

# Course Syllabus: On the Essay

**Course Name:** On the Essay

**Instructor:** Joshua Craze

**Class Times:** 4-5.30pm Wednesday & Friday

**Place:** 123 Dwinelle Hall

**Office Hours:** 2-3.30pm Wednesday. Café Strada (corner of Bancroft and College)

**CCN:** 02561

## Course Description

The essay is a famously open form: not entirely science, but not fully art, it delights in being unmethodical. This course is both an anthropological study of the essay, and an intensive workshop in how to write.

We will begin, after a dalliance in modern Americana, by reading Montaigne, whose essays (or ‘attempts’, literally translated from the French) inaugurate the tradition. Montaigne asks a single skeptical question that becomes the touchstone for essayists across the world: What do I know? Not: What does science know? Nor: What do books tell me? But: What do I know? What can I learn about the world by looking inside myself?

All the great essayists we will read during this course will return to this question, and to the importance of our selves, not as egos with opinions, but as barometers of the world.

We will read—at most—one essay a class. The reading load will not be heavy, but the essays must be read extremely closely. Emphasis will be made on close reading, and students will be encouraged to engage with the style of the prose encountered. Importantly: we will read aloud. A lot. One of the chief ways you can improve your writing is by reading it out aloud, and hearing its rhythms. We will be reading some of the most beautiful essays that have graced this earth—such as Emerson’s *Experience*—and reading selections out aloud will allow us to encounter the wonder of their prose.

We will ask two different questions of the essays we read: (1) What do these essays tell us about the possibilities and limitations of the essay form? (2) What type of relationship do these essays have to the world around them? How do these essays engage with the political and social life of their authors?

We will focus on two national traditions of essay writing: the French and the American, but we will also touch on the British and German traditions. Authors whose essays we shall read include: Michel de Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walter Benjamin, T.S. Eliott, Jean Améry, Hannah Arendt, Italo Calvino, John Berger, and David Foster Wallace.

Many of these essayists will be replying to each other, despite the gap of centuries that sometimes separates them, and by reading them together, as part of a shared conversation, emphasis will be placed on the tradition of the essay. We will treat this tradition

anthropologically, by looking at the way the same questions, taken up over many centuries, shift their meaning and significance.

Subjects these essays discuss include: cannibalism, suicide, homelessness, lies, cruelty to animals, and other happy themes.

At the same time as this course is an anthropological history of the essay form, it is also a course on both how to write an essay, and what it means to write as an essayist today.

What is the gap separating us from Montaigne?

Throughout the course, there will be continuous short writing exercises. The quality of your sentences and paragraphs will be dissected and improved. There will be a lot of close reading of each other's work. One of the earliest exercises—for instance—will involve writing multiple variants of an opening line to an essay, and discussing and comparing them in groups. There will be a great deal of collaborative work and discussion.

If you love words, and want to work hard on becoming the best writer that you can be, this is the class for you.

### **Readings & Class Structure**

All the readings will be available online on Bspace. You must bring a hard copy of the relevant essay to class. You must have read the essay in question for the class, and come prepared with at least one thing to say.

Great essayists keep great notebooks. As great-essayists-to-be, you shall all also keep notebooks. Each of you will have a Wiki page on Bspace, on which you should keep all your assignments, as well as any other observations you wish to make.

Each week, before 5pm the day before class, you must post a short response to the reading assigned for tomorrow. This doesn't have to be long, but it must include a short reflection on what you thought of the text.

The class is structured in four sections. At the beginning, we will read two of the exemplary modern American essayists. While doing so, our writing exercises will focus on understanding what makes a good sentence. Then, while reading some of the great essays in the French, American, and German traditions, you will write the first draft of your essay. You will write a total of three drafts of this essay. In part three, we will focus on our near-contemporaries: essayists from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while doing a number of short writing exercises designed to allow you to develop your style and thought as writers. We will also work on the second draft of the essay. In part four, after extensive feedback from the professor you will complete the final draft of your essay, while we consider the contemporary tradition of the essay.

## Assignments and Grading

There are continual assignments during the class. But don't be scared! They are not big assignments. One of the problems I frequently encounter with American undergraduates is that essays are written at the last minute, in a rush, and then thought of as finished. We will focus on drafting one single essay several times, through multiple different exercises and group work. It is imperative that you complete all the exercises. There will be around 20 exercises: each will constitute 5% of your grade. As long as you are engaged with the class, and complete the assignments, you will get a good grade. If you don't complete the assignments, then your grade will be poor.

## Policies

Computers are not allowed in class. Phones are not allowed in class. Lateness is not allowed in class: if you are more than ten minutes late (e.g. 10 minutes after Berkeley time), then please don't attend. Please let me know in advance if you will be absent.

## Week-by-week outline

You are expected to have read the essays we will discuss in class beforehand. We will be doing a lot of close reading. If you have not read the essays thoroughly, it will be impossible for you to participate. You *must* bring a hard copy of the essay to class.

### PART ONE: AN IMMERSION IN AMERICA

#### Wednesday 22 January

An introduction to the essay form and to the structure of the class

#### Friday 24 January

*Reading:* Joan Didion, *On Keeping a notebook* [It's a short text]

*Assignments:* First assignment given. Write the first sentence of an essay and three variants, explaining why you choose the sentence you did. Due on Wednesday 29 January.

#### Wednesday 29 January

*Reading:* David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I will Never do Again* (pp.33-40)

*Assignments:* First sentences due in. Second assignments set: comment on the first sentences of another member of the class, write the first paragraph of an essay, due Friday 31 January.

#### Friday 31 January

*Reading:* David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I will Never do Again* (pp.41-56)

*Assignments:* Hand in first paragraph of an essay. Due next Wednesday:

Respond to another student's paragraph; prepare a variation on your first paragraph, and discussion that variation.

## **PART TWO: OUR GLORIOUS ANCESTORS**

### **Wednesday 5 February**

*Reading:* Michel de Montaigne, *On Cannibals*

*Assignments:* Hand in your variations of a first paragraph. Due on Friday: comment on another student's version of a paragraph.

### **Friday 7 February**

*Reading:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuse of History for Life* (pp.1-6: Read them very carefully: until the end of section one)

*Assignments:* Hand in your comments on another student's paragraph. Due next Wednesday: Plan a preliminary structure of an essay.

### **Wednesday 12 February**

*Reading:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuse of History for Life* (pp.7-10: until the end of section two)

*Assignments:* Preliminary Structure of an essay due. For Friday: Form study groups, and present your essay ideas to the study group.

### **Friday 14 February**

*Reading:* Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuse of History for Life* (pp.10-13: Until the end of section three)

*Assignments:* Give in your comments on the group work done during the week. Due next Friday: The First Draft Sally.

### **Wednesday 19 February**

*Reading:* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Experience* (the first four paragraphs)

*Assignments:* N/A.

### **Friday 21 February**

*Reading:* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Experience* (paragraphs five-eight)

*Assignments:* Hand in the first draft sally. Due Wednesday: Read out your first draft aloud to three people, and mark onto the first draft all the changes you would then make, scan it, and put it on Bspace.

### **Wednesday 26 February**

*Reading:* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Experience* (the rest of the essay)

*Assignments:* First drafts are returned. Due: the marked-up versions of the essay. Due next Wednesday – comment on two other student's essays.

### **Friday 28 February**

*Reading:* Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*

*Assignments:* Hand in commentaries on your fellow students' essays. Due next

Wednesday: come to class with examples of stories, narratives, and fables. Due next

Friday: A full structure of your second essay.

## **PART THREE: THE UNTIMELY MODERNISTS**

### **Wednesday 5 March**

*Reading:* Walter Benjamin, *The Story Teller* (pp.1-7)

*Assignment:* Due: examples of stories, narratives, and fables.

### **Friday 7 March**

*Reading:* Walter Benjamin, *The Story Teller* (pp.8-14)

*Assignment:* Due: Full Structure of your second essay. Due next Wednesday: Single paragraph description of a great individual talent, and their relationship to a tradition.

### **Wednesday 12 March**

*Reading:* T.S. Elliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

*Assignment:* Due: single paragraph description of a great individual talent. Due on Friday: single paragraph description of experiencing oneself as a number.

### **Friday 14 March**

*Reading:* Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*

*Assignment:* I return your essay structures. Due: single paragraph description of experiencing oneself as a number. Due next Wednesday: short essay describing your experience of home.

### **Wednesday 19 March**

*Reading:* Jean Amery, *How much home does a person need?*

*Assignment:* Due: short essay describing your experience of home. Due next Friday: a short essay on identity.

### **Friday 21 March**

*Reading:* Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*

*Assignment:* Due: a short essay on identity. For after spring break: Write a short essay on lying.

### **Wednesday 26 March**

*Spring Break*

### **Friday 28 March**

*Spring Break*

### **Wednesday 2 April**

*Reading:* Czeslaw Miłosz, *Alpha the Moralist*

*Assignment:* Due: a short essay on lying. Due on Friday 18 April: the second draft of your essay. Form Essay discussion groups. From this week onwards each group will meet once a week to discuss one of your essays, and post the results to the Wiki.

### **Friday 4 April**

*Reading:* Elias Canetti, *Power and Survival*

*Assignment:* Write a short essay on uses of the idea of the human being. Due Wednesday.

### **Wednesday 9 April**

*Reading:* Roland Barthes, *The Great Family of Man*

*Assignment:* Write a short paragraph on irony, due on Friday.

## **PART FOUR: WHERE ARE WE?**

### **Friday 11 April**

*Reading:* Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp*

*Assignment:* Ongoing Essay work. Due on Wednesday: A close description of an animal.

### **Wednesday 16 April**

*Reading:* John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*

### **Friday 18 April**

*Reading:* John Berger, *Field*

*Assignments:* Second draft of your essays are due.

### **Wednesday 23 April**

*Reading:* Octavio Paz, *At Table and in Bed*

*Assignments:* Second draft of your essays are returned to you.

**Friday 25 April**

*Reading:* Italo Calvino, *The Rubbish*

*Assignments:* Edit your final essays.

**Wednesday 30 April**

*Reading:* Joshua Craze, *Dreams are not made of Concrete*

*Assignments:* Edit your final essays.

**Friday 2 May**

*Reading:* Class discussion

*Assignments:* Edit your final essays.

**Final Essay Due: Monday 12 May 2014**