

The Long Personal Essay
Fall 2020
JOUR-GA 1182.002
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Professor James Marcus
Tuesday, 1:00pm-4:00pm, 7th Floor Library
Office hours: Tuesday 10-12, or by appointment

Course Description

This course examines the personal essay, an infinitely elastic form that only *appears* to be easy. To some extent, we can blame this misconception on the Internet, where hasty confessionals and half-drunk polemics are thick on the ground. The personal essay, of course, can include both of these elements—but ideally, it takes us beyond the merely personal. It uses the self as raw material, as a way to wrestle with not only our private demons but with the great world. It encompasses many other genres: memoir, reportage, criticism, meditation, travel narrative, case study. It also raises some tricky questions. How do you write about yourself? How do you write about the people you love (or even hate), and balance personal experience with reportorial distance? How do you reconcile what you remember with the verifiable facts? To explore these questions, we'll read some of the great contemporary essayists and analyze their technique, tone, angle of attack, and ethical choices. Having worked with several of these essayists at *Harper's Magazine*, I will share insights into the editorial process—and rope a few of them into virtual fireside chats. The class will involve brief responses to readings, longer exercises, in-class discussion (lots of it), presentations, and peer critique. The final project will be a reported personal essay of 4,000-5,000 words.

Learning Objectives

- Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
- Emerge from the course with a substantial, original, publication-ready essay

Course Structure and Requirements

- There will be readings for each meeting, usually a pair of related essays. These are substantial pieces and can't be bolted down in a single, last-minute, Adderall-fueled session. I urge you to give them time, to enjoy them, to think about them. Then you will need to write a short response of 3-4 paragraphs, addressing one or both essays. I'm not looking for summaries but for engagement with what these pieces have

accomplished--and what you can absorb, steal, adapt. All responses must be posted by 11:00 PM the night before we meet. We will then discuss the essays, and your responses, in class.

- There will be a series of short exercises along the way. For example, I might ask you to describe the history of a given object in your life. I might ask you to narrate a brief episode from your past that you have never shared before (trivial or traumatic, your choice). I might ask you to take a previous piece you've done and rewrite it in an utterly different tone. These exercises will call for a mini-essay of 750-1,000 words, and will typically be due a week after the initial assignment.
- From the beginning, you should be thinking about possible subjects for your final project. We will have one-on-one conversations (mostly virtual, alas) about what you want to write. By our third class meeting, you should submit a project proposal of 1-2 pages to me, which we can keep refining even as you leap into the research, reporting, and writing. An important caution: especially if your essay involves substantial research, do *not* put off the actual writing while you heap up the essential facts. The two processes should overlap and feed off each other.
- Once you're all rolling with your final projects, two students will make short (15-minute) presentations each week. This isn't a test or ordeal: it's a chance to share challenges, discoveries, triumphs, sinkholes, and bat around ideas as a group.
- A rough or incomplete draft of your final project is due three weeks before our last meeting. This is just to keep you on track and allow for last-minute course correction if the piece has wandered from its original conception.
- The final project is due at our last meeting. You should aim for a smart, rigorously honest, and compelling piece of work--you should aim for something that *matters*, to you and to a legion of potential readers. It should also be beautiful. By that, I don't mean written in a flowery, adjective-clogged style, only that the language should be original, memorable, and stamped with your own personality.

Required Texts

- Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*
- I will scan all other texts and post them on Google Docs

Other Requirements

- You are expected to come to class having read all of that week's readings, and to participate in group discussion, even if you're shy or hungover.
- You are expected to turn in all writing assignments on deadline.

- More than two absences will lower your grade; more than three will make it difficult to pass the course. Absence on a presentation day is particularly nefarious. Email me in advance if you can't make a class.

Grading

- Weekly reading response – 20%
- Class participation – 20%
- Project presentations - 20%
- Final piece - 40%

Accommodations

- Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University's Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at [212-998-4980](tel:212-998-4980) or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

Diversity & Inclusion

- The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.

Week 1, September 8—Introduction: the long personal essay

Readings: “The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard (from *Boys of My Youth*) and “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*)

Exercise #1: TK, due at next session

Week 2, September 15—Essay as memoir

Readings: “Argon” by Primo Levi (from *The Periodic Table*) and “Six Glimpses of the Past” by Janet Malcolm (from *The New Yorker*)

Week 3, September 22—Essay as geography

Readings: “As Goes the South, So Goes the Nation” by Imani Perry (from *Harper's Magazine*) and “Chicago” by Elizabeth Hardwick (from *The New York Review of Books*)

Submit project proposals

Exercise #2: TK, due at next session

Week 4, September 29—Essay as portraiture

Readings: “Natives on the Boat” by Teju Cole (from *Known and Strange Things*) and “Mr. Lytle: An Essay” by John Jeremiah Sullivan (from *Pulphhead*)

Week 5, October 6—Essay as argument

Readings: “Dispatch from Flyover Country” by Meghan O’Gieblyn (from *Interior States*) and “Why I’m a Pacifist” by Nicholson Baker (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

Exercise #3: TK, due at next session

Week 6, October 13—Essay as criticism

Readings: “Flesh and Blood” by Vivian Gornick (from *Harper’s Magazine*) and “Getting In and Out” by Zadie Smith (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

Week 7, October 20—Essay as adventure

Readings: “An Expedition to the Pole” by Annie Dillard (from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*) and “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell

Week 8, October 27—Essay as history

Readings: “Snowden’s Box” by Jessica Bruder and Dale Maharidge (from *Harper’s Magazine*) and “Such, Such Were the Joys” by George Orwell (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*)

Week 9, November 3—Sickness and health

Readings: “The Devil’s Bait” by Leslie Jamison (from *Harper’s Magazine*) and “Brown Album” by Porochista Khakpour (from *Brown Album*)

Week 10, November 10—Trivia and sublimity

Readings: “The Death of the Moth” by Virginia Woolf (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*), “The Infinity of the Small” by Alan Lightman (from *Harper’s Magazine*), and “Brummelliana” by William Hazlitt (from *Selected Writings*)

Submit rough/incomplete draft of final project

Week 11, November 17—Student essays

Readings: “A Small Place” [initial section] by Jamaica Kincaid and “Less Than One” by Joseph Brodsky (from *Less Than One*)

Week 12, November 24—Student essays

Readings: “The Way of All Flesh” by Ted Conover (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

Week 13, December 1—Student essays

Readings: “On Being an Only Child” by Geoff Dyer (from *Otherwise Known as the Human Condition*)

Final projects due