

WRTG 20500
PERSONAL ESSAY
MWF 1:00-1:50
CNS 118
Spring 2007

Instructor **Dr. Jack Wang**
Office **Park 245**
Office Phone **274-3493**
Office Hours **MW 12:00-12:50, 2:00-2:50; F 12:00-12:50 and by appointment**
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Course Description

This course is an introduction to the art of the personal essay. Through thoughtful exploration of your own experiences and the artful application of literary techniques, you will learn to write meaningful and engaging essays about your own life.

This course is as much a course in reading as it is in writing. Those who aspire to write must read, widely and often. Toward that end, we will be reading personal essays and memoirs as well as essays on craft, all of which will deepen your understanding of the art of personal narrative. Naturally, we'll also be writing, and reading each other's writing—attentively, rigorously, and generously—in a workshop format that will emphasize process as much as product.

In his introduction to the anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, editor Philip Lopate claims that the essayist “must be a good storyteller” and that the “hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy.” What you will learn in this course, then, is how to tell a good story and how to create an intimate persona on the page, among other things, all of which will help you make meaning of your own experience and convey that meaning to others.

Required Texts

The Truth of the Matter, Dinty W. Moore, ed.
The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative, Vivian Gornick

Coursework

Writing exercises	10%
Brief modeled essay	10%
Brief memoir (portfolio with at least two drafts)	15%
Brief personal essay (portfolio with at least two drafts)	15%
Conventional-length essay (portfolio with at least three drafts)	35%
Written responses to peers' essays	10%
Final Exam	5%

All assignments will be clearly explained in due course, including those briefly outlined below, and all major assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

The Readings

In this course, you'll be asked to read as writers, which means reading not only for meaning but also for craft. In other words, with attention to how the author manages to achieve desired effects and how you might achieve similar effects in your own work. In response to your readings, you'll occasionally be asked to write an informal journal response that reflects on various aspects of craft. All responses must be completed and submitted with your portfolio in order for your essays to be graded. Therefore, it's essential that you do all your readings.

The Exercises

Toward the beginning of the semester, you will be assigned a series of writing exercises that will help familiarize you with some fundamental aspects of personal narrative, such as detail and description, characterization and scene, and voice and point of view. At the same time, these exercises will help you explore significant dimensions of your life (people, places, events, etc.). These exercises may serve as building blocks for your essays, but they don't have to; you can choose to expand on them or not.

The Essays

This semester, you will write three complete essays, two brief essays and one conventional length essay. All essays will be workshopped in class, so please don't write about anything that you don't wish to share—or rather, please find the courage to share whatever it is you most wish to write about. My hope is to give you as much latitude as possible in choosing your own subjects, but assignments may come with some narrowing of the focus.

Course Policies

Online Courseware/WebCT

Most course materials, including some drafts of written assignments, will be distributed electronically through WebCT, which can be accessed by going to <http://courses.ithaca.edu> and logging in with your e-mail username and password. Please check regularly for updates and announcements and submit assignments on time.

Attendance

Attendance is crucial to your success in this course, so please come to class every day prepared and ready to contribute. All students are allowed two unexcused absences. **Thereafter, every unexcused absence will result in a one-third letter grade deduction to your final grade. In keeping with department policy, students who have nine absences (excused or unexcused) will be dropped from the course, and if the last absence occurs after the period of withdrawal, they will receive an F in the course.** Whenever possible, please let me know ahead of time that you won't be in class. In cases of emergencies and school-authorized events, please document your absence. Remember, you are responsible for anything missed in class, including any changes to the syllabus.

Grading

Specific requirements for each assignment may differ, but in all cases my evaluation of your work will consider content, originality, expression, and maturity of thought. General criteria are as follows:

- A An A essay is an artful and engaging work of personal narrative that vividly dramatizes some meaningful episode(s) or aspect(s) of the writer's life. Through a well-crafted persona, the writer achieves all of the hallmarks of a good personal essay—intimacy, honesty, and reliability. At the same time, the writer's self-portrait is nuanced enough to produce self-contradiction and complexity and therefore insight. The language is fresh and evocative and unhampered by problems with mechanics or usage.
- B A B essay also illuminates the writer's life vividly and engagingly, though perhaps with less complexity, originality, or artfulness than an A essay. For the most part, the writer's intentions are clearly identifiable through the artistic choices he or she has made, with only the occasional lapse in persona, dramatization, or structure. The language is precise and idiomatic with few problems of mechanics or usage.
- C A C essay is a clear, coherent essay that demonstrates a satisfactory understanding of craft. However, the persona, though suitable, tends to lack dimensionality, and insights veer toward the predictable. Some key aspect(s) of the writer's life may be underdeveloped or unexplored. The language is appropriate but lacking in vividness.
- D A D essay is superficial and reflects consistent weaknesses in numerous areas of craft. The writer appears unwilling or unable to examine his or her life thoughtfully, and as a result the persona adopted fails to garner much interest or sympathy. The structure is unclear and the language clichéd.
- F Assigned when the criteria for the assignment have clearly not been met. Also assigned in cases of academic dishonesty (please see below).

All formal written assignments, including drafts, must be typed, double-spaced, titled, paginated, and submitted in MLA format. **Late work will be penalized 10% a day. Assignments more than two days late will not be accepted. On weekends, late work can and should be submitted electronically.**

Academic Dishonesty

Anyone who attempts to present someone else's writing—published or unpublished, in whole or in part—as their own will fail the course and may face further action by the College.

It's simple: tell your own life stories. After all, it's *your* life.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who wish to receive reasonable accommodations, as required by law, should identify themselves to the professor as early in the semester as possible. Please register with and bring documentation to the Office of Academic Support Services for Students with Disabilities and bring documentation to the professor from the ACSSD indicating the need for academic accommodation, preferably during the first week.

A Final Note

I look forward to working with you this semester. If we all approach this course with effort and enthusiasm, we can enact in the classroom what all writers hope for: a community of other writers with whom to talk eagerly about literature and writing and what it means to live through art.

What little I've accomplished has been by the most laborious and uphill work, and I wish now I'd *never* relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of The Great Gatsby: "I've found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Schedule

TM=The Truth of the Matter

SS=The Situation and the Story

Week 1

M January 22 Introduction to the Personal Essay

W January 24 *TM*: Chapter One: True Stories, Innovative Forms (3-7) and Chapter Two: What Makes Nonfiction Creative? (8-17), "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction" by Bret Lott (279-85).

F January 26 *TM*: Chapter Three: Detail and Description (21-28).
Introduction to Exercise #1.

Week 2

M January 29 *TM*: "Brothers" by Bret Lott (207-10).

W January 31 **Exercise #1 due.**
TM: Chapter Four: Characterization and Scene (29-40).
Introduction to Exercise #2.

F February 2 *TM*: "Out There" by Jo Ann Beard (127-31).

Week 3

M February 5

Exercise #2 due.

TM: Chapter Five: Distinctive Voice and Intimate Point of View (42-52).
Introduction to Exercise #3.

W February 7

TM: “What They Don’t Tell You About Hurricanes” by Philip Gerard (151-56). “Innocence and Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction” by Sue William Silverman at:

http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_voice.htm

TM: Chapter Six: Discovery (54-62).

F February 9

Exercise #3 due.

TM: Chapter Seven: The Memoir Essay (66-72).

“The Things I’ve Lost” by Brian Arundel at:

http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/brev22/arundel_lost.htm

Introduction to the Brief Modeled Essay.

Week 4

M February 12

TM: “The Drama Bug” by David Sedaris (229-35), “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?” by Mimi Schwartz (286-91)

W February 14

The Brief Modeled Essay due.

TM: “Alive” (103-4) and “You’ll Love the Way We Fly” (105-6).

Introduction to the Brief Memoir.

F February 16

TM: “Dumber Than” (107-8) and essay from *Brevity* (TBA).

“Prose Poems, Paragraphs, Brief Lyric Nonfiction” by Peggy Shumaker at:

http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_prosepoems.htm

Week 5

M February 19

Essays from *Brevity* (TBA).

“On the ‘Speedy Narrative’” by Jeff Gundy at:

http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_speedy.htm

W February 21

First draft of the Brief Memoir due.

Bring copies for peer review.

F February 23

Workshop first draft.

Week 6

M February 26

Workshop first draft.

W February 28

Workshop first draft.

F March 2

Workshop first draft.

Week 7

M March 5

TM: Chapter Nine: The Personal Essay (84-91).

Introduction to the Brief Personal Essay.

W March 7

“Joyas Voladoras” by Brian Doyle (handout).

“Copyediting. Vital. Do It or Have It Done” by Diana Hume George at:
http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/craft/craft_copyedit.htm

F March 9

Final draft and portfolio of the Brief Memoir due.

Week 8

March 10-18

Spring Break. No class.

Week 9

M March 19

Essays from *Brevity* (TBA).

W March 21

**First draft of the Brief Personal Essay due.
Bring copies for peer review.**

F March 23

Workshop first draft.

Week 10

M March 26

Workshop first draft.

W March 28

Workshop first draft.

F March 30

SS: Introduction (3-26). One, The Essay (29-52).
TM: “The Courage of Turtles” (184-88).
Introduction to the Conventional Length Essay.

Week 11

M April 2

Final draft and portfolio of the Brief Personal Essay due.

SS: One, The Essay (52-77).

“For My Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business” by Seymour Krim (handout).

W April 4

SS: One, The Essay (77-85).

TM: “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin (111-26).

F April 6

SS: Conclusion (159-65).

TM: “Mirrorings” by Lucy Grealy (157-66).

Week 12

M April 9

First draft of Conventional Length Essay due. Bring copies for workshop.

W April 11

Workshop first draft.

F April 13

Workshop first draft.

Week 13

M April 16

Workshop first draft.

W April 18

Workshop first draft.

F April 20

Workshop first draft.

Week 14

M April 23

Second draft of Conventional Length Essay due. Bring copies for workshop.

W April 25

Workshop second draft.

F April 27

Workshop second draft.

Week 15

M April 30

Workshop second draft.

W May 2

Workshop second draft.

F May 4

Workshop second draft.

Week 16

Final exam TBA

Final draft and portfolio of the Conventional Length Essay due.