types. We'll learn about themed essays, such as those about food, as well as innovations that certain writers have made to the form, such as the microessay and the "proem"—a cross between poetry and prose. These lectures also consider

essay forms that, at first, might seem to be another kind of writing altogether, such as letters, commencement addresses, or blog posts. All in all, through the second half of this course, we'll see just how flexible and adaptable the essay is. And you'll learn how to harness this flexibility by combining personal experience, ideas, research, and memories to shape new forms and adopt new styles that are appropriate for each essay you attempt to write. Ultimately, this course will provide you with the writing skills to improve your essays, the critical thinking skills to critique your drafts, and the creativity to master a strong and persuasive voice, regardless of your essay's subject or purpose.

Lecture I

Steal, Adopt, Adapt: Where Essays Begin

How can we define an essay? Is it an argument, a recollection, a blog post, a food review, or a piece of literary criticism? Is it some sort of erudite, poetic prose—bound in leather and tucked on a bookshelf? It's possible for an artful essay to be any of these, depending on a writer's purpose. An essay is an attempt at connecting your personal experience, ideas, and memories to people outside yourself. It is direct and palpable as a handshake, yet to be effective, it's a form that requires careful preparation and delivery. In this lecture, we'll try to define the essay and look at five elements that essays must embody and convey.

Early Essays

- In 1580, Michel de Montaigne published a three-volume collection of writings that scholars agree are the world's first books of essays. He titled them *Attempts*. Although other writers before Montaigne turned to themselves as their primary subject matter, no one before him had thought the stuff of a person's everyday life worthy of close literary attention.
 - ◆ Montaigne's subjects range from the sublime to the mundane—from prayer and the force of imagination to drunkenness and thumbs. And his preferred structure is a series of digressions that allow him to follow the vagaries of his own thoughts.
 - ◆ Montaigne deliberately wrote vernacular French rather than formal Latin. Thus, his voice is immediate and intimate, like two friends bending elbows at a neighborhood café.
 - ◆ These unusual attributes for the time have come to define the principles of the modern essay: a true story, told in accessible language, by someone who has direct experience with the subject matter.

- ◆ We also owe Montaigne a debt for defining the essay's central purpose. He believed that the individual represents the universal, and he continually sought to link his own life to wider human experience. As Montaigne once wrote, "Every man has within himself the entire human condition." This revelation underscores the idea that essayists must write not just for themselves but also for their readers.
- After Montaigne, the popularity of this newfangled genre jumped the channel, with Francis Bacon writing his own collection in English—also called *Attempts* or *Essays*—in 1597. The English essay came fully into its own about a century later, with the rise of a middle-class reading public.
- At the beginning of the 18th century, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele launched literary and society journals with a satiric bent—called *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*—that both celebrated and critiqued their contemporaries and social peers. Theirs was a ready-made, literate audience with disposable income, casting about for something clever to read.
 - ◆ In a departure from Montaigne's self-reflection, Addison and Steele turned outward. They created narrative personas, such as Mr. Spectator, who "spectated" on human flaws and foibles, then "tattled" about them.
 - ◆ Addison and Steele aimed to delight and to surprise their readers—not to preach at them. But their essays did have an instructive purpose. They saw themselves as arbiters of their culture, defining what was—and what was not—acceptable behavior.

Defining the Essay

- Essays can be personal or public, argumentative, autobiographical, lyrical, epistolary, historic, or humorous. Some essays convey themes, while others are experimental, including such innovations as the microessay and the "proem," which is a cross between poetry and prose.
 - ◆ At first blush, some forms, such as letters, speeches, e-mails, and blog posts, might not seem to be essays at all. To complicate things even further, essays are written in many tones and approaches, from critical and playful to expository and exploratory.

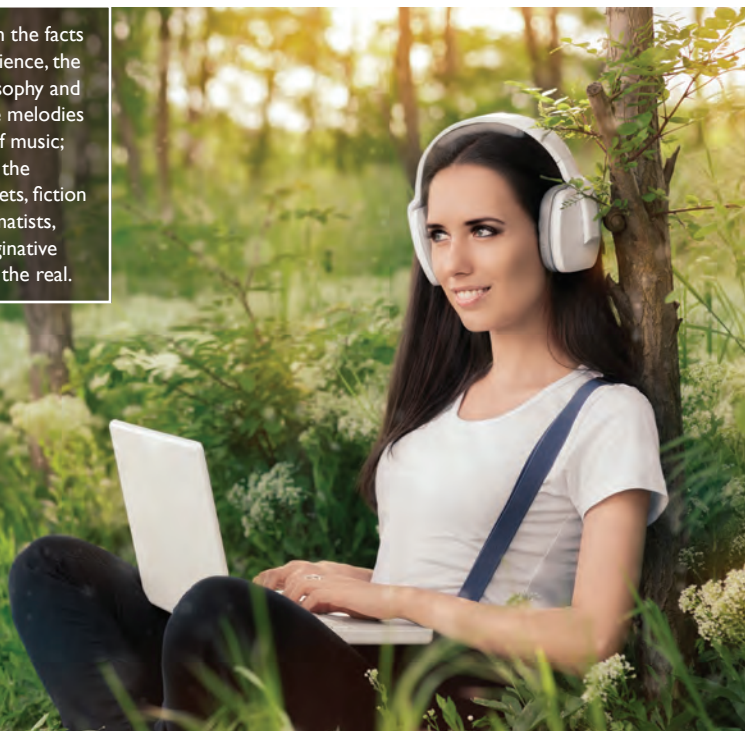
- ◆ Yet all these examples use the same basic features: the true story, told in smart words, by the person who lived or witnessed it.
- In his anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate divides essays into two categories: formal and informal.
 - ◆ What we think of as a formal essay today is largely the kind students start to write in elementary school, when teachers ask them to turn in a “theme.” Typical assignments include descriptive, comparison-contrast, expository, and persuasive essays. The intent here is to teach young minds how to write a thesis statement, use principles of organization, and use and cite secondary sources.
 - ◆ In contrast to formal essays, the informal essay is always personal. In recent years, the blog post has become a prevalent kind of informal essay. This genre can sometimes be worthy of attention, but like other social media spaces, the blogosphere is overwhelmingly occupied by trivia.
 - ◆ Lopate’s division is helpful in some ways, but even he admits, “The distinction between the formal and informal essay can be overdone, and most great essayists have crossed the line frequently.”
- We might also think of essays as containers for human memory.
 - ◆ Bill Roorbach’s definition of memoir is useful for essayists. He calls memoir “a true story, a work of narrative built directly from the memory of its writer, with an added element of creative research.”
 - ◆ In turn, Patricia Hamp’s ideas about why people love memoir is also helpful: “We do not, after all, simply *have* experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it.”
 - ◆ These ideas should resonate with essayists. What matters most is how we writers witness the world around us and remember what we saw, heard, and felt by putting those memories into words.
 - ◆ The definition of “memoir,” however, is too limited to account for all essays. An essay is not a synonym for memoir because memoir is always about the writer’s past. Although there’s no question that an artful essay can be every bit as subjective and intimate as a memoir, an essay doesn’t have to be about the writer’s own life—even though that’s often a good place to start. Thus, it’s more accurate to say that memoir is a type of essay.

- We essay writers are adventurers and trailblazers. We are able to engage a kind of originality that's harder to find in the conventions of fiction or poetry or drama. The essay has no fixed parameters apart from including a first-person narrator who is intent on telling the truth. An essay's form and style is entirely dependent on your purpose and your audience. You get to create a new form and adopt a new style with each essay that you write.
- Even more liberating, essay writers can be thieves without any concern for consequences. In fact, an essayist is expected to steal—to adopt and adapt— aspects of all other forms of writing.

Elements of Essays

- Even if we can't pinpoint an all-encompassing definition of an essay, we can recognize specific elements that seem essential for essays to encompass and convey.

Essayists draw on the facts of history and science, the musings of philosophy and theology, and the melodies and harmonies of music; then, by applying the techniques of poets, fiction writers, and dramatists, they pursue imaginative encounters with the real.



- First, an essay must have *ethos*, a Greek term meaning “moral character.” For Aristotle, in his 4th-century treatise *Rhetoric*, *ethos* is the first of three artistic proofs, or modes of persuasion, which also include *pathos* (emotional appeals) and *logos* (proof of a truth through rational arguments). These artistic proofs are available to any writer who hopes to convince and compel an audience on any topic.
- Second, whatever about an individual is presented within an essay must represent a larger, more universal truth. Once *ethos* is established and a reader trusts the writer, then an essay will speak beyond the petty concerns or obsessions of the essayist.
 - ◆ According to Lopate, the essay has embedded within it a “democratic bent, in the value it places on experience rather than status distinctions.”
 - ◆ Successful essays engage the wider world and those who inhabit it—namely, readers. Remember Montaigne’s maxim: “Every man has within himself the entire human condition.”
- Third, an essay must address the vital question “So what?” Jotting down notes about a fickle lover or how much your sister irritates you is an instance of personal storytelling that fails to consider the wider world. An essayist must ask: What is the purpose—the point—of my essay? What is my central claim, argument, or conception?
 - ◆ As essayists, we must remember that we write for the common reader, not academics or even other essayists. Our readers are intelligent, curious, and hungry for meaning.
 - ◆ And if our writing can’t speak to this common reader, then we are not speaking to people. We’re just speaking to ourselves.
- Fourth, although all essays express a structure of some kind, there is no formula to follow. An essay is a mental walkabout. When reading an essay, we meander inside someone else’s head, looking out through his or her eyes.
- Finally, essays tell the truth. Writers need to convince the audience that they are credible, have wisdom, and are reliable.
 - ◆ This brings us back to the first point, which is that an essay writer’s *ethos* is the clout of character that makes his or her claims both credible and

powerful. It's important to understand that ethos comes from writers themselves.

- ◆ And because ethos is a proof that comes directly from the writer, Aristotle calls it an artistic proof. By this, he means that the integrity of the writing stems directly from the author rather than from data, interviews, statistics, or other “nonartistic” proofs. Unlike other kinds of writing that adopt a distant and supposedly objective third-person point of view, essays are subjective, almost always written in the first person.
- ◆ Put simply, then, an essay's ethos is the credibility that comes out of the writer's self-knowledge and self-presentation. As such, an essayist cannot just tell a reader about his or her life. Instead, an essayist must allow the reader to re-experience something both vital and true about the human condition.
- ◆ Abstract ideas and themes must be grounded in concrete facts, yet these facts must then be synthesized with intelligence, emotion, and reflection that speak both to the hearts and heads of readers.

Assignment: Keeping a Commonplace Book

- The Harvard Library's website defines a “commonplace book” as “a collection of significant or well-known passages that have been copied and organized in some way, often under topical or thematic headings, in order to serve as a memory aid or reference to the compiler.”
- For the purposes of keeping your own commonplace book, use a ring-bound notebook or an artist's sketchpad. Make sure the pages are large enough to weave a tapestry of quotations, excerpts, ideas, and notes on a single page.
- Much of our lives is determined by our routines, but the commonplace book is where you either deliberately break out of your routines or write them down while examining such customary practices through new eyes. Notice the people, places, and things around you, and write down details about them that are striking, odd, beautiful, or unnerving. The result will be one-of-a-kind writing that is your own essay.

Suggested Reading

Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*.

Gutkind, "What Is Creative Nonfiction?"

Lopate, "Introduction," *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

Montaigne, *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*.

Root and Steinberg, *The Fourth Genre*.

Lecture 2

Memory Maps and Your Essay's Direction

Some travelers avoid using cameras because they don't want to look at a new place through a viewfinder. Indeed, as the word "viewfinder" suggests, a camera is often what creates a traveler's perspective. In a way, travelers who take photographs give up a bit of their autonomy because it's the camera that determines the look of whatever they observe. An essay, in contrast, carries both the memory and the understanding of a place. In this lecture, we'll learn how a writer can "map" the memories of place through the written account of his or her experiences there, and we'll see that how that map is interpreted shapes the truth of the writer's encounters with the place and its people.

Creating a Memory Map

- One way to turn notes into the first draft of an essay is to follow a two-part exercise that we might call writing a memory map.
 - ◆ First, draw a rough map of a specific place you have visited and written about. After drawing the outline, fill in your map with notes about the memories you experienced there, writing in the margins. Jot down the smells, tastes, textures, and sounds, looking back at your journal to help you remember these details.
 - ◆ The second part of this exercise involves writing a story from your map. This story is the rough draft of your essay—your first attempt at creating a map of how you experienced your travels in your mind.
- Unlike a photo album, a map is a dynamic combination of words and images. It charts a specific geography within a clear set of parameters. Further, a map evolves over time. When a cartographer realizes that this or that feature



Photographs offer only a partial window to recollection; they aren't faithful to the dynamic and liquid quality of experience, as opposed to the static and fixed.

needs to be expanded or reduced or changed altogether; a new map can be created. And because the purpose of a map is navigation, it calls out to its user; a map is meant to be explored. In this way, a map is inherently a shared form, in which the map reader and the mapmaker make meaning together:

- One way to excavate your own memories for the purpose of writing essays is to create a map of the mind for each potential piece. As you remember and record your memories, certain points are charted along the way. These points ultimately form a map that encompasses the whole of recollection and interpretation.

“Street Haunting: A London Adventure” by Virginia Woolf

- To offer a concrete example of mapmaking, let's turn to an essay by Virginia Woolf called “Street Haunting: A London Adventure.” Although many travel essays use a narrator who is a stranger in a strange land, London was Woolf's home—a familiar landscape. Yet Woolf manages to turn London into a strange land—and herself into a stranger exploring it. She does so by bringing together memory with imagination, deliberately shifting her perspective from that of a native to a visitor.
- Ethos is the narrative voice a writer creates for a reader, a voice that must have credibility, conveying the writer's truth of his or her experience, rather than just the facts. Ethos is both how an essayist understands the self and how that self is presented to others. In turn, a reader reacts to that writer—and if the writer is credible, the reader is willing to listen in order to hear what the essayist has to say. The persuasive narrative voice that Woolf creates in her essay “Street Haunting” is a strong example of how to build a credible ethos.
- Consider how Woolf navigates her literal map of London against the figurative or mental map that she draws alongside it.
 - ◆ On the one hand, Woolf traces an actual map of London, following a footpath along its streets from her home in Bloomsbury to an area called the Strand by the River Thames, then back again. If a reader were to stick to the place names associated with Woolf's evening stroll, it would be easy to draw a map of her journey.
 - ◆ This representation provides a clear sense of where Woolf goes as she “haunts” the streets on a winter's evening. But very little of her essay is concerned with the places and people she passes or the real-world events she encounters along the way. Instead, her essay is more about how she interprets those places, people, and events.
 - ◆ Woolf is interested in how she imagines these places, people, and events and how they, in turn, imagine her—both the flesh-and-blood person and the narrator. Thus, another way to trace the map of Woolf's mind is to consider how it offers interior directions—a chart that isn't at all faithful to the map a cartographer might draw.



The map created in Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting" charts both the physical world and Woolf's mind.

- In the opening sentences of “Street Haunting,” Woolf says that she wants to go out and buy a pencil, although she admits that this is only a pretext to indulge in what she sees as the “greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London.”
 - ◆ Before she ventures out into the twilight, though, Woolf describes her own sitting room, a living space that defines and expresses her life. In other words, Woolf begins by showing herself as a native. She establishes her ethos—her credibility—by talking about how well she knows the ins and outs of her flat in Bloomsbury.
 - ◆ For Woolf, one object that stamps her memory is a blue-and-white china bowl on the mantel above her fireplace. It brings to mind a windy day in Mantua, Italy, when an old shopkeeper deliberately manipulated Woolf into buying the bowl by thrusting it in her hands and saying, “Take it!” while adding that the shopkeeper herself would one day end up starving.
 - ◆ The bowl shows that Woolf’s house is a known quantity. In this space, her memories are fixed, always tied to her own narrow life. Woolf calls the memories that people associate with the places they go to every day the “shell-like covering[s] which our souls have excreted to house themselves.”
- Once she steps out into the London night, Woolf adopts the ethos of a visitor, and as a result, her metaphor for memory radically changes. Whereas before she thought of her memories as a shell, now she imagines herself as a “central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye.” Taking a winter walk offers Woolf the ability to lose herself in other people and places that are ever-changing and unfamiliar.
 - ◆ Woolf refers to these strangers on the sidewalk as an “army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room.”
 - ◆ Then, referring to herself—as well as her reader—Woolf states: “The eye ... floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.” And it is in this state of pure looking—of taking in your surroundings and losing yourself in the process—that Woolf draws a distinctly different kind of memory map.
- Once Woolf leaves her flat and shuts her front door, it’s possible for us to stroll beside her along the pathway of her actual map, where Woolf first transforms a small city park called Russell Square into a field of English countryside. The

park is nearby her home, but for a moment, Woolf thinks she's in the country with no buildings at all. By changing this urban park into a rural landscape, Woolf starts to alter her own perspective from that of a native to that of a visitor:

- Leaving Russell Square, Woolf then turns south along Oxford Street, which even today is known for its rows of shops. Striding along, Woolf looks at clothes, furniture, and jewelry for sale along the street. As she peers into the shop windows, she builds up the rooms of an imaginary house and, just as quickly, dismantles them again, under no obligation to possess this house or that one.
- Woolf then glances into a jewelry shop, admiring a string of antique pearls. As she thinks about trying on the pearls, she starts to imagine how her life might change.
 - ◆ “Wearing pearls, wearing silk,” Woolf writes, “one steps out on to a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair. . . . [And] the aged Prime Minister recounts to Lady So-and-So with the curls and the emeralds the true history of some great crisis in the affairs of the land.”
 - ◆ This moment has a reality television appeal, especially the slippage between fact and fiction that transforms an ordinary life into one that's extraordinary, in this case, a life spent in the company of the prime minister.
- Again, Woolf is like a visitor within her own city. She intensifies this idea when she reminds herself, “But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil.”
- From here, Woolf makes her way to the River Thames before finally arriving at the stationers' shop in the Strand. After witnessing an argument between the shopkeeper and his wife, Woolf buys her pencil—which is, of course, a symbol of her writing—and heads back to her flat in Bloomsbury.

Lessons from Woolf

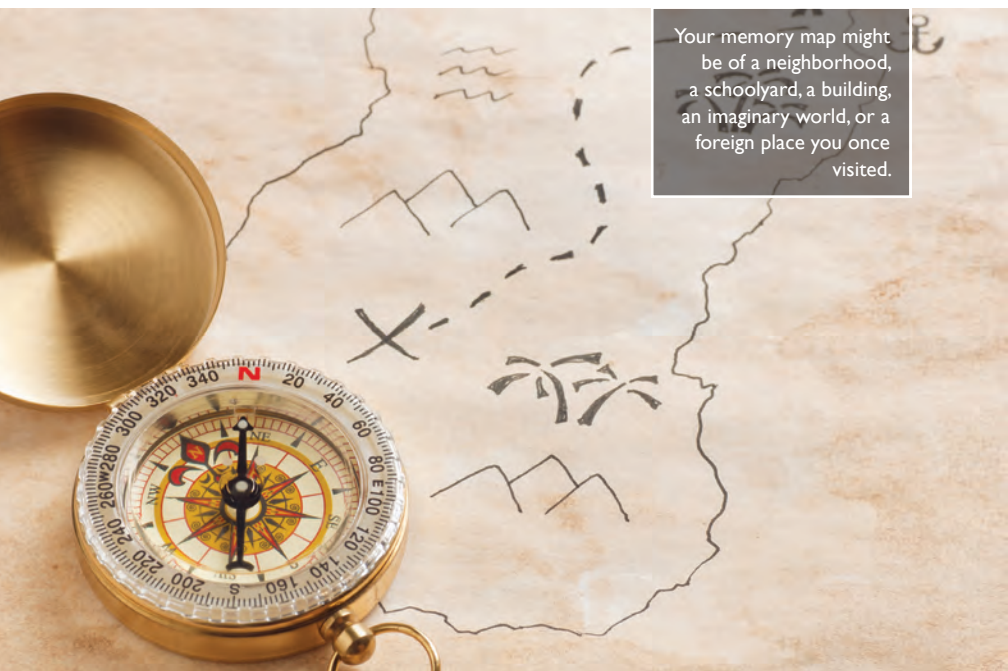
- What can a modern-day essayist learn from Woolf's walk about London? First of all, the ability to shed your individual, private self to take on a

wider perspective is crucial for any essayist. Woolf moves from the shell to the enormous eye; from being curled up inside her own memories and experiences to taking in the sights of the world around her.

- ◆ In addition, all essayists must learn how to transform personal memories into public ideas if they hope to make points that are relevant to others. Woolf steps out of herself to observe what is both strange and familiar within just a few steps of her flat in London.
 - ◆ For example, after spying a “dwarf woman” in the boot shop, Woolf’s vision abruptly changes. Up to this point, all she saw was beauty. But now her eye fixes on nothing but “the humped, the twisted and the deformed.” This profound change of mood allows Woolf to look more deeply—into the shadows where London’s destitute population lives.
 - ◆ Woolf traces this deeper map to excite empathy on the part of her reader. Her highly impressionistic essay also becomes one with sharp political points.
- Woolf offers writers a second lesson: She demonstrates that chronological time is not the way humans experience memory nor the way essays must be structured. She plays with an idea that Toni Morrison has defined as “rememory.”
 - ◆ In Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, a character named Sethe explains “rememory” in this way: “If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.”
 - ◆ In essence, Woolf and Morrison both show writers how pictures within the mind create their own places and spaces. This radical notion gives imagination an incredible power, suggesting that the way a writer sees—then rememories those sights through an essay—can change the concrete world beyond words.
 - All writers make choices. Once Woolf makes certain choices to show her reader specific memory maps of London, she can’t make contradictory or otherwise distracting choices. When essayists create an ethos or narrative voice, they do so deliberately to influence or affect their readers in a certain way. Different words, a different organization, or a different focus would make the ethos of Woolf’s “Street Haunting” something else entirely.

Assignment: Writing a Memory Map

- As an exercise, write your own memory map, drawing together the concepts of ethos, memory, imagination, and the ability to map a sense of place that is both literal and of the mind.
- Start by drawing a concrete map of a specific, meaningful place from your past. This pictorial map might be a geography you remember from your childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Make sure you can draw the place in concrete terms; it shouldn't be only an imagined place but a brick-and-mortar one, too.
- Once you're done with your visual map, in the margins, list qualities that you remember about the people who live there or about the physical features of the space itself. Be highly descriptive and tactile. Move beyond the memories of sight to sound, taste, touch, and smell. If you're writing about a sunset, don't just talk about its vibrant hues of orange and purple or its popcorn clouds. Imagine what it would be like to touch the sunset—or to taste it.



Your memory map might be of a neighborhood, a schoolyard, a building, an imaginary world, or a foreign place you once visited.

- Once you've finished your visual map, write a story out of it, either from a small corner of the map or from the whole. Don't edit yourself too much or try for anything perfect or polished. Just get your ideas down; brainstorm, make notes, or do whatever else you need to do to turn a white page or a blank computer screen into a first-draft essay.
- The story need not be long, but keep going if you're on a roll. And keep in mind this definition of "story," purportedly from Flannery O'Connor: "If nothing happens, it's not a story." In a story, something needs to happen.
- In the end, your memory map—and the story that comes out of it—will be a first go at taking the stuff of your life—your recollections—and turning them into a credible and compelling essay.

Suggested Reading

Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth*.

Woolf, "Street Haunting," *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

Lecture 3

Secrets, Confession, and a Writer's Voice

The process of writing a draft of an essay—what Aristotle called *inventio*—is rarely a straightforward one. Invention isn't a set of railroad tracks, inviting a traveler to cross the country along an elegant, tidy path. Instead, invention is more like walking through a jungle, seeing only a thick tangle of leaves a few feet ahead. Sometimes, you get stuck and have to backtrack. Sometimes, you're surprised, stumbling upon a snake or glimpsing a crescent moon through the trees. As we'll see in this lecture, the purpose of invention—that first attempt at getting your thoughts down on paper and giving them a shape—is to explore and discover what your essay wants to be about.

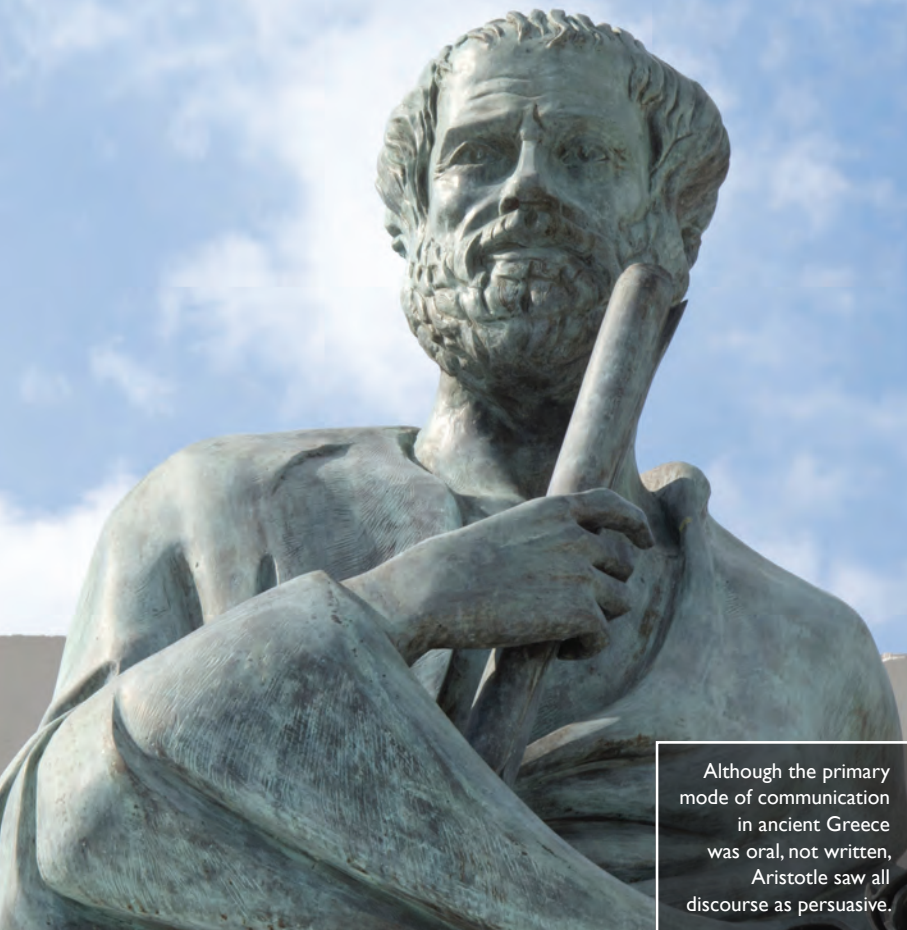
Essayists and Privacy

- The writer Patricia Hampl discusses the ethical ramifications of writing in an essay called "Other People's Secrets." Here, she explores her desire to write honest essays and her relationship with her mother.
 - ◆ When Hampl was in her early 30s, she sold her first book of poems, and her mother was exuberant. This excitement was tempered, however, by Hampl's revelation that the opening poem concludes with telling the world that her mother had epilepsy, a family secret.
 - ◆ At first, her mother was horrified that her daughter had exposed this secret. Yet when Hampl said she'd be willing to cut the poem from the book, her mother relented, and the poem stayed in.
 - ◆ Years later, Hampl asked her mother if giving permission to publish the poem was a kind of relief or whether her mother had agreed merely because she loved her. Without hesitation, her mother replied, "Because I loved you," then added, "I always hated it."

- Hampl says that publishing this poem signals the beginning of what she now calls her career of betrayal—meaning that, in writing personal essays and memoir, she inevitably tells other people's secrets now and then or interprets their personalities in ways that they find hurtful, incomplete, or simply wrong.
- On the one hand, Hampl is trying to have an open conversation about an ethical dilemma that most essayists must consider at some point: just how responsible a writer must be about other people's privacy. Yet Hampl is also talking about the transition between a process of pure invention and the complete first draft of an essay.
 - ◆ When she gets to the point of starting to contour an initial draft into something more clearly defined—less about the self and more about the world—Hampl says that her next draft must be a “new seeing of the materials of the first draft. Nothing merely cosmetic will do.”
 - ◆ In essence, when she arrives at her second draft, she must consider her readers: what will move them, what will convince them, and what might anger, irritate, or bore them.

Invention

- To quote Aristotle, invention is the faculty or power of “discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion.”
- For Aristotle, whether we communicate verbally, through writing, or even using body language, we are attempting to persuade someone else to listen to us, to believe us, or to react. Even more important is Aristotle's belief that a speaker or a writer discovers the available means of persuasion.
- Discovery suggests that writers are consciously aware of how and why they want to communicate; any piece of communication is, thus, a carefully considered process among the writer, the intended audience, and the subject matter. Writers have something important to say—their truth; thus, they must discover or choose the best available means by which to convey that truth. It's this attention to discovering the best persuasive elements that takes a writer through a process of what Aristotle called invention.



Although the primary mode of communication in ancient Greece was oral, not written, Aristotle saw all discourse as persuasive.

- To invent is not to make something up. Instead, “invention” means figuring out how to get your ideas before your reader, then persuading that reader to take them seriously. In other words, invention is a combination of that magic synthesis between a writer’s memory and imagination that then evolves into a deliberate selection of words, imagery, information, quotations, a structure, and a tone that will create the most compelling effects on a reader.
- In considering these elements, writers are required not only to think about what examples, evidence, anecdotes, or images will be credible but must also weigh the potential consequences of what they’re arguing or what they

might reveal in their essays. Once writers get their raw ideas on the page, then they must be mindful that every choice they make in an essay must be true to the essay's purpose.

- In the case of Hampl's story about disclosing her mother's epilepsy, she makes careful rhetorical choices to arrive at her main point, which is, actually, not to confess that she wronged her mother in hopes of absolution. Rather, her essay's central purpose is to consider the age-old tension between silence, which is dependent on privacy, and expression, which is dependent on revelation.
- Another prominent essayist, Dinty Moore, writes about a similar topic in his piece entitled "The Deeper End of the Quarry." Yet Moore ultimately comes to a different conclusion about whether it's better to choose expression over silence.
 - ◆ Whereas Hampl makes the case that, in the end, interpreting our own pasts through writing is the best means we humans have of creating a collective sense of history and witness, in Moore's essay, he explains why sometimes a writer should keep quiet.
 - ◆ Specifically, Moore couldn't finish a book he was working on about raising a daughter in America's "girl-poisoning culture," even after five years' worth of research and writing.
 - ◆ Although Moore agrees that the duty of the writer is to "view the world with no filters over the eyes," when it came to writing about how he and his preteen daughter grappled with sexism and the objectification of girls in American popular culture, he felt that he just couldn't be honest, at least not on the page. Such honesty would mean that he would have to judge and find fault in his own child.

Essayists' Choices

- From a rhetorical perspective, it's interesting to think about how Hampl and Moore come at their arguments from both sides of the expression/silence coin. In particular, it's useful to examine the choices they make in their word choice and form. The opposite decisions that these two essayists make either to reveal or to conceal their families' dirty laundry illuminate how essayists take up distinct modes of invention in seeking to express disparate points and, thus, create different approaches to achieving ethos or credibility as writers.

- For example, toward the end of Hampl's essay, as she's bringing together her main ideas, she writes:

[My mother's] passage through this life, the shape she too has made of things, her visions, the things she alone knows ... I can see now that she was standing up for the truth of her experience, the literal fact of it, how it jerked and twisted not only her body but her life, how it truly seized her. My poem and I—we merely fingered the thing, casually displaying it for the idle passerby. What she knows and how she knows it must not be taken from her.

- ◆ Here, the diction is more literary or formal, and Hampl uses metaphor and sense-based imagery. She plays on the double meaning of the word “seized,” and she uses the precision of the verbs “jerked” and “twisted” to re-create the sensation for a reader of what a physical and an emotional seizure might be like. Because the main point of her essay is complex, it makes sense that her language level and imagery are also complex.
 - ◆ Yet Hampl also wishes to speak to a wide audience, to touch universal human experience. Thus, she also uses more informal diction, with such words as “things,” “knows,” and “life.” The final sentence, made up almost entirely of monosyllable words, is accessible but also emphatic.
- In a passage from Moore's essay in which he is also synthesizing his main points, he has a couple of instances of elevated diction, but for the most part, his word choice is conversational. Because his essay is about how he struggled and failed to write a book about his day-to-day life raising a girl, this conversational diction is true to his essay's purpose.

Returning to Aristotle

- Once Hampl and Moore knew what they wanted to write about and made distinct choices about their essays' diction and form, other options were no longer available to them.
 - ◆ Moore couldn't write a long, meandering essay about silence, chockful of digressions and arresting metaphors. To do so would belie his purpose.

- ◆ In turn, Hampl couldn't craft a brief, colloquial essay to probe the messiness of individual memory in the face of history. That tone and approach wouldn't serve her sweeping yet nuanced points.
 - ◆ And it's these self-imposed rhetorical limitations that help explain and determine how Hampl and Moore's respective essays develop in the way they do and why their voices just aren't the same.
- And their voices shouldn't be the same, not if their desire is to further their ethos or credibility with their readers. In both cases, these writers are dishing up dirt on other people. But an essayist's ethos shouldn't be built on gossip or telling other people's tales. For different reasons and with distinct purposes in mind, both Hampl and Moore had to think about what it means to be both ethical and credible when writing about others.
 - As you follow your own process of invention, you'll also need to realize that, regardless of what you choose to write about, in seeking stories and writing them down, you're becoming a kind of history keeper.
 - ◆ Whatever you put into your essays will be but a version of the truth, not the whole truth, and you'll have to acknowledge your limitations.
 - ◆ Even more, if you choose to reveal family dysfunction or the irritating quirks of your friends, you'll need to ask whether you're doing so for the right reasons. Your goal should be to witness the imperfect and messy but also the beautiful and miraculous experience of the human.
 - ◆ As long as you keep that intention, you'll inevitably create a strong ethos, selecting the right words and putting those words into the right order to develop a workable structure.

Suggested Reading

Aristotle, *Rhetoric*.

Castro, *Family Trouble*.

Cognard-Black, "The Hot Thing," *From Curlers to Chainsaws*.

Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*.

Moore, "The Deeper End of the Quarry," *Family Trouble*.

Lecture 4

The Skeptical Essayist: Conflicting Views

At times, writers contradict themselves. Sometimes, they change their minds about what they once thought was true; at other times, they realize that their ideas are inconsistent. And once in a while, writers deliberately reverse course. On more than one occasion, Socrates argued against himself, switching sides to test all parts of a claim. Socrates called his imaginary contrarian the “man who is always refuting me.” Debate teams, political strategists, and defense lawyers have long borrowed this technique to poke holes in their own lines of reasoning and learn how their opponents might try to undermine them. As we’ll see in this lecture, an essayist can also benefit from taking on the stance of the refuting man or woman.

Elastic Thinking

- A primary reason to avoid being too one-sided as a writer is that keeping a number of possibilities in play enables you to think creatively. In a foreword to the 2012 edition of *The Best American Essays*, Robert Atwan argues that successful essayists “like to examine—or, to use [a] favorite term, *consider*—topics from various perspectives.”
- Even if a writer ultimately comes down on one side or the other of an issue, it’s still compelling and potentially surprising to consider multiple perspectives along the way. Doing so develops an elasticity of mind, an ability to appreciate both nuance and complexity that helps deepen an essay’s range of ideas.
- Elastic thinking also ensures that a writer won’t become a ranting partisan—a Joseph McCarthy or a Hunter S. Thompson that a majority of readers would

probably dismiss. Writers who are empathetic to both sides of an issue and consider several versions of the same story can build their ethos and bring readers more firmly into their camp.

Memories of a Catholic Girlhood by Mary McCarthy

- In 1957, Mary McCarthy published an astonishing memoir called *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, in which she becomes her own refuting woman, dealing directly with competing versions of the same events.
- The book is astonishing for two reasons. First, McCarthy didn't wince when she related the abuse she and her siblings endured at the hands of relatives who took them in after they were orphaned. Second, McCarthy tells her story straight before telling it slant. In other words, after she reveals aspects of her terrible childhood, she criticizes her own recollections, offering them up to scrutiny. As one reviewer noted, McCarthy's reversals are particularly powerful because of her "remarkable candor." At one point in her book, she simply states, "There are several dubious points in this memoir."
- McCarthy's memoir is a watershed book for modern-day essayists. Rather than allowing herself to invent a truth for the sake of a good story, she confesses that she must have made up or misremembered various details and events. In cataloging factual mistakes and admitting moments of pure fancy, McCarthy reveals her own fallibility, making her writing vulnerable.
- But this method doesn't qualify her ethos; she doesn't seem wishy-washy or capricious. Instead, she comes across as an elastic thinker. By criticizing her own desire to edit and shape her past experiences, McCarthy strengthens her credibility as a narrator.
- Perhaps the most striking section from *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is a chapter called "A Tin Butterfly," which was published as a standalone essay in *The New Yorker*. It is a disturbing piece in which McCarthy tells of the physical and psychological abuse she and her brothers received from their foster parents, Aunt Margaret and Uncle Myers. In essays, moments of violence are often handled in sensationalistic, clichéd, and one-sided ways, but in "A Tin



In her book *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy is honest and raw with her memories, trying to tell it like it was, calmly and with detail—which was quite revolutionary for the late 1950s when the book appeared.

Butterfly,” McCarthy provides contrasting views, and this approach makes her horrific experiences all the more affecting and believable.

- ◆ Early on in the piece, McCarthy paints unflattering pictures of her foster parents. Uncle Myers is brutish and wears a sweat-stained “wife-beater,” while Aunt Margaret has corrugated, prune-like skin. McCarthy links her uncle’s rough looks and her aunt’s prim lack of fashion to their respective methods of abuse, which are revealed later.
- ◆ As her essay unfolds, McCarthy relates multiple examples of how Margaret and Myers mistreated her and her brothers. Because Uncle Myers was suspicious of education, Mary wasn’t allowed to read. Candy was forbidden, as were toys. On winter weekends, Mary and her brothers had to play outside for six hours each day; frozen and miserable, they stood in the snow, crying.
- ◆ Myers and Margaret also beat the children. When Mary won a prize at school for an essay she wrote, her uncle took her into the basement bathroom and beat her with a razor strop—as McCarthy explains, “to teach me a lesson, he said, lest I become stuck-up.” Other beatings often came without any clear reason or excuse.
- ◆ As the culmination of this appalling treatment, McCarthy tells the story of a tin butterfly pin that her youngest brother, Sheridan, got from the bottom of a Cracker Jack box. A week later, however, the pin went missing, and without any evidence, Myers claimed that Mary had stolen it.
- ◆ Both her aunt and uncle insisted that Mary admit her guilt, but she refused, standing up to them for the first time. Ultimately, she was beaten by Margaret and Myers, and although she came close to admitting a crime she hadn’t committed, in the end, she swore that she never took the butterfly. Eventually, the beating stopped. “I finally limped up to bed,” she writes, “with a crazy sense of inner victory, like a saint’s, for I had not recanted, despite all they had done or could do to me.”
- ◆ At first blush, McCarthy’s essay seems to be about goodness triumphing over evil, but that wasn’t her central purpose. She goes on to relate a moment many years later, after she and her brothers were rescued by their Protestant grandfather, and McCarthy went away to college. Her brother Preston told her that he had seen Uncle Myers planting the evidence of the tin butterfly to implicate Mary in its theft.
- ◆ This stunning revelation concludes the first part of the essay, a moment that reveals the full extent of Myers’s cruelty. There’s a satisfaction that



In the essay "A Tin Butterfly," McCarthy's brother finds a trinket in a box of Cracker Jack and uses it to make his siblings jealous.

comes with such conclusions, one that's mirrored in myths, fairytales, and classic fiction when, say, Little Red Riding Hood outwits the Big Bad Wolf. When a bad guy is punished, a mystery is solved, and good people live happily ever after; such stories reverberate with the pleasure of resolution, one that speaks to our human need to make order out of chaos.

- If "A Tin Butterfly" had stopped there, McCarthy's ending would have followed that of a Victorian novel or a Hollywood blockbuster. Yet real life rarely allows for such gratifying outcomes. More often than not, life is middling and messy, and the second part of McCarthy's essay explores such ambiguity.
 - ◆ In the second part of her essay, McCarthy turns to outside sources to try to verify her own memories. But by consulting her siblings and other family members, her memories are undermined rather than strengthened.
 - ◆ "About the tin butterfly episode, I must make a ... serious correction or at least express a doubt," she admits. "An awful suspicion occurred

to me. ... I suddenly remembered that in college I had started writing a play of this subject. Could the idea that Uncle Myers put the butterfly at my place have been suggested to me by my teacher?"

- ◆ After this realization, McCarthy checks with her brother Kevin and again with Preston, but neither remembers. Although she remains certain that she and her siblings talked over the butterfly affair one evening, McCarthy confesses, "I do not know, really, whether I took the course in Playwriting before or after [that] night. ... [And t]he most likely thing, I fear, is that I fused two memories. *Mea culpa.*"
 - ◆ With that phrase "*mea culpa*," McCarthy potentially frustrates her readers, thwarting any hope of a tidy ending. Interestingly, her readers are also implicated in McCarthy's doubts. They experienced moral outrage at Myers's duplicity at the end of the first part of her essay, but they now feel unnerved and unsettled—unsure whether their first conclusion was the right one.
 - ◆ Further, because McCarthy provides her contrasting views through interviews with family members, she accrues credibility as a writer who is willing to suspend her own desires in favor of seeking the truth. Even though her readers are denied the pleasure of a simple, satisfying ending with a clear hero and an exposed villain, McCarthy's readiness to throw herself under the proverbial bus makes her essay even more convincing and realistic. In weakening her own conclusions, she winds up strengthening her overall ethos.
- By having her refuting woman write an addendum to "A Tin Butterfly," McCarthy not only re-creates a productive tension between fact and truth, but she also takes on a kind of double vision. And this double vision enables her and her readers to adopt a dual consciousness: to see Myers as a villain and McCarthy as a hero but also both of them as a mess of contradictory desires and actions, in which neither one is fully good or bad.

Assignment: Refuting Your Work

- Using a first draft of an essay that you've already written, take on the role of the refuting man or woman. Imagine that you disagree with your own recollections and suppositions. Scrutinize your own statements and assertions.

Do you know for sure that the information you're providing is accurate, or are you merely assuming that it is? Be skeptical about any conclusions that you've drawn. Are your resolutions convenient for you as the narrator of your own piece? Do they cast you in a flattering light and leave the wrinkles and warts of others exposed?

- To help strengthen your refuting position, you might interview others who experienced the same events you did. Then, just as McCarthy did, write a second part to your own essay, one in which you question everything that you've declared or solved in the first part. Your aim shouldn't be to overturn anything or to flip your reader's mind the other way. Instead, in the words of Robert Atwan, your job is to consider, not to conclude.
- Try to keep both sides of your story or both halves of your argument in tension with each other. In the end, the point of taking on the role of the Socratic refuting man or woman is to show that no matter what story we tell or what case we make, we writers are all human. In fact, it's our humanness—our limitations and our ignorance as much as our knowledge and insight—that can make us into astonishing, absorbing essayists.

Suggested Reading

McCarthy, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.

Muller, "The Conversion of a Climate-Change Skeptic," *The New York Times*.

Roorbach, *Writing Life Stories*.

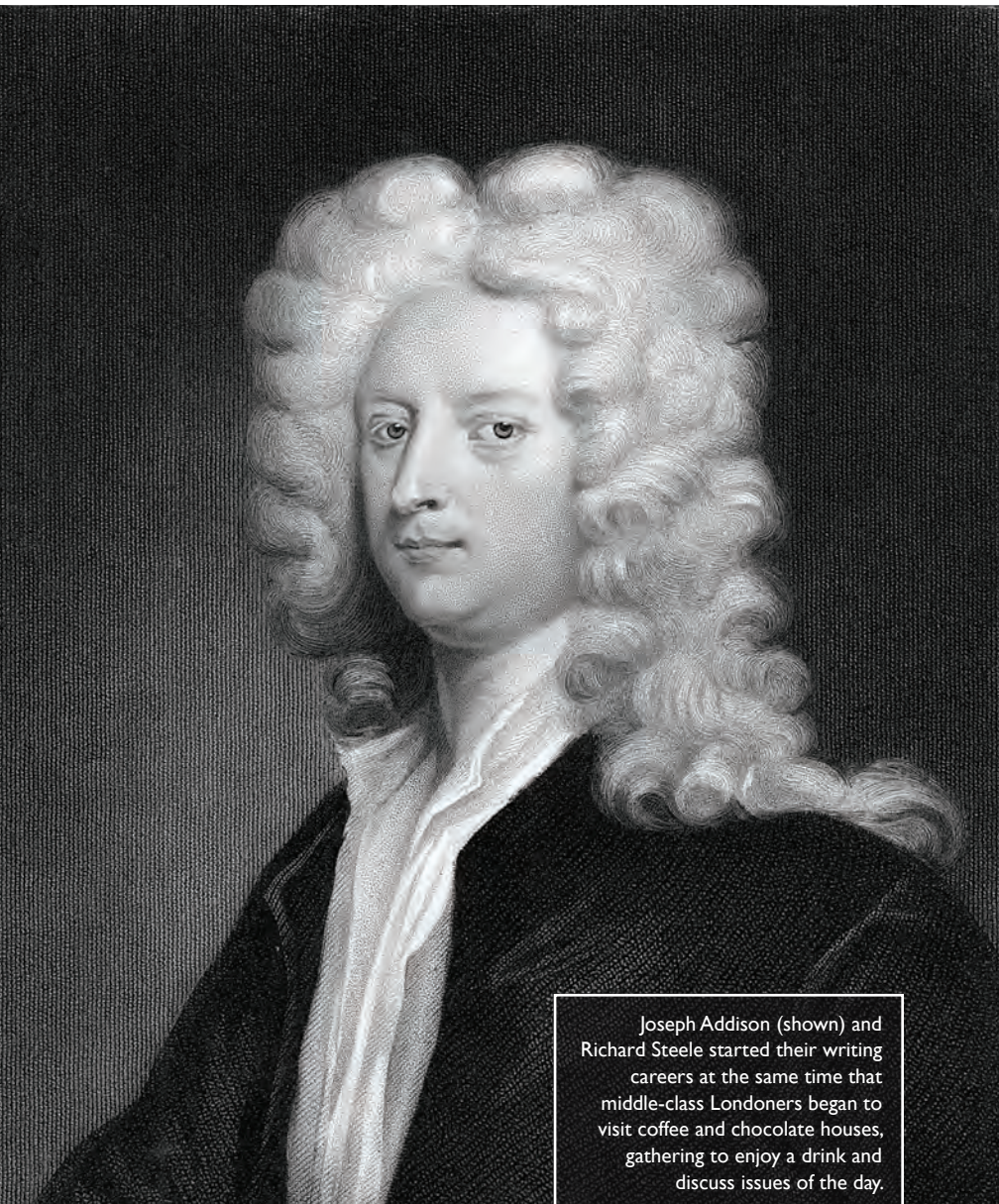
Lecture 5

The Reasonable Essayist: Artistic Proofs

Whether essayists are humorous or heartrending, conversational or bookish, a reader must believe that these writers are reasonable if their points are to have resonance or the potential to change a reader's mind. To turn to sources other than yourself—what Aristotle called “non-artistic proofs,” such as interviews, data, quotations, or photographs—is one way to appear reasonable, because this strategy incorporates other people's voices and lends objectivity to your essay. Yet there are also “artistic proofs” that come from within yourself, from expertise you've gained through direct observation and experience—through both feeling and thinking.

Richard Steele and Joseph Addison

- As we've said, ethos, or the ethical appeal, is the most important kind of artistic proof, but another vital appeal is *logos*: the development of coherent and convincing arguments achieved through both inductive and deductive reasoning. To understand logical appeals through inductive and deductive means, let's look at the work of two British essayists who were masters of the reasonable essay in the early 1700s, Richard Steele and Joseph Addison.
- In 1709, Steele started a society and literary journal called *The Tatler*, in which he, along with Addison, published essays about their observations and judgments of society. Just two years later, the two launched yet another periodical named *The Spectator*, this time, with a fictional narrator who was part of an imaginary group called the Spectator Club.



Joseph Addison (shown) and Richard Steele started their writing careers at the same time that middle-class Londoners began to visit coffee and chocolate houses, gathering to enjoy a drink and discuss issues of the day.

- Although both journals were dismissed by some as nothing more than gossip rags, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* became instant hits. In particular, they featured essays on what it meant to be civilized: how to dress, eat, think, and converse like people of manners.

Inductive Reasoning

- “Inductive reasoning” is thinking that moves from particular information, pieces of evidence, or case studies to a more general conclusion. It is the basis of the scientific method—an approach that always starts with specific data or experiments to arrive at more broad-based theories and explanations.
- Whenever we engage in inductive reasoning—no matter how many examples or pieces of data we have—at some point, we must make an inductive leap from particular instances to a more broad-based conclusion.
- It’s important to note that although the conclusion of a deductive argument is certain, the validity of the conclusion is only probable—based on the given evidence. An essayist working through an inductive argument must be convincing in how he or she builds the case.

“The Trial of the Petticoat” by Joseph Addison

- Addison’s “The Trial of the Petticoat” is a persuasive piece arguing against the fashion of enormous hoop petticoats that were all the rage in his time. In the essay, Addison starts by creating the fictitious context of a legal proceeding. As the mock trial is about to begin, however, the criminal can’t fit through the door because of her enormous petticoat.
- Given that hoop petticoats weren’t comfortable, cheap, or convenient, they were obviously meant to symbolize the wealth and status of the wearer. Addison strikes at the heart of the quixotic nature of such fashions when he asks the criminal why she would wear such a crazy thing, and she answers, “that she had a mind to look as big and burly as other persons of her quality . . . ; that if she laid it aside, people would think she was not made like other women.”

- With this introduction of the essay's main purpose—to consider whether it's truly civilized to wear impractical clothing in the name of fashion—Addison puts forward the arguments on both sides of the issue.
 - ◆ The counselors on behalf of the petticoat point out that the owners of British woolen mills, rope manufacturers, and whalers all profit from the petticoats, which use these materials in prodigious amounts. This argument follows a line of inductive reasoning, demonstrating how this undergarment supports specific industries and British trade as a whole.
 - ◆ The petticoat's counsel then concludes with a zinger, noting that the “weight and unwieldiness of the garment ... might be of great use to preserve the honor of families.”
- Addison then takes up the other side of the case, also following an inductive argument. He first points out that men have gone more into debt because they must purchase expensive petticoats for their wives and daughters.
 - ◆ He then contends that even though British manufacturers might get richer producing materials for petticoats, the poor will get poorer: Old dresses will no longer be handed down to the poor but will be cut up and made into even more petticoats. Ultimately, Addison finishes by saying that while petticoated virgins might not be seduced as easily, such sexual frustration might prove too successful, and young women will remain unmarried.
 - ◆ Addison touches on each of these particulars to address the two main points of his challengers: that hoop petticoats add to the nation's wealth and that they protect women's virtue. On the contrary, Addison argues, this ridiculous fashion drains wealth from British citizens and undermines marriage. His final inductive leap is clear: Such petticoats should not be allowed in respectable social circles.
- Throughout the essay, Addison is clever with his *logos*. Although it's absurd to believe that a hoop petticoat could alter the national economy or make a difference in whether people have sex, Addison's application of inductive reasoning isn't actually meant to convince his reader on either of these points. Instead, he's applying a highly rational approach to expose just how irrational this garment is.

- Addison makes his rhetorical choices deliberately, playing on society's staunch belief in the validity of rational thinking yet giving his astute middle-class readers an idea of just how unreasonable wealthy people can be. By the end of his essay, Addison briefly drops the veil of cool, rational *logos* and calls the hoop petticoat a “monstrous invention,” revealing his true purpose: to expose the atrocity of the rich who flaunt their peacock feathers in the name of status. Addison hopes to teach his audience to be women and men of substance, not surface.

“The Gentleman; The Pretty Fellow” by Richard Steele

- In another *Tatler* essay about what makes for a gentleman versus a rogue, Steele follows a deductive process of reasoning. This essay starts by defining two general types of men: A Gentleman is a man of good judgment, one who displays his superior discernment in how he converses with others. In contrast, the Pretty Fellow is artificial and consumed by his own vanity.
- After Steele offers these broad definitions, he then gives his readers two examples: One is a character named Sophronius, and the other is Jack Dimple. According to Steele, Sophronius enters a room looking directly forward, while Jack must repeatedly admire himself in the mirror. With this deductive reasoning process, Steele defines his terms and applies them to a specific case, thus illustrating his point with both elegance and clarity.
- Deduction is epitomized by the “syllogism,” a form of reasoning that draws a conclusion from two premises—a major premise and a minor one—both of which are assumed to be true. Aristotle's famous example of syllogistic reasoning is this:

All men are mortal [major premise].

Socrates is a man [minor premise].

Socrates must be mortal.

- With deductive reasoning, then, the conclusion is certain, although that doesn't necessarily mean that the conclusion is either true or ethical. Veracity depends on whether the premises are true and ethical.

- For Steele's essay on the Gentleman, he builds his deductive arguments around two linked syllogisms. The first is this:

*A Gentleman is a man of good judgment.
Sophronius has good judgment.
Sophronius is a Gentleman.*

The second is this:

*A Pretty Fellow mimics how a gentleman looks and speaks.
Jack Dimple mimics the look and speech of Gentlemen.
Jack Dimple is a Pretty Fellow.*

- If it's true that Gentlemen have good judgment and Sophronius has this trait, then the conclusion that he's a Gentleman must be accurate. But it's easy to see how this kind of reasoning could be manipulated. For one thing, who's to say what counts as good or bad judgment? And how could we know for sure that Sophronius isn't impersonating a Gentleman?
- The potential dangers of deduction become all the more obvious if we consider how syllogistic reasoning has facilitated such horrors as the Holocaust or American slavery. Adolf Hitler built his Final Solution around a deductive process, believing that Aryan people constituted a superior race, that Jewish people weren't of this race, and therefore, that Jewish people were inferior—and should be exterminated.

“Tense Present”

- Like Addison and Steele, David Foster Wallace is often touted as an arbiter of modern American culture. In his essay “Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage,” he grapples with controversies concerning English language usage.
- In the essay, Wallace speaks of the advice he gives his student writers who speak Standard Black English. In one-on-one conferences with these students,

Wallace claims that he requires them to master Standard Written English (SWE) or, in his words, “Standard White English.” According to Wallace, he tells his students, “I’m respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE.”

- On a purely logical level, Wallace is being completely reasonable, following a line of deductive reasoning. He offers a major premise: that SWE is “the dialect of the American elite.” Then, he gives a minor premise: that his black students often speak and write in their own dialect. As a result, the black students are not and cannot be members of the American elite until they learn how to write and speak SWE.
- As might be imagined, Wallace’s advice wasn’t always appreciated by his black students. And he ultimately learned a point that all essayists must keep in mind: Our *logos* is never applied in a cultural vacuum. As Wallace puts it, “I allowed the substance and style of my Logical Appeal to completely torpedo my Ethical Appeal.” A writer’s *ethos*—all that makes up his or her identity—will inevitably determine whether his or her *logos* will be seen as fair and measured.
- Wallace’s story also gives essayists yet another lesson about how to be reasonable in our writing. In turning the tables on his own story and flipping his own logical process, he actually reestablishes his *ethos*. Wallace makes himself more credible in admitting that he was being reasonable to a fault.

Suggested Reading

Addison, “[The Trial of the Petticoat],” *The Tatler in Four Volumes*.

Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*.

Cognard-Black and Cognard, *Advancing Rhetoric*.

Steele, “[The Gentleman; The Pretty Fellow],” *The Tatler in Four Volumes*.

Wallace, “Tense Present,” *Harper’s Magazine*.

Lecture 6

The Unreasonable Essayist: Strategic Irony

Reasonable writers gain a built-in ethos as a result of their lucid arguments, evenhandedness, and smart yet familiar style, but there are times when essayists choose to be unreasonable, telling their truths slant rather than straight. Sometimes, an unreasonable writer is provocative by design, such as when David Foster Wallace wants his readers to question negative political ads. Sometimes, unreasonable writers use demagoguery to play on readers' prejudices, such as 19th-century anti-abolitionists who catalogued the benefits of slavery in newspaper essays. And still other times, a writer's lack of reason is an effective form of irony. This ironic unreasonableness can be most interesting because it's a backward way to build your ethos, arguing the opposite of what you intend.

"Eat Your Pets" by Ellen Meloy

- Ellen Meloy was a staunch environmentalist and a nature writer who died suddenly in 2004. Her observant and funny essays were chiefly about the American West, the place where she lived and worked.
- In a darkly comic piece called "Eat Your Pets," Meloy uses a tone of sharp irony to show the virtual impossibility of living off the land, at least for modern urbanites. Meloy's intent is to demonstrate that virtually all her readers are reliant on industrialized agriculture, even those of us who frequent farmers' markets, eat local and seasonal foods, and buy organic products. In order to eat off the grid, Meloy claims that a city slicker or even most modern-day farmers would have no choice but to prepare and consume taboo foods, including roadkill, rodents, and pets.



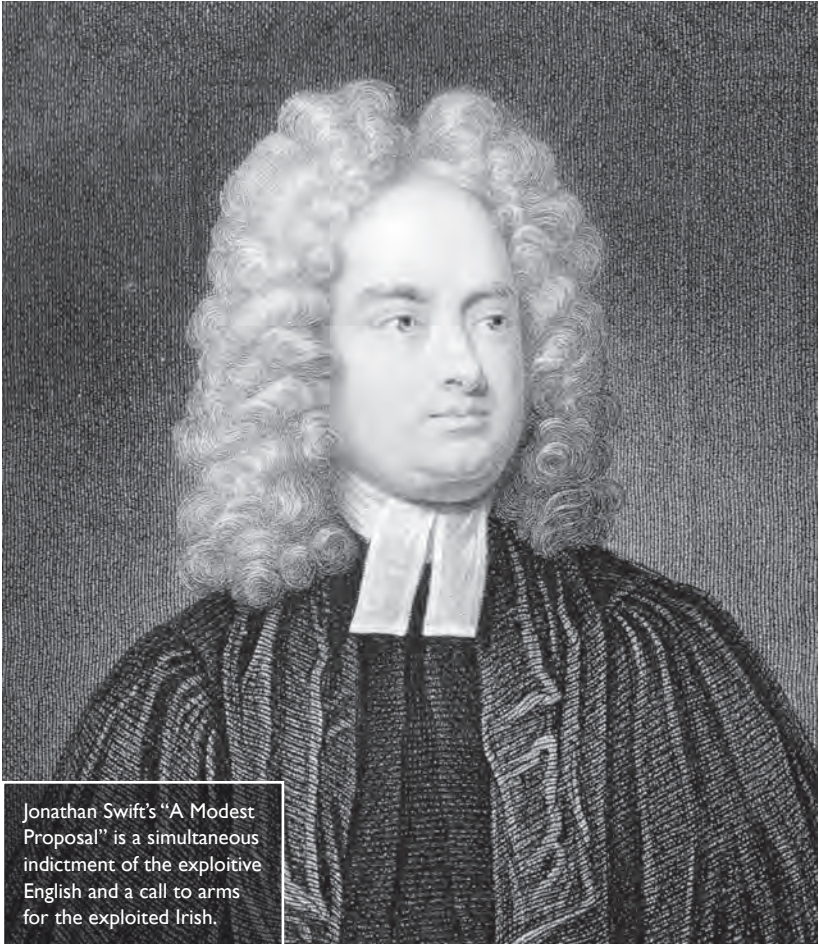
In her essay “Eat Your Pets,” Ellen Meloy uses strange imagery that can pull a reader up short; for example, she describes herself in a traffic jam as “slumped over the wheel, dripping stalactites of drool.”

- Although we might be aghast at Meloy’s solution to pulling us back from what she calls our society’s “ecocidal brink,” her tone deserves some attention. She’s mocking her own subject and, to a certain extent, her readers and even herself. As mentioned earlier, a reasonable essayist gets instant credibility for being thoughtful, balanced, clear, and open-minded, but because Meloy is being deliberately unreasonable, her ethos is more complex.
- Contributing to Meloy’s complex ethos are her thick diction and imagery. She chooses unusual nouns and verbs, such as “throttled,” “gnawed,” “stalactites,” and “incite,” which take a moment for a reader to process. She also uses strange imagery that can pull a reader up short. And because it takes some work to read, her sardonic tone is not immediately obvious.
- Meloy’s unusual diction and imagery also get her reader to reexamine—and, thus, rethink—the urban landscape, as well as people’s relationship to what they put on their kitchen tables. Yet because her tone is ironic, she also seems to implicate her readers and even herself for being complacent participants in this broken environment.

- Meloy's simply yet sardonic conclusion—"Eat your pets!"—reveals the genius of her unreasonable ethos. At first, readers may laugh uncomfortably, imagining what it would be like to eat their hamsters, cats, or dogs. Then, a reader may realize that what we think is edible or inedible is a fairly arbitrary distinction. There are societies that consume dogs, after all, as well as cats, hamsters, and songbirds.
- Further, although a reader never really believes that Meloy is going to eat a retriever, the irony of foodies calling themselves "local" and "sustainable" eaters becomes clear. In fact, much of Meloy's essay is an indictment of how so much about American food and foodways has become class-based and inequitable. The unreasonableness of Meloy's ethos is the very tool that allows her readers to see their own unreasonableness and complacency when it comes to what we eat and where it comes from.

"A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift

- Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is now a legendary essay, although it was published as an unassuming pamphlet back in 1729. According to the subtitle, the piece was meant to help prevent the "Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden on Their Parents, or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public."
- At first blush, the essay seems like a reasonable one, particularly because Swift's tone is replete with what we now call governmentese. This innocuous tone, coupled with the fact that the essay itself uses the rigorous logic of classical argumentation, makes it all the more surprising when Swift details his appalling proposal.
- The proposal is simple: Because Ireland is suffering from overpopulation, poverty, and famine and because an Irish baby is, according to Swift, a wholesome and tasty food, a readily available means to take care of Ireland's national crisis is for wealthy Englishmen to buy and eat surplus Irish babies. Though his suggestion is shocking, Swift's adoption of a measured tone, coupled with rational argumentation, makes it seem as though a reader's assent is inevitable.



- At the time, Ireland was an English colony, economically and politically dependent on Great Britain, and the English benefitted greatly from this inequitable relationship. Keeping Ireland weak enabled England to plunder its resources, tax its citizens, and offer little or no assistance for the country's unemployment and food shortages. In a sense, the English were devouring the Irish, consuming their land and wealth.

- Swift decided to literalize this metaphor, suggesting that the English might as well actually eat the Irish, given that they were doing it anyway. This dreadful idea enabled Swift to shame England for its greed and inhumanity and shock members of the Irish Parliament into trying to do something about the nation's plight.
- Swift crafts his argument as a Ciceronian oration, named for the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero.
 - ◆ In a Ciceronian oration, speakers or writers establish their ethos through the first four parts: an *exordium*, presenting the topic as worthy of consideration; a *narratio*, necessary background information on the issue; a *propositio*, in which a position is taken; and a *partitio*, in which major arguments are outlined.
 - ◆ From here, *logos* is displayed in the *confirmatio*, confirmation of the authors' positions through persuasion and outside evidence, and the *refutatio*, in which narrators preempt disagreements by addressing potential objections. *Pathos* is engaged in the *digressio*, which includes a story, anecdote, extended metaphor, or allegory that brings the main point home. Finally, authors reestablish their ethos in the *peroratio*, which attempts to address why readers or listeners should care about the issue.
 - ◆ Swift's obvious choice to mimic a Ciceronian oration would not have been lost on an audience of educated politicians in Ireland and England. Yet Swift's purpose is radically opposed to his essay's structure; although the structure is rational, his purpose is unreasonable. The inevitable result of such a disconnect between form and function is satire.
- The sharpest stings of Swift's satire and the climax of his argument come at the end of his essay. In his *refutatio*, at first, he declines to let any man talk to him of "other expedients," then proceeds to list those very ideas, including the numerous proposals Swift himself had already made to members of the Irish Parliament to help alleviate starvation and poverty.
- Even more importantly, in Swift's *peroratio*, he turns almost serious, asking what other way might be found to provide food and clothing for the Irish poor. He then goes on to say that even the parents of poor children would prefer his solution to their current hardships.

- In the final move of his essay, Swift piles on the suffering in order to pull back the curtain and show his reader the stark truth: that the Irish poor would be better off dead. Yet the cycle of poverty that Swift has just enumerated is clearly an endless one—a cycle that doesn't actually cease with death.
- Swift's concluding paragraph returns to the dry, distanced narrator he established early on, and he claims that he himself has no children by which he can "propose to get a single penny." In other words, Swift cannot be attacked as self-serving, and a reader must believe him when he says that he has "no other motive than the public good of my country."
 - ◆ Of course, this claim to an ethos of altruism twists the knife of irony because Swift really is interested in the public good of his country. Yet he has other motives, too. By channeling his unreasonable argumentation through this reasonable rhetorical form, he makes it plain just how monstrous it is that nothing has been done to help these people.
 - ◆ And as readers move through his Ciceronian oration, they realize—with horror—how cold and inhumane it is that, in fact, the Irish poor are being consumed, left to a fate worse than death.
 - ◆ Swift has another motive, as well: He gets to castigate the government officials who have allowed such cannibalism to occur. At one level, then, his scathing satire is a way of conveying his own anger and frustration through a highly controlled means. At another level, it's a way for Swift to show his primary audience—members of the Irish and British parliaments—that it is within their power to do something.

Assignment: Practicing Unreasonableness

- To try your own hand and unreasonableness in writing, choose a controversial issue that you'd like to address, such as whether teachers should be allowed to have guns in their classrooms or whether super-PACs should be allowed to bankroll political campaigns. Whatever issue you choose, make sure that your central point is to try and expose hypocrisy, greed, or bias at a national level. And don't choose an amorphous, generalized problem, such as hate crimes or teenage suicide. Your issue must be specific enough that you can mount an argument for or against it.

- Then draft an essay in which you take a clear stance on your issue and offer up a corrupt or outrageous solution to this national problem, although you should make sure that your solution is technically feasible. No solution should involve magic, supernatural events, or space aliens. Remember: hypothetically speaking, we could eat our pets or children. And even though these aren't reasonable ways to solve our environmental problems or poverty, it's certainly possible to do them.
- While writing your draft, think carefully about either your tone or your form.
 - ◆ If you want primarily to work on developing an ironic tone, craft a narrator who talks about the problem in a seemingly rational way, even though the solution is clearly absurd.
 - ◆ If, in contrast, you'd like to try manipulating a practical format into something it's not meant to do, choose a structure for your draft that already exists in the world—ideally, one that's organized through *logos*. Select a type of document that has a recognizable and straightforward structure and copy that structure, but make sure that the structure doesn't at all fit what you're arguing. And remember that when form doesn't fit function, satire is almost effortless.

From “Eat Your Pets” by Ellen Meloy

Standing in a million acres of remote, roadless, rock-throttled, moisture-sucked, lizard-gnawed Utah desert, I think back to a recent time in California, stuck on a freeway out of Santa Barbara, three lanes of halted cars spewing several millennia of fossilized plant beds from their exhausts, the fumes popping my few remaining chromosomes like bubble wrap, nearly knocking me unconscious so that if the traffic ever did move again, I, slumped over the steering wheel, dripping stalactites of drool onto the rental car's tasteful silver shag carpet, would incite gridlock anew, and [other drivers, their bloodstreams raging with espresso,] would hate me and start shooting.

Suggested Reading

Cognard-Black and Cognard, *Advancing Rhetoric*.

Meloy, "Eat Your Pets," *Northern Lights Magazine*.

Pollan, "Why Mow? The Case against Lawns," *The New York Times Magazine*.

Swift, "A Modest Proposal."

Lecture 7

The Empathetic Essayist: Evoking Emotion

Pathos, Aristotle's final artistic proof, is the appeal to an audience's emotions—the empathy the writer has for his or her subject. Sometimes, pathos is tied to logos to make the logic of an argument more attractive. Other times, pathos is key to strengthening a writer's ethos. It's a powerful thing to feel a strong emotional connection with a writer, and such a connection can build trust between author and reader. Even though pathos is a potent and effective rhetorical appeal, as we'll see in this lecture, it may also be the hardest for an essayist to use.

False Pathos

- In the late 20th century, the Swiss chocolate corporation Nestlé introduced a new product called Nescafé Ice Java. One ad for this product, featured in *Jane* magazine, showed photographs of two men and two women watching an old film on an urban rooftop and enjoying coffee drinks. Everything about the ad—from its colors and fonts to its copy—reinforced the idea that Ice Java was cool, sophisticated, and exotic.
- Readers of *Jane* magazine were women between the ages of 18 and 35 who might well have identified with a group of diverse, adventurous friends watching movies on a rooftop. Such readers may also have wanted to see themselves as both sexy (hot) and self-possessed (cool). The advertising executives at Nestlé understood that they had to remake their image if the old instant coffee Nescafé was going to appeal to this audience.
 - ◆ An article on the company's rebranding reported that at the turn of the new millennium, the Nestlé execs deliberately sought out younger consumers, "looking for new coffee experiences, new textures and flavors."

- ◆ The rebranding worked. In the past 15 years, Nescafé has moved into the market of 20- to 30-year-olds with a range of new products, all of which use emotional appeals that target a younger and more diverse demographic.
- Despite this success, the ad's emotional appeals are sophistic rather than respectable. For example, the ad plays on a consumer's desire to be cool in a figurative way. The catchphrase, the imagery, and ad copy all suggest that those who drink Ice Java will be as young, good-looking, exciting, and carefree as the two couples in the ad. As with most advertisements, this one exploits the audience's potential insecurities—in this case, that they aren't all that cool.
- The advertiser's motives are also selfish. The owners of Nestlé want to grow their demographic to make money. They're not interested in whether drinking Ice Java will literally make someone more stylish or sexy. They only hope that the brand will make consumers feel that way. And such emotional manipulation is a clear example of false pathos.
- Instances of false pathos can be found in arenas beyond advertising, as well. Political speech writers and campaign managers are notorious for misusing pathos.
 - ◆ When politicians claim that more money should be allocated for education because, otherwise, suburban children will have an advantage over urban children, they are engaging in false pathos. It matters little whether the claim is factual or not. The point is to get a sound bite about children that will play well with the voters.
 - ◆ We don't recall famous political sound bites because they resonate with emotional complexity. We remember these slogans, such as "Yes, We Can," because they're zingers. They pack an emotional punch—but that punch is short-lived.

Genuine Pathos

- If essayists hope to move their audience—to get readers to see something in a new way or to change or expand their minds—then appeals to emotion must be genuine and complex. Where bad pathos leads to bad writing—

clichés, stereotypes, sensationalism, and saccharine imagery—the point of true pathos is to build up emotion slowly, through a careful re-creation of experience, to help readers feel as if they, too, are living through what the writer sees, does, and thinks.

- The essayist's job is to get readers to re-feel, re-see, and re-think emotion in a meaningful way to arrive at a new understanding about the world or about themselves. The purpose of pathos shouldn't be to persuade others to want something; that's the false pathos of advertising and many political campaigns. The purpose should be to influence readers to feel something significant. Thus, essayists must be ethical in their motives for engaging pathos.
- In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses the proof of pathos in three distinct ways. First, he wants speakers and writers to understand the nature of the emotion they hope to inspire; second, he wants them to consider how this feeling is aroused in an audience; and third, he wants them to decide on the reasons, motivations, or causes that elicit this kind of emotion.
- In other words, true pathos isn't reactionary or transitory. It isn't meant to rev up readers' pulses or get them to open their wallets. Instead, by teaching readers how to empathize with someone or something beyond themselves, true pathos is an artistic appeal that has the profound power to change people's sense of themselves and their sense of others. Essayists must think carefully about how to evoke emotional responses in their readers and consider how readers might then put these emotions to use.

“No Name Woman” by Maxine Hong Kingston

- In Maxine Hong Kingston's essay “No Name Woman,” she retells a story she once heard from her mother about a nameless aunt—nameless because the aunt had killed both herself and her baby after she had gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Although she was the only sister of Kingston's father, the memory of this woman had been erased in the family.
- At the climax of her essay, Kingston reiterates the story of the baby's birth as if she herself were there to witness it. Here, she synthesizes facts with

imagination to get at a larger sense of truth; she is also precise and vivid in her details and imagery.

- ◆ At first, Kingston likens the baby to a disease: a “foreign growth” that “sickens” the mother. It’s also a thing—a “hot, wet, moving mass.” Yet as soon as the baby is born and brought up to the mother’s stomach, it becomes recognizable as human. Now, the baby is a child rather than just a growth, and as the mother nurses it, she “clench[es] her teeth at its preciousness.”
 - ◆ Kingston’s precise description of the baby laying on its mother and making “snuffling noises” allows the reader to re-see and re-hear this baby—not as a generic baby but as a particular baby at a particular moment. In a way, this anonymous dead child is brought back to life in Kingston’s tactile descriptions of its body and sounds.
- This climactic passage elicits complex emotions and uses a complex approach to writing. Kingston’s refusal to be generic in her writing—to call the baby “beautiful” or “miraculous”—as well as her insistence that an untold story about an unnamed woman can still be vivid and valid is what enables her to engage authentic pathos. This tender moment is simultaneously a hard, horrific one, and the way in which Kingston humanizes her lost aunt and cousin simultaneously erases both of them. Such is the intricacy of true pathos, which is neither easy nor simplistic.
 - One way for essayists to use pathos effectively is to resist generalizations. The more detailed, descriptive, and specific you are in your writing—and the more you engage your reader’s full senses—the richer and more resonant will be your pathos. Another important way for essayists to eschew false pathos is to avoid clichés at both the sentence level and at the level of idea.

Barack Obama’s First Inaugural Address

- A political speech is one of the most notorious places to find clichés, although often these clichés are at the level of ideas, such as the “challenges we face” or “peace and prosperity.”
 - ◆ A political speech may be obligated to invoke at least some of these clichés, which have become platitudes precisely because they are a



Such clichés as “crying her eyes out” try to convey powerful emotions, but ironically, readers have encountered them so many times that they feel nothing when they read them.

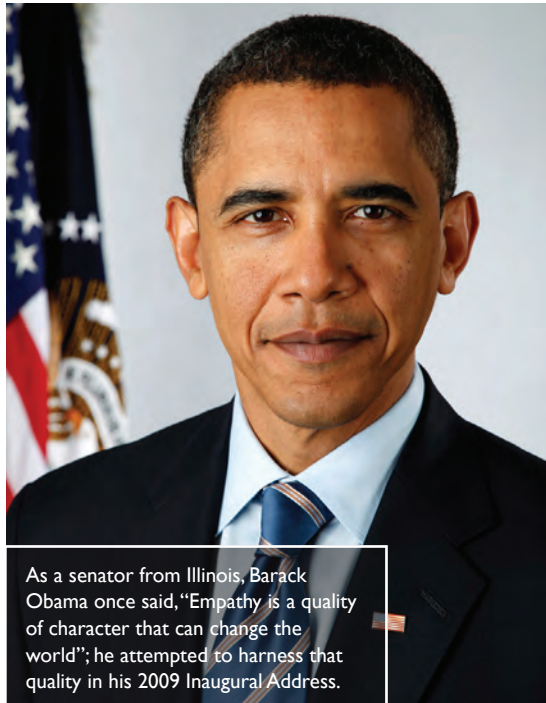
common language. Yet a speech—or an essay—doesn’t have to string together one chestnut after another. In fact, the best speeches alter the common language of clichés, extending and amending it. In doing so, a cliché may be renovated into an idea that is fresh and new.

- ◆ Although an inaugural address isn’t often thought of as an essay, of course, such a speech is yet another kind of true story, well-told by a first-person narrator, with the intention of persuading an audience. And if the president builds on the common language of a citizenry’s clichés in a meaningful way, then that speaker is using true pathos to reinforce his or her own credibility and the nation’s credibility. In Barack Obama’s first inaugural address from 2009, he does just that.

- One of the rhetorical elements that is immediately apparent in this speech is its rhythm. Obama is particularly adept at using “parallel constructions,” which create a kind of refrain in his writing, similar to the returning chorus in a pop song. For example, he repeats the same phrase in a sequence of

sentences, such as “the time has come.” This musicality, especially when read out loud, fosters a sense that the ideas spoken are both right and apt—they go together:

- Even more importantly in terms of how he uses pathos, Obama turns clichés into something that engages real feeling. He uses such hackneyed expressions as “riches and fame” or “prosperity and freedom,” yet his speech doesn’t begin and end with clichés. Instead, like Kingston, he invokes specific images and excites a listener’s senses.
 - ◆ After talking more generally about the “men and women” who are “obscure in their labor” and who “carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom,” Obama then provides mini-stories to give more explicit examples of these kinds of people. We see those who “packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans,” “toiled in sweatshops and settled the West,” and “endured the lash of the whip.”
 - ◆ When Obama gets to his final image of people “work[ing] till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life,” these brief stories have painted a distinct picture in the mind’s eye about the millions of citizens who came before us and created our modern nation-state.
 - ◆ The final image of the individual becoming the group, of the past becoming the now, allows Obama to



As a senator from Illinois, Barack Obama once said, “Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world”; he attempted to harness that quality in his 2009 Inaugural Address.

land on his larger idea, one that actually isn't a cliché: that America is “bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions” and “greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.”

From Barack Obama's 2009 Inaugural Address

In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted—for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things—some celebrated but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the long, rugged path toward prosperity and freedom.

For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life.

For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.

For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.

Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.

Suggested Reading

Cognard-Black and Cognard, *Advancing Rhetoric*.

Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*.

Obama, Commencement Address, *Best Speeches of Barack Obama*.

———. Inaugural Address, *The White House Blog*.

Lecture 8

When an Essayist's Feelings Face Facts

Writers run into problems any time that pathos—an emotional response to a topic—trumps logos—rational understanding. One way to try to bring these two together is to write an essay about a subject that's hard for you to view with a clear, objective eye, such as the theme of home. Writing about this theme is one way to learn how to combine your feelings with your thoughts. At the end of this lecture, we'll explore a more developed exercise for writing about home, but first, we'll think about how writing on impassioned or underdeveloped topics can sometimes lead to bad logic—which inevitably equals bad writing.

Logical Fallacies

- Essays that rely too heavily on the heart over the head tend to fall prey to three logical fallacies in particular: “faulty generalizations,” “ad hominem arguments,” and “bandwagonism.” These fallacies are worth avoiding because they are examples of bad thinking—thinking that occurs when essayists are either deliberately trying to hoodwink their readers or, more often, when writers are pulled around emotionally while drafting a piece, not knowing exactly what they want to say or why they want to say it.
- One fallacy that often appears in melodramatic or opinionated essays is the faulty or hasty generalization. This fallacy occurs when a writer makes a sweeping comment or reaches a decision based on too little evidence. These essayists make claims that are impossible to verify, such as chocolate is the best candy or modern women are too frank about their sex lives.

- ◆ When it comes to faulty generalizations, it's one thing if the faulty claim affects only the writer, such as the idea that smoking can't be that bad because the writer's own mother smoked and lived to be almost 90.
 - ◆ However, hasty generalizations can become more problematic when they inform public debates rather than private desires. Particularly in political or philosophical essays, making faulty generalizations can be a forceful, if irrational, way to try to undermine the opposition.
- Another prevalent fallacy in overly emotional essays is the ad hominem ("to the man") argument. This fallacy occurs when someone attacks a person with an idea rather than the idea itself.
 - ◆ Interestingly, the broken reasoning of ad hominem arguments even appears in our Declaration of Independence. There, Thomas Jefferson spends more time listing the grievances against King George III than he does making claims of humans' inherent rights to life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. At the end of his long list, Jefferson calls the king a barbarian, which may have felt good at the time but is an example of how passion can overtake a writer's reason.
 - ◆ For the essayist, it can be all too easy to condemn a person rather than that person's ideas. This is especially true when the writer feels wounded or irritated by someone else's actions or beliefs. And a long list of grievances against a target inevitably rings hollow. It becomes nothing more than a "gripe-fest," an expression of the writer's selfish need to complain. As a result, essays built around ad hominem fallacies often become tedious.
 - A third logical fallacy is bandwagonism, which occurs when an essayist makes an assertion and assumes that all readers will agree. Anyone who's ever encountered a teenager knows all about bandwagonism, which often boils down to: "But, Mom, everyone's doing it!"
 - ◆ Although this fallacy is a favorite among teens and pop culture addicts who follow whatever fad is trending, bandwagonism is also frequently used by politicians. A powerful example comes from a speech written in 1837 by John C. Calhoun, a man who held numerous political offices, including vice president for both John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Calhoun gave this speech on the floor of the Senate.

P.T. BARNUM & CO'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH & THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS COMBINED WITH

GREAT JUMBO'S SKELETON

JUMBO

P.T. BARNUM

The term *bandwagonism* comes from the stage used for circus performers; it became popular when a former clown ran for president and invited other candidates to “jump on the bandwagon” during his campaign.

THE COLOSSAL FRAME OF THE LARGEST & NOBLEST Animal that ever lived, THE ONLY ELEPHANT SKELETON ever publicly exhibited. A STRANGE & AMAZING SHOW WITHOUT A PARALLEL. AS REPORTED BY PROF. HENRY A. WARD, THE DISTINGUISHED NATURALIST & SCIENTIST OF ROCHESTER, N.Y.

SANGERS ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE & GRAND INTERNATIONAL SHOWS

- ◆ First, Calhoun starts with a central claim, which is both simple and direct: “Abolition and the Union cannot coexist.” He then maneuvers his bandwagon appeals rather brilliantly to make it seem as though this claim is universally accepted by everyone. First, he asserts that he himself believes this statement: “As a friend of the Union I openly proclaim it.” By calling himself a friend of the nation as a whole, he appeals to patriotism, which is a kind of bandwagonism we see all the time in our own political campaigns and punditry.
- ◆ Quickly, though, Calhoun moves from the first-person singular “I” to the first-person collective “we.” “We of the South,” he says, “will not, cannot, surrender our institutions.” As Calhoun takes on the collective ethos of

everyone living in the South, he uses bandwagonism to make it seem as though he has the credibility to do so. For any Southerners listening to or reading his speech who might have abolitionist leanings, Calhoun's fallacious appeal could potentially get them to change their minds.

- ◆ Calhoun goes a step further to threaten violence should his listeners not accept that abolition is anathema to the survival of the Union. Here, Calhoun's bandwagonism becomes coercion—a threat that binds those who agree with him to violence but also puts Northern abolitionists on the defensive. Finally, he uses bandwagonism once again to suggest that not just Southerners but the Union as a whole will be destroyed if slavery is either questioned or resisted.
- ◆ Bandwagonism is perhaps the most common and potentially the most volatile logical fallacy that polemical, impassioned, and unethical essayists employ. The fact that Calhoun was partially responsible for the onset of the Civil War reveals the dangers of such appeals—appeals that play on an audience's need to belong, regardless of whether the writer's arguments are honorable or just.

Assignment: Writing about Home

- In an essay entitled “One Village,” Naomi Shihab Nye blends rational argumentation with compassionate anecdotes to persuade readers that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank is both flawed and problematic. This stance is a tricky one, yet Nye doesn't try to convince her readers through either careful arguments or logical fallacies. Instead, she approaches her subject through the private and personal lens of home. The village of the title is a small community of Palestinians, and her essay describes a visit there after 15 years of being away; through this visit, Nye comes to have a complex understanding of the political struggles of the region.
- For your essay, think about a tension that's embedded in your idea of home. This tension might be political, such as a concern over how poor and minority populations are sometimes mistreated in your home state. Or the tension might be historic—a look through the dual lenses of the past and the present to show how an area has changed over time. Or it might be about your own sense of self in relation to your home. Maybe you once identified strongly with



In writing about your idea of home, you may struggle against the tendency to romanticize; you must separate yourself from your emotions to take cold, hard facts into account.

this community, but now you're more ambivalent about your origins. Of course, your home may also combine all these strains—political, historic, and personal.

- The opening of Nye's essay immediately draws on pathos-based appeals to the senses, especially smell. "The village smells familiar," she writes, "a potent soup of smoke, sheep wool, water on stone." In this way, Nye tries to make this village intimate to her readers. By labeling the combination a "potent soup," Nye also domesticates the smells, evoking the ideas of a kitchen and cooking.

- For the first paragraph of your essay, try to follow Nye and make your home as specific and realistic for your readers as you can. Describe what your home looks like, but also allow yourself to engage senses other than sight, such as sound, smell, and taste. As Nye did, try to be precise in what you describe so that your readers can experience what you do when you're in this place.
- Another way in which Nye arouses emotions in her readers is to tell anecdotes about her family members. These anecdotes are mostly journalistic in tone, rather than sensational. In your essay, try to write at least three anecdotes about your home that speak to the central tension you're considering. But be as honest as you can about what you remember or what you witness when you're there. Work hard not to infuse your memories or descriptions with your multicolored feelings about them.
- At this point, you'll have drawn on your readers' senses and told a few anecdotes in the hopes of arousing certain emotions from your audience. These are both pathos-based strategies for creating empathy. To integrate feeling with thinking, your essay also needs to discuss the theoretical or philosophic ideas that these sense-based descriptions and anecdotes bring to the fore. You could reflect on what these images and stories tell about the place you think of as home; you might even develop a more specific definition of what you mean by the idea of "home."
 - ◆ In Nye's essay, she makes a logos-based argument about the fraught politics of the Middle East. She refers to Israel as a "racist state," yet she isn't just name-calling. She doesn't apply this label to Israel without context.
 - ◆ Because she has tried to take on the perspective of Jewish people and think about why they would want a national "home," her claim has credibility. She even tries to discuss both sides at the same moment that she says the Israelis are wrong. Thus, even if readers don't agree with her, Nye has attempted to be rational and balanced in her argument, which strengthens rather than undermines what she's trying to say.
- Nye also combines this rational or logos-based discussion of home with one that's more emotional, bringing readers inside her own feelings about visiting this small Palestinian village. Here, Nye thinks about the fact that she is calling a place home that countless others—people she will never know—have also called home. This musing extends Nye's essay.

- For the closing of your own essay, try to sharpen your definition of “home” by writing about what kind of home you’re reconstructing. Is it, like Nye’s, a genetic home? Or is it an adopted home, a reclaimed home, a self-fashioned home? Is it a home that no one else would want or one that many other people know and cherish? Is it a spiritual home or a ruggedly physical one? Whatever the case, be precise in how you define home within your piece. Finally, for your conclusion, try to link this more precise definition to an argument you wish to make about what home means to you. Like Nye, take a stand, although your stand need not be one-sided.

From “Slavery a Positive Good” by John C. Calhoun

Abolition and the Union cannot coexist. As the friend of the Union I openly proclaim it—and the sooner it is known the better. The former may now be controlled, but in a short time it will be beyond the power of man to arrest the course of events. We of the South will not, cannot, surrender our institutions. To maintain the existing relations between the two races, inhabiting that section of the Union, is indispensable to the peace and happiness of both. It cannot be subverted without drenching the country in blood. . . . [Slavery] has grown up with our society and institutions, and is so interwoven with them that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people.

Suggested Reading

Calhoun, John C. “Slavery a Positive Good,” *Teaching American History*.
 Cognard-Black and Cognard, *Advancing Rhetoric*.
 Nye, “One Village,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*.
 Shonagon, “Hateful Things,” *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

Lecture 9

Unabashedly Me: The First-Person Essay

The writer Phillip Lopate claims that anyone who writes essays must embrace “unashamed subjectivity.” Unlike a story that’s told by an invisible, third-person narrator, the essay traditionally claims the first-person singular as its perspective. This person is the essay’s truth speaker—one who claims the authority of experience, witness, knowledge, and intimacy. In addition, unlike a story’s or a poem’s speaker, an essay’s narrator is a flesh-and-blood person, one who lives in a certain time and place. Thus, this speaker inherently has a distinct viewpoint, a specific attitude, and a one-of-a-kind voice. And it’s this unique voice that is a large part of what entertains, persuades, and motivates readers.

First Person versus Third Person

- Despite the fact that essays inherently embody a unique voice, many teachers still insist that students’ work should seem as if it materialized from thin air. These teachers tell their students that the first-person should be avoided at all costs, that a writer should work hard to come across as objective. Teachers also teach the passive voice, as if an essay’s ideas and claims arise from no one and out of nowhere. This same approach to writing is advocated by those who hold business-writing workshops or seminars for employees of large organizations.
- However, every essay invites and perhaps even demands the idiosyncratic charms of the first-person “I.” Because essayists are tethered to their own bodies, as well as limited by their own historical moments, the voice in all essays, on any topic, is inherently subjective—even if a writer is trying to sound neutral or unbiased.

- ◆ And that's as it should be. As Lopate said, subjectivity within essays should be unashamed. Because essayists are not impartial, they shouldn't strive to sound robotic. The essayists' job is to reflect and interpret, to hypothesize and muse, to comment and to judge.
- ◆ Whether essayists are successful in their attempts at persuasion is another matter altogether. And the essayists' ethos will be either broken or made on whether they can discover new ways of thinking about old subjects and are able to see beyond themselves to the wider world.
- If you don't quite believe in the power of the first-person "I," try transforming any piece of writing that's written in the third person into the first-person singular point of view.
 - ◆ Whether you alter a website or a children's story, you'll find that switching out the pronouns changes the writing profoundly. The text will seem more confessional, and the speaker, more vulnerable.
 - ◆ And as Lopate has said, part of the reason readers trust a good essayist is that such a writer is willing to expose his own "betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust. [His] sincerity issues from an awareness of [his] potential for *insincerity*," which grants the writer a "doubled authority." In other words, adopting the "I" point of view automatically gives an essayist a stronger ethos.
- Vivian Gornick is another well-known writer who agrees with Lopate that it's the betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust in an "I" narrator that make essays compelling. In her book *The Situation and the Story*, Gornick writes that the essayist must be both strong and willing to show weakness—to be open, self-conscious, honest, and unsure. The more essayists uncover themselves, paradoxically, the more cosmic they become.
 - ◆ To create understanding among your readers for what you have to say—to get them to believe that you can touch the universal through your individuality—you must show your willingness to expose your own weaknesses, deficits, and insecurities.
 - ◆ You don't need to be willing to confess your darkest secrets, but you must be as self-scrutinizing as possible as you muse, argue, project, and reflect within your essays. To be reliable, your truth speaker must admit how and when you're unreliable. Otherwise, the voice in your essays will potentially come across as insular, self-consumed, and a know-it-all.



One promise of the first-person perspective is intimacy; it's like having the writer whisper in your ear about events that he or she has witnessed.

Intimacy

- The first promise of the first-person perspective is one of intimacy. As we've mentioned, the first-person point of view gives essayists an inherent ethos or credibility; with this point of view, writers are witnesses to whatever they are writing about, speaking what they see as truth to readers with a confidential voice.
- Because a narrator is both faceless and fleshless, intimacy is easier to establish in real life than in words. In an essay, the language itself must do all of the work of making readers feel as though the writer values them enough to be sincere and unguarded in what he or she has to say.
- Natalia Ginzburg, an Italian writer who survived the Holocaust, establishes an easy, seemingly effortless intimacy at the outset of her essay "He and I." Here's how the essay begins: "He always feels hot; I always feel cold. ... He speaks several languages well; I do not speak any well. He manages—in his own way—to speak even the languages that he doesn't know."
- The persona that Ginzburg creates here is interesting in and of itself. Her speaker's diction is commonplace; her syntax is a series of contrasting parallel constructions; and her images are consistently domestic. Ginzburg doesn't even name the "he" (her husband), yet this lack of identification suggests intimacy rather than impartial objectivity. Ginzburg doesn't need to name this "he" because the man is known so thoroughly by the narrator.
- The effect of this persona's unabashed honesty about the daily, private, and intimate interactions between herself and her scholarly husband makes us feel as if we already know him. Thus, Ginzburg is able to create and sustain a wonderful tension between the generic "he" (the everyman husband) and the specific one (her own husband). This strategy creates intimacy between Ginzburg and her readers. Potentially, readers nod their heads in recognition, particularly if they're married themselves.

Witness

- Another promise met by the first-person perspective is that of witness. In essays based on this promise, whatever the narrator tells readers, he or she has truly experienced in the real world. For example, early on in his essay “On Dumpster Diving,” Lars Eighner admits, “I began Dumpster diving about a year before I became homeless.”
- Eighner then gets into the details of dumpster diving with a precise list of what he pulled from dumpsters and used in his house. This specificity attests to Eighner’s eyewitness experience with this topic, and because he tells his story through the first-person perspective, readers believe what he has to say. Eighner really was homeless for three years.

Empathy

- The final promise of an essay’s first-person persona is the promise of empathy, which is an integral part of the pronoun “I” itself. When you are in the presence of the “I,” you’re in the presence of a kind of magic. When you speak of yourself, you say, “I did this” or “I thought that.” And when others talk about themselves, they also say, “I.” This means that the moment you evoke the “I” in your essay, the reader, who’s reading alongside you, projects himself or herself into what you’re writing about. The reader, too, becomes the “I.”
- This empathetic magic is largely invisible to readers because we read the pronoun “I” all the time. Note how Lucy Grealy, in her haunting essay “Mirroring,” brings her “I” into the very first sentence: “There was a long period of time, almost a year, during which I never looked in a mirror.”
- Grealy’s overall topic—her disease with mirrors, with seeing herself outside of herself—is the perfect metaphor for how the “I” is an innately empathetic point of view. With the “I,” writers see themselves reflected. The “I” itself is a kind of language mirror.
- Note, though, that Grealy is also creating empathy by writing on a topic that almost everyone has experienced: seeing yourself in a shiny surface, sometimes

distorted. Readers immediately commiserate with Greal's persona because what she's writing about and how she's writing about it are simultaneously intimate, believable, and empathetic.

The Perils of First-Person Point of View

- There's a well-known adage in the world of fiction that says, "Show, don't tell." In a nutshell, this phrase means that a fiction writer should strive to demonstrate a character's interior feelings and thoughts through that character's actions. When a fiction writer puts a character into a scene, and we readers get a chance to see him or her in motion, the character becomes both more realistic and more interesting.
 - ◆ In essay writing, the truth speaker's main job is, of course, to tell truths as he or she sees them. Thus, essays are a genre that necessitate telling over showing. Yet there's still a problem when an essayist just tells anything and everything.
 - ◆ Essays that don't engage in enough showing run the risk of reading more like journal entries. The writer may use a "poor-me" first-person perspective rather than a truth-speaking perspective. In fact, such essays are often packed with what teenagers call TMI: too much information.
 - ◆ One way to avoid this mistake is to sketch in momentary scenes that give the essay the texture of showing. These are not the full-blown scenes you might write in a short story, but even mini-scenes allow for imagery and sense-based details that mere telling rarely provides.
- Another peril of the "I" is egotism. In his memoir *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau explains that when essayists write from the "I," they can get lost in this perspective because they know themselves better than anyone else.
 - ◆ The poet Mary Oliver says this about writing for someone other than yourself: "I write poems for a stranger who will be born in some distant country hundreds of years from now. ... I must make a complete poem. ... Not *my* poem, if it's well done, but a deeply breathing, bounding, self-sufficient poem." To make self-sufficient writing is the job of essayists, too—to write a piece that lives beyond us.

- ◆ Thus, in working on an essay, a writer must think about a stranger in a distant country hundreds of years from now. Why would your essay matter to this stranger? To answer that question, you must work to create a persona—the truth-speaking narrator of your essay—to tell your tale. You must investigate and implicate yourself, working to translate your own low-level self-interest into something of value for a disinterested, unknown, future reader.
- The final peril of the “I” is small-mindedness, which is closely linked to the peril of egotism. One solution here is “ice-boxing” the essay, that is, putting it aside for a period of time to allow you to gain some distance from it. From this distance, you may come to new realizations about yourself or the topic you’re discussing—in other words, you’ll become a speaker of truth.

From “Lip Service” by Jennifer Cognard-Black

When I’m at dinner or out for drinks with colleagues, I sometimes joke that my daughter has been orphaned by my profession. It’s a line I picked up from one of my students, a young man named Toby—a student who has the odd distinction of having taken me for seven separate courses . . . , who is the youngest son of my department chair, and who, like me, is the product of two academic parents—that rare and aw(e)ful upbringing.

Once, when Toby and I met to discuss his senior project, we got distracted and started talking about what it was like to grow up in a houseful of PhD’s—about playing “grading” with our siblings (I gave my younger sister A’s or F’s on her doodles, depending on if I liked them), about learning to drink coffee with lots of sugar and fake cream (all that was available in our parents’ offices), and about whooping or skulking through the halls of various college buildings, waiting for Mom or Dad to finish up with a student.

At some point, Toby said, “Yeah. I was orphaned by the profession, man. I raised myself.” And though he continued to tease about how he’d carefully learned to avoid using “lay,” “lie,” “laid,” or “lain” in any sentence (another thing we have in

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common: both sets of parents are English professors), I was too struck with what he'd just said to hear much else. Without meaning to, Toby had just [put] his finger on my own heart's bruising: this tender belief that my own commitment to the profession has forsaken my daughter.

Yet to say that my daughter Katharine has been orphaned by my profession is, frankly, a line out of a . . . Hollywood tragedy—a line that takes the responsibility off my own shoulders and blames, instead, my line of work. If I am honest in the telling, I must write that my daughter has been orphaned by me[,] by my own choices.

Ask me what the most important thing in my life is, and I'll tell you that it's Katharine. Every night when I kiss her—even if she's already asleep when I get home—I rub my nose in her hair; smell her weedy, warm, little-girl smell and whisper that I love her more than anything. It is my ritual.

But take an inventory of my days, my weeks; get inside my head and see how I'm consumed with what needs to happen next—with the papers I need to grade; the novel I need to read; the manuscript I need to edit; the colleague I need to have lunch with—and it's clear that the most important thing in my life is an on-going mental tally. My work, my work work work. It's clear that putting my family before my work is just lip service—lip service I pay to a version of myself that I project to others. And this version of myself is one I cherish as any reader and writer of fiction cherishes one of her favorite characters. (There's a website where a reader can take a quiz and be told which nineteenth-century heroine she most resembles. I'm Anna Karenina: passionate, articulate, taciturn, tragic.)

Suggested Reading

- Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*.
Cognard-Black, "Lip Service," *Mama PhD*.
Eighner, "On Dumpster Diving," *50 Essays*.
Ginzburg, "He and I," *The Art of the Personal Essay*.
Olds, "Take the I Out," *Blood, Tin, Straw*.

Lecture 10

Essayists as Poets: Tapping into Imagery

To begin our discussion of how best to apply figurative language and the senses in essays, let's start with a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz entitled "The Terminal." Taken in 1893 on a blustery day in New York City, the photo shows the southern end of the Harlem streetcar line in front of an old post office. In the foreground, a driver is watering down his sweaty horses after a long day of pulling the streetcar up and down Fifth Avenue. As we begin this lecture, try "walking" straight into the photograph, imagining yourself inside the scene in three dimensions.

Assignment, Part I: Entering "The Terminal"

- Alfred Stieglitz took "The Terminal" using a new handheld camera. Unlike his older, unwieldy camera that required a tripod, this handheld one gave Stieglitz the freedom to knock about New York, taking pictures of the dynamic street life around him. Once you "enter" this image, allow the street scene to become three-dimensional.
- Inside the photograph, look to your left, right, and upward. Pay attention to what you're standing on, what you're wearing, and who's nearby. Even though it may be 95 degrees where you actually are, try to experience the bitter wind as if you're inside 1893 in the chilly heart of Manhattan in winter.
- The next step is to make some notes on the scene, paying close attention to all your body's senses other than sight (to which we'll return).
 - ◆ Begin with what you feel in this place, keeping in mind that your entire body is covered with skin—not just your hands and face. Take a moment to reflect on what you're touching, on the textures that surround you.



"The Terminal"
by Alfred Stieglitz

What do your earlobes feel like? How about your elbows? What about your ankles and lips? Wake up your entire body, and pay attention to what it's telling you.

- ◆ Next, think about what you might hear when on Fifth Avenue in 1893. Are the noises loud or soft, repeated or random, pleasing hums and melodies or jarring thuds and clatters? Are the sounds unusual or unknown to you, or have you heard these noises many times before?
- ◆ As a next step, think about smells and tastes together. Sniff the air and ask yourself: Are the scents harsh or sweet, strong or subtle, enjoyable or nasty? Do you recognize these smells? Are they coming from you—your own body and possessions—or are they from the people, animals, streets, and buildings beyond? At the same time, ask yourself what you taste. Even if you're not eating anything—although you could be—your mouth always has some kind of a taste to it. Try to taste this scene's atmosphere and record its flavors.

- After you've made some notes on the other sensations you experience inside "The Terminal," turn your attention back to what you're seeing. But instead of describing this particular environment, draw analogies between what you're looking at and something else that it reminds you of. For example, the shape of the driver's hat may remind you of a mushroom. Look for shapes, shadows, angles, and items that, for you, are reminiscent of some other thing. Compare elements within this photograph to other objects or ideas that are not actually there.
- Finally, once you've come up with a few analogies, write a short paragraph in which you describe being inside this photograph, using your notes as a guide. Make sure to pull from at least one example of each of your senses and to use at least two of your analogies. Use the first-person point of view, and write in the present tense to give your imaginative experience immediacy. When you're done with your paragraph, choose a phrase or a single word out of the writing and use that as your title—as a theme or focus for this experience.
- Photographs, by their very nature, bring the dead back to life. Although whatever is represented in a photograph has already happened and cannot happen again, each time we look at that image, that moment returns. Photographs skim the real, and they are always in the present tense.
- Writing essays that engage a reader's senses also creates the experience of a present-tense reality within the photographic chamber of the mind. In engaging the body's senses within Stieglitz's scene, the image becomes solid. The scene is no longer a thin coat of chemicals on paper or pixels on a screen. Instead, the hot horses and the streetcar driver, the ice and snow, and the drab city buildings become embodied. They seem both palpable and real.
- Here is the main gift of sense-based writing for any essayist: It brings essays to life. Even though words are only black marks on a page, by evoking taste, touch, smell, and sound through those words, a reader's body is affected. The flesh-and-blood reality beyond the writer's page is changed through the use of the senses.

Imagery

- Over the centuries, the term “imagery” has evolved to mean the creation of any visual images, as well as mental pictures and, of course, written representations. It’s often assumed that imagery is the purview of poets. Yet rhetorical imagery is used by all kinds of writers. What matters is this: When writers turn to imagery, they’re interested in getting readers to re-feel and re-see experience. Imagery is a powerful tool of pathos, and essayists must learn to wield it well, even if they don’t identify as poets or poetic writers. For essayists, two particularly effective kinds of imagery are sense-based descriptions and metaphors.
- We’ve already touched on how engaging the senses can wake up your essays, but let’s talk further about metaphor—which, generally speaking, means the representation of one thing by another thing. Why should essayists employ

A metaphor claims that one thing is another thing, whereas a simile compares two things using “like” or “as,” as is Robert Burns’s “O, my Luve is like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June.”



metaphor rather than leaving it to the poets? The answer is that comparing two objects, actions, or ideas inevitably creates beauty, surprise, and humor in any kind of writing. Metaphor makes essays fresh and evocative, and such figurative language is also a decisive factor in constructing an original voice.

- Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a Pulitzer Prize–winning memoir: The book is about how Dillard—a writer and an amateur naturalist—visited the same terrain around Roanoke, Virginia, across all four seasons, then wrote about what she discovered while there. In a chapter entitled “Seeing,” Dillard decides to stay late at a creek to watch as twilight descends and she can no longer see much of anything.
 - ◆ Dillard is a master of creating marvelous metaphors within her essays. For instance, she describes water turtles as “smooth as beans” and says that they glide “down with the current in a series of easy, weightless push-offs, as men bound on the moon.”
 - ◆ In one way, these two similes are obviously distinct. It's unlikely that most people put turtles and beans or turtles and astronauts together on a regular basis. Yet these two similes actually work together to create harmonious and vivid images in the mind's eye—images that are decidedly concrete in portraying how water turtles look as they swim downstream.
 - ◆ These comparisons adhere to the three main qualities that make for good metaphors: They are fresh; they are concrete; and they are apt. Freshness comes from the surprise of the analogies—turtles as beans or astronauts. These images get readers to see something in a way they've never thought to see it before.
 - ◆ Yet the comparisons are also detailed and concrete. Dillard didn't write that the water turtles were “beanlike” or that they moved “like they were in outer space.” She said they were as “smooth as beans”—thereby evoking tactility—and she claimed that they travel in the same way that “men bound on the moon”—once again, offering precision about how men move in space.
 - ◆ Finally, Dillard's metaphorical comparisons are always apt. Even though they're fresh or unusual, they fit the tone and context of what she's writing about. For readers, there's a delight in metaphors and similes when they are ideal for the mood the essayist is trying to create—in this case, a mood of wonder; as well as a desire to see and to know more.

- ◆ It's easier to understand the power of Dillard's metaphors if we try to rewrite them as clunkers. For example, if we alter "the last of the swallows ... caught at my heart and trailed it after them like streamers" to "the swallows caught at my heart like something really pretty," we eliminate Dillard's precision and concreteness.
 - ◆ In addition, bad metaphors often come from clichés. To avoid a clichéd comparison, ask yourself whether you've heard the analogy before. If the phrase "as ____ as ____" is easy for you to fill in ("as happy as a clam"), then your metaphor or simile won't be original.
- Two additional aspects of Dillard's writing make her essay deeply and powerfully imagistic. First, Dillard brings in precise descriptive details and information from science. She tells her readers exactly how fast we're spinning around the earth's axis, orbiting the sun, and moving within the solar system. In quoting these enormous numbers, she actually creates a kind of mental dizziness.
 - Further, Dillard's diction is similarly precise. If we were offered just lists of Dillard's verbs, nouns, and adjectives, we would still have a vivid sense of what her essay is about.
 - ◆ Instead of using bland verbs, such as "sit," "walk," or "look," Dillard brings in "stalk," "straddle," "hunch," and more. She doesn't talk only of bugs, birds, and mammals, but she names water turtles, carp, and swallows.
 - ◆ And her descriptors paint pictures in the mind all by themselves: "tear-shaped," "weightless," "uneasy," "unfathomable." Like a poet, Dillard understands that the language of an essay is the language of particulars.

Assignment, Part II: Writing a Photo Essay

- To conclude this lecture, let's return to the idea of the photo essay, this time, using a photograph of your own choosing. Look for a deliberate image—something more than a snapshot—that was taken with an eye to creating art.
- Then, write a photo essay using your chosen picture, limiting yourself to no more than 750 words. Pay close attention to the precision of your diction, the descriptiveness of your details, the freshness of your metaphors and similes (and their concreteness and appropriateness), and the vividness of how you

engage the senses. Be as specific and particular as you can be; don't allow yourself to use the words "thing," "something," or "anything."

- And no matter what your subject matter—be it the Vietnam War or a Thanksgiving dinner—take care to engage your readers' bodies and imaginations. Allow them to re-feel and "re-memory" your experience right alongside you.

Suggested Reading

Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

Naef, ed., *In Focus*.

Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*.

Lecture 11

The Visual Essay: Words + Pictures

Pictures tell stories. Or, more accurately, when viewers look at pictures—whether they are paintings, sketches, photographs, digital images, or street art—those viewers find stories within them. And if you hope to produce a visual essay—meaning an essay that incorporates pictures—it’s important to consider the imaginative and the private or confessional possibilities contained within pictures. A picture may open up ways to extend, comment upon, or even contradict ideas within an essay. Pictures can also start interesting dialogues between words and images. And pictures can provide readers with surprising interpretations or emotional reactions that deepen and expand your essay’s significance.

Pictures and Viewers

- As mentioned, when viewers look at pictures, they find their own stories with them. Sometimes, these stories are fanciful, such as when viewers see Vincent van Gogh’s painting *The Starry Night* and imagine his expressionistic swirls of stars as an astral map of a foreign land. At other times, the stories that images tell come out of viewers’ own life experiences, as with Andreas Gursky’s enormous photographs of supermarket aisles.
- But just as it’s vital to ignite readers’ imaginations and draw on their experiences when bringing images into your writing, it’s also crucial for you to realize that to see only one’s own fantasies or history within a picture is to limit its potential. Just as we viewers think about pictures as we gaze at them, in a sense, the pictures think about us as they gaze back. All images already contain within them the notions and opinions of the artists who made them.

And even more importantly, pictures also contain the notions and opinions embedded within the artistry of the images themselves.

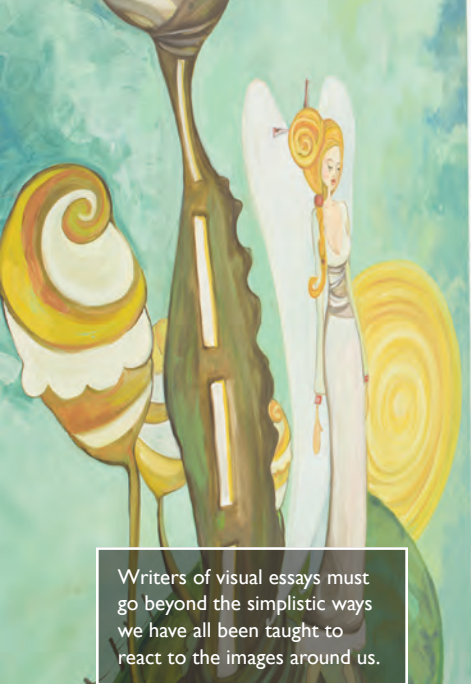
- The award-winning British novelist Jeanette Winterson wrote a series of essays called *Art Objects*, in which she grapples with the complex dynamics between a picture and its viewer. She especially speaks to the dangers of viewing images in a limited or limiting way. Winterson wrote:

Looking at paintings is equivalent to being dropped into a foreign city, where gradually, out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax makes a clearing in the silence. Art, all art, not just paintings, is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it familiar. No-one is surprised to find that a foreign city follows its own customs and speaks its own language. . . . We have to recognize that the language of art, all art, is not our mother-tongue.

- In essence, the rest of this essay is an attempt to explain how we viewers might try to learn the language of pictures—not the written or spoken language we ourselves use to describe or to interpret images but, instead, the visual language that the pictures themselves speak.

A Visual Essay

- By starting with a specific image and generalizing more broadly, Winterson is attempting to revise and rethink the relationship between an art object and its audience. Thus, one approach to writing a visual essay is to take a picture that arrests or captivates you in some way and to build a piece of writing around it. Here, your essay draws on the picture itself as a stimulus for probing your own thoughts and feelings about what this picture might be saying to you, as well as why the picture's language might mean something to your readers.
- Winterson offers a challenging exercise for how writers might pay better attention to pictures. First, she says, we must detach ourselves from the ingrained and clichéd ways of viewing that we've been taught as consumers of popular culture—ways that trivialize pictures, reducing them to surface instead of substance.



Writers of visual essays must go beyond the simplistic ways we have all been taught to react to the images around us.



- We must then agree to spend at least an hour with whatever picture we hope to understand. In doing so, she believes we would find out a great deal about ourselves, including the fact that “we are not very good at looking.”
- From here, though, Winterson believes that if we continue to look—if we truly focus our whole attention on the picture—then we’ll start to move away from distraction and will discover increasing invention. We’ll start to ask ourselves detailed questions about the picture. Is it a portrait or a landscape? Is it abstract or realistic? What colors define it? Where are its shadows, its highlights? What story does the picture tell, and what emotions does this story potentially evoke within us, the viewers?
- For Winterson, these questions are a good start; they demand that we meet the picture’s intensity of representation with our own intensity of looking. And yet, even while we start to move from distraction to invention, Winterson admits that we will also become increasingly irritated. We want the picture to do something. After all, Winterson writes, “Why should I admire it? Quite clearly it doesn’t admire me.”

- And that, confesses Winterson, is the great difficulty of trying to grasp the foreign language of pictures. We viewers demand that art should reflect the reality of our own lives—our own obsessions, needs, and vanities. “The true [picture];” claims Winterson, “... cannot do this, except coincidentally. Its reality is imaginative not mundane.” What Winterson means here is that the truth of the picture is its own universal truth—not the mundane facts of our own lives that we want to see reflected in it.
- Thus, Winterson asks writers to push beyond their selfish, small desires to see their own pursuits and passions, their own needs and wants, their own fears and fantasies within paintings, photographs, and drawings.
- Essayists can accomplish this by spending more time with the picture on different days. Eventually, with repeated viewings, you’ll start to learn your picture’s alphabet and dialect. Finally, what you’ll start to see in the picture will be the result of a collaboration, a connection, between that picture and you—and not just a representation that you’ve remade in your own image.

Alternative Visual Approaches

- Although essayists across many centuries have long used techniques of imagery to paint pictures in the mind, there is also a strong tradition among writers of bringing together words and pictures to produce visual essays and memoirs. The most obvious examples are pieces in which pictures serve the story the writer is attempting to tell. These are illustrated essays, in which the two mediums work together to produce a common meaning.
 - ◆ Examples of this approach to visuality include essay collections or memoirs with chapter heading illustrations that signal to a reader what each section of the book is about. A recent example is a book of essays by Barbara Kingsolver called *Small Wonder*. One piece in it is called “Lily’s Chickens,” which begins with a description of Kingsolver’s daughter, who loves chickens and enjoys gathering eggs.
 - ◆ At the start of this essay—as is true for all of the essays in her collection—Kingsolver includes a drawing by an artist named Paul Mirocha. In this case, the picture is of a hand cradling an egg in its palm.

- ◆ Obviously, Mirocha's picture reinforces Kingsolver's words. Further, because the drawings in the book are highly detailed black-and-white sketches, this style of illustration echoes 19th-century woodcuts or old-fashioned children's book pictures. In other words, the style of Mirocha's sketches brings to mind a one-to-one correlation between word and image that typifies essays and memoirs that are illustrated in a traditional way.
- To reinforce words through images is a straightforward yet highly engaging way to enhance your writing and to bring even more meaning into your visual essays. But if your aim is either to call into question the assumed power of images or to create a kind of tension—perhaps a conversation or an actual argument—across words and pictures, then you might also wish to try another kind of visual approach called “second-sight essays.”
 - ◆ In these essays, writers want readers not just to look more closely at pictures but to look at them again, to re-see them, to view them anew. More often than not, these essayists are writing about what they believe pictures can and cannot contain: whether pictures have the ability to capture human memory or history fully, whether they have an inherent morality or should be held to an ethical standard, or whether their artistry is more important than their subject matter.
 - ◆ The writers who craft second-sight essays are often amateur philosophers, cultural critics, or self-proclaimed intellectuals. They are intrigued by the doubleness of all imagery: how it represents a person, a place, a thing, or an idea but how, too, it can never actually be that person, place, thing, or idea. As we know, all pictures—regardless of medium—are just substitutes for the real, the actual, and the now.
 - ◆ Thus, second-sight essays initiate dialogues across language and image to create an interdependent reading experience, one in which the pictures convey the writers' ideas as much as their carefully chosen words, their metaphors, or their attention to pathos- and logos-based appeals.
 - ◆ A compelling example is Roland Barthes' well-known reflections on photography, *Camera Lucida*, a series of short, interlinked essays that contemplate the elusive power of a photograph to create and shape reality. In some of his essays, Barthes embeds certain photographs, allowing a reader to see them. In others, however, he doesn't, and his photographic absences are as important as the pictures he provides.

- ◆ In writing your own visual essays, you might try this second-sight approach. If you're interested in this method, you'll want to make whatever pictures you include a vital part of your essay's purpose. These pictures should "talk" or "speak" every bit as much as the words, and in fact, the words and the pictures should have a kind of conversation within your piece.
 - ◆ You might also want to consider whether you wish to refrain from giving a reader all the images you're discussing—whether you want to create deliberate absences that "talk" or "speak" through strategic silences.
- Whether you decide that you'd like to try writing an essay based around your relationship with a single picture—as Winterson does—or attempt an essay that's illustrated with images that exemplify the story you're trying to tell—as Kingsolver does—or perhaps try a second-sight essay in which you put pictures and words in dialogue with each other—as Barthes does—it's important for you to try to create a visual essay. Whether we realize it or not, all of us are visual thinkers. The images that are a part of our daily lives—from snapshots of family members on the fridge to a painting that hangs in the living room—speak to us, telling us stories of who we are as well as whom we hope to be.

Suggested Reading

Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

Ephron, "The Boston Photographs," *Crazy Salad*.

Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

———, "Lily's Chickens," *Small Wonder*.

Millman, *Look Both Ways*.

Sebald, *A Place in the Country*.

Sontag, *On Photography*.

Swegman, *Philadelphia on the Fly*.

Winterson, *Art Objects*.

Lecture 12

Writing Inch by Inch: From Draft to Polish

It's no secret that most writers feel blocked on occasion in their careers. But the idea that writers must wait around for an "invisible influence"—in the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley—is a fiction that can be damaging to the writer's psychological and physical health. It's true that some writers continue to live with the idea that a muse will inspire them, but overwhelmingly, writing isn't about finding inspiration from a fickle source outside yourself. As hackneyed as it might sound, it's about nothing more than hard work and finding inspiration from within.

Starting the First Draft


- As you begin to write, what may help to keep you from worrying too much about what you're drafting is a liberating idea from the funny, cranky, and generous Anne Lamott, an essayist who believes that everyone—from novice writers to bestselling authors—writes "shitty" first drafts. If nothing else, Lamott boosts the confidence of beginning writers, who are almost all in the grip of nasty imposter syndrome. Thinking of every first draft of every essay you'll write as a shitty first draft helps to free you from the sense that you're a fraud.
- How does an essayist even begin a bad first draft? At the risk of citing a platitude, whatever your topic may be and whatever your hoped-for purpose, it's best to start at the very beginning. You might even try just writing a first sentence. Although this first sentence isn't necessarily the most significant part of an essay, it's your invitation into the writing.

- One intriguing first sentence comes from Gloria Anzaldúa's essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* begins this way: "'We're going to have to control your tongue,' the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth." This first sentence is good for a number of reasons.
 - ◆ First, it's active. The sentence starts with a line of dialogue and an implied scene. Readers can easily imagine themselves sitting in the dental chair, at the mercy of the dentist.
 - ◆ This sentence also provides an idea of character—both the dentist's and the narrator's. With his use of the royal "we," the dentist seems to have a bit of a superiority complex, while Anzaldúa herself is in a more vulnerable position. Yet she is also the one who is creating the essay. The mere juxtaposition between the essay's title, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," and this opening sentence makes it clear that Anzaldúa isn't happy with this situation. She doesn't like having someone tame her wild tongue, either literally or figuratively.
 - ◆ In addition to giving us a sense of place, Anzaldúa's first sentence also suggests a bit about the people involved and the essay's ultimate purpose. Further, we get the perspective of the essay because Anzaldúa uses the pronoun "my." We're inside a first-person story, which means we're in the dental chair right alongside her.
- Across any essay, the best opening sentences touch on these four elements: place, people, perspective, and purpose. Doing so offers a clear invitation to the reader—a clear sense of what the essay is going to be about and what the writer hopes to convey.
- In contrast, let's look at a bad first sentence, this one from William Hazlitt, now often remembered as the father of the modern personal essay. For all of Hazlitt's renown as an essayist, he begins a piece entitled "The First" in this way: "Where there's a will, there's a way." This first sentence suffers from clichéd prose and overly general diction, and it has none of the necessary elements that make for precision or enticement. By quoting a well-worn and tedious phrase, Hazlitt has sparked no interest in the reader and has made his invitation into the essay both drab and unappealing.

- As an exercise, write the first sentence of a draft essay. As you work, try to make sure your sentence provides a distinct perspective, an idea of place, some understanding of the relevant people involved, and a gesture toward what you think your purpose might be. If you jot something down, play with it, and if you still don't like your sentence, then try again.

Continuing the Essay

- Once you have a sentence that you're willing to work with, you've taken the first step toward producing a first draft. But think of this sentence as a threshold; now it's time to walk through the door, to see what the interior of your essay might look like. Wherever your door may lead, there are numerous exercises that can assist you in constructing the middle of your essay from that initial threshold sentence. A particular favorite is one from Anne Lamott that she calls "short assignments." As you work through this exercise, keep your primary aim in mind: You're not trying to write a perfect essay on the first go.


A pair of hands is shown from the bottom and sides, framing a view of a vast yellow field (likely rapeseed) under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The hands are positioned as if holding a rectangular frame.

If you feel paralyzed at the idea of writing a 4,000- to 10,000-word essay, use the one-inch frame exercise; try to see the pieces of your essay in successive one-inch frames.

- Lamott likens short assignments to a one-inch picture frame. To step across the first-sentence threshold and enter the first room of your essay, write only as much as you can see through a one-inch frame. That one-inch might be a single paragraph on the first thing you did after the taxi dropped you off in the middle of Beijing, and you didn't speak a word of Chinese. Or that one paragraph might be what your father looked like and smelled like as he took you into the woods for your first hunting trip.
- When your first one-inch picture is done, then move on to the next one. In the essay set in Beijing, the next inch might describe how to use a bathroom with no Western toilets. Or in the essay on hunting, the next inch might capture that strange little yelp the family dog made before your father told it to get up a covey. Of course, when you're done focusing on that next inch, you move to the following one. As Lamott explains, "You don't have to see where you're going[;] you don't have to see your destination or everything you will pass along the way. You just have to see two or three feet ahead of you."

Ending and Iceboxing

- Eventually, if you move inch by inch, you will have a terrible first draft of an essay. And that's exactly what you want. But then comes the moment when it's time to stop. Your process of invention isn't quite over; you need an ending. Because essays really must find their own forms, maybe a standard or supposedly ideal ending can never be reached. Or it may seem as though any ending is arbitrary: You simply stop with a certain line of dialogue, a quotation from a favorite writer, a question, a symbol, or an image.
- Just as an essay discovers its own form along the way, it's also true that, in many ways, an essay invents its own ending. Thus, when you're ready to conclude your draft, write a single, one-inch paragraph about something that is related to what you're writing about but that's also completely distinct.
 - ◆ If your essay is about the fact that college football is a national narrative that rewrites the story of the American dream, then write a paragraph about the glorious end of a sandlot softball game you played when you were eight years old.



Once you're done working through your terrible first draft, take a moment to celebrate both the risk you took by attempting to put words on paper and your accomplishment in doing so.

- ◆ If your essay delves into why Americans seem to have a rapacious need to hear ghost stories, then write a one-inch paragraph about a similar desire for the legends of Big Foot or Area 51. Make what Lopate calls a “wacky diagonal run.” Don't feel as though you have to tie it all up with a big, shiny bow. Really, all you need is a final one-inch frame.
- After you've completed your terrible first draft, the next step is to icebox it. Maybe read through it once the next morning to clean it up a bit, but after that, put it in the deep freeze. Remember, even if you put it away for a while, your first draft won't change. What will change during that time, however, is you. And as you change, your ability to see—and to re-see—your essay will become stronger.
- Most beginning writers don't like to hear it, but the real work of writing isn't invention (the fun at the beginning) or copyediting (the drudgery at the end). No, writing is the hard part in between that leads you to something close to

a finished work. As the American poet Mary Oliver says about first drafts and writing, “What matters is that you consider what you have on the page as an unfinished piece of work that now requires your best conscious and patient appraisal.”

- After iceboxing, you must return to your essay with that conscious and patient appraisal, which cannot happen if you don't separate yourself from the origins of the essay, from the heat of its creation. It's not your personal connections that matter in revision; it's whether you've said what you must say in order to captivate, inspire, and move a stranger who will pick up your essay many years from now.

Transitioning to Later Drafts

- One strategy for transitioning your terrible first draft into a respectable second draft and an effective third draft involves a process of re-seeing, of coming to your work with fresh eyes.
- After you defrost your essay, read it all the way through in one sitting, without doing any revising. Imagine that this essay was written by someone else and ask yourself what parts interest you the most. Then, take out a red pen and cut your essay in half, leaving in only the best parts.
- Put the text you've cut somewhere that you can get to it later (although you may never look at it again), then take a few days, weeks, or months and rebuild your essay. If you want, use the strategy of writing one-inch frames as you rebuild; you may tinker with your revised opening sentence; and you may write a new ending that once again takes your piece in a diagonal direction. This new version is your respectable second draft.
- With your respectable second draft in hand, you must then find a reader. Join a writing group, take a workshop, or ask a trusted friend or a colleague. Make sure you find someone who will tell you the truth. You need an honest critique—not a saccharine or a safe one.

- In the end, your best re-vision—your best chance at seeing your work with truly new eyes—is when you read the comments about your essay offered by your reader. Once you revise your piece based on those comments, you end up with your pretty darn good third draft!

Suggested Reading

Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Barry, "Turkeys in the Kitchen," *Miami Herald*.

Lamott, *Bird by Bird*.

Lopate, *To Show and To Tell*.

Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," *College English*.

Williams, "Why I Write," *Writing Creative Nonfiction*.

Lecture 13

Short Forms: Microessays and Prose Poems

The structure of essays is highly flexible—and the best ones find their own forms. Unified by the storytelling perspective of a first-person “I” speaking from experience, essays spin themselves along, seeking the next turn of idea as they go. Essays explore, imagine, and digress. They don’t have fixed rules for their structures. They may move lockstep through a careful progression, circle back on themselves, or branch out in all directions. The form depends on the needs of the writing. Ideally, an essay’s form should fit the function of the essayist’s main point as perfectly as a glove warms a hand.

Structure in Writing

- Most literary genres have relatively strict rules about structure. For instance, as we all learned in high school English class, a traditional short story begins with an initiating circumstance, followed by a rising action and a climax, and ending with a denouement.
- Essays assigned in school also often come with organizational conventions. Students are taught the five-paragraph persuasive essay, the comparison-contrast essay, the descriptive essay, and so on.
 - ◆ The construction of such essays helps to demonstrate certain approaches to critical thinking, releasing students from developing their own forms and allowing them to focus on elements of argumentation, description, and narration.
 - ◆ In essence, then, these educational essays—or “modes of discourse”—are a first step in developing and honing analytical skills that can enable



Like a house designed by an architect, an essay serves the needs of its creator—meaning that the essay’s design will match your own needs, given what you hope to say.

more practiced writers to discover the most appropriate framework for whatever essays they attempt.

- Once you’ve discovered what you want to write about and have had a chance to practice some of the more mature strategies that help in constructing well-designed and powerful pieces, your task is to shape your burgeoning ideas into a cohesive whole. You must transform your intangible thoughts into an apt and elegant structure—one that fits the intention of your primary points.
- Of course, with such freedom comes potential doubt. You may find yourself perplexed about how to develop the right arrangement for your essay. It’s also true that there are numerous essay forms from which to choose, such as memoirs, public intellectual essays, travel pieces, and so on. Further, certain purposes necessitate certain structures. For now, however, let’s look more closely at two intriguing short forms: the “microessay” and the “proem.”

The Microessay

- In the late 1990s, an award-winning essayist, Dinty Moore, started an online journal called *Brevity*. Moore saw this journal as an experiment in developing excellent essays that were 750 words or less—now called “flash nonfiction” or “microessays.” For Dinty Moore, microessays are in keeping with other distilled art forms, such as two-minute dance solos or brief experimental films. He believes that “there’s a through line of emotion, beauty, and discomfort that can fit into the tiniest of frames.”
- When asked in an interview what writerly qualities define the best microessays, Moore’s answer was simple yet direct: “Tight, crisp language. An immediate and consistent voice. [And a] [c]arefully shaped structure.” An essay called “Split” by student Jess Edwards-Smith encompasses all these qualities.
 - ◆ One thing that’s fascinating about this brief essay is that although the author had to sustain a compelling first-person voice, at the same time, she also had to figure out how to split her voice in two. She’s successful, in part, because her two voices are indeed consistent, even though one is optimistic and one morose.
 - ◆ Both voices speak in straightforward sentences, often starting with a simple subject-verb construction (“She sings,” “She turns,” “She believes,”), a structure that underscores the candid and direct nature of this narrator.
 - ◆ Also, both voices have instances of precise and vivid imagery, such as when the optimistic girl of the past describes her current self as sitting in a “blue bubble of laptop light,” whereas the morose girl of the present watches her ceiling self “pour steaming tea into a luminescent cup.” Even as the author’s two selves are clearly opposed, they also speak as one in terms of syntax and style.
 - ◆ Edwards-Smith chooses the form of a triptych to convey how the same person may be split between a dynamic girl of memory and a depressed girl of the present. She begins and ends with the remembered girl, the ghost girl, while keeping her present-tense self inside the essay’s center. As a result, the form directly follows the microessay’s function: The girl’s core self—the one that’s actually alive—is sandwiched between two sections representing the girl as she used to be.

- ◆ In terms of the essay's structure, then, the center—the place where this girl's actual self resides—is paradoxically drained of motivation, emotion, movement, and life. It's a starved place, both literally and figuratively.
- ◆ By bookending the microessay with observations from the ghost girl, the girl of the past actually merges with a potential girl—one who's still coming into focus. The ghost girl holds onto the talent, wit, beauty, and ambition of the real girl's previous life, and in the final section, the ghost girl suggests that there will be a better future. As these two figures drive back home, they merge into one, into “music and smiles.”

The Proem

- As you might expect, a proem is a piece combining aspects of both poetry and prose. In the 15th century, a proem actually meant a preface or a preamble. The term has evolved from its denotation as a prologue to a connotation that involves an elision of prose-like qualities within a poetic structure—or a prose-poem.
- Proems adopt the extended rhythms, syntax, punctuation, characters, and lines of dialogue that characterize short stories, novels, memoirs, and essays. A proem may also be recognized for its scene-like or situational qualities, its focus on sound without the intrinsic musicality of a poetic line, its sharp imagery, and its block-like form on the page.
- One proem that is often reproduced in anthologies is Carolyn Forché's “The Colonel”—a piece about Forché's experience in the late 1970s with a Salvadorian colonel who emptied a sack of human ears in front of her after a dinner. While the colonel shook the ears onto a table and swept them to the floor, he told both Forché and her friend that their people should not expect legal or human rights.
 - ◆ “The Colonel” is poetic in its sense-based, descriptive detail about this monstrous dinner. Forché describes the colonel's house-turned-fortress, with glass shards embedded in his external walls to thwart anyone trying to climb over them. She also employs precise, heart-wrenching imagery, comparing the ears scattered on the floor to “dried peach halves.”

- ◆ What keeps this piece simultaneously essayistic, not just poetic, is the way in which Forché adopts the confessionality of a creative nonfiction narrator who tells a story. From the moment she declares at the outset of her proem that she was present, Forché signals her desire both to witness and to reveal this horrific event to her readers.
 - ◆ Furthermore, in terms of form, Forché presents this proem as a single block of text made up of simple, short, and severe sentences that combine exposition, her own interior monologue, and direct dialogue from the colonel. In this way, Forché presents a carefully reconstructed scene that tells a brief narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- Another example of a proem comes from a writing student named Matthew Alexander who came to college after serving as a U.S. Marine in Afghanistan. As with Forché's proem, Alexander's piece also brings together the narrative qualities of prose with the rhythms, sounds, descriptions, and imagery of poetry. The piece is called "Same Drab Walls."
- ◆ Once again, although this structure is distinctly different than that of a microessay, the author's chosen form fits the function of his intent. With this proem, Alexander creates a kind of stream-of-consciousness in which everything he remembers and everything he experiences are held within a single block of text. The compactness of this form brings to the fore the crowded, claustrophobic emotions both expressed and withheld in the proem.
 - ◆ Although there's a story here—one that's suspended between two similar yet different bedrooms in two distinct times and places—the essay is shaped by a poet's ear more than a storyteller's sense of plot or sequence. With his repetition of the phrase "Strange how," Alexander creates a kind of refrain, an effect that likens this recurring phrase to the strange vacillation he feels between the life he is living in college and the one he has left in Afghanistan.
 - ◆ To further stress this constantly fluctuating perspective, Alexander also uses parallel syntactic constructions throughout the piece. For instance, he says, "He didn't belong," then adds "I didn't belong"; he tells his readers that his memories are both "ones to remember and ones to forget"; and he notes that for him, "time passes but also stops." As a result, Alexander is able to draw on the poet's powers of linking sound to sense.

- ◆ Further, the proem fully engages the reader's senses. Readers see the rifle versus the novel, hear the echoes of combat against the foghorn announcing a party, and smell the sweat and heat emanating from both barracks and dorm rooms. By placing the reader's own body within the proem, when Alexander turns to address Benny, the reader feels the loss of Benny's body all the more.
 - ◆ This turn also signals a change in the proem's perspective, especially when Alexander takes on the first-person "I" at the end to talk directly to Benny. In classical rhetoric, to speak to someone who isn't present is to engage an "apostrophe," a figure of speech in which a narrator communicates with a third party who is absent or cannot be seen. Thus, when Alexander says, "In the shadows of my new room within these new drab walls, I can still see you, Benny," he's apostrophizing his lost friend and fellow soldier.
 - ◆ This address to Benny creates a deep sense of intimacy. When Alexander writes, "And it's worth every bit, Benny. Your life and Conger's legs. It's well worth it all for what we have now: an education and a future," we readers feel as if we're overhearing a conversation. The moment is raw, wretched, and hopeful. And it's how Alexander makes the stream-of-consciousness of his essay less about his own struggles and more about the inevitable losses of war.
- Did these student authors know that they needed the structure of a microessay or a proem to write the essays they intended to write? No, they did not. Instead, both of them had a burgeoning sense of what they hoped to convey, then began writing. Their drafts changed as they went along, but eventually, after revision, their essays found the forms that were best suited for their subjects.

Suggested Reading

Forché, "The Colonel," *The Country between Us*.

Kalinich, "Nonfiction Narratives in under 750 Words," *The Review Review*.

Patton, "Focusing on Flash Nonfiction," *River Teeth*.

“Split” by Jess Edwards-Smith

She thinks through worst-case scenarios with her best fake smile, and I watch her converse with a lover like the lover is mine. I know she’s not being honest when she tells him, “Oh yeah, babe, everything’s great,” because even though I don’t really know her anymore, I know the lie in the second-and-a-half space between expression and reaction. I am her consciousness; I float between this moment and the next. She sees me up here on the ceiling. I smile back. She doesn’t.

She doesn’t know what time it is anymore. Hunger pains are second-hands she ignores. The only numbers she seems to remember are statistics. Late at night, and I watch her Google “How many college girls have depression?” It’s 45%. She must think that knowing statistics will keep her from becoming one. I hold the hurt she no longer feels. I tell her to eat or to go outside or to write something pretty or at least to write something, but she never listens to me. She just lies on the floor in a blue bubble of laptop light.

She believes I took her soul, but then again, she doesn’t like that word “empty.” She blames me for being smart, hopeful, organized, full, and well-rested. She thinks that because I am all of those things, she can’t be. But when she had a soul, she was talent, wit, beauty, and ambition. I remind her that I’m keeping safe these things that once filled her, but when I say that they’re up here with me, she gets angry or quiet. She says she can’t reach.

I do not remember forgetting myself. I never used to look up and see a girl floating above me, out of reach, holding everything I once was and wanted. She looks like me and she smiles like I used to, and sometimes I can even trick myself into smiling like that, watching my mouth open and close in the fluorescent bathroom mirror, repeating, “It’s all good; it’s all good; it’s all good.”

I can’t tell you when the split happened. It’s like rain—you never see the first drop, but after a while, you’re caught in a downpour, and you don’t remember when you started missing the sun.

But at least in storms, you can’t see the light you’re missing. She’s quick to give me memories, bursts of light. “Here, see this day when you brought home your puppy?”

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Look at that front-page article you published. Why aren't you proud?" She's annoying, giving me advice and telling me things I already know. The more I ignore her, the louder she gets. She wants me to do well. She believes I can. As if finding the rhythm of normalcy is as easy as brushing my teeth. "Hey, it's warm out today. Let's go on a hike," she says. "Hey, it's lunchtime. There's a sandwich in the fridge," she says. "Hey, you really can't afford not to get a job this summer. Do you want to get stuck waitressing at that seafood place again?"

The girl on the ceiling is happy and attractive and good at all the things I was once good at. I watch her drift around up there, stringing sparkling beads into necklaces, reciting Romantic poetry. I watch her giggle and pour steaming tea into a luminescent cup, asking me if I want one spoonful of sugar or two. She knows I won't answer. I never do. But she asks anyway because courtesy is something else I lost in the split.

I follow her into her car, and the ceiling is much closer. I'm just above her head. These are moments when we feel almost connected. She is still warm with life; she listens when I tell her I wish I could give her back what she thinks I stole. But as much as I want to be let back in, I can't be without her permission. And I don't think she knows how to give it to me. She starts the engine, drives over the big bridge, heading back home from school. Her stereo is turned all the way up, and I float into the speakers, into the music, into her ears. She sings every word of the songs she finds me in, and that's invitation enough. She turns up the music and smiles. And so for a song or two—for a drive—we are again one.

“Same Drab Walls” by Matt Alexander

Twelve years after public school, memories fade and new ones emerge. Ones to remember and ones to forget. Ones violent and past and ones still in the present tense. My first taste of freedom—away from my family, away from my friends—was a drab white room, no pictures allowed. The sounds all around me were of drunken men walking the hallways. Yelling, laughing, crying. Funny how a single weekend can show the whole range of human emotions in a four-story brick building made from the blankness of warfare. Sometimes we would talk about our friends back home; sometimes we would talk about our families, but there was one constant that never changed: we talked about our Brothers. The way we lost them in country, the way we lose them at home. Strange how the most dangerous place for a Marine can be in his own backyard. When those same drab walls began to close in, and the hum in my ears got louder and louder, all I could hear was the echoing sounds of combat. My new roommate heard nothing but silence or the videogame he was playing. He wasn't in “the ghan” with us, so I shunned him; we all shunned him. He didn't belong. Weird how, after coming home, I started to feel that I didn't belong. Now, though, in the room I live in, pictures are allowed and no sergeant is telling me what to do. No field day every night, no 4:00 AM wake-up, no drunken men crying in the corridors. Crazy how, in the blink of an eye, it was a rifle, and now it's a novel. Now there's a door that locks and my own bed. A place to think, read, write, where the shadows from the past can't always reach me and where peace has started to set in. That quiet sound of peace, no hum at all, just the occasional fog horn. Cool how that fog horn is an announcement for a nearby party and not something else. The room still smells like the barracks, looks like the barracks, and it still has the sound of men, but only sometimes drunk and never crying. Now there is laughter and students cheering for the home team. Strange how the differences are easy; it's the similarities that are hard. So Benny didn't make it here with me like we'd planned, and that's a bummer. His life remains back there, in a world I've almost forgotten. In the shadows of my new room within these new drab walls, I can still see you, Benny. So I guess I'm not all alone here like I thought I would be. And there's a picture on the wall, the one we took on our first deployment with Conger. That picture is my motivation. I wake up with it and fall asleep to it, flashing a small light towards it when I roll over from a dream in the dark. And it's worth every bit, Benny. Your life and Conger's legs. It's well worth it all for what we have now: an education and a future. Strange how you're both here and there with me in those memories. Strange how time passes and also stops.

Lecture 14

The Memoir Essay

A memoir essay is a piece of writing that draws on a writer's past, then uses that past as a means of self-reflection. Such an essay often returns to a painful or difficult moment, such as a bout with breast cancer or the time the writer was unfairly fired from a much-loved job. Unlike a personal essay that may be pulled from a writer's past, present, or even an imagined future and may be focused on any topic, a memoir essay must evolve from the intimate recollections a writer excavates from his or her own life, coupled with thoughtful reflections on those memories.

Reminiscence

- The word “memoir” is derived from the French definition of *mémoire*, meaning “reminiscence.” This word is an evocative one, for reminiscence is more than mere memory. To reminisce also means to recover innate knowledge held by the soul or the subconscious—knowledge that comes out of a collective and ancient sense of the human. Thus, the very idea of writing a memoir essay has embedded within it simultaneous acts of retrieval and revelation.
- David Owen, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote an essay called “Scars,” in which he used the marks on his own body as a map of his childhood and teenage memories.
 - ◆ In one sense, Owen’s scars are a handy means for accessing certain recollections: the gouge on his toe from cherry-bomb shrapnel; a mark on his arm from a “molten G.I. Joe”; and so on.
 - ◆ Yet as his wounds accumulate in the essay, Owen’s scars come to represent more than pain followed by healing. They don’t represent just resilience; they also represent loss. In particular, they represent the

loss of his childhood friend Duncan, who died relatively young and who was present at many of the everyday disasters that resulted in Owen's injuries.

- ◆ Although scars tell the tale of a body's resistance, they also foretell the body's death. Thus, Owen's revelation is this profound and melancholy truth: Our scars determine our losses as much as they attest to our will to survive.
- In this way, a memoir essayist looks backward in order to teach forward. Any private recollection stemming from a writer's narrow, individual life should ultimately shed light on the lives of countless others he or she may never meet. There's a whole world of people with their own scar-tissue memorials, and Owen's essay invites those people in.

Opening a Memoir Essay

- "Opening My Eyes" by Matt Flyr is about a study tour the author took to South Africa with a group of students; it was the first time he'd ever traveled out of the country.
- The opening of the essay offers sharp, precise, and vivid details from an expedition to swim with sharks.
 - ◆ Flyr doesn't write in vague generalizations or with a bunch of boring minutiae. For instance, in the moment of greatest tension, just before he slides into the cage, he writes, "I swing my legs over the boat's side. I see the outlines of the sharks, breaking from their methodical movements to snap their jaws over slivers of innocent chum." The writing gives us arresting and evocative detail.
 - ◆ The author uses exact verbs to re-create particular actions. He "swings" his legs, while the sharks "break" their swimming to "snap" their jaws. Also, Flyr uses just the right imagery to show his uneasy mood. The sharks are mere "outlines" under the water, and the pieces of chum are "innocent slivers," which symbolically stand in for the author himself. Note, too, that Flyr describes the sharks' movements as "methodical." This adjective evokes a sense of their viciousness as both calculated and cold.

- In any memoir essay, it's crucial to plumb the depths of your recollections for precise details about the time and place you're trying to recall. If you can't quite remember the texture of certain particulars, do your homework. Sift through old photographs or return to the place where your memories first occurred. Ask family members and friends what they recall about the people, places, and events you're attempting to re-create.
- Then, wake up your details by using some of the same techniques that Fly uses. Choose exact verbs. Create vibrant and relevant imagery. Use just the right adjective to describe the best noun you can find for the job. Without this level of precision, any writer's memories become flabby and generic. Be just as careful, though, not to cram copious amounts of detail into every margin of your memoir. Without an emotional interpretation to connect these details to the greater purpose of your essay, your detail-studded style will quickly become tedious.
- Fly also keeps himself and the memory he's sharing inside a place of struggle. He doesn't save himself as the focal figure and narrator of his tale. In fact, he's not the hero here. Instead, Fly is consistently insecure and consistently

In a memoir essay, you need to show your memories, not just tell them; in Matt Fly's essay, the author seeks to show the sharks as cold-blooded killers, not merely say that they are scary.



attentive to what's happening around him. In trying to muster the courage to swim with sharks, he also shows us that he's terrified to do it.

- A memoir essay shouldn't be a memory dressed up as a heroic tale, nor should it be a long lament about how hard you had it in the past or how unlucky you are now. Your motivation for the writing should be to grapple with the struggle of it all—with the mess. Flyr's piece is about his struggle in trying to get himself into the shark-infested waters, and it's in relating such struggle that any memoir essay gets at some part of what it means to be human.

Reflecting on Memories

- Despite its strengths, the opening of Flyr's essay is not yet fully memoir: It's written from memory, and it does a good job of re-creating memory, but the author isn't yet reflecting on what he remembers. In order for this piece to rise to the level of true memoir, the author is required to reminisce.
- Just as there's a risk in swimming with sharks, there's also a risk in revealing one's own insecurities. Thus, Flyr must shift from thinking chiefly about his bodily risk to considering his psychological, moral, spiritual, and emotional risks. To write memoir, authors must be vulnerable to their readers. They must link external observations to a kind of internal honesty.
- In the next section, Flyr's memoir essay starts to move in this direction, toward vulnerability and self-knowledge. After he admits to the reader that he closed his eyes while slipping into the shark cage, there's a white-space break, and he goes on to talk about other experiences he had in South Africa in the weeks leading up to the shark adventure.
 - ◆ Without overtly stating it, Flyr's essay evolves from grappling with his fear of sharks into grappling with the much more convoluted fears of race, class, and ethnic difference. Here, he comes to recognize his own privilege as an American tourist and his biases about this place and these people—biases based on his textbook and mass-media understandings of South Africans and the history of apartheid.
 - ◆ To offer such revelations means that Flyr is taking a risk. He's exposing himself as someone with both privilege and prejudice. Although there

are other kinds of essays that draw on real-life experience, memoir essays are particularly revealing about a writer's own life. They're often confessional, touching on taboo or potentially scandalous topics.

- The memoir essay demands that you take chances. To write one, you must talk openly about what most people want to hide. You must take a long, hard look at your own foibles and at embarrassing or unflattering moments from your past. A memoir essay is all about the raw and brutal truth of the essayist's own life.
- Flyr approaches his difficult topic—memories that lay bare his own racism—in a literary way. In particular, he employs the twinned metaphors of blindness and sight to reveal his racist preconceptions about South Africans.
 - ◆ First, Flyr draws on the metaphor of blindness—about what it means not to see or not to understand what one sees. He talks about his first few days in Cape Town, which of course are days of culture shock. He can't navigate the roads—which is a kind of directional blindness. He doesn't understand the Xhosa language—a linguistic blindness. And he's confused by the broken glass and barbed wire surrounding the houses owned by the wealthy white population, a population that remains invisible to him—which amounts to a cultural blindness.
 - ◆ Then, as Flyr and his fellow students climb on a bus to head to the Langa township, his blindness intensifies. He wants to keep his gaze blinkered, focused on his fellow classmates, on all that is "recognizable" and "comforting." When he finally peeks out a window, he sees what he expects to see through the taint of preconceived notions. He writes, "Through the dirty glass, I see the outskirts of the township—houses made of shipping containers, underfed stray dogs running to smell the severed goat heads being prepared over an open fire by women with faces smeared in a strange white paste."
 - ◆ Note how Flyr takes on the perspective of a white, Western outsider visiting what in the 19th century was called "darkest Africa." He plugs into racist and ethnic stereotypes that have circulated for centuries when describing how Africans live: the extreme poverty, seemingly backward customs, and even the dirtiness of the window itself. And Flyr heightens his fear of difference by making a bold reference back to the first part of

his essay. He claims, “I am a human among sharks, and soon I’ll have no boat to protect me.”

- ◆ It’s here, though, when he likens South Africans to sharks, that Flyr demonstrates his willingness to look hard at his own failings in order to understand them better—to recollect them and to reflect on them. Looking back at this moment after much time has passed, Flyr knows that thinking of these people as “sharks” is a racist fear.
 - ◆ His search for self-knowledge is revealed when he shows us how he stepped off the bus and closed his eyes—literally engaging in self-blinding—and calls this gesture a “childlike escape.” Here, Flyr admits his immaturity; he establishes credibility by admitting his own blindness but also opens himself and his readers up to a new kind of sight: one of kindness, self-possession, openness, joy, and hope.
- Flyr is confessional without being narcissistic. And although there is personal peril in his confessionality, the potential reward in writing an honest and thoughtful memoir essay is, in the words of Socrates, to know thyself. It is by trying to understand the self in all its chaos and confusion that we can come to know the world better.

Suggested Reading

Dillard, *The Writing Life*.

HAMPL, *I Could Tell You Stories*.

Levy, “To Cèpe, With Love,” *Books That Cook*.

Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

Owen, “Scars,” *The New Yorker*.

Roorbach, *Writing Life Stories*.

Lecture 15

Lyric Essays: Writing That Sings

A lyric poem is a short poem that was originally meant to be sung. It expresses the poet's thoughts through the intimacy of the first-person "I," and unlike a ballad or an epic, it does not tell a story. Lyric essays are those that link the wholeness of prose to the grace and eloquence of poetry. In this aspect, they are similar to the proem, although unlike many proems, a lyric essay is often storyless. It's a form that moves by association, not progression, accumulating its meaning through fragments. As a result, there is no real resolution at the end of a lyric essay. Even after the last word, the writer is still probing, seeking, and wondering.

Qualities of Lyric Essays

- Because the voice of a lyric essayist is one that probes and seeks, it is almost always a private, ruminating voice. To read a lyric essay is to eavesdrop on the desires and doubts of a secret mind.
 - ◆ Consider this sentence from Joan Didion's piece on her recurring migraines, from an essay she entitled "In Bed": "When I am in a migraine aura, I will drive through red lights, lose the house keys, spill whatever I am holding, lose the ability to focus my eyes or frame coherent sentences, and generally give the appearance of being on drugs, or drunk."
 - ◆ On the one hand, this short excerpt demonstrates that Didion's writing is lyrical. It has a cadence. Didion draws on alliteration (with "drugs" and "drunk") and assonance (with phrases such as "I am in a migraine aura"), as well as on the staccato rhythms of monosyllabic words ("drive," "red," "lose," "house," and so on).
 - ◆ On the other hand, Didion's readers aren't just listening to the musical qualities of her writing; they're also swallowed inside the throbbing head

of a migraine sufferer. We follow the ferocity of Didion's private pain by following the meanderings of her migrained mind.

- Although Didion's voice rambles, it is also reticent, restrained, and reserved. Unlike a memoir essayist who hinges meaning on full confessionality, the lyric essayist is almost always coy or shy. Lyric essayists are hesitant to fill in all the blanks of their experience because they, too, are unsure about what exactly those blanks should hold.
- A final quality that tends to define a lyric essayist is the ability to create a strong mood. Another well-known writer of the lyric form is John D'Agata. In one of his essays, D'Agata offers the following paragraph to sum up an amateur bus driver's attempt at being a tour guide. D'Agata's essay is about going with family members to visit the Hoover Dam, trapped on a six-hour bus ride without air conditioning.

[The driver's] words emit circles, whip bubbles around our heads. His sentences wrap around the bus and greet themselves in midair. All the way to the dam the bus rumbles inside this cloud, ... the tour transforms into a silent scratchy film that is slowly flitting backward through frames of older dreams.

- ◆ Although D'Agata is paying allegiance to the facts of his experience, he also withholds basic information from the reader, such as where they were and the sites they saw. Instead, D'Agata silences this information by turning it into metaphoric circles and bubbles that form a cloud wrapping itself around the bus.
- ◆ Keep in mind that it's not just the details that matter in a lyric essay; it's also the mood of the writing, its sensibility. D'Agata's mood here is both a bit humorous and poignant, suggesting that the history that's presented to tourists in the forms of monuments, gift shops, and tours is fleeting.
- Just as a lyric poem cannot unearth every detail or spy into every corner, a lyric essay, too, depends on silence as much as speech. Any leap from one paragraph or sentence to the next should be understood as the same kind of leap found between poetic stanzas or lines. As such, a lyric essay depends on its breaks and fissures as much as its sounds.

Lyric Essays and Memory

- This dependence on gaps and suggestion aligns the lyric essay with the workings of human memory, and that makes it a type of essay well-suited to exploring recollection.
- To understand this idea, try this exercise. Start by going back to the recollection that is your earliest memory. Such memories are usually a series of two or three visual flashes with a bit of sound, taste, or tactility thrown in. You probably hold onto them because they were moments of emotional intensity; their passion or agony or joy was seared into your brain.
- The trick of forming a lyric essay out of such memories is to take the shimmering shards and write each discrete image into its own rare shape and sound. The point isn't to string them together like beads on a necklace. Rather, the idea is to think of your words as individual notes that when played in a sequence, allow your readers to hear and feel the full, whole melody of your piece.

The powerful feelings we associate with memory shards are not about storytelling but about brute emotion—frustration, agony, or fear.



“Alone” by Benedict O’Connor

- The student essay “Alone” by Benedict O’Connor is lyrical precisely because the piece is poetic rather than narrative or persuasive, polemical or reflective. The author crafts a mosaic, with each of his sections forming a separate “tile” of thought and sound that, when seen and heard as a whole, snaps into focus as a single, striking picture.
- In the seven sections of this lyric essay, O’Connor tries to capture the somatic and psychic feeling of solitude. He wants his readers to re-feel and, thus, re-experience his aloneness through their own bodies. We are asked to walk in the woods, sift sand, spoon a lover, and drive through the night with him. Each section of his lyrical essay is active and palpable, and O’Connor focuses on heightening the readers’ senses through his poetic and precise diction and imagery.
- One thing that makes O’Connor’s essay lyrical is that his speaker’s voice is both meandering and reticent. Initially, his meandering is made literal as we walk alongside him through the woods. But such meandering quickly becomes metaphorical as he transitions from striding down a dark path to striding in and out of life’s experiences, driving or sleeping or sifting sand.
 - ◆ O’Connor also creates an interesting thematic tension between walking—which gives him movement and activity—and his essay’s focus on aloneness, which has a static quality of helplessness. This is an unwanted solitude that O’Connor cannot seem to shake, no matter what he does or whom he’s with.
 - ◆ The author also meanders in and out of images by threading certain phrases and pictures across the totality of his essay: the spinning wheel of the moon, the white truck, the invisible string, and so on. In this way, his meandering mind is woven together into a kind of whole: a complex image of what it means for him to be alone.
- Yet O’Connor’s meandering voice is also a reticent one. He doesn’t tell us whether he appreciates being alone or whether he believes it’s a loss of human connection. There are times when his imagery suggests that there’s a beauty in solitude; at other times, it’s clear that his aloneness is fearful or

melancholy. O'Connor's essay refuses to be clear about his desire for or rejection of being alone; thus, the totality of his piece is in its contradiction: that his solitude is both productive and damaging.

- Finally, note that O'Connor's essay is consistent in creating a certain mood through a quietly rhythmic tone. The music of his essay is slow and soft, sometimes somber and sometimes aching in its loveliness.

Lyric Essays and Storytelling

- As we've said, lyric essays are often plotless, yet there are lyrical pieces that manage to retain a rough sketch of a plot. This is the case in an essay entitled "Grip" by Joy Castro—an essayist and novelist who writes about the violence that typified her childhood in an abusive home and how that childhood still shadows her adult life, particularly as a mother.
- Castro's attention to lyricism in this essay is obvious, with her metaphors and her use of alliteration and assonance. Like O'Connor, Castro also provides a rhythm to her musicality through parallelisms.
- But perhaps what's most intriguing is how, in "Grip," Castro has threaded together three sets of memory shards from three distinct moments in her life to produce a plot—one from a shooting range, one from her infant son's bedroom, and one from a story about her stepfather breaking into her mother's house.
- Yet true to the distinctive qualities that make lyrical essays what they are, Castro withholds as much information as she offers through these three scenes. She tells us that her mother "wouldn't say what happened in the house" the night that her stepfather broke in. And Castro herself doesn't expound on the abuse that she experienced as a child. In this way, even though Castro's essay has a narrative arc, it remains more imaginative and shapely than either confessional or exhaustive.

Assignment: Writing a Lyric Essay

- To bring together all the elements of lyric essay writing that we've discussed, return to your own memory shards and try weaving them together with additional shards from two other points in your life history—ideally, points that aren't too close together. Try to form a connection among these three spots of time through a common idea or image.
 - ◆ Don't worry about being chronological; your aim is to make vivid impressions on your reader from each moment, impressions that will eventually circle around the core of your primary image or idea.
 - ◆ And with each memory shard that you render in words, set a brief scene, have yourself or another character engage a specific action or say a line of dialogue, and work hard to provide descriptive detail and a well-defined metaphor or two.

- After you've written your draft of this lyric essay, print it out, take a pair of scissors, and cut your essay into its discrete points in time. Try rearranging the parts as you would a puzzle, looking for new patterns as you go. As you rearrange, read each version of your lyric essay out loud, listening closely to the cadence of your piece with each new composition.

Suggested Reading

Castro, "Grip," *Fourth Genre*.
D'Agata, *Halls of Fame*.
Didion, *The White Album*.
Kitchen, "Grounding the Lyric Essay," *Fourth Genre*.
Tall, "The Lyric Essay," *Seneca Review*.

Lecture 16

The Epistolary Essay: Letters to the World

Letters seem to have a magical ability to resurrect their authors in ways that other kinds of writing do not. The epistolary form seems almost like holy writ—documents that contain death and life, the self and the reader, as well as the past and the eternal present tense. Unlike other forms of communication, letters live; they have their own tiny heartbeats, even long after the letter writer is gone.

Assignment, Part I: Writing a Letter

- As a first assignment for this lecture, write a letter to someone with whom you have an ongoing and rich relationship. In this letter, write about a pivot point from your own life, then explain to your recipient something about how this life-changing event has changed you.
 - ◆ Perhaps you've always wanted to tell this person about this particular moment—to thank him or her in some way for having had a role in the event. Maybe you want to convey to your receiver the struggle you went through at this particular time in your life. Or maybe you've never written about this moment but now want to reflect on it many years after it took place.
 - ◆ Whatever your motivation for choosing this subject and this recipient, take your letter seriously and make sure that it's handwritten. Then, mail the letter.
- After you've posted the letter, in the two or three days that it will take to arrive at your recipient's door, contact this person through two additional mediums, such as e-mail or text message. Note that you don't have to refer to

the life-changing event in this contact; you just have to reach out in other ways before your snail-mail letter arrives.

- After your recipient gets your letter and has had a chance to digest it, get back in touch in whatever way you wish and ask the person what difference it makes to receive a handwritten letter as opposed to a text or an e-mail. What is it about the hard-copy letter that makes it distinct from these other forms of written communication?
- It's likely that your recipient will note that it felt special to receive a letter from you and that this piece of writing may be saved in a way that e-mail and text messages cannot. You may hear that your letter feels particularly intimate, largely because you took the time to write it. The slowness of the exchange encourages a deeper, more extended, and more sustained conversation.
- This exercise underscores the idea that a letter is unlike any other form of writing. And it's this singularity that draws essayists to the form. Writers look to capitalize on the unique elements that define the genre of the letter—its intimacy, immediacy, materiality, and privacy—in writing epistolary essays.

Unique Qualities of Letters

- With origins in politics, philosophy, and theology, epistolary essays obviously push letters from the private sphere into the public one. Indeed, sometimes epistolary essays start out as private letters and later become published pieces. Other times, epistolary essays are deliberately offered as “open letters” to a wide readership. Either way, what distinguishes an epistolary essay from other kinds of essays is that the author expects to adopt the innate ethos of intimacy that's embedded in a handwritten letter.
- With this innate combination of immediacy and intimacy, an epistolary essayist can also tap into a collective psychology that's captured and circulated through letters—because letters are assumed to contain human desire and reveal human truth.
 - ◆ Consider, for example, Frank Warren's *PostSecret* project, which includes a series of books, a website, a TED talk, and a touring show, all of which



Part of the mystique of a letter is the script itself; the doodles and crossed-out mistakes of the author reveal the writing process.

feature the same, simple act: millions of anonymous people mailing postcards to Warren that reveal their greatest secrets.

- ◆ Recall, too, that many people hold onto boxes of old letters from past lovers or dead family members. Further, we Americans maintain archives that house our “national letters” because we see them as a repository of our country and our culture. Letters articulate both nations and selves. The epistolary essayist may take for granted that his or her piece will carry with it a strong sense of reality and veracity.
- An epistolary essayist may also take for granted that readers will recognize themselves in the piece. Although we believe that letters convey the unvarnished truth of a relationship between two people, we also enjoy the “thrill of voyeurism mingled with the wonder of recognition” that letters provide. Even across centuries, there is an undisguised nakedness to epistolary communications. From letters, we hear ordinary people speaking of their dreams, their loves and heartbreaks, their jealousy and avarice, their struggles and their aspirations.
- As historians Lisa Grunwald and Stephen J. Adler explain in their anthology *Letters of the Century*, letters provide “what history sounds like when it is still part of everyday life.” Although we readers may feel a bit voyeuristic overhearing the private confidences or confessions contained within letters, we also nod our heads, recalling our own struggles with loss, love, frustration, and anger. Letters ring true, and what people write in them tends to be believed.

Letters versus Epistolary Essays

- The common denominator that makes epistolary essays letter-like is that, even though they are public documents, they speak to a certain recipient and, thus, retain their credibility as trustworthy, confidential communications.
 - ◆ Epistolary essayists play up the genre’s privacy by addressing the essay to a particular person, revealing aspects of a relationship between two people that serves as a representation of more universal themes and ideas.

- ◆ In this way, the epistolary essayist is able to adopt a kind of “private publicity”—a simultaneity of secrecy and openness—that is particularly powerful when writing about controversial or complex topics.
- The writer of an epistolary essay hopes to teach something profound to the reader—something that moves the letter beyond just a private expression of emotion. A grandmother’s letter to a grandchild is not an epistolary essay. It’s not didactic but informational and sentimental. Although such letters may be heartfelt, they don’t attempt to change the reader’s mind. A writer chooses the form of an epistolary essay to be both private and public at once—to grapple with difficult subjects and teach readers how to think differently on those subjects.
- Consider, for example, the series of 10 letters that Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to Franz Xaver Kappus between 1903 and 1908 in response to Kappus’s solicitation for critical commentary on his poems. After Rilke’s death, Kappus published these responses as *Letters to a Young Poet*; the letters constitute a series of epistolary essays on such subjects as how to listen more closely to one’s own heart and how to be more confident in one’s own artistic abilities.
 - ◆ In one letter, Rilke attempts to discuss the nature of melancholy and how writers might come to understand the workings of such sadness and its potential usefulness. Rilke’s interest is philosophic. He’s not talking about explicit, time-bound problems in Kappus’s life. Instead, Rilke’s letter is thoughtful and probing, attempting to discern a greater reason for why humans experience sadness—and to think about the “new experience” that melancholy can potentially offer to allow for “important changes” in a person’s self-knowledge.
 - ◆ Although Rilke’s letter is clearly intimate, the use of the second-person “you” quickly feels universal rather than directed solely to the young Kappus. Part of this universality is a result of Rilke’s lack of specificity about Kappus’s own life. Instead of making a list of Kappus’ trials and tribulations, Rilke creates a texture of detail through metaphor. This strategy of locating details in metaphor and simile enables Rilke’s advice to Kappus to become advice for any would-be poet.
- A much more recent epistolary essay, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is about the impossibility of living in a black body and being treated

with equity in the United States. This short book is presented as an extended letter by Coates to his adolescent son.

- ◆ Coates employs a rhetorical strategy in which he sometimes speaks to all Americans and sometimes speaks only to white Americans. When Coates contends that “race is the child of racism, not the father,” his metaphor is universal; thus, what Coates is trying to teach here is meant for everyone. Yet when he qualifies his phrase “America’s progress” with “or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white,” Coates is talking to those very same people: people who claim whiteness as their race.
- ◆ As Coates’s epistolary essay evolves, this shift between speaking directly to his son and speaking to a multitude of citizens becomes ever more strategic and pointed. Sometimes, Coates creates moments when his readers are excluded from the intense privacy of his parental relationship with his child, while at other times, he creates moments in which some or all of his audience is invited in.
- ◆ Thus, Coates’s choice to write an epistolary essay actually links form to function in a powerful way. In his intent to reveal the intrinsic racism embedded in American history and culture, he makes white readers aware of their race as he either includes or excludes them from the content of his letter.

Assignment, Part II: Writing an Epistolary Essay

- To write your own epistolary essay, you need to choose both a recipient and a topic. The topic should be neither purely informative nor frivolous. Your subject matter should be a philosophic, political, or personal issue that matters to people beyond just you and your addressee.
- The first assignment in this lecture was to write about a life-changing event in a letter to a trusted recipient; for this exercise, you could start with that experience. But your piece could also be about a personal struggle or issue that you’ve been working through, such as how to communicate better with your teenage daughter. Or you could write about a topic with national significance: immigration policies, the current state of the economy, and so on.

- Whatever you choose to write about, your aim should be twofold: to define and develop your topic and to teach the recipient of your letter—both the specific recipient and anyone else who will read it—something vital and true about your subject. Your ethos should be purposefully didactic.
- Finally, you should try using the second-person pronoun “you” instead of repeating your recipient’s name. Although you’ll be counting on the intimacy that’s created by addressing your epistolary essay to a single individual, by referring to your reader as “you,” you’ll also get that double audience that all epistolary essayists seek. In other words, you’ll simultaneously address both the family member or friend you hope to convince and any other reader who might be searching for the honest connections that letters imply.

Suggested Reading

Coates, *Between the World and Me*.

Grunwald and Adler, *Letters of the Century*.

Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Warren, *PostSecret*.

Lecture 17

Portrait Essays: People in Words

A portrait is a distinctive kind of visual biography. Whether a painting, a drawing, or a photograph, a portrait reveals more than just what someone looks like. It also conveys something of the essence of a person's character. Clothing, body language, and backdrop all become their own language—idioms that speak to the viewer about people's interests, talents, and class, as well as their obsessions and longings. It's also true that the portrait maker's view is a powerful one in shaping how a viewer will interpret the person being portrayed. In writing a portrait essay, a writer must understand that any depiction of another person—whether a celebrity or a family member—is also a reflection of the writer.

Enlightenment Portraits

- Enlightenment portraits were pictures of men (and, occasionally, women) who epitomized 18th-century ideals about humans as creatures of reason and sensibility. Such portraits tried to display people's capacities for reason and empathy by including symbols of education, the arts, and the sciences. The subjects wore clothes or appeared amid scenes that demonstrated their civility and good taste. One example is the famous painting of Benjamin Franklin by Charles Willson Peale, completed in 1789, the year before Franklin died.
- Another Enlightenment portrait is the frontispiece of the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano. This was a slave narrative that eventually gained an international audience. Perhaps the most revolutionary feature of this portrait is the fact that Equiano stares directly out at the viewer. This breaks conventions of 18th-century portraiture that insisted that women, children,



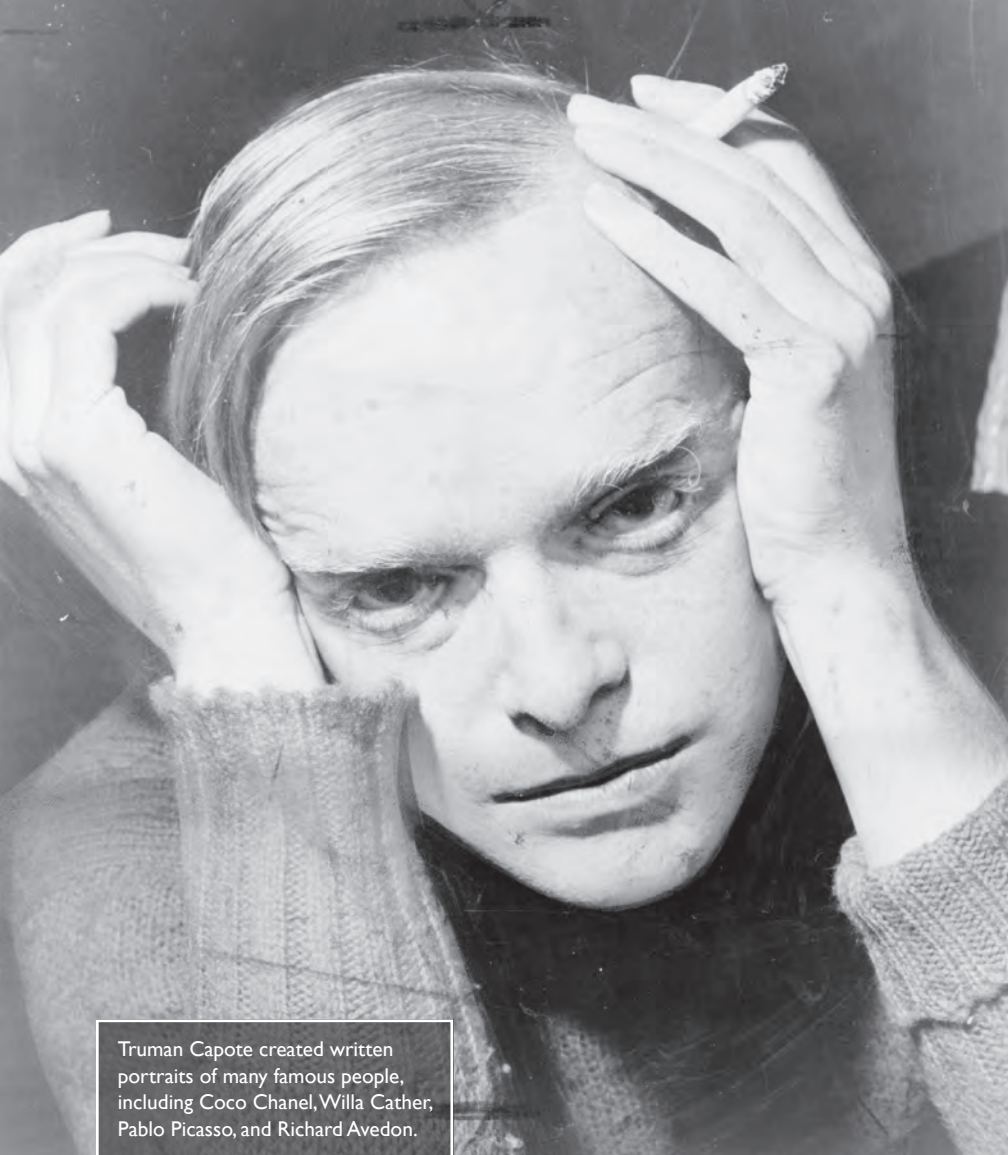
Just as the sitter tries to choose clothing and an expression that will capture the core of who he or she is, the artist's gaze is also at work in the making of the image.

slaves, and servants be passive instead of active in their facial expressions. Equiano's gaze is steady and confident. This man isn't just a survivor of slavery; he has used the horrific experience of being enslaved as the basis for mounting an abolitionist argument.

- The takeaway for writers from this discussion of the Franklin and Equiano portraits is threefold:
 - ◆ First, any writer who hopes to create a likeness in words rather than paint or pixels should be aware that there must be a strong visual element to any portrait essay. The subject's looks and actions should be re-created through precise imagery in the mind of the reader.
 - ◆ Second, whether a likeness is offered through an image or in language, there are conventions of portraiture that writers should adopt, but these may also sometimes be broken, depending on the writer's needs or intentions.
 - ◆ Third, there is an intriguing power dynamic among the person being portrayed, the writer who is attempting to portray him or her, and the reader who is potentially privy to the foibles and desires of both.

Portraits and Observations by Truman Capote

- Truman Capote was a notorious novelist, screenwriter, and literary journalist who wrote *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood* and who offered up written portraits of many famous people. Some of these portrait essays were collected and published after his death in the book *Portraits and Observations*.
- In a portrait of the film actress Elizabeth Taylor, Capote first discusses her looks—an expected element of the portrait genre and one that's even more important when discussing a famed beauty. But rather than simply extol her beauty, Capote notes that Taylor is a “runt” with legs “too short for the torso” and a “head too bulky for the figure” but with a face that constitutes a “prisoner's dream, a secretary's self-fantasy.”
- Capote's aim here is to affirm and complicate Taylor's fabled loveliness.
 - ◆ Capote affirms her beauty in describing her eyes as “lilacs” and her face as one that prisoners dream of and secretaries fantasize about having.



Truman Capote created written portraits of many famous people, including Coco Chanel, Willa Cather, Pablo Picasso, and Richard Avedon.

But he also challenges this beauty by calling Taylor a “runt” with a big head. Further, he tells us that her beauty doesn’t give Taylor confidence. Instead, she comes across to him as “shy” and “vulnerable,” as well as suspicious of those around her.

- ◆ Thus, Capote casts Taylor in a new light, one that people wouldn't necessarily see through her movies or in the newspapers. This kind of complication of one's subject is exactly what any portrait essayist should seek: to make the subject as fully human as possible, revealing both strengths and weaknesses.
- Capote then develops and extends Taylor's image by moving beyond her appearance. He claims:

It was not until I encountered her that Elizabeth Taylor made an impression on me, at least as a person ... [I was surprised by] how well-read Taylor seemed to be—not that she made anything of it, or posed as an intellectual, but clearly she cared about books and, in haphazard style, had absorbed a large number of them. And she discussed them with considerable understanding of the literary process; all in all, it made one wonder about the men in her life. ... [W]hat on earth did this very alert and swift-minded young woman find to talk to them about?

- ◆ This passage is where Capote's own obsessions, prejudices, and vanities are in greatest evidence. What convinces him that Taylor is an actual person—not just a dressed-up doll—is that she's a reader who knows something of writing.
- ◆ His tone here reveals his sense of superiority to Taylor and her entourage of adoring, dumb males. Thus, we clearly see a portrait of Capote alongside his representation of Taylor.

“Under the Influence” by Scott Russell Sanders

- Often, portrait essays about personal friends or family members are meditations on the difficulties of the relationship between the author and the subject. Writing about those difficulties brings into sharp relief the limitations that both parties have in bridging the gaps of their differences. One such piece is “Under the Influence” by Scott Russell Sanders.

- In this essay, Sanders represents and responds to his father's alcoholism. His opening sentence is "My father drank"—simple and stark. The details Sanders offers for how his father's alcoholism affected his family are equally direct and harsh.
- Sanders provides a series of brief, hard examples of what his drunk father couldn't do—"fix a bicycle tire, balance a grocery sack, or walk across a room"—as well as what his dad did do, which was lie and bully his children. These details are all the more poignant because Sanders knew quite well what his father could achieve as an athlete or a businessman from the few years that his dad stayed sober.
- This portrait breaks the convention of most portraiture that shows a sitter in an idealized light. Saunders's father dies, never admitting or confronting his illness. Sanders says, "[My father] would not speak about his feelings, would not or could not give a name to the beast that was devouring him."
- Sanders's essay also implicates himself as the portrait's artist. Although he vows "never to put in my mouth or veins any chemical that would banish my everyday self," he nevertheless admits, "Work has become an addiction for me, as drink was an addiction for my father." The self-implication here is obvious. Sanders claims that he wrote this essay to spare his children from feeling responsible for their own father's mania—in this case, the mania of a workaholic. Sanders takes his essay to a conclusion, although it's not a place of resolution.
- There's a crude honesty to this essay that makes it hard to look at the father or at Sanders too closely or carefully because the portraits of both are as gritty and sharp as photographs of a murder victim. This double portrait of a helpless father and his equally helpless son brings to the fore the readers' own helplessness over whatever they may feel compelled to drink, eat, take, or do.
- The portrait demands a combination of precise visual descriptions of a subject's body, expressions, and actions with an interpretation of these visual elements that reveals the writer's own motivations in turning to this particular person for this particular portrait.

Assignment: Writing a Portrait Essay

- For this assignment, draft a short piece about a specific person, someone you'd like to capture in a portrait essay. The essay should be no more than 750 words. Make sure you describe what the person looks like and sounds like, as well as how he or she talks, gestures, and moves. Also consider why you're drawn to this individual and what it is about this person that is distinctive.
- Next, take on the identity of the person you're writing about. Revise the essay so that it's in the first person, as if you're actually Whoopi Goldberg, William Shakespeare, or your Aunt Mildred. Relate a story about something that's happened to this person and what that experience means to him or her now. Given how brief this essay is, it's probably best to focus on a single moment or aspect of your subject's life. Choose a moment that shows the complicated nature of your subject.
- Then, translate your written essay into a series of hand-drawn pictures. (Stick figures work well.) Put each picture you draw onto a sticky note without any words. In this step, you are picturing your essay—turning words into images.
- Once you're done drawing your frames, you have an easy way to consider how sequencing changes meaning. Start moving the frames around to find new arrangements. You might try putting the sticky notes in a circle rather than a line. You might have your last sticky note become the first one. The point here is to experiment with sequencing until you find a progression that you feel best tells a story from your chosen person's life.
- Finally, add the words back in. Sketch in dialogue and thought bubbles. Write captions. Label objects or actions within each frame. Does the portrait of this person become clearer? What's still missing? What might you add or subtract? Would readers feel that they understand the essence of your subject's personality?
- If you wish, at this point, you may abandon the graphic format and rewrite your portrait essay in the third person, keeping in mind, however, that part

of the punch of a portrait essay is how vividly you re-create the image of the person you're writing about. As you step back from your subject, start to ask yourself what it is about this individual that moves or angers or compels you. Remember that you're writing about your own thorny and intriguing feelings about people as much as you're attempting to portray them for who they are. In turn, those thorny, intriguing feelings will open up the reader's feelings, as well.

Suggested Reading

Capote, *Portraits and Observations*.

Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*.

Pekar and Crumb, "The Harvey Pekar Name Story," *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*.

Sanders, "Under the Influence," *Harper's Magazine*.

Spiegelman, *Maus*.

Lecture 18

The Essayist as Public Intellectual

Public intellectual essays about current political topics are among the most difficult kinds of writing. Unlike creative nonfiction essays, public intellectual essays must speak to a wide audience and grapple with controversial topics. Those who write such essays participate in the larger conversations of society by thinking about, responding to, and often upending assumptions about social issues and ills. As a result, the style of such essays must be clear, simple, and direct, and the ethos adopted must be opinionated but not polarizing. That's a narrow rhetorical line to walk.

Defining an Intellectual

- The idea of the intellectual came into being in Europe and North America during the 18th century with the Enlightenment and a new appreciation for the power of the mental and emotional faculties of human beings. Intellectuals were men (and sometimes women) of letters—the clergy, academics, and gentlemen scholars. Their job was to stand outside the workings of the government and the greed of industrialists to comment on and potentially overturn social practices that debased or oppressed the masses.
- Today, a public intellectual is a generalist, not a specialist. A Renaissance man or woman, the public intellectual is able to draw on knowledge from multiple disciplines and, increasingly, from the discourses of popular culture. Intellectuals' interests are eclectic, and their impulse is to synthesize, not to separate. They seek to discern hidden social patterns and work to upend traditional assumptions.

- In the words of cultural critic Edward Said, “This role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma . . . to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by government or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.”
- By necessity, then, public intellectuals are readers, thinkers, and experimenters. They are shameless in their belief that education matters—meaning the kind of education that’s found in books, laboratories, classrooms, and art galleries more than any “instruction” that may come from websites or TV shows. Although public intellectuals may draw from mass media to make claims about the social, the political, or the spiritual, they also understand that the intention behind those who produce popular culture is—in the words of media theorist Neil Postman—to amuse their audience to death.
- For public intellectuals, comedy and entertainment are not and cannot be the epitome of human experience. Instead, public intellectuals must see through the scrim of mass amusement to get at what our society sells, buys, silences, or erases altogether. In this way, the intellectual is a bit like a cultural sleuth, trying to expose the workings of ideology by asking those embarrassing questions and giving a voice to the voiceless.
- There is clearly an activist element in writing a public intellectual essay. This form doesn’t lend itself to meanderings of the mind, as a lyric essay does, or to the intimate revelations found in memoir. Intellectuals are not supposed to confuse their private interests with public ones, even though they themselves are members of the public.
- This insistence on using one’s mind for the common good is directly related to the history of intellectualism, which comes out of the Enlightenment belief that the application of human reason is the key for transforming a repressive or apathetic society. Thus, early public intellectuals were those who launched revolutionary arguments about how to make human beings the best they could be in relation to the broken world around them; they included such progressive thinkers as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

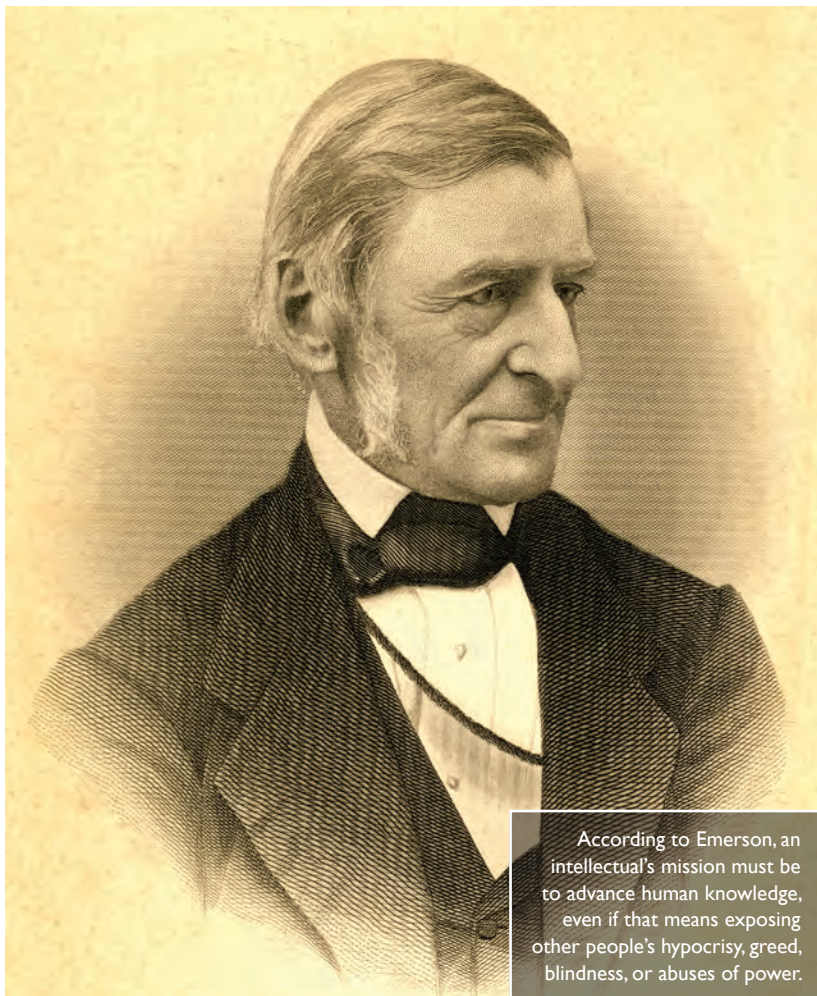
- Although intellectualism grew out of the Enlightenment, it was actually a 19th-century writer and lecturer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who pioneered the form of the public intellectual essay in the United States. In fact, it's fair to say that Emerson was America's first public intellectual.
 - ◆ As most know, Emerson was a philosopher who broke with traditional religious beliefs to formulate a theory of universal interconnectedness between an individual's soul and the surrounding unity of the world, or "common heart."
 - ◆ Emerson also championed self-reliance and educational freedom. These ideas about what he once called "the infinitude of the private man" were eventually housed under the umbrella philosophy of "transcendentalism," which became an intellectual movement.
- Over the course of his career, Emerson primarily wrote and gave lectures that he then turned into essays, which perhaps explains why his writings have such a strong public ethos. In the early 1840s, these lectures-turned-essays, including such well-known ones as "Nature," "The Over-Soul," "Experience," and "Self-Reliance," were gathered together and published in two series. These two essay collections launched Emerson's national reputation as a great American philosopher.
- Perhaps Emerson's most celebrated essay is his address to the entering first-year class of the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard University on August 31, 1837—a talk that he entitled "The American Scholar."
 - ◆ This lecture represents a formative example of the public intellectual essay in the United States. It's a piece with a civic purpose. Emerson meant to shake up people's ideas about the best forms of education and to persuade people that our nation was on the wrong cultural track.
 - ◆ In addition, "The American Scholar" is a piece in which Emerson's form fits his function. Just as he is writing and delivering a public intellectual essay, Emerson is also talking about the importance of intellectuals to the development of American thought and to the nation's future.
- To try to achieve a new nation of men and women—of people who will no longer mimic the "courtly muses of Europe" but who will, instead, forge their

own ideas and produce their own literature and art—Emerson calls on the young Harvard men to become a figure he names “Man Thinking.” By this term, Emerson means a kind of scholarly collective consciousness of the best and the brightest, using their shared brain power to lead the country out from under the cultural thumb of Europe.

- Emerson believed that the masses were in desperate need of such intellectual leadership. In 1837, he viewed the citizens of our relatively new nation as a people in need of direction—a people who had given up on their combined creativity in favor of individual success and monetary gain. He saw selfishness at work in America, greed for things and status over a desire to work together and to help one another. To make his concern clear, Emerson draws on an old fable for inspiration.
- For Emerson, this old fable or common cultural story is the idea that there was once a mythic figure, or “One Man,” who represented the whole of a community. As Emerson says, this One Man “is not a farmer, a professor, or an engineer; but he is all. [The One] Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier”—a “fountain of power.” In Emerson’s time, however, he argues that this original ideal of a cooperative man “has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered” back together.
- To reclaim this mythic communal idea, Emerson believed that young scholars must reclaim their role as Man Thinking for the whole of the American nation. Emerson insists that an American scholar cannot be a “mere thinker” or, worse, “the parrot of other men’s thinking.” Instead, the fabled Man Thinking must be “free and brave” in his intellect and in his actions. To transform oneself into this figure, Emerson outlines three crucial influences and activities that every intellectual should engage.
- According to Emerson, the most important influence on the scholar is the natural world. His key point here is that public intellectuals, if they are to speak on behalf of their nation, must appreciate the miracle of human empathy. They must understand that they are bound to everything else in the universe and recognize themselves in nature. An individual is never just an individual. He

or she is connected to everyone and everything else and must write as if thinking and speaking for all of humanity.

- Beyond gaining inspiration and a sense of humility from the natural world, Emerson also insists that the American scholar must honor the collective



According to Emerson, an intellectual's mission must be to advance human knowledge, even if that means exposing other people's hypocrisy, greed, blindness, or abuses of power.

“mind of the Past” through books, while also realizing that books themselves are a limited resource.

- ◆ Emerson cautions against regurgitating the ideas of others. Instead, he wants each generation of scholars to write their own books, for their own moments, to know the history of ideas that come from their own civilization, but then to let that history remain in the past, where it belongs.
 - ◆ According to Emerson, only then can a public intellectual potentially stand outside society and its institutions and comment on its workings. In this way, Emerson reveals the inherent politics in any public intellectual essay.
- Emerson’s third and final piece of training for the American scholar is action. He says that public intellectuals must absorb the world around them—must do as well as think. In a sense, he is making a claim for what we now call “applied” or “experiential learning.” Emerson believes that scholars who pay attention only to the shadows of the world they find in writing can only be partial scholars. They must put down their books and get out in the streets to talk and work with real people. Otherwise, their ideas remain nothing but ideas and can easily become solipsistic. In essence, then, Emerson calls on public intellectuals to be activists.
 - There’s a reason that “The American Scholar” has been called our nation’s “intellectual Declaration of Independence.” Emerson is talking of nothing less than the freedom of the human mind—meaning a freedom from the tyranny of consumer culture, spoon-fed politics, big-brother surveillance, and cookie-cutter principles. Emerson’s teachings are radical, like those of the best public intellectuals. Public intellectuals must think outside the box, and sometimes, they must break down the box altogether.
 - Emerson’s advice on how to cultivate a worldview based on empathy, inclusive research, and activism is advice that you should take yourself as you consider what range of issues you might address when crafting your own public intellectual essays.

Suggested Reading

- Cognard-Black, "Extreme Makeover: Feminist Edition," *Ms*.
- Emerson, "The American Scholar," *The Project Gutenberg Ebook of Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson*.
- , *The Ralph Waldo Emerson Journals Digital Archive*.
- Gewen, "Who Is a Public Intellectual?" *The New York Times*.
- Mishra and Gregory, "Is It Still Possible to be a Public Intellectual?" *The New York Times*.
- Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.
- Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.
- West, "An Abiding Sense of History:'

Lecture 19

Polemical Essays: One-Sided Arguments

A polemical essay is an argumentative essay, but it's a one-sided argument. It's similar to the persuasive essay that most of us were taught to write in school—the kind that carefully lays out two sides of a debate and attempts to give equal weight to both before landing on one side or the other. However, a polemicist supports a single position and doesn't entertain anyone who holds a contrary opinion. Among many literary scholars and writers of all stripes, polemics are seen as simplistic, dogmatic, histrionic, and partisan. But in this lecture, we'll see that polemics have their place as a vital part of smart social discourse.

The Value of Polemics

- Being opinionated when taking on certain social issues can actually be a clever rhetorical strategy, especially when the issue you're discussing is a highly politicized or polarizing one, such as abortion, pornography, or the death penalty. A smart polemicist doesn't shy away from writing about volatile social topics, but at the same time, the smart polemicist also knows that there's a significant difference between ranting on these topics and making persuasive arguments about them.
- Consider the intelligent polemicists from the past who have changed people's minds and hearts through their passionate entreaties. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* convincingly argued that people should throw off the yoke of tyranny if a government doesn't protect the rights of its citizens, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was pivotal in convincing people that women should have access to formal education. If you can be reasonable as well as impassioned, and if your aim is to make a case for an

unpopular stance that could potentially benefit others, then the polemical essay may be the best form.

- Even some literary historians have started to come around to the polemic as a valuable essay form. In his book *Inventing Polemic*, scholar Jesse Lander makes a compelling case for seeing the polemic as a foundational genre in creating modern civilization. Lander points out that writers during the Renaissance, the 18th century, the Romantic and Victorian ages, and the modern period helped to reform all aspects of society.
- Lander also notes that because polemical essayists incited a cultural backlash against their diatribes, they cleared the way for a rise in “polite learning” and writing, meaning the poetry and prose that we now think of as literary. In other words, people became more interested in the kinds of writing that tried to elevate readers through exciting their empathy rather than hitting readers over the head with vitriolic arguments.

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Jonathan Edwards

- In thinking about writing your own polemical essays, the key to convincing your audience is to truly believe that you are right but also to refrain from berating readers. An early American polemicist who was at first quite successful but ultimately failed when he became too strident was Jonathan Edwards, a Congregationalist minister and theologian.
- The sermon for which Edwards is best known is the 1741 “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which was later published as a pamphlet. Undoubtedly, what Edwards has to say in this sermon about sinners and salvation is combative and inflammatory; it’s polemical in every way. Edwards takes it upon himself to be God’s mediator and contends that there is only one true path to salvation.
- As a Calvinist, Edwards believed in predestination; only the elect, or those whom God had already chosen, would go to heaven. Edwards further believed that the only way to prove one’s election was to take a test of faith and become a full member of the church. Unlike other Protestant ministers of the



Many sermons are polemical essays because the form tends to attract those who want to make moral arguments.

time, Edwards insisted that only those church members who had undergone this test should be allowed to participate in communion.

- “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is Edwards’s attempt to speak to those members of his congregation who hadn’t yet taken this test of faith, as well as those who were complacent in their faith. In this way, Edwards was able to cast all of his audience—church members and nonmembers alike—as sinners and claim that each of them was in danger of being cast into hell by an unforgiving, wrathful God.
- Edwards’s view of hell is one that even a nonbeliever would want to avoid; he calls it a place where the eternal “Flames do now rage and glow” and where “The Devil stands ready to fall upon [sinners] and seize them as his own.” Edwards’s view is that God, too, is eager to cast souls into the fiery furnace. God thinks of the members of Edwards’s congregation as nothing more than spiders that he is dangling over a hot flame.

- Edwards goes on to say that the only thing keeping his listeners from tumbling into hell is God's whim and that—sooner or later—God will let them fall into that flaming pit just as a rock tears through a spider's web. The "God that holds you over the Pit of Hell," claims Edwards, is the same one who "abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; . . . you are ten thousand Times so abominable in his Eyes as the most hate-ful venomous Serpent is in ours."
- On the one hand, it's easy to understand why those who attended this sermon were, according to witnesses, "deeply impressed." Even though he never shouted when giving his sermon, Edwards's message was persuasive because he personalized his argument. He made the threat of hell intimate and close.
- Edwards doesn't talk in sweeping generalizations about God or damnation. Instead, he demonstrates God's rage by providing his listeners with vivid and grotesque images of how this God will kill them as he would worms or spiders or snakes, splattering his robe with their blood. Such choices are deliberate. Edwards didn't want his congregation just to hear the words "fire" or "anger." He wanted them to be seared by these words.
- Edwards also speaks in the second person, saying that God abhors "you"—not some vague sinner. In fact, his sermon starts in the third person, with Edwards talking about "people," "Israelites," "sinners," and "they." But as he moves into the second half of his polemic, he relentlessly points at his listeners and says "you." This turn to the second person is particularly effective as he brings his argument into the current moment. Edwards switches his verb tense from past to present, and he repeats the word "now." He even insinuates that someone sitting in the pews at this moment will be in hell by tomorrow morning.
- It shouldn't be terribly surprising that eventually, Edwards's congregation ran him out on a rail. His criticisms were just too personal, and his arguments must have seemed hypocritical. He himself was clearly on one side, headed for heaven, and his congregation was on the other, bound for eternal suffering. When he began humiliating local families as "backsliders" and when he insisted that only those who had publicly declared themselves saved could take communion, Edwards was dismissed from his congregation.

Laura Kipnis

- Laura Kipnis is a professor at Northwestern University who is known for taking unpopular stances on contentious social issues and has built her career writing polemical essays. The opening of her book *Against Love: A Polemic* notes that the form is ideal for promoting opinions that are universally disliked. We might think of the polemicist as a kind of cultural provocateur, which means that any polemical essay is inherently political, even if it's not overtly about politics.
- Two years before publishing her book, Kipnis wrote a *New York Times* essay called "Love in the 21st Century," in which she distilled the main ideas of what became her longer project. This polemical essay is not about politics if we define politics as disagreements between people or parties who hope to gain civic power. Yet Kipnis's claims are definitely political insofar as they grapple with a moral standard of public life—namely, how romantic love has become a kind of political morality in its socially sanctioned form of monogamous marriage.
- Kipnis's polemic is against marriage as much as it's against love, and she turns to adulterers as the real truth-tellers on the subject of romance. These are the people, Kipnis believes, who understand that monogamy is soul-killing—that it's the optimistic fantasy of a populace desperate to find happiness in marital relationships.
- In the same article, Kipnis claims, "the expectation that ... sexual attraction can last a lifetime of coupled togetherness" is a romantic fantasy, particularly given all the "hard evidence to the contrary." Kipnis flat-out disagrees with the pervasive belief that long-term relationships sustain long-term sexual desire. Instead, she asserts that "the parties involved must 'work' at keeping passion alive."
- Obviously, Kipnis wants to provoke her readers, many of whom are married or hope to get married. To compare marital sex with endless, mindless drudgery—like working an assembly line—is Kipnis's attempt to get her readers to rethink the need to be married. And in championing adulterers for acting on their sexual desires, she also tries to get her readers to rethink the scandal of adultery as an act of erotic integrity. Kipnis turns the tables on marital monogamy and offends many readers in the process.

The Polemical Speaker

- Although it's true that we live among the "me" generation of millennials, that doesn't mean that your readers are primarily interested in hearing about you or your life. Edwards doesn't tell his congregation how he came to Jesus. Kipnis doesn't offer up a compendium of the men she's married or the joyless sex she's endured. Both writers understand that the power of their polemics comes from their incisive, surprising, and often combative arguments and images, not from a laundry list of their private wounds and complaints.
- If you hope to be persuasive and credible in writing polemical essays, understand that your motivations in writing them must be ethical. Your ethos will be compromised if all you want to do is take someone down or complain without caring whether anyone hears your complaints. Although Edwards's sermon was all fire and brimstone, his motivation remained ethical: He genuinely wanted to save souls. And Kipnis wants to save readers from being imprisoned in romantic relationships that aren't actually romantic at all.
- There's no doubt that your opinions should be strong ones—a polemic requires that. But your goals in sharing these opinions must come out of a desire to connect with other people, to try to persuade them or teach them, even if you risk making them angry by telling them what they don't want to hear.

Suggested Reading

Cohen, "A Defense of Polemics," *Nick Cohen*.

Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Goldberg, "The Laura Kipnis Melodrama," *The Nation*.

Kipnis, *Against Love*.

———, "Love in the 21st Century," *The New York Times*.

———, "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," *The Chronicle Review*.

Lander, *Inventing Polemic*.

Lecture 20

Historical Essays: Past as Present

To develop a writer's reflections on the past and its meaning for the present, a historical essay draws from the work of those who study past events and from texts and images that contain facts about the events themselves. Yet historical essays also place the writer's own ideas within the moment of their creation, which means that such essays look both backward and forward. There's a double vision here: The people and places that are long gone lie cheek-by-jowl against the writer, who is very much alive, experiencing, thinking, reflecting, synthesizing. The past is static and fixed; the writer is dynamic and liquid. Such double vision turns all historical essays into a conversation between the living and the dead.

Personal Objects

- A simple but powerful way to start thinking about how to write your own historical essays is to initiate a conversation between the living and the dead in the context of your own life. One significant source of personal history is the objects we live with every day.
- Like history, objects are static and fixed. And your interaction with them is a kind of dialogue between yourself in the present and these things that contain and express the past. We could further argue that all objects—the antique and the new alike—tell stories: the story of how you first came to own them and the story of how they were originally made.
- In writing a historical essay, you might start by looking through the rooms where you live as if they belong to someone else. As you look at your



An antique book or painting conjures the past, linking those of us who are alive to those who are dead and who once held, used, and owned these same things.

possessions, ask yourself which objects intrigue you and why. Where did they come from? Why do you keep these things? What do they mean to you?

- An object can initiate a historical essay because it has the capacity to bring together what it means to you and what it meant to others from the past. And the object you choose to study doesn't have to be an "antique." It really can be anything at all.
- How do you select which sources to include in writing about your object? Cast your net wide. Read everything you can about your object—from historians, advertisers, and average folk who write about these objects in their letters, journals, and blog posts.

"Laundry" by Maureen Stanton

- The creative nonfiction writer Maureen Stanton is particularly adept at writing historical essays and always brings an eclectic mix of sources into her pieces.

One of her essays is called “Laundry,” and it starts with a simple action—a human being, usually a woman, washing clothes.

- The essay includes references to numerous objects that people have used to do laundry over many centuries. Stanton mentions the ancient Egyptians who washed their clothes on rocks, British colonists in Massachusetts who boiled water in kettles and used bluing to brighten their garments, and the first patented washing machine. She provides details about the first hand-cranked clothes dryer and even describes how Roman women first discovered soap in 200 A.D.
- In addition to examining the objects associated with washing clothes, Stanton also considers the places where women do laundry. She writes about how generations of women have used natural water sources, such as rivers and ponds, but she also talks about her own grandmother’s tiny kitchen, where she put in a “fancy new electric washing machine” after Stanton’s grandfather died.
- The essay is an excellent example of how Stanton makes the past resonant within her own lived experience. The essay isn’t just about the history of doing laundry in the Western world. It’s also about a kind of mysticism that’s bound up in washing clothes, as well as an act of love, especially when someone does laundry for someone else.
- In fact, a significant portion of Stanton’s essay grapples with telling the story of her fiancé’s terminal illness by describing what it was like to do his laundry while he was dying.
 - ◆ Stanton and her lover, Steve, were together for only a couple of years before he was diagnosed with a virulent cancer that started in his liver before spreading along his spinal column. All the domestic chores fell to Stanton, including the laundry.
 - ◆ At first, going to the laundromat was a way for Stanton to take a break from watching Steve waste away. But after Steve died and Stanton finally mustered the energy to wash clothes again, she came across a pair of her fiancé’s boxer shorts in the pile of dirty laundry. These were garish, with yellow, red, and blue polka-dots, a “joke gift from Steve’s cousin after he’d first entered the hospital.”

- ◆ Holding them in her hands, the boxer shorts looked tiny—reminding her how Steve himself had shrunk down to only 100 pounds, even though he was over 6 feet tall. What did Stanton do? “I washed the boxer shorts, and a handkerchief,” she says, “the last two pieces of Steve’s laundry, which I still have.”
- In this way, Stanton’s historical essay is also an elegy to Steve. Stanton’s final paragraph drives this idea home: “In the laundromat,” she explains, “as I conduct the most ignoble chore, I find myself pondering the cycles of life, the structure of time, the nature of humanity: how we all need clean garments, clean sheets to sleep on, how we are all alike ultimately, walking around in our clothes, covering our bodies with fabric, as if that could protect us from anything.”
- In this synthesis of the world’s laundry—Egyptian to colonial to Stanton’s own—we readers learn how personal and intimate objects and actions become part and parcel of the whole of human history. In this way, then, laundry comes to represent the loss of a loved one, but at the same time, it also symbolizes a reclamation of that death.

The Five-Paragraph Format

- A key piece of advice in writing a historical essay is not to stuff your piece into the standard five-paragraph or five-section format that so many historians use. Whether you realize it or not, you’ve been indoctrinated into the five-paragraph cult and may write one without even trying.
- For instance, the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences website explains that the basic elements of any historical essay include “a thesis and evidence, divided into three parts: an introduction, the systematic development of an argument, and a conclusion.” Those “three parts” are actually five because in systematically developing the argument, Rutgers’ recommendation is to touch on three main points.
- The five-paragraph format is the one that’s taught relentlessly in high schools and colleges as the single container in which you can shove any kind of essay, regardless of your subject matter or purpose. The format consists of

an attention-grabber and thesis in the first paragraph; extended examples to prove the thesis in the second, third, and fourth paragraphs; and a concluding paragraph.

- The five-paragraph format is easy to remember and is effective in certain rhetorical contexts. At the same time, however, it is an assault on the writer's creativity and represents the death of critical thought.
- Those who worship the five-paragraph structure believe that any topic and any approach to that topic may be contained within the exact same form, which is like using a ketchup bottle for all your condiments.
- The classic rhetorical elements of all historical essays—including persuasion, organization, evidence, and the adoption of a captivating and convincing style—should not be contained within a five-paragraph format. Instead, form should follow function. And the best practitioners of historical essays do just that, building one-of-a-kind scaffolds as they write.
 - ◆ Just because she's making a historical argument about the nature and purpose of laundry connected to her personal experiences, Stanton doesn't go for the default structure.
 - ◆ Instead, she toggles between sections that offer insights into the diverse history of how humans in the Western world have done their laundry for more than 36 centuries and other sections that tell laundry's story through her grandmother's, her mother's, and her own moments of washing various clothes and linens.

“My Father's Hats” by Jeffrey Hammond

- Another example of how a historical essay can create its own form is “My Father's Hats” by Jeffrey Hammond. In this essay, Hammond gives readers a rundown on the history of hats, from Paleolithic caps and Greco-Roman helmets to Renaissance crowns, Enlightenment tricorns, Victorian top hats, and the more modern fedoras and ball caps.
- Hammond's point in providing a mini-history lesson on the development of the hat is to make clear that these pieces of clothing aren't arbitrary; they



In his essay "My Father's Hats," Jeffrey Hammond laments that, in our own day and age, the hatless man is now the norm, unless he decides to wear a ball cap or an old-timey golfer's cap.

“make the man” by designating his class status, religion, and place of origin. “Once a hat becomes personally iconic,” explains Hammond, “it’s yours for good.” To offer evidence, Hammond notes historical examples: Napoleon’s bicorne, Sherlock Holmes’s deerstalker, and Roy Rogers’s Stetson.

- Yet Hammond’s essay isn’t just a list of men’s hats through the ages. It’s primarily about his own ideas about what they symbolize, especially when he was a child hoping to put on manhood by donning certain kinds of hats and now as a grown man in a world that’s mostly hatless. At the moment, in middle age, Hammond has acquiesced to the ubiquitous American ball cap, but he also knows that, eventually, he will put on the golf cap that he inherited when his father died.
- To tell this story about inheritance through a historical essay, Hammond crafts a careful structure. He offers personal stories about his father’s and his own hats as bookends on either side of the middle of his essay. Both Stanton and Hammond fashion forms for their historical essays that fit the sum and substance of their thoughts and arguments.
- How can you deprogram yourself from the five-paragraph essay cult?
 - ◆ Return to that object you discovered anew from your own living space, read whatever you can about the object, and type up notes on what you discover. Also jot down the memories you have connected to this object.
 - ◆ Once you’ve drafted notes from research and your memories, read through all of it at once and think about how these separate writings might merge. Perhaps they would be best if they were laid out as a linear chronology, as history is traditionally written. Or perhaps it’s best to bookend the middle of your essay, making those bookends either the places where you develop your outside research or where you tell the intimate stories of your own experiences with this object.
- Whatever form your historical essay takes, remember that history is always subjective, and the way in which we tell stories from the past influences how we come to understand their significance.

Suggested Reading

Cognard-Black, "The Wild and Distracted Call for Proof," *American Literary Realism*.

Dyer, Cognard-Black, and Walls, *From Curlers to Chainsaws*.

Hammond, "My Father's Hats," *Pushcart Prize XXXV*.

Stanton, "Laundry," *Iowa Review*.

Lecture 21

Humor Essays

Comedy is really all about tragedy. Think about it for a moment: What do humorists tend to joke about? David Sedaris continually writes about his humiliations, such as being forced in elementary school to see a speech therapist for his lisp and how his teacher reminded the class of it every day. Taken at face value, the subject of grade school mortification isn't all that funny. Why, then, do humorists transform tragedy into comedy? Because just as Aristotle claimed that the effects of tragedy on a spectator can be purifying emotionally, laughing is also cathartic. Laughter is a means of purging one's fears to find a kind of restoration or renewal of emotional equanimity.

Advice for Humor Essayists

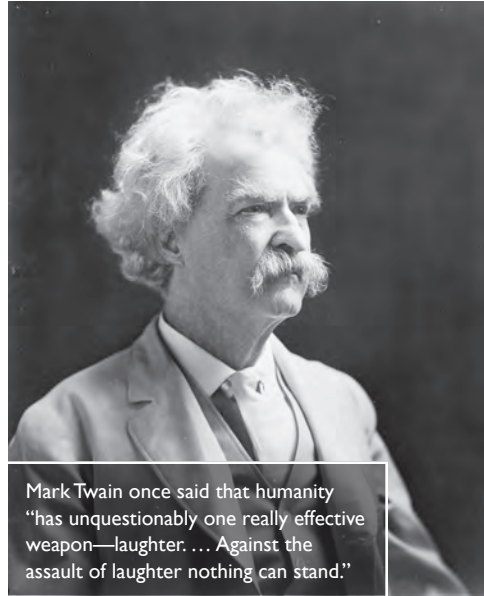
- Given that comedy is so closely related to tragedy, one valuable piece of advice for humor essayists is to make fun of your own suffering—to joke about the pains and struggles that come out of your own life. Although you might find yourself delving into the shortcomings of others now and then, it's better to be self-deprecating when you can. Otherwise, you might come across as patronizing or conceited, which would undermine your chances of making people laugh.
- A second piece of advice is to pay close attention to those who are masters of the humor essay.
 - ◆ You might start by reading some of the earliest examples of modern humor essays, such as the ones written by British satirists Sir Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. These two exposed the foibles of their fellow Englishmen and women in the pages of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*—



Washington Irving displayed his comic genius in the humor essays in his *Sketch-Book*, written under his pseudonym, Geoffrey Crayon.

two periodicals that they founded and edited.

- ◆ Of course, there also is Mark Twain, who was a prolific columnist, lecturer, and travel writer. Particularly recommended are his books *What Is Man? And Other Essays* and *The Innocents Abroad*.
- ◆ Finally, there are many contemporary humor essayists worth studying, including David Sedaris, Aasif Mandvi, Sarah Vowell, James Thurber, Erma Bombeck, Woody Allen, Steve Martin, Nora Ephron, Anne Lamott, Garrison Keillor, and David Rakoff.



Mark Twain once said that humanity “has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. ... Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.”

- Perhaps the best lesson worth learning from reading these comic essayists is how and why self-deprecating humor is so vital to their collective ethos. Consider Woody Allen, whose films and essays alike are a relentless parade of his own neuroses, or Garrison Keillor, who jokes continually about his height, his age, his Midwesternness, his lack of technological know-how, and his growly singing voice. As such authors find hilarity in their pain and suffering, readers wind up recognizing their own flaws, insecurities, and social failings—and laughing at those, too.

David Sedaris

- By way of example, let's look more closely at the work of American author and radio personality David Sedaris, whose primary genre is the humor essay. In fact, he's published eight collections of such essays, and he won the prestigious Thurber Prize for American humor with one of these books, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, about the months he lived in France with his romantic partner, Hugh Hamrick.

- If you're not familiar with Sedaris's writing, then you may not know that he got his break in the early 1990s. He was invited to read one of his comic pieces, the "SantaLand Diaries," on National Public Radio. This humor essay is indicative of his signature style: one in which Sedaris makes relentless fun of himself.
- An excellent example of this style comes from the "SantaLand Diaries," when Sedaris explains:

I am a 33-year-old man applying for a job as an elf. I often see people in the streets dressed as objects and handing out leaflets. I usually avoid leaflets, but it breaks my heart to see a grown man dressed as a taco. So if there is a costume involved, I tend not only [to] accept the leaflet, but to accept it graciously, saying, "Thank you so much," and thinking, "You poor son of a bitch."

- What becomes immediately clear in Sedaris's humor is that he never condemns someone else without also condemning himself. Although the human taco is the butt of a joke, the taco-man story actually functions as a way to reveal Sedaris's own prejudices against being an adult and making a living dressed as an object or a character. In turn, this confession comes back to bite him when Sedaris himself becomes a short-statured 33-year-old man wearing green knickers who must prance around a department store as one of Santa's helpers.
- Now it becomes the reader who thinks, "Your poor son of a bitch," as Sedaris goes on to explain about the silly shoes Macy's elves must wear; the elf dress rehearsal they are required to attend; and the children's tantrums, vomiting, and verbal abuse they must endure. Brilliantly, Sedaris turns the tables so that the reader gets to feel relieved about not having to work as an elf or a walking taco, while Sedaris himself gets to come off as pitiful. And Sedaris's willingness to make fun of himself gives him a stronger ethos as someone who is confident enough and secure enough to admit his weaknesses and silliness.
- Yet Sedaris doesn't just engage in this kind of self-criticism as the basis of his wit. He also goes to the next level and engages his readers' empathy by turning the comedic into the cathartic. "Understanding Owls: What Does the Gift Say about the Giver?" is an excellent example of how Sedaris's self-deprecating humor fosters true empathy in his reader.

- ◆ The premise of this piece is simple and familiar: Sedaris wants to find the perfect Valentine's Day gift for his partner, Hugh. But as so often happens in long-term relationships, over the years, the gift-giving stakes have gotten higher: Where they used to exchange chocolates, now their gifts are more idiosyncratic and expensive. "Like everything else," Sedaris explains, "holiday gifts escalate."
 - ◆ Sedaris decides to buy Hugh a taxidermied owl. He goes to a London taxidermy shop, but what he discovers there is not at all what he expected. There are two owls for sale, but what throws Sedaris off track is that the taxidermist immediately shows him a series of oddities that would be more appropriate for a Ripley's Believe It or Not museum: a Pygmy skeleton, an amputated forearm, and the 400-year-old head of a young girl. Sedaris is horrified and fascinated, but he pays for his owl and leaves.
 - ◆ On the subway ride home, holding Hugh's owl in a cardboard box, Sedaris is disturbed. He wonders what was so unnerving about meeting the taxidermist—whether it was the stuffed human body parts or something else. What he finally comes to is this: that although it's common for people to misunderstand or to misread others around them, it's much less common for them to size another person up accurately and immediately.
 - ◆ Sedaris explains, "The taxidermist knew me for less time than it took to wipe my feet on his mat, and, with no effort whatsoever, he looked into my soul and recognized me for the person I really am: the type who'd actually love a Pygmy [skeleton], and could easily get over the fact that [the Pygmy had] been murdered for sport. . . . Worse still, I would flaunt it, hoping . . . that this would become a part of my identity."
 - ◆ If we strip away the humor, this essay contains some truly nasty information. Yet because Sedaris couches this entire scene in humor and makes sure to question his base desires in front of the reader, we actually come to trust him more rather than less as a narrator. His humor makes him more credible; it isn't founded on attacking other people or things, which is cheap pathos. Instead, if he attacks anyone, it's himself.
- Note, too, that Sedaris draws on elements of good essay writing to make his humorous scenes both vivid and realistic. His descriptive details are exact, and he shapes funny scenes with elaborate settings, characters, and lines of dialogue, which make his essays active and distinct.

Assignment: Writing a Humor Essay

- Here's an exercise in writing cathartic rather than cheap humor: First, choose something from your life that you've experienced that really wasn't funny at all, such as a debilitating illness or a humiliating job.
- Then, write down every excruciating detail you can think of about this very unfunny thing. Get down all the disagreeable bits about undergoing dialysis or slipping around in the grease at the fast-food job where you made french fries for people who were too lazy to even get out of their cars to pick up their food.
- Next, go back and reread the record of your own bile. As you read, think about how you are implicated in all this nastiness. If you've written about your competitive nature with your coworkers, then ask yourself, why are you competitive? Are you insecure because you think they're smarter than you? Are you angry because you actually think you're the smarter one, and they don't deserve the credit they receive? Be willing to admit your own faults and limitations.
- Finally, try to write the draft of a humor essay in which you tell your story, but as you tell it, make sure to show both sides. Be highly detailed about what you didn't like about this experience or that person, but be just as detailed about how this situation reveals your own weaknesses, insecurities, spite, and small-mindedness. Make fun of yourself at least as much as you make fun of your topic—if not more. And remember that, even though you're joking about both your subject and yourself, your goal is to wield humor with a purpose: to get your readers to empathize with the absurdities of your plight and, in so doing, potentially have the ability to laugh at the tragedies in their own lives.

Suggested Reading

Allen, *How to be Funny*.

Mandvi, *No Land's Man*.

Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.

———, "Understanding Owls," *The New Yorker*.

This American Life, "Christmas and Commerce."

———, "What Doesn't Kill You."

Lecture 22

Nature Essays

Mary Oliver, one of America's best-known nature poets, says that the natural world is a kind of "warehouse of symbolic imagery" for writers. "Poetry is one of the ancient arts," Oliver explains, "and it began, as did all the fine arts, within the original wilderness of the earth. Also, it began through the process of seeing, and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering—*remembering in words*—what these perceptual experiences were like, while trying to describe the endless invisible fears and desires of our inner lives." Embedded in Oliver's explanation for how poetry came into being is a potent writing exercise that we will take on in this lecture.

Assignment, Part I: Taking Notes on Nature

- If you are interested in tapping into nature's primeval warehouse of symbolism, take a notebook and a pen and go to the nearest field, forest, hill, or shoreline, leaving your cell phone, iPod, and tablet behind.
- Walk until you find a comfortable spot with no one else around. Lean against a tree or on sit a rock and spend at least a full hour, without any distractions, taking notes on what you see, feel, hear, smell, touch, and even taste.
- The point of this exercise is to let go of the social world as much as possible. Keep in mind that you are out in the wilderness to remember that you're not just in nature, but you *are* nature. Your very body is made of dirt. Your breath is air.

- Once you find a secluded and comfortable place, allow yourself to slow down. Find stillness as you listen, look, smell, and taste. Feel your body in this moment—every hair, every nerve. Then, jot down what your body is telling you about this place. If you like, you may try to sketch what you see, but don't take photographs. If you can manage to do this exercise more than once—maybe two or three times in a week across more than one landscape and in more than one kind of weather—your notes will be all the richer as a result.
- When you've finished gathering your notes and have a chance to return to your desk at home, read through everything at once with a critical eye. You've successfully transformed the experience of your body into language, which is the first step. The next task is to draft a nature essay from these notes that isn't overly simplistic or sappy.

William Wordsworth

- We have the celebrated poet William Wordsworth to thank for the idea of nature as an eternal source of beauty, inspiration, renewal, and refuge.
 - ◆ At the turn of the 19th century, Wordsworth and his collaborator, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, witnessed the plight of disadvantaged people around them and cast about for an alternative social paradigm. They wanted to find relief for those living among the cold realities of industrialization and the rise of an insatiable consumer culture.
 - ◆ What Wordsworth and Coleridge settled on was the restorative power of the natural world as a kind of salve against the harshness of modernity.
- The 1798 publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's collaborative book of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, has been called nothing short of a revolution in poetic form, as well as the book that instigated the Romantic era of literature. But even though these two writers revolutionized the language, subjects, narrators, and forms of poetry, what's perhaps more interesting is how this slim, unassuming volume also revolutionized people's ideas about the natural world.
- Before *Lyrical Ballads*, much of the writing about the great outdoors characterized global landscapes as places to be explored, tamed, or owned.



It's often difficult to write about nature without being sappy because we've all been taught that nature is a source of beauty and inspiration, and it has the capacity to renew the soul.

Land was a valuable resource, one that Europeans and North Americans sought to seize, map, and control. And while it's true that there were also some pre-Romantic writers who turned to the beauties of the pastoral, it was Wordsworth and Coleridge who popularized the ideas that the rural is the polar opposite of the urban and that nature offers people solace from the corruptions of city life.

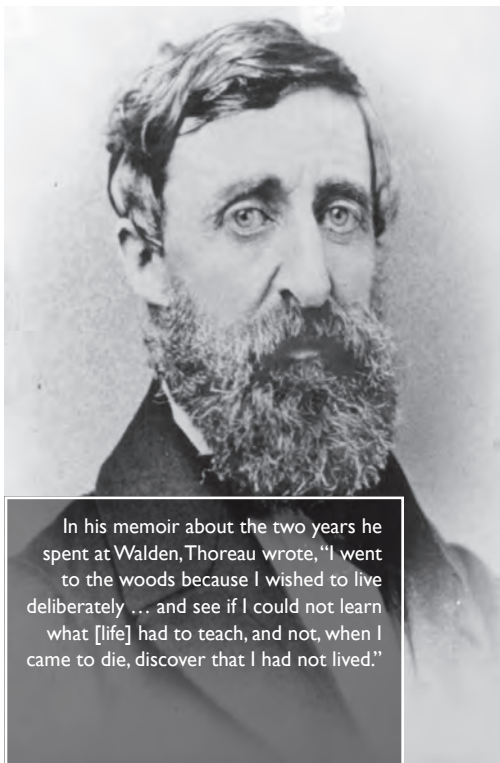
- In a poem called "Tintern Abbey," we see Wordsworth's philosophy on display: that humans aren't separated in any way from nature. The stuff of the human is the stuff of the stars. Yet Wordsworth idealizes the natural world to such an

exaggerated extent that he also winds up making it seem as though human beings should do nothing but feel awe and wonder when rambling about in nature. For Wordsworth, all ugliness and artificiality are located in cities; all beauty and solace are inside his view of nature.

- Even though we can give Wordsworth credit for showing us the splendors of nature, there's a problem with making him the primary mentor for nature essayists. Modern-day writers who follow in Wordsworth's footsteps tend to produce limited, histrionic, and clichéd pieces. And as they extol nature, they actually keep themselves apart from it. Even though Wordsworth himself believed that humans are nature and nature is humans, what we've inherited from him is a kind of schmaltzy writing that sees the outdoors as distinct from people—as completely separate from the lives we live in our concrete jungle.

Henry David Thoreau

- As you think about writing your own nature essays, push beyond Wordsworth toward another mentor: Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau might be called the first environmentalist writer—a nature writer who wrestles with people's moral responsibility to protect the earth. Thus, Thoreau is influential to the work of contemporary nature essayists whose writing is neither schmaltzy nor clichéd. These are the writers who tend to be keenly interested in maintaining and preserving nature as a vanishing resource and who understand completely that people's lives are interdependent with the natural world.



In his memoir about the two years he spent at Walden, Thoreau wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... and see if I could not learn what [life] had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

- Thoreau didn't draw on memories of the natural world, as Wordsworth did, to find inner strength to combat the ills of society. Instead, Thoreau separated himself from society altogether and went out to live in nature. As everyone knows, he built a small cabin next to a place called Walden Pond and lived there for two years.
- As an early environmentalist, Thoreau was one of the first Americans to speak in favor of keeping parts of our landscape as a national resource and for creating protected parks and forests. Thoreau witnessed the beginnings of urban sprawl in and around his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. In response, he wrote, "Let us keep the New World *new*, [and] preserve all the advantages of living in the country[!]"
- Thoreau is the primary model for contemporary essayists who write about nature, particularly those who hope to help improve the health of the planet by taking on issues of pollution, biodiversity, and sustainability. These are essayists who adopt an environmentalist perspective and who speak to the symbiotic connections between humans and the natural world. This self-consciously political approach is more in keeping with the ethos of our modern moment than Wordsworth's spiritual musings or those who focus exclusively on the miracle and grandeur of the earth.

Assignment, Part II: Writing Your Nature Essay

- With Thoreau in mind, return to the notes you took while spending quiet time outside. You don't have to write like Thoreau, whose observations were often bleak, but you should approach your nature essay by being both evenhanded and self-conscious.
- To be evenhanded in writing about nature, it's important not to romanticize it but to show that although the natural world can be awe-inspiring and gorgeous, it's also, in the words of Tennyson, "red in tooth and claw"—meaning that it's violent, containing as much death as it does life.
- You shouldn't shy away from describing the harsher elements of nature. Debra Marquart—a successful environmental essayist—has written a good

deal about growing up on a farm in the barrens of rural North Dakota. In a piece for *Orion Magazine*, Marquart writes with honesty of the endless chores that must be done on any farm. With regard to manure, for instance, she has “sprayed it with a hose, swept it into gutters, scraped it, buried it, burned it, and shoveled it.”

- In addition to being evenhanded, you must also be self-conscious about the fact that there is nothing between you and the universe and that whatever other people do to the world around you is something that’s also being done to you. In other words, you have to take nature personally. Whether you want to write about global climate change or the small dramas of life and death played out in your kitchen garden, you need to recognize the fact that all these topics are also, inevitably, about you—because you are organic.
- An example of a self-conscious writer is the essayist Michael P. Branch. By using humor and irreverence, Branch’s blog, *Rants from the Hill*, pushes the envelope of the traditional nature essay.
 - ◆ Branch has written about both the sublime and the mundane. His monthly rants cover an eclectic range of topics about nature and the natural world, such as keeping expensive chickens with beady eyes; raising a feral daughter who is equal parts “cute little girl, simian beast, and Hollywood stunt double”; hiking with a group of buddies; and more.
 - ◆ Apart from Branch’s mix of the serious with the silly—all delivered through a razor-sharp wit—what makes his essays unique is how self-conscious they are about his intimate relationship with nature. Branch never holds nature at arm’s length, thinking that he’s superior to it or separate from it. Instead, he understands completely that every decision he makes is one that affects the natural world in some profound way—and vice versa.
 - ◆ For instance, in a rollicking essay called “Lawn Guilt,” Branch’s self-consciousness is particularly evident. He offers a bevy of reasons that Americans shouldn’t keep lawns, as other nature writers—notably, Michael Pollan—have done before him.
 - ◆ But then, as Branch steps down from his “eco-soapbox,” he offers a “surprising confession”: “I have a lawn.” “Of course,” he goes on, “my dual status as arid lands environmentalist and lawn-watering dolt has provoked in me a serious identity crisis. . . . Am I proud of my lawn? Hell

no! I'm completely ashamed of it." Branch admits, "I have a terminal case of lawn guilt."

- ◆ Here's the self-consciousness at work. This nature writer isn't just condemning what others do to plants, animals, the oceans, the sky, the land, or the planet. Instead, he admits that he himself also does dastardly things to the natural world.
- ◆ It's this willingness to be self-conscious—to admit one's own hypocrisies and weaknesses—coupled with an evenhandedness about the beauty and the horror that is nature that will make all the difference when transforming your nature notes into your own environmental essay.

Suggested Reading

Berry, "An Entrance to the Woods," *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

Branch, *Rants from the Hill*.

Marquart, "Chores," *Orion Magazine*.

———, *The Horizontal World*.

Thoreau, *H. D. Thoreau*.

———, *Walden*.

Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth, "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Lecture 23

Food Essays: My Grandmother's Recipe Box

As we begin this lecture, write down a recipe you know by heart. As we move through the lecture, we'll see that this recipe tells about yourself, your family, and the country and time period in which you live. We'll then think about the story your recipe tells. What kind of setting do readers encounter when they cook your dish? Maybe your recipe invokes the idea of a traditional Italian meal, or maybe it's for a seasonal dish that brings to mind the chilly landscape of northern California. Whatever the setting or situation your recipe calls to mind, there's sure to be a story that's waiting to be played out the moment a reader starts to assemble your dish.

Reading a Recipe

- When reading a recipe, it's best to begin with the title. Consider, for example, a recipe for "Date Puffed Rice Balls." The title of this recipe does more than just name the foodstuff. It also says something about this food's ethnicity, class origin, historical period, authorship, and connection to a specific community of recipe writers.
 - ◆ In this case, the recipe is attributed to Florence Anderson, whose name alone gives us information about her gender, ethnicity, and locale. With the surname Anderson (meaning "son of Andrew"), Florence is almost certainly an Anglo-American woman from a family who immigrated at some point from England to the United States. She's also probably someone who grew up during a time in which Florence was a relatively common female name—which means between about 1880 and 1940.
 - ◆ Just from the title itself, we also know a few things about this culinary community. To make Date Puffed Rice Balls, a cook would have to be a

middle-class consumer familiar with American convenience foods. This same cook would also have to believe that ball-shaped desserts—which were fashionable in the 1940s and 1950s—are worth making.

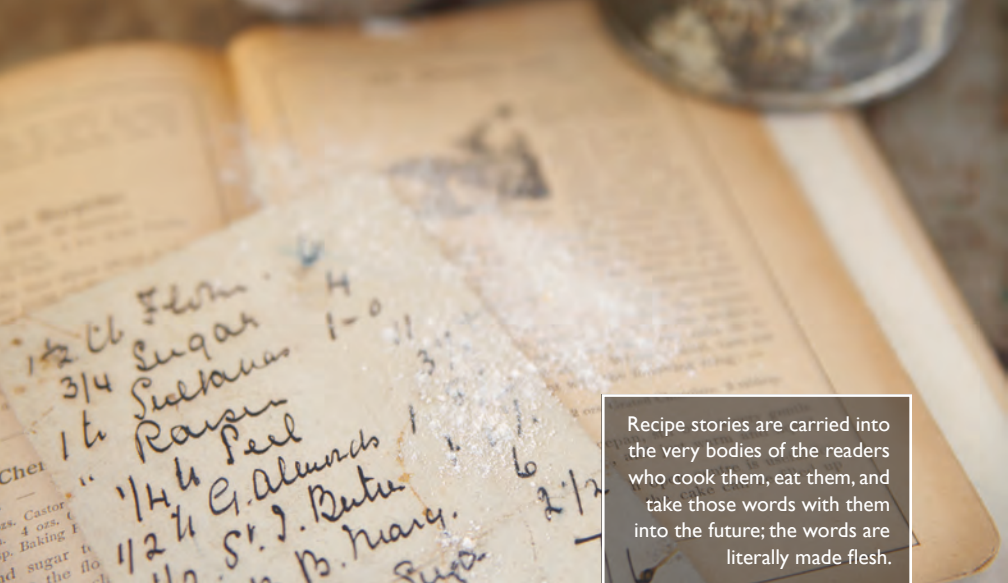
- After we get a title, an author, and sometimes a rating of the recipe, we then get a list of ingredients. Such lists actually signal certain things about the historical and cultural context of any recipe. For instance, an ingredient list might indicate that the recipe uses foods produced by industrialized agriculture (such as corn oil), that it’s reliant on consumer culture (if it calls for Hershey’s chocolate or Lay’s potato chips), that it comes from a certain region (if there’s Andouille sausage or blue crabmeat in the dish), or that it participates in the culinary traditions of a certain ethnic group (think here of okra or tortillas).
 - ◆ A list of ingredients also alternates between chef-speak (with such words as “soufflé,” “fricassee,” or “reamer”) and cook-speak (such as “fry,” “casserole,” and “juice”), which create either a more intellectual or a more conversational tone—one that sometimes makes it seem as though a recipe is more masculinized or feminized.
 - ◆ Also, many ingredient lists are rife with sense-based imagery. In a recipe for a roasted leg of lamb given by Ellen Meloy at the end of her humorous food essay “Eat Your Pets,” she says, “Remove the excess fat from a leg of lamb. . . . Rub the outside of the meat with olive oil, the inside with salt and pepper, then stuff it with garlic cloves and a thatch of cilantro.” Such phrases as “excess fat from a leg of lamb” and “garlic cloves and a thatch of cilantro” are as vivid and sharp as the imagery found in a poem.
 - ◆ Finally, an ingredients list provides the necessary amounts a cook needs for each item. In the United States, this focus on measurement originally came from Fannie Farmer’s 1896 *Boston Cooking School Cook Book*—which published standard measurements for the first time. After that, measuring spoons and cups became regular kitchen appliances.
 - ◆ The ingredients list from the recipe for Date Puffed Rice Balls also reveals the historical period of this piece of writing. It makes consumer-culture reference to Rice Krispies, it uses measurement terms, and it includes the word “oleo,” an abbreviation of “oleomargarine” that was used as a synonym for margarine through about 1949.

Recipes as Stories

- It's important to note that an ingredients list also suggests something more than history, gender, culture, or poetry. A recipe is more than just a set of instructions; it's also a story. It sets a scene, forms a plot, arrives at a climax, and ends with a denouement. Readers themselves become the main characters in these stories, because they're the ones who have to perform the actions of the recipe. Recipes, then, are both collaborative and embodied—a unique form of writing.
- It may be a bit odd to think of recipes as stories. If there's any “story” in a recipe, surely it's nothing more than a how-to. Yet once you think about how an ingredients list imagines a setting; how the instructions form a narrative arc; how the finished product might be seen as a happy, tragic, or at least, an adequate ending; and finally, how the plating, the serving suggestions, or even the calorie count becomes a finale to the whole—all of a sudden, a recipe becomes something more than the sum of its parts.
- To enter the story of Date Puffed Rice Balls, a reader-cook will need, first, to set out 1 stick of oleo, a 1/2 cup of sugar, and 1 cup of finely chopped dates on the kitchen counter. In a way, this list is a bit like “once upon a time,” but instead of introducing a cottage in the woods or a castle on a hill, we're asked to recall a 1950s American kitchen.
- Then, of course, the recipe becomes a set of directions. As with all recipes, the directions are given through a series of imperative phrases that begin with verbs in the present tense: heat, add, mix, roll. All recipes sound a bit bossy, yet recipes aren't just domineering.
 - ◆ They also invite readers to co-create meaning by participating directly in the unfolding of this story through these precise verbs. If these Date Puffed Rice Balls are not just read about but actually made, then the world beyond the writing is transformed.
 - ◆ It's this three-dimensional reading experience that makes recipes so fascinating, particularly as the foundation of food essays. Reading recipes is both a literal and a figurative act. To “consume” a recipe is to eat it with your eyes, your mouth, and your mind all at once.



You can learn a great deal about yourself and your cooking community in the recipes you make repeatedly; read such recipes for their gastronomic language, culinary imagery, and connections to your culture.



Recipe stories are carried into the very bodies of the readers who cook them, eat them, and take those words with them into the future; the words are literally made flesh.

Assignment: Recipe Recollection

- For this exercise, begin by choosing a family recipe, ideally one that connects you to your past. It doesn't have to be a cherished recipe; it can be one for watery, tasteless soup that you were compelled to eat as a child. The important thing is this: The food should evoke your childhood or teenage years. It should help you recollect your family, friends, and acquaintances. And the recipe should be linked to a specific geography. Think of this recipe as the basis of what James Beard calls a "taste memory": "the ability to recall a taste sensation" through re-imagining a food from the past.
- Now, get your hands on the main ingredient of your recipe and engage all your senses in examining it. Draw it, smell it, hold it in your hands. Then, build on what you're experiencing to re-create your own recollections connected to this food and this recipe.
- If you have the time and inclination, cook the dish. When it's made, once again, study it closely. Peer at it, smell it, and touch it before you put a bite in your mouth. Consider what other flavors come to mind, linked to this dish. Recall the food in both good and bad ways. When was it best? When was it worst? Is this dish an early love or an early hate?

- Next, make wider associations with your food—metaphoric, symbolic, or connected to literary allusions or common sayings. For instance, if your main ingredient is an apple and your recipe is for apple pie, what does your dish mean in terms of literature or religion? The Bible suggests that an apple represents both knowledge and evil; Greek mythology gives us the Apple of Discord, as well as the Golden Apple; and writers from Shakespeare to Thoreau to Bradbury have written essays, stories, and poems about apples and apple pie.
- Think, too, about what your food means in terms of popular culture. What are some familiar sayings that people have about this food? We all know the maxim “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” or the phrase that a beloved is the “apple of one’s eye.” What is your food a symbol of? Does your dish represent a certain group or nation? Apples, of course, are symbols of education, but they’re also symbols of America itself. Finally, does your food sell anything? Is it a commercial of itself?
- Then, go back to the recipe. It should be incorporated directly into your edible essay, but how you incorporate it should be something you think about carefully. You don’t have to list title, ingredients, and instructions all in a row. In “H Is for Happy,” M. F. K. Fisher gives her reader two ingredient lists—one physical and one spiritual. The spiritual are “equal parts of hunger and happiness.”

Below is a list of recommended food essays from *Books That Cook: Teaching Food and Food Literature in the English Classroom* (Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa Goldthwaite, eds.) and *We Are What We Ate* (Mark Winegardner, ed.).

- “Funeral Food,” Michael Lee West
- “In Nancy’s Kitchen,” Caroline Grant
- “Don’t Ask, Just Eat,” Gish Jen
- “H Is for Happy,” M. F. K. Fisher
- “The Pleasures of Eating,” Wendell Berry
- “The Famine of Bengal,” Gita Mehta
- “Pie,” Judith Moore
- “My Son, Eating Dinner,” Charles Baxter
- “The Assurance of Caramel Cake,” Maya Angelou

- Now that you have set out on your desk the ingredients for an edible essay, it's time to assemble it. You might ask yourself such questions as: What did this dish mean to me in the past, and why? Has that meaning changed, and why? What does it mean to family members, friends, enemies, neighbors, fellow citizens of my country, or citizens of another country? Where does the dish come from originally? Do others believe that this dish is inedible? Is this food "girly" or "manly"; is it for "old-timers" or "youngins"; or is it for a specific ethnic or cultural group? Is this food sexy, or is it a turnoff, and why?
- Ultimately, your task is to take these ingredients and "cook" them in such a way that you tell a story that remembers this food from your past at the same time that you reflect on it, considering its larger meaning. That "meaning" might be thematic, symbolic, or cultural. The most important thing is this: Your edible essay must have three layers. It needs to re-create the recipe itself in sensual, descriptive detail. It needs to represent the past through recollection. And it needs to look backward, reflecting from the perspective of the present moment on what this taste memory means to you now and to your readers.

Suggested Reading

Cognard-Black, "Eating, Reading, and Recipes."

———, "The Embodied Rhetoric of Recipes," *Food, Feminisms, and Rhetorics*.

Cognard-Black, and Goldthwaite, eds., *Books That Cook*.

———, "Books That Cook," *College English*.

Floyd and Foster, eds., *The Recipe Reader*.

Winegardner, ed., *We Are What We Ate*.

Lecture 24

Sharing Your Essays: From Blog to Book

In an era of online blogs based on writers' individual thoughts and opinions, it's not a stretch to say that millions of people think of themselves as essayists. And for the essayist who hopes to send his or her work out into the world, it's true that blogs are the new frontier. Without having to find an agent or get a degree in creative writing, the blogger can cultivate an audience of like-minded readers. Some bloggers reach a wide audience, but many do not, and many posts are not true essays. In this lecture, we'll distinguish between posts and fully formed blog essays.

Posts versus Essays

- Andrew McDowell is a librarian and an “aspiring author of Young Adult Fiction.” Recently, McDowell started a blog in the hopes of connecting with other young adult writers and spurring his own creativity. At the moment, he has only one entry, a piece called “Why Do I Write?”
- In this post, McDowell considers the question of whether he's chosen to write the best genre; he dives into his childhood and adolescent writings; and gives credit to his parents, friends, and fellow young adult enthusiasts. Despite all this, the piece doesn't yet rise to the level of the literary because it's a blog post, not a blog essay.
- McDowell's desire to become a good writer is both real and heartfelt. He's reaching for something beyond the quiet life of tedium that can arise from schoolwork or a job, and he understands that to become a true artist, you can't hope to make a bunch of money and get famous. Perhaps most important, McDowell is willing to practice. He's been writing since he was

a boy; he took creative writing workshops in college; and now he's seeking support and feedback on his work, in part by starting a blog about his writing.

- However, McDowell's piece is like a cross between an author bio and a journal entry. He is not yet writing about anyone other than himself or anything other than his own struggles, and his purpose isn't to reflect on the bigger picture of what art and artistry might mean to his readers or to his culture.
- In contrast, in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott explains why writing matters. Specifically, she claims:

Because ... books are as important as almost anything else on earth. What a miracle it is that out of these small, flat, rigid squares of paper unfolds world after world after world, worlds that sing to you, comfort and quiet [you] or excite you. Books help us to understand who we are and how we are to behave. They show us what community and friendship mean; they show us how to live and die. They are full of all the things that you don't get in real life—wonderful, lyrical language, for instance, right off the bat. And quality of attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of a day[,] but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author makes you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift.

- This paragraph comes from a chapter in *Bird by Bird* that's about how to get started as a writer; and the reason it rises to the level of an essay is that it's not exclusively about Lamott's own authorial fears and limitations. It's also not a laundry list of her advice to young writers.
- Obviously, Lamott is thinking about that greater purpose behind making a bunch of black marks on a white background for others to see and try to understand. For one, she says that writing is miraculous—or what Stephen King calls “telepathy.” As King puts it in *On Writing*, “All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation. ... We're not even in the same year together; let alone the same room ... except we *are* together. We're close. We're having a meeting of the minds.”

- In addition to writing's magic, in this paragraph, Lamott also talks about empathy—about sympathizing with those worlds and people who unfold out of all of those “small, flat, rigid squares of paper.” If we readers can stand inside someone else's shoes, then we have a real chance at finding meaning in this life, in coming to appreciate, as Lamott says, “what community and friendship mean” or “how to live and die.”
- After magic and empathy, Lamott also touches on the wonder of a writer's style: how he or she reproduces people and places, objects and ideas in a way that no one else ever has or ever will. Books are all about that “lyrical language” and “quality of attention” that Lamott mentions, meaning an author's voice and attitude. Thus, writers' quirky imagery and diction, their luscious details and descriptions make us notice those everyday things that, otherwise, we would surely ignore or miss.
- In other words, in contrast to McDowell, Lamott cracks her essays wide open. Her focus is on idea—which is the sum and substance of all good essays. Her focus is not on personal issues, top-ten lists, or the unfiltered and unreflective opinions that dominate so many blog posts masquerading as essays.

True Blog Essays

- An example of a blogger who writes true essays is Robin Bates. He writes a political and literary blog called *Better Living through Beowulf: How Great Literature Can Change Your Life*. The premise is simple: Bates examines philosophic theories and true-to-life lessons in classic literature that have the power to help ordinary people work through psychological and existential dilemmas.
- On his blog, Bates explains how certain pieces of literature have assisted him over the years as he grew up, found his life's path, and went through periods of grief. He says, in particular, “Works of literature have . . . come to the rescue at moments of unimaginable pain. . . . When our oldest son died in a freak drowning accident, I turned to *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. . . . [T]hey provided me some relief in [seeing] the grieving process as a journey, not as a mindless thrashing around.”



Blogs are a viable way to get your essays out the door, but you must work to distinguish your essay from a mere blog post.

- The reason that almost all of Bates's pieces are actual essays and not just posts isn't only that he's a well-trained writer and a long-term teacher of writing. It's also that he pays attention to the purpose of, and the audience for, his blog. Although he draws on his own life experience, his pieces spur thought. They take into account what matters to readers, not just what matters to Bates. And his central point is to move, rouse, educate, inform, and generally launch conversations with his audience.
- In his post "Lear's Lesson," Bates links Shakespeare's *King Lear* to the dynamics of politics over whether the United States should make an arms deal with Iran. Here, Bates draws from the personal, but he attempts to make it into something political and universal.
- Bates has pulled together some of the politico-literary essays on *Better Living through Beowulf* into a book entitled *How Beowulf Can Save America: An Epic Hero's Guide to Defeating the Politics of Rage*. In essence, then, Bates's blog

became his primary means for writing the draft of a book. He has used this online forum as a means of practicing his craft and creative thinking.

- If you decide to try your hand at keeping a blog to hone your writing skills, you might do so with an eye toward using it as if it were a collection of essays. With a blog, however, your essay drafts won't be in a drawer or buried on a computer, with no one to read them. Instead, the comments you'll receive from your blog followers will help you to know which pieces work, which don't, and why. In turn, this feedback will potentially allow you to revise and polish certain essays into pieces that achieve artistic and even monetary success, including books, screenplays, and podcasts.

Assignment: Review of the Market

- One valuable assignment for potential essayists is a review of the market. Visit 10 websites of journals that publish creative nonfiction essays; these journals need to be small-press ones, with at least half of them publishing issues in hard copy. You can find such journals at the back of any *Best American Essays* collection. If you tend to write a certain genre of essay—such as nature essays or food essays—then you can also skim through collections specific to that genre to see where the selected essays come from.
- Once you've decided on your top 10 journals, go to each website and read at least two essays or parts of essays to get a feel for the kind of creative nonfiction these journals publish. Also look up specifics about how to submit your work. Find out when the journal comes out, the number of essays accepted every year, whether the journal pays for publication, and so on.
- After you've taken notes on each journal, write up a review of the market that explains why you chose these particular journals for your essays and how you see your work operating in this market. As boring as it may sound, you should probably do this kind of review at least once a year.
- Beyond doing a review of the market for small-press journals, if you're hoping at some point to shop a collection of essays, then it's probably also worth your while to invest in a copy of the current *Writer's Market* and to look at

the websites for university presses. Once you have some experience under your belt, you might also look into the question of getting an agent.

- Finally, keep in mind this piece of advice from Harper Lee to anyone aspiring to a writing career: "Before developing his talent, he would be wise to develop a thick hide." If writing is revision, it is also rejection. But every time you get a rejection, send your essay out again. There's another reader out there who might appreciate what you have to say.

Suggested Reading

Bates, *Better Living through Beowulf*.

Branch, *Rants from the Hill*.

King, *On Writing*.

Lamott, *Bird by Bird*.

Powell, *Julie & Julia*.

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