

English 200 (Spring 2016)  
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@ProfPfefferle (#ArtOfTheEssay)

Monday/Thursday 9:30-10:45  
Office: J710  
Wednesday, 12:00-4:00

## **English 200**

### **Analysis and Interpretation of Literature: The Art of the Essay**

#### **Course Description:**

The etymology of the word “essay,” from the French *essai*, describes a literary practice that hinges on the idea of an *attempt*. As the prolific Twitter essayist Jeet Heer (@heerjeet) puts it: “At the very root of the essay form is its experimental and makeshift nature. An essay isn’t a definitive judgment but a first survey.” In this class, we will hone our skills as essayists—readers and commentators who embrace the experience of thinking and writing as ever-going processes—through the close examination of seminal essays of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From Virginia Woolf’s essays about essay writing to Teju Cole’s experiments with social media platforms, the *attempts* that we encounter and discuss will help us nurture skills and habits of mind that we will put into practice in various ways over the course of the term.

As well as being expected to read and think carefully about the material, students who take this class should be prepared to write—and re-write—voluminously. Weekly writing workshops will occupy as much of our collective energy as the analysis and interpretation of the rhetorical strategies and argumentative positions activated by the essayists whose work we will study.

#### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Develop the vocabulary, critical tools, and habits of mind necessary for success in a humanities degree program in general, and an English literature program in particular.
- Acquire comprehensive knowledge about the historical development of the essay, including the relationship between form and content.
- Read closely and critically, with a mind to gaining heightened awareness of the rhetorical strategies and stylistic conceits the best writers employ to generate meaning and persuade readers.
- Write with increasing precision and efficiency to compose fluent literary documents.

#### **Texts:**

In lieu of forcing you to buy a restrictive and prohibitively expensive anthology of essays, the texts that we will read and discuss will be uploaded to the course Blackboard page for your convenience. You **must** print these off: laptops, tablets, and cell phones are prohibited.

NB: I recommend buying a used copy of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* (any edition), which will serve you well in this class and others.

#### **Method of Evaluation:**

Attendance and Active Participation (in class and online): 10%  
Writing Workshop Assignments (3) (300-500 words; 1-2 pages): 15%

Short Essay 1 (800 words; 2-3 pages): 10%  
Short Essay 2 (1000 words; 3-4 pages): 20%  
Essay Proposal (300-500 words): 15%  
Final Essay (1200 words; 5-6 pages): 30%

**NB: Assignments must be submitted *in hard copy* and *in class* on the Thursdays of each respective deadline week.**

**Class Schedule:**

**Week One: Why Write?**

Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook" and "Why I Write"  
George Orwell, "Why I Write"

**Week Two: The Writing Life**

Zadie Smith, "Fail Better"  
George Saunders, "Mr Vonnegut in Sumatra"

**Due: Writing Workshop Assignment (1): Why I Write/Why I Do Not Write**

**Week Three: The Modern Essay and Modern(ist) Form**

Virginia Woolf, "The Decay of Essay Writing" and "The Modern Essay"  
--. "Modern Fiction," and "Street Haunting: A London Adventure"

**Week Four: The Essay and Fragmentary Experience**

Elizabeth Bowen, "London, 1940" and "Preface to *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*"  
--. "The Demon Lover" and "Ivy Gripped the Steps (Short Story)"

**Week Five: The (Political) Urgency of Essay Writing**

George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," and "A Hanging"  
James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

**Due: Short Essay (1): "Modern \_\_\_\_\_"**

**Week Six: The New Journalism**

Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved"  
Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"

**Week Seven: The Essay and Everyday Life**

David Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"  
Leslie Jamison, "The Devil's Bait"

**Week Eight: Peer Review**

Students must bring a **hard copy** of a **revised draft** of "Modern \_\_\_\_\_" to class for peer review

**Week Nine: The Function of Criticism at the Present Time**

Edward Said, "Introduction" to *Reflections on Exile*  
Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" and "Introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*"

**Due: Short Essay (2): "Modern \_\_\_\_\_"**

**Week Ten: Close Reading**

Salman Rushdie, "Out of Kansas"

Christopher Hitchens, "America's Poet? Bob Dylan's Achievement"

**Week Eleven: Interpretation, For and Against**

Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave" and "Notes on Camp"

Film Screening: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

**Due: Writing Workshop Assignment (2): "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"**

**Week Thirteen: The Art of the Review**

Pete Wells, "As Not Seen on TV: Guy's American Kitchen & Bar in Times Square"

Pauline Kael, Review of "Gimme Shelter"

**Week Fourteen: Peer Editing Session**

Students must bring a **hard copy** of their final project to class for peer review

**Week Fifteen: The Essay in the Age of Digital/New Media**

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "A Case for Reparations"

Teju Cole, "A Piece of the Wall"

**Writing Workshop Assignment (3): Twitter Essay**

**Due: Final Project (Publishable Review)**

**Attendance:**

Attendance is mandatory. Unless you have cleared it with me, failure to attend more than three times will result in your being asked to withdraw from the class.

**Late Work:**

Due dates are non-negotiable. Although I will accept late work, I will dock a half-letter grade per day late. Thus, a paper that is one day late that would have received an A will receive an A-. Two days late: B+. And so on.

**College ADA Policy:**

Students with documented physical, learning, psychological and other disabilities are entitled to receive reasonable accommodations. If you need classroom or testing accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center (Student Union Building, Room 205, 257-3020). The DRC will provide forms verifying the need for accommodation. As soon as the instructor receives the form, you will be provided with the appropriate accommodations. Students are encouraged to request accommodations as close to the beginning of the semester as possible.

**Statement on Academic Integrity:**

Students are expected to maintain the highest standards of honesty in their college work. Cheating, forgery, and plagiarism are serious offenses, and students found guilty of any form of academic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary action.

If a student has any question about what constitutes a violation of academic integrity, it is that student's responsibility to clarify the matter by conferring with the instructor and to seek out other resources available on the campus. The link regarding plagiarism on the Sojourner Truth Library's website is an excellent beginning: <http://lib.newpaltz.edu/assistance/plag.html>

**Technology Policy:**

A 2011 study at the University of Michigan found that 75% of students reported “using a laptop during class increased the amount of time they spent on non-course work.” 35% of students reported having spent “more than ten minutes per class using social media sites and email. Although I am uploading readings to the web, I expect you to print them out and have them with you—ideally with voluminous marginal notes!—in class every day. Without exception, laptops, tablets, and cell phones must be stowed away in bags.