

English 402—Topics in Writing and Research: The Essay as Form
Fall Semester 2011 | Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:30-1:45pm | Neville 406

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 2:00-3:30pm and by appointment

Course Description

This section of English 402 will function as a hybrid seminar-workshop devoted to the reading, writing, and theorizing of the “essay” as a form and as a practice. Taking Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” as our starting point, we will study a wide range of essayists—from Michel de Montaigne to Emerson, Virginia Woolf to Susan Howe, Roland Barthes to Susan Sontag, and beyond—and we will also encounter essays realized in media other than writing, most importantly the film essays of Agnes Varda, Chris Marker, and others. Throughout the semester students will be engaged in “essaying”—in the etymological sense of “attempting”—the form in a variety of scales and styles. They will also serve as first readers and editors for the essays their peers compose. The culminating project for the course will take the form of a sustained “essay on the essay.”

Required Texts

Available at UMaine Bookstore; students who elect to purchase through other vendors should ensure that all texts are in hand by the first week of the semester.

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed. and introd. Larzer Ziff. New York: Penguin, 2003. 978-0-14-243762-9.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essays: A Selection*. Trans. M.A. Screech. New York: Penguin, 2004. 978-0-14-044602-9.
- Risset, Jacqueline. *Sleep’s Powers*. Trans. Jennifer Moxley. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling, 2008. 978-1-933254-42-5.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, 1966. 978-0-312-28086-4.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Common Reader*. First Series. Ed. and introd. Andrew McNeillie. Orlando: Harcourt, 1984. 978-0-15-602778-6.
- Zinnser, William. *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. 978-0-06-089154-1.

Additional required readings will be circulated electronically or in hard-copy as the semester unfolds (check syllabus). Students will also be responsible for screening several films outside of class time.

Primary Learning Goals

Upon completion of this class, students will

- (1) be able to write compelling essays in a variety of styles and lengths, suitable to a variety of audiences;
- (2) be able to recognize and value the role that revision plays in the process of all writing, including the writing of essays;
- (3) be able to compare the historical contexts and compositional strategies of writers widely recognized to have excelled at the “essay” as a form, and to assess independently the validity of the reputational claims made on their behalf;
- (4) be able to describe the distinctive features of “the essay” as a genre and to draw pertinent contrasts to other modes of writing (the scholarly article, the academic paper, the scientific paper, the journalistic story, etc.);
- (5) be able to articulate explicitly the conventions of “writing well” and to know the consequences of breaking with those conventions;
- (6) be able to offer concrete and constructive editorial advice to fellow writers and to take advantage of such advice when offered peers;
- (7) be able to plausibly restate, artfully interpret, and reasonably debate the claims made by a range of writers, including those deemed “difficult” or “demanding”;
- (8) be better able to sustain the concentrated attention demanded by serious reading and to enhance the experience of reading by employing writing practices such as annotation, summary, quotation, etc.

Evaluation

- 40% Composition of essays, including drafting, revision, and completion (Primary Learning Goals: 1, 2, 5)
- 20% Reading of essays as documented in reading calendar and personal reading notebook (Primary Learning Goals 3, 4, 8)
- 20% Comprehension of essays as demonstrated in regularly circulated notes, class discussions, and one-on-one conferences (Primary Learning Goals 3, 4, 7)
- 20% Editorial work on peer essays and anthology of peer writing (Primary Learning Goal 6)

Attendance

The format of this course requires the consistent, active participation of each student enrolled in it. If an emergency arises that will prevent you from attending class for any sustained period of time, it is your responsibility to communicate with me at the earliest opportunity. More than two unexcused absences will lead to a diminished grade for the semester; more than four will make the student ineligible for a passing grade.

Communicating with Me

I am best reached at my First Class account (steven.evans@umit.maine.edu). I appreciate messages that observe basic e-mail etiquette: a clear and specific subject line, succinct body, and sparing use of categories like “urgent.” Because I have my FC mail automatically forwarded to another account (mainly to avoid the data loss occasioned by First Class’s “expiration” dating), the “history” function is not a reliable indicator of whether I’ve seen your message or not. If after twenty-four hours you have not received a reply from me, feel free simply to resend your message.

Health-Related Contingency Plan

In the event of disruption of normal classroom activities due to an H1N1 swine flu outbreak, the format for this course may be modified to enable completion of the course. In that event, you will be provided an addendum to this syllabus that will supersede this version.

Plagiarism & Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism—the presentation of someone else's writing and/or thinking as your own—will result in immediate failure of the class and notification of the appropriate University authorities. Other forms of academic dishonesty are, likewise, not tolerated.

Disability Notice

If you wish to request an accommodation for a disability, please speak with me or with Ann Smith, Coordinator of Services for Students with Disabilities (Onward Building, 1-2319) as early as possible in the semester.

Basic Practice One: Writing Essays

- Action 1: To write an essay of between 800-1200 words every other week from week three to week twelve (five essays in all).
- Action 2: To bring each essay through a revision process guided by self-reflection and peer and instructor review.
- Note: Finalized versions of essays will be submitted in the form of a portfolio including all previous versions of the essay, including initial notes.
- Action 3: To write a sustained “essay on the essay,” to be submitted in lieu of a final exam.

Basic Practice Two: Reading Essays

- Action 4: To read an essay a day by one of our four main writers for the duration of the semester.
- Note: Take advantage of the fact that essays vary radically in length to achieve this goal even on busy days. Except where specified by the syllabus, and keeping in mind the “complete by” deadlines, you may read essays in the order you prefer.
- Action 5: To read and reflect upon Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” at regular intervals (specified on the syllabus) throughout the semester.
- Action 6: To read Jacqueline Risset’s book of brief essays on a single topic, *Sleep’s Powers*.
- Action 7: To learn about the genre of the “film-essay” by watching and discussing Agnes Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* along with a handful of films mentioned in Philip Lopate’s essay on the topic.

Basic Practice Three: Responding to Essays

- Action 8: To keep a Reading Calendar and an informal Reading Notebook in which you chronicle your “essay a day” project.
- Note: Your updated reading calendar will be circulated on a weekly basis. Your notebook can take a variety of forms and will be reviewed at one-on-one conferences with the instructor but need not be shared with the whole class.

- Action 9: To file brief notes on two essays a week (due Mondays and Wednesdays) and to be the “go-to” person for those essays in class discussions that week.
- Action 10: To provide thoughtful responses and constructive editorial suggestions to essays by peers.
- Action 11: To edit a selection of essays written by peers over the course of the semester, to be submitted along with the culminating “essay on the essay” in lieu of a final examination.
- Action 12: To carefully prepare for and actively participate in all class meetings.

COURSE CALENDAR

subject to change, consult on-line version regularly

Week 1 – Aug. 30 & Sept. 1

Read Adorno, Theodor W. “The Essay as Form.” *Notes to Literature*, volume 1. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 3-23. [Handout]

Begin reading Jacqueline Risset’s *Sleep’s Powers*; complete by end of week 2.

Watch Varda, Agnès, dir. *The Gleaners and I*. 2000. 78min.
<http://movies.netflix.com/WiMovie/The-Gleaners-and-I/60022368?trkid=1481020#height1973> or DVD.

Week 2 – Sept. 6 & 8

Finish reading Jacqueline Risset’s *Sleep’s Powers*.

Read Lopate, Phillip. “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film.” *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*. Ed. Charles Warren. Hanover: Wesleyan, 1996. 243-270. [Handout]

Begin reading in Montaigne; complete by end of week six.

Supplemental readings by:

Bacon, Francis. From *Essays*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/575/575-h/575-h.htm> [Handout]

Descartes, Rene. “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth.” 80-130.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/59>. [Handout]

Week 3 – Sept. 13 & 15

Group I submits essays; Group II edits.

Continue reading in Montaigne; complete by end of week six.

Read Emerson (313-36) and Woolf (58-68) on Montaigne.

Screen *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker no later than end of week four.

Week 4 – Sept. 20 & 22

Group II submits essays; Group I edits.

Continue reading in Montaigne; complete by end of week six.

Begin reading in Emerson; complete by end of week eight.

Reread Adorno's "Essay as Form."

Screen *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker no later than end of week.

Week 5 – Sept. 27 & 29

Group I submits essays; Group II edits.

Continue reading in Montaigne; complete by end of week six.

Continue reading in Emerson; complete by end of week eight.

Supplemental reading by:

Howe, Susan. "Sorting Facts: or, Nineteen Ways of Looking at Marker."
295-344. [Handout]

Week 6 – Oct. 4 & 6

Group II submits essays; Group I edits.

Finish reading in Montaigne.

Continue reading in Emerson; complete by end of week eight.

Begin reading Woolf; complete by end of week ten.

Week 7 – Oct. 13

Group I submits essays; Group II edits.

Continue reading in Emerson; complete by end of week eight.

Continue reading Woolf; complete by end of week ten.

Week 8 – Oct. 18 & 20

Group II submits essays; Group I edits.

Finish reading in Emerson.

Continue reading Woolf; complete by end of week ten.

Begin reading Sontag; complete by end of week twelve.

Week 9 – Oct. 25 & 27

Group I submits essays; Group II edits.

Continue reading Woolf; complete by end of week ten.

Continue reading Sontag; complete by end of week twelve.

Reread Adorno's "Essay as Form."

Week 10 – Nov. 1 & 3

Group II submits essays; Group I edits.

Finish reading Woolf.

Continue reading Sontag; complete by end of week twelve.

Week 11 – Nov. 8 & 10

Group I submits essays; Group II edits.

Continue reading Sontag; complete by end of week twelve.

Week 12 – Nov. 15 & 17

Group II submits essays; Group I edits.

Finish reading Sontag.

Reread Adorno's "Essay as Form."

Week 13 – Nov. 22

Drafting and editorial work on sustained "essay on the essay."

Work on selection of peer essays for anthology.

Week 14 – Nov. 29 & Dec. 1

Continued work on sustained "essay on the essay."

Continued work on selection of peer essays for anthology.

Week 15 – Dec. 6 & 8

Continued work on sustained "essay on the essay."

Continued work on selection of peer essays for anthology.

Finals Week

Submit "essay on essay" along with anthology of peer essays.