

**Communication/Writing 2990:
Art of the Essay: Making the Personal Public
Spring 2008, Tuesdays, 6-8:30**

Instructor: Douglas Haynes, Assistant Professor of Writing

NEC Mail: Box 76, Simon Center Mail Desk

Office: 107 Spaulding

Office Phone: 428-2309 (office), 226-1987 (home)

E-mail: dhaynes@nec.edu

Office hours: Mondays 12-1, Tuesdays 2:30-5, Wednesdays, 12-1, Thursdays 2:30-4
and by appointment

Course Description: *Personal Essay & Reportage* will immerse students in two kinds of critical conversations and communities: first, the ongoing discussion among writers and literary scholars about what constitutes an essay; and, second, current discussions among the public about issues of civic importance. This course will enter these conversations by exploring two dominant forms of the essay, personal reportage and the personal essay. Course readings of modern and contemporary essayists writing in English will feature different ways that essayists have employed these forms to personally engage with prominent civic issues of their times, particularly related to cultural identity, the environment, social justice, and political action. In addition to including student and instructor-led discussions of course readings and articles on the craft of essay writing, this course will provide generative writing exercises and an overview of research strategies for immersion journalism. Students will then apply these exercises and strategies in writing original essays that personally engage them in issues of civic importance. Finally, the course will involve a creative writing workshop, where students learn and practice constructive criticism of each other's essays in order to transform their narrative-based essays into intimate, publishable work about public issues for the *New Englander* and other publications.

Format: This course will incorporate civic engagement in three primary components of its curriculum: reading, research, and writing. The reading component provides models of two different essay forms—personal reportage and the personal essay—which showcase authors who engage with issues of civic importance by telling their own personal stories. The readings will focus on four contentious areas of civic life, in particular: cultural identity, environment, social justice, and political action.

The research component of the course will incorporate civic engagement by training students to practice immersion journalism that positions them in the area of local civic life that they are writing about. This training will involve the study of journalistic ethics, as well as interview and information-gathering techniques practiced in the context of community involvement and/or a volunteer experience.

The writing component of the course will also incorporate civic engagement by asking students to research and target a specific public audience/publication for each essay they produce. In writing with this audience/publication in mind, students will learn how to more effectively participate in public conversations about their chosen issue.

Course Objectives: In this course, students will strive to:

- Gain an overview of the personal essay's evolution, audiences, and civic uses;
- Become more critical readers of public discourse;
- Transform their own and other people's personal stories into universal commentaries on matters of civic importance;
- Practice a recursive writing process that produces clear, concise, evocative work for publication in local and national periodicals focused on civic issues;
- Apply strategies for providing constructive written and oral criticism.

Required Texts: *Literary Nonfiction: Learning by Example*. Ed. Patsy Sims. Oxford UP, 2002.

Telling True Stories. Eds. Mark Kramer & Wendy Call. Plume, 2007.

Coursework: At the end of the semester, class members will be evaluated on the basis of their performance in the following areas:

- **A portfolio** of 20-30 pages of revised, edited, typed, and double-spaced original personal essays/reportage based on immersion journalism. This may include one long essay or two or three shorter pieces. The portfolio should also include at least one early draft of each piece with my comments. The portfolio will be evaluated on evidence of revision, incorporation of techniques we've discussed in class, and mastery of the strategies of immersion journalism. It will be worth **50% of the course grade**.

- **A bound writer's notebook** that includes a typed query to an editor, in-class writing exercises, research and reporting notes, quotes, and interviews relevant to your immersion experience and final portfolio. Your writer's notebook will be collected with your portfolio at the end of the semester and will account for **10% of the course grade**.

- **Class participation** that includes the following contributions:

- 1) On-time, complete submissions of drafts for workshop (**10% of course grade**).
- 2) On-time editor's letters for every draft submitted to workshop (**10% of course grade**).
- 3) Weekly immersion in a community organization/activity (**10% of course grade**).
- 4) Consistent and prepared contributions to class discussions of texts, including one discussion-leading session based on a researched, typed brief (**10% of course grade**).

Late Work and Attendance: In an upper-level elective course, we expect each other to be self-motivated and committed to a smoothly-running class. If you are unable to come to class on a date when you have work due, please contact me ahead of time or simply hand-in your work early. Class members who miss class on the due date and do not notify me ahead of time or hand-in their work early will not be able to turn-it-in late for credit. Since the class only meets once a week, attendance is crucial. Missing more than one class will negatively affect your final grade.

Syllabus

Book abbreviations: *TTS*=*Telling True Stories*, *LNF*=*Literary Nonfiction*

- 1.22:** What is reportage? What is immersion? Survey of terms and approaches.
 Discuss “Finding Good Topics” (20-24 in *TTS*)
 Discuss writing query letters
- 1.29: Due:** 1 page query to an editor requesting a semester immersion experience
Discuss: “Participatory Reporting” by Ted Conover (35-39 in *TTS*),
 “The Art of Literary Journalism,” “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” (handouts),
 & Susan Sheehan’s “Ain’t No Middle Class” (*LNF* 269-289)
- 2.5: Discuss:** “Travels in Georgia” by John McPhee (178-215 in *LNF*), “Being There” (39-45 in *TTS*) & “Reporting for Narrative” (24-30 in *TTS*)
- 2.12: Discuss:** Madeleine Blais, “A Room of Her Own” (5-20 in *LNF*) & 66-74 in *TTS*
- 2.19: Discuss:** “Taquile’s True Colors” by Tim Cahill (21-32 in *LNF*), “Travel Writing” (74-78 in *TTS*) & “Reporting Across Cultures” (46-48 in *TTS*)
- 2.26: Discuss:** “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream” by Joan Didion (43-61 in *LNF*), “Narrative Investigative Writing” (89-91 in *TTS*) & 132-148 in *TTS*
- 3.4: Discuss:** “A Road that Never Ends” by David Finkel (62-72 in *LNF*) & 98-121 in *TTS*

SPRING BREAK

- 3.18: Due:** Group 1 (shorter pieces) drafts for workshop
Presentation by guest writer Stephen Braun
Discuss: “Mrs. Kelly’s Monster” by Jon Franklin (73-85 in *LNF*) & 109-121 in *TTS*
- 3.25: Due:** Letters on two Group 1 pieces for workshop
Discuss: “A Life Lost . . . and Found” by Tom Hallman & 104-109, 126-132 in *TTS*
- 4.1: Due:** Letters on two Group 1 pieces for workshop
Discuss: “September” by Tracy Kidder (131-148 in *LNF*)
- 4.8: Due:** Group 2 (longer pieces) drafts for workshop
Due: Letters on two Group 1 pieces for workshop
Discuss: “True Detective” by Walt Harrington (105-129 in *LNF*) & 54-64 in *TTS*
- 4.15: Due:** Letters on two Group 2 pieces for workshop
Discuss: “Driving Mr. Albert” by Michael Paterniti (216-249 in *LNF*) & “The Basics of Personal Reportage” (handout)
- 4.22: Due:** Letters on two Group 2 pieces for workshop
Discuss: Hunter S. Thompson, from “The Scum Also Rises” (handout) & 78-83 in *TTS*

4.29: Due: Letters on two Group 2 pieces for workshop

Discuss: Norman Mailer, from “The Armies of the Night” (handout) & 197-212 in *TTS*

5.8: Final portfolio & writer’s notebook due.