

The Long Personal Essay

Spring 2021

JOUR-GA 1182-013

Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute

Professor James Marcus

Monday, 10:00am-1:00pm, 726 Broadway, Room 701

Office hours: Wednesday 10:00-12:00 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 about 3,000 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. We will then discuss the essays in class.
- There will be a series of short exercises along the way. These exercises will call for a mini-essay of **around 800 words**, and will be **due at the following class meeting**. We will typically **workshop three of these mini-essays** each time. I've attached a **schedule** at the end of the

syllabus so you can see when you'll be presenting: when your date comes up, you must **post your piece online by 3:00 PM the afternoon before class** so that everybody can be ready to join the critique.

- 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.
- During each of our last four meetings, three students will **present their final projects**, in part of whole. This isn't a test or ordeal: it's a chance to share challenges, discoveries, triumphs.
- 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 send all other texts in PDF form via email or park them on NYU Courses

Other Requirements

- You are expected to come to class having read all of that week's readings, and to participate in group discussion.
- 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, February 1—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: The assignment is to describe some aspect of your life that has been radically changed by the COVID pandemic. **Due on February 8, unless you're presenting**, in which case it's due by 3:00 PM the day before class.

Week 2, February 8—Essay as memoir

Readings: “Getting to the End” by J.C. Hallman (from *Harper's Magazine*) and “Six Glimpses of the Past” by Janet Malcolm (from *The New Yorker*)

We will workshop/discuss Exercise #1.

J.C. Hallman will visit the class for a Q-and-A via Zoom.

Week 3, February 22—Essay as geography

Readings: “As Goes the South, So Goes the Nation” by Imani Perry (from *Harper's Magazine*) and “Once More to the Lake” by E. B. White (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*)

Submit project proposals

Exercise #2: The assignment is to **describe or recount something you have never shared before**. This could be just about anything: an incident from your own life, a conversation overheard in the street, a dream, a scheme, something you learned about somebody else's life. **Due on March 1, unless you're presenting**, in which case it's due by 3:00 PM the day before class.

Week 4, March 1—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 *Pulphed*)

We will workshop/discuss Exercise #2

Week 5, March 8—Essay as argument

Readings: “Big and Slow” by Elisa Gabbert (from *The Unreality of Memory*) and “Body Language” by Alex Marzano-Lesnevich (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

Exercise #3: At this point, we will start doing exercises related to your actual essays. The assignment is to **describe a person who plays a role, major or minor**, in your essay. The exercise **need not represent the final language** in your project, although it certainly can. **Due on March 15, unless you’re presenting**, in which case it’s due by 3:00 PM the day before class.

Week 6, March 15—Essay as criticism

Readings: “Flesh and Blood” by Vivian Gornick (from *Harper’s Magazine*) and “Desperately Seeking Susan” by Terry Castle (from the *London Review of Books*)

We will workshop/discuss Exercise #3

Week 7, March 22—Essay as sensation

Readings: “Seeing” by Annie Dillard (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*) and “The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain” by Edward Hoagland (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*)

Exercise #4: The assignment is to **describe a place** related to your essay. Most of the time, this will be a physical location—a specific landscape, kitchen, car interior, escalator, ballroom, crawl space. If your essay includes literally no physical place, let me know and we’ll figure it out. **Due on March 29, unless you’re presenting**, in which case it’s due by 3:00 PM the day before class.

Midpoint check-in on final essays

Week 8, March 29—Essay as politics

Readings: “How to Make a Slave” by Jerald Walker (from *How to Make a Slave*) and “Such, Such Were the Joys” by George Orwell (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*)

Exercise #5: The assignment is to **write a scene from your essay**. Quite often, this will allow you to bring together the person and place you described in the previous two exercises. **Due on April 5, unless you’re presenting**, in which case it’s due by 3:00 PM the day before class.

We will workshop/discuss Exercise #4

Jerald Walker will visit the class for a Q-and-A via Zoom.

Week 9, April 5—Essay as tribulation

Readings: “Seven Years of Identity Theft” by Rick Moody (from *Harper’s Magazine*) and “The Devil’s Bait” by Leslie Jamison (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

We will workshop/discuss Exercise #5

Rick Moody will visit the class for a Q-and-A via Zoom.

Week 10, April 12—Trivia and sublimity—Student essays

Readings: “The Death of the Moth” by Virginia Woolf (from *The Art of the Personal Essay*), “Reading Aloud” by Nicholson Baker (from *The New Yorker*)

Submit rough/incomplete draft of final project

Week 11, April 26—Student essays

Readings: “Less Than One” by Joseph Brodsky (from *Less Than One*)

Week 12, May 3—Student essays

Readings: “Falling” by Donovan Hohn (from *Harper’s Magazine*)

Week 13, May 10—Student essays

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

Final projects due

PRESENTATION SCHEDULE (Alphabetical)

February 8:

March 1:

March 15:

March 29:

April 5:

April 12:

April 26:

May 3:

May 10: