Que sais-je? (What do I know?)

Michel de Montaigne

… it seems to me the extreme narrowness of system alone, and of that rage for classification, by which, in matters of taste at least, we are perpetually perplexing, instead of arranging, our ideas … We are for ever deceiving ourselves with names and theories.

Charles Lamb

… you have me once again in my natural pretensions – the lean and meager figure of your insignificant essayist.

Charles Lamb

Essays! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions! How little is made out, and that little, how ill!

William Hazlitt

**Description:**

Historically, essays have been among the most overlooked and undervalued of literary genres. Lacking the egos and claims of their poetic counterparts, essayists since Michel de Montaigne have been an apologetic lot, attested to by the quotes of some of the greatest essayists found above. Those who discern what genres “count” and what don’t have taken essayists at their word, and routinely excluded them from *The Dictionary of American Writers and Poets and Writers*, which list recognized writers with at least twenty-five publications. Yet some of the greatest writers have been essayists: Seneca, Cicero, Frances Bacon, Samuel Johnson, Emerson, Thoreau, Sherman Alexie, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard (who won the Pulitzer for her essays in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), … The essay, like its parent, nonfiction, defies definition in form and content.

In this course, we’ll explore the protean, creative form of the essay and from there, its modern Internet version – the blog, using a selection of essays drawn from a number of sources, looking at different kinds of essays (theoretical, argumentative, descriptive, narrative, and experimental, blogs). What is an essay? How do current events, locations, politics, ethnicity, other genres, cultural psychology, economics, and so forth affect the form and narrative of the essay? In this class, we will extract the essay from its academic box and understand what a rich poetic heritage it has. We will investigate the essay’s vital role in social, political, physical, and emotional exploration into what it means to be human on this planet. We will query how the narrator’s position in relation to audience, use of rhetorical devices and poetics, publication medium, and
real world context affect the essay. An understanding of the work of essayists can influence your own forays into critical and creative writing and thinking.

By the end of the course, you will have a framework with which to examine different kinds of essays generally and the tools to decide for yourself what constitute essays or high quality essays or “next” (future) essays, such as are found in blogging or in experimental forms. You will encounter subjects that make you uncomfortable as well as those that are funny or reflective – in all cases, you will discover the passion inherent to the form. You will analyze the rhetorical devices each essayist adapts to his or her purpose, looking at the underlying values and assumptions, the position of the narrator relative to the reader, the context, and the experiments with form and poetic devices. You will become familiar with blogging, which is used by all businesses in the twenty-first century, as well as individuals and media. And, of course, as this is an upper division WRTG 3020 course, you will improve your critical thinking skills, research skills, and your critical and creative writing skills in regard to the topic at hand. The format for this class is as diverse as the genre of essay requires. We will read a variety of essays that I have on D2L (as well as some blogs) and those I have selected in John D’Agata’s (ed.) The Next American Essay.

TEXTS (available at CU Bookstore; however, feel free to get used copies in the local bookstores or online). We will explore each in terms of the rhetorical issues it raises within its given cultural and narrative context.


Electronic reading

D2L site for this course: I have a variety of readings, which draw from different time periods and illustrate different kinds of essays and rhetorical techniques, including blogs, all of which are required for the course. On the day we discuss them, you should have them printed, read, and with you in class.

The Internet http://urbanparamedic.blogspot.com
other people’s emergencies: random thoughts of an urban paramedic

You must have readings in class (hard copy of D2L and/or actual books) on days we discuss the texts. Failure to do so will count as an absence. Read the assignment BEFOREHAND and be ready to discuss.

Technology in used in this class includes online reading, research using Norlin’s data bases and other sources, blogging sites such as WordPress, and the Microsoft Office Suite.

CCHE, CU, and PWR REQUIREMENTS

Offered through the Program for Writing and Rhetoric, College of Arts and Sciences, WRTG 3020 fulfills curricular requirements established by the University of Colorado at Boulder and the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, as well as the Program for Writing and Rhetoric, through which it is offered.

University of Colorado at Boulder Core Requirement
WRTG 3020 fulfills the core upper-division writing requirement for students in the Arts and Sciences curriculum in written communication, and builds on the skills practiced through the first year writing core requirement by applying an advanced understanding of rhetorical concepts to communication within specialized fields.

The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE)
WRTG 3020 also meets CCHE criteria for an Advanced Writing Course (critical thinking, reading, writing, and content communication) in the Colorado system of higher education.

Extend Rhetorical Knowledge: Rhetoric is the art of shaping words and images to move a particular audience to a particular purpose. An advanced knowledge of the rhetoric used within a given genre or discipline allows the writer to chose the most effective approach, reasoning, voice, tone, poetics, and strategies for a given audience.

• Essays from D2L and from Best American Essays will illustrate how changes in historical context, including socio-economic, political, and other influences, inflect the rhetorical situation in the essay and thus, the rhetorical devices chosen by the essayist to convey a particular message.
• Readings from blogs will demonstrate how the Internet has influenced the essay and access to broader rhetorical contexts and audiences.
• Handouts and assignments from the instructor will help you analyze the reading to understand its purpose, techniques, biases, and success.
• Handouts will also help you identify the structure of a given essay, and its dependence on ethos (a set of moral values), pathos (emotional or illustrative writing), or logos (reason) in putting together an argument.
• Class discussions will open up the analyses of these essays to diverse points of view, as well as the essay’s effect on readers, who might not share the essayist’s or each others set of values, biases, or assumptions.

Extend Experience in the Writing Process: Writing is an ongoing process that requires multiple drafts as well as a range of strategies for developing, revising, and editing texts. Advanced skill in engaging the writing process increases both efficiency and effectiveness in generating essays for academia, applications for jobs, programs, and graduate schools, or for publication. The fact that the publishing world that the essayist inhabits involves a team of editors, publishers, and readers requires a writer to work skillfully with multiple levels of feedback.

• Multiple drafts and instructor comments allow you to improve a work in progress.
• Group workshops expose your essay to a given rhetorical audience and allow you to evaluate your effectiveness in using rhetorical techniques to argue, persuade, illustrate, investigate, or experiment, depending on the nature of the assignment.
• Exposure to a variety of essays written for many different purposes and audiences will allow you to evaluate what techniques you might use in your own writing.
• The investigative and informative nature of the essay and repeated drafts will allow you to perfect you ability to identify primary and secondary sources and use them effectively in your drafts. Furthermore, it will extend your technological ability to isolate sources on the Internet or on scholarly data bases appropriate to your particular essay.

Extend Mastery of Writing Conventions: The variety of essays you will write (narrative, analytical, investigative, experimental, blog, etc.) in formal and response assignments will allow you to perfect your ability to communicate to a variety of audiences using prose techniques. These will help you to achieve your goals in academic and professional settings.
Writing assignments: Your papers and projects will include a variety of forms:

• Regular short cumulative critical response writing assignments responding to critical rhetorical issues presented by the text. Topics will vary weekly and form the basis of class discussion. These are reflective papers or analysis exercises and are never summaries. They are meant for you to interact with the text thoughtfully on your own terms and to analyze the readings for writing and rhetorical techniques that work – or don’t. Roughly ten one to two page responses throughout the semester.
• Narrative descriptive essay on a place or experience with cumulative drafts This assignment requires you to recall a place or event you have experienced, and write about it thoughtfully in a way that conveys some reverberating insight or perspective to the reader. The type of writing for this assignment is one used extensively in application essays for jobs and grad schools, and for journalistic work. 6-7 pages, multiple drafts.
• An investigative/advocacy essay that incorporates your research about a given topic with cumulative drafts. This will address some contentious issue about which you feel passionately. This polishes your research, investigative, analytical, and argument skills, and skills of incorporating research into a fluid account about some larger issue for a given audience. 8-10 pages, multiple drafts.
• A proposal for your investigative advocacy essay, outlining your topic, its topic, its purpose, its conflict, and your interest in this topic.
• A 500 word essay: The 500 word essay is a very common form of essay, and is the “norm” for graduate application essays, job applications, proposals, as well as essay applications to various programs. Following reading some of the more “poetic” memoirs in Next American Essays, you will write either a short essay whose purpose is to experiment with some of the poetics to which you have been exposed in different kinds of essays or an essay typical of what you use for applications to medical school, Teach for America, etc. Essay: 450 – 500 words (up to 750 if your application calls for that). Multiple drafts.
• A blog entry (or entries) for a blogging subject your group might like to design. This assignment is in combination with a group presentation project on blogs, which will examine types of blogs for purpose, audience, tone, etc. This will give you practice in understanding writing for “the unseen world at large,” a type of audience found in Internet formats. About 1-2 pages for each blog, multiple drafts.

ALL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE HANDED IN ON THE DAY THAT THEY ARE DUE. I ACCEPT NO LATE PAPERS. THEY MUST BE TYPED, STAPLED, AND SPELL- AND GRAMMAR-CHECKED.

Classroom Policies

• Attendance: Given that much of the course is based on in class learning, attendance is **mandatory**. You may miss up to three classes without harm to your grade (these are good for such things as religious observations, unexpected illness, etc.). If you miss a class, you must contact a fellow student (not me) to find out about assignments or check with the Tentative Schedule. After that, your grade can be lowered one step with each class missed. Six absences will result in course failure. Attendance means being here on time with prepared work or reading material for that day in hand. Persistent (more than three times) and/or flagrant lateness also will result in lowering your grade. **ABSOLUTELY NO CELL PHONES OR OTHER ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT ARE ALLOWED IN CLASS IN ANY WAY SO FORGET IT.** If you text message, email, check MySpace, or any other permutation in class, you will be dismissed from class and counted as absent. Turn off cell phones before class begins.
• **Workshops:** We will have workshops to discuss your work in class. Writing demands an audience; your classmates are your working audience and teammates in assuring that all of you improve your writing. This is your big opportunity to explore your work with others and get constructive feedback. Conscientious verbal and written feedback to your colleagues’ work is required. Workshops will be a safe place for the expression of ideas and development of writing strategies. When discussing work written by students in the class, comments will be focused on the work, not the author. Comments based on religion, culture, gender, sexual orientation, race, creed, or color will not be tolerated. You will also be required to make written comments on your colleague’s work in a process that we will discuss in class. Failure to do so will affect your grade.

**RESOURCES**

• **Writing Center:** The Writing Center is located in Norlin and is free to all students. Skilled writers devote 50 minutes to whatever you want to work on, including papers, job and grad school applications, brainstorming, polishing, citation, and so forth. You can schedule up to two appointments per week. People who use this source tend to do better on papers. [http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.html](http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.html) or email at wrtghelp@colorado.edu

• **Research Center:** Located on the first Norlin within the Writing Center. Library staff are on hand to work with you to find sources for your paper. [http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/pwr/index.htm](http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/pwr/index.htm)

• **Helpful online sources**

Writing and Grammar Tips -- Purdue University Online Writing Lab  
[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/)

Online Citation Style Guide  
[http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html)

• **Rough grade breakdown**

Writing assignments – 80% These include a narrative place essay (15%), an investigative essay (25%), an experimental memoir (15%), a blog entry (entries) and presentation (25%), and a number of response essays (20%). To receive an A on response essays, you need to complete all of them as full page, typed reflections, handed in on the day of class and have addressed the response questions appropriately. Late or handwritten papers will not receive credit.

Participation and preparation – 20%

**Grades:**

A Excellent in form, content, and thought; highly original; clean, clear style with no mechanical errors; highly original, shows rigorous revision

B A good interesting narrative with no major flaws, shows thoughtful revision

C A competent essay that meets the objectives of assignments and has a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, shows thoughtful revision

D Poor in content, form, style, mechanics, not well thought out, little or no revision

F Incoherent, seriously flawed, or late, little or no revision
NOTE: If your paper demonstrates consistent problems in syntax, punctuation, grammar, etc., I might require you to go to the Writing Center to work on mechanical issues.

Grades for participation
A always prepared for class (reading materials, assignments, etc.), participates without being called on, comments of colleague’s papers show insight and are helpful
B generally prepared for class; occasionally participates without being called on; comments on other’s papers show insight and are helpful
C usually adequately prepared for class; only participates when called on; criticisms of student papers somewhat helpful and relevant in terms of class goals
D badly prepared; never participates unless called on; comments on other student papers show casual reading, at best; comments not consistent with course goals
F disruptive to class (reads newspaper, talks, is late); unprepared; unwilling or unable to participate in class discussions

VERY IMPORTANT NOTES:
• Plagiarism (using someone else’s work under your name without citing the correct author) may result in expulsion from the University. Plagiarism of any form (using someone else’s work or ideas and claiming them as your own) also results in an F on that assignment. We will discuss plagiarism in greater depth in the course. I am widely read and can generally pick out plagiarism, particularly as I will become very familiar with your writing style. Given that this course is the one time you may have to develop your own voice and thoughts and actually be heard, plagiarism really defeats the purpose. So don’t do it.
• If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability (physical, emotional, and/or learning), please submit to me a letter from Disability Services (DS) early in the semester so that your needs may be addressed. DS determines accommodations based on documented disabilities (303-492-8671, Willard 322).
• The University has adopted two codes relating to classroom conduct and student conduct (the Honor Code). Make yourself familiar with these policies at http://www.colorado.edu/policies. The Honor Code also has stringent mandates concerning plagiarism, which can result in failure of the course.

Students with disabilities:
• Religious holidays: Campus policy requires that faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. Talk to me if you need to make arrangements because of a religious holiday ahead of time. See policy details at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html.
• Classroom behavior: Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Students who fail to adhere to behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Faculty have the professional responsibility to treat students with understanding, dignity and respect, to guide classroom discussion, and to set reasonable limits on the manner in which students express opinions. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender, and nationalities. See policies at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html and http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/judicialaffairs/code.html#student_code.
• Sexual harassment: The University of Colorado Policy on Sexual Harassment applies to all students, staff, and faculty. Any student, staff or faculty member who believes s/he has been sexually harassed should contact the Office of Sexual Harassment at 303-492-2127 or the Office of Judicial Affairs at 303-492-5550. Information about the OSH and the campus resources available to assist individuals who believe they have been sexually harassed may be found at
http://www.colorado.edu/sexualharassment/
Tentative Course Outline – Essay to Blog

Note: This is more of a road map than a carved-in-stone plan. There may (most likely will) be changes or additional readings, depending on class interest and direction. All changes will be announced and discussed in class. Note: Next American Essay = NAE

Week One: 13 - 17 January – Introduction to the Essay
M: Introduction to course and each other.
W: Due: “To the Reader” (Google: Montaigne, To the Reader) “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects” (both D2L). Response.
F: Due: “Language of Discretion.” (D2L) In class write.

Week Two: 20-24 January – Introduction to Place Essays
M: No class – Martin Luther King Jr. Day.
W: Due: “Serpents of Paradise” and “Spring” (D2L). Discussion of place. Pass out narrative place essay assignment.
F: Due: “Colorado” (D2L) and “Dr.Don” (D2L). Discussion on methods of presenting place.

Week Three: 27 January – 31 January – Place Essays, continued
M: Due: Proposals for place essay. Workshop. Read “Oregon” (D2L)
W: Due: “Here is New York.” (book) and “New York” (D2L) Cumulative response – how do gender, city vs. “nature,” and ethnicity affect these three essays?
F: Due: “The Search for Marvin Gardens” (NAE). Discuss the relationship between searching and place. In class writing exercises.

Week Four: 3-7 February – Place Essays, continued. Workshops of student writing.
M: Due: First full draft place essay. Read: “Raven” (NAE) and “Bats” (D2L). Are there other ways of evoking place?
W: Due: Full class workshop.
F: Due: Small group workshops.

Week Five: 10-14 February – Place essays in challenging contexts.
M: Due: Dillard, “Total Eclipse”, (NAE). This is both a memoir and a place essay. Where do they overlap?
W: Due: Didion, “The White Album” (NAE).
F: Independent time to work on place essay.

Week Six: 17-21 February – Introduction to 500 Word Essay
M: Due: Discuss and assign 500 Word Essay. Read: “Missing.” Brainstorm ideas for 500 word essay.
W: Due: Final draft place essay. “Swimming with Canoes” “Fury and Grace” and “A Sense of Water” (D2L). Be prepared to discuss how to keep things short for effectiveness and the comparative success or failure of each essay.

M: Due: Sontag, “Unguided Tour” (NAE) “A∆l’ (NAE). Due: response: out of the techniques you have read so far, what best seems to work for catching a reader’s attention on a narrative essay?
F: Independent time to work on 500 word essay.

Week Eight: 3-7 March – 500 Word Essay, Contest essays, workshops.
M: Due: First full 500 Word Essay. Read the Nation essays (D2L). Panel discussions.
W: Full class workshop.
F: Small group workshops.

Week Nine: 10-14 March – Introduction to Investigative Advocacy Essay
M: Due: Read “The Price of a Ticket” (D2L). Discuss investigative - controversy assignment.
W: Due: “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” (D2L). Due: Response.
F: Due: Proposal for investigative/controversial essay. In class workshop. Discussion of approaches and research.

W: Due: “At Death’s Window” (D2L). Continue discussion of approaches
F: Due: “Captivity” (NAE). Discuss – how does ethnicity affect the position of the narrator relative to the reader? How do experiment techniques affect the success of the message?

Week Eleven: 24-28 March SPRING BREAK!!!!! NO CLASS!!!!!

Week Twelve: 31 March – 4 April – Investigative Essay, Research Strategies, testing research
M: Lab day: Bring laptop computer to class for research.
W: Read “Ticket to the Fair” (NAE). Discuss implicit controversial outsider narrator.
F: Read: “The Order of Things.” (D2L)

Week Thirteen: 7-11 April – Investigative Essay, challenging plagiarism, workshops
M: Due: First draft investigative essay. Read: “Shadow Scholar” (Google). Discuss implications in class.
W: Large group workshop
F: Small group workshops

Week Fourteen: 14-18 April – Introduction to Blogs, Contexts, Types
M: Intro. to blogs. Readings from “Urban Paramedic” and other blogs TBA. Assign blog – writing and group presentation.
W: Read: “Wild Flavor”. Response – analyze audiences and messages for this and “Urban Paramedic.”
F: Group work on blogs.

Week Fifteen: 21-25 April – Investigative Essay Workshops, Blog workshops and presentations
M: Small group workshops: refining investigative essay.
W: Workshop: group work on blogs.
F: Blog presentation group one.

Week Sixteen: 28 April – 2 May – Blog presentations
M: Blog presentation group two.
W: Blog presentation group three.
F: Blog presentation group four. LAST DAY OF CLASS – FINAL PORTFOLIO DUE.