Varieties of the First Person

Not so long ago, the only permissible use of "I" in journalism was inside quotation marks—quoting somebody else. The first person was anathema; "I" had no place in news outside the work of columnists.

But today the first person is important to attracting readers to much journalism and other nonfiction writing. Often the relationship of the writer to the material, the story-behind-the-story, is not only interesting but crucial. By the same token, the first person can get in the way. The author’s presence, or attitude, can come between reader and writing, rather than bringing them together.

This course will involve reading and writing exercises designed to help us find our voice—our first person. There will be a modest amount of reporting, sometimes as a group. But mostly we'll experiment with ways to say things—including, most importantly, how to sound like ourselves.

The best model for this course is neither a seminar nor a workshop but a lab. I want to create a space for experimentation, want you to try different things, take chances. The goal, by semester’s end, is for each student to find a dexterous first person voice that she feels comfortable using.

En route to this we will

• Consider the first person as a question of degree asking
  -- how much about me? how loud? how long? what's Too Much Information?
  -- when is the third person a good idea?

• Consider the first person voice as something that comes out of us naturally ... but that we modulate in writing, just as we do when speaking to different people.

• Experiment with writing about ourselves
  for example
  -- a time we didn't tell the truth
-- a time we told the truth and weren't believed

• Experiment with writing about other people
  for example
  -- an obituary of someone we knew
  -- a parody of someone we know

• Experiment with writing about ourselves with other people
  for example
  -- people we know
  -- strangers, in a variety of situations that the city makes easy to find

• Experiment with expressing strong opinions, in the first person and the third

Our lab work will be grounded in readings by some really good writers, some selected by me and others selected by you. Among the readings from me:

Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*
Philip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*
Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History*
Personal essays by members of our faculty
Perri Klass, Suketu Mehta, James McBride, Salman Rushdie, Katie Roiphe and others
also Nicholas Dawidoff, Kristen Dombek, Cheryl Strayed/Dear Sugar
A selection of 20th century news and feature writing that we'll examine in a bid to disinter its hidden first person.