

## English 29 Honors: Types of Literature

### Reading and Writing Women's Lives: Personal Essay, Autobiography, Biography, Autoethnography

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#### General Description:

“Reading and Writing Women’s Lives” is a course designed to introduce you to genres of writing that involve personal and lived experience about and by women: personal essay, biography, autobiography, and autoethnography. Not only will we be reading these forms as well as theories about writing and women’s experience, but we will also try our hand at producing them ourselves.

The guiding method of this course is collaborative learning: between teacher and students, between me and each of you, between each of you and your own small group or the class in general. The course emphasizes dialogue and process--experiential learning at its heart, since the very topic of the course necessitates that we confront our understanding of experience itself, and confront the ways our understanding of our selves depends on it. Together we will learn to recognize and examine various scripts for being and knowing, in order to seize the one(s) we find most meaningful.

The telling of women’s lives—and the various, often non-traditional, forms (diaries, journals, letters) that telling has taken—is an established topic of study. Women writers have been drawn to that telling for a long time, and they continue to be drawn to it now. In this class, we will read and write about recent—twentieth-century—women’s lives. We are particularly interested when their telling takes the form of the essay (often called the personal essay, a subset of creative or literary non-fiction). Such recent personal writing has evolved, in part, from the long-standing practice of women writers—such as Virginia Woolf, or, more recently, Adrienne Rich, or Alice Walker—to use the personal essay to unsettle a stance of objectivity and the assumption that there is just one truth for everyone and in every situation. Autobiography, by definition, as it constructs a subject and locates it within a context that gives it meaning, already questions whether there can be a common viewpoint outside individual or situational forces.

Our course will ask: what does it mean to adopt the stance of the personal, whether in writing about or reading about one’s self or others? In asking that question, we will emphasize the fabricated nature of the personal—rather than being innate, essential, pre-existent, unchanging, and so irreducible that it is not open to examination (often our intuitive sense of it), the personal is actually crafted, and according to a set of rules and conventions that we will demonstrate through the readings and the practice of writing in

the course. As Carolyn Heilbrun argues, other lives—as messy and uncoded as our own—cannot provide models for our lives. Only the stories of other lives can. Our course emphasizes the discursive—the imaginative—work of self-making, the ways who we are (and are not) depend upon the stories that are available for us to tell about ourselves. Yet because those images are constructions and not fact, they are—as imaginative construction and unlike some stubborn and unruly facts—open to change.

Questions about the personal, then, become these: how do we define the self through experience? How is experience generated by expectations and forms of telling? How does the particular form of the essay condition that telling? What do the at least double selves of autobiography—the self writing, the self written about—suggest about the complexity of an identity we often idealize as singular and integrated? What assumptions do we make in biography when writing about others' lives, as to the knowable connections between selves? Between cultures? What (along with gender) are the various—and competing—elements that selves, and cultures, recognize as constituting identity: race, sexuality, age, physical ability, nationality, region (the South, for example), religion, profession? When is it useful to claim identity politics, when obstructive, and in terms of what imagined rhetorical effects on one's audience? What are the relations between self and cultural context? How is the personal actually a form of cultural history? How has the form of the personal been taught, encouraged, prevented, in the classroom? In the production of knowledge?

#### Course Practice:

- a. Both reading (interpreting) and writing (representation and critique) are equally emphasized in the course, leading us straight into the central practices of intellectual life at the university. I want the topic (and models provided) to challenge you to re-conceive women's lives, encounter widely diverse forms of writing, and write about your own lives with a critical edge.
- b. We are concerned not only with what we read, but how we read. The course will emphasize active, critical reading—that we don't get everything on first reading, we re-read, we refer back to the text, that rereading becomes second-nature for good readers. Many of our units depend on going back to previous texts, reading them in a new light and context, finding different meaning in them by asking different questions. Often the daily writing exercises emphasize such retracing as well.
- c. Classes will be taught using a workshop approach that emphasizes the role of writing in learning and promotes interactive, experiential learning (as opposed to a presentational lecture format). My teaching will emphasize process: how to read, write, analyze, interpret, understand, and create written texts. Your voices and writing will be central to this class—through large and small group discussion, oral presentations, class leadership, and project demonstrations.
- d. This class focuses on life-writing and will incorporate many practices that will enable you to be reflective about and conscious of the self you will be writing about. These

meditative practices, ranging from freewriting to periods of silence during class, will promote your writing, stimulate your imagination, and also develop self-understanding. Public readings of your essays, process letters, and peer-response on the web forum will help transform our classroom into an appreciative audience and a community.

- e. Each of you will become part of a class cluster--small working groups that will serve as writing groups, discussion groups, as smaller cohorts in the larger community of the classroom.
- f. Multiple and many forms of writing will be incorporated, including journals and letters. Major writing projects will be supported by a sequence of daily writing assignments. These sequences will lead you through intellectual projects proceeding from one week to the next. They're designed to give you a feel for the rhythm and texture of an extended academic project. Using a process approach, you will write multiple drafts, receive ongoing feedback from peers and teacher, and participate in evaluating your own and others' written projects.
- g. The writing projects will involve you in a wide range of activities, including traditional reading, writing, and research, but also primary library archival work and/or investigations of individuals/communities outside the university. You will be encouraged to use many rhetorical forms and strategies in writing (models you'll encounter in the assigned reading).
- h. Evaluation and grading will be accomplished using portfolios (collections of your written work) and a grading contract.
- i. Using newly available technology, you will produce an online anthology of your written work, specifically one piece from each writer (and teacher too).

#### Course Connections:

This course is not predominantly for English majors; instead it will introduce you to some of the most useful issues, approaches, and skills of that discipline so that you can go on to apply those questions and tools in the rest of your university work--and, I hope, in the rest of your lives. I will make concrete connections to other fields by tapping the resources of the university community, especially through class visitors. My hope is that some of you will want to go on to take other courses in English: those might include courses such as English 35N ("Creative Non-Fiction"). In addition, other closely related work includes courses in other programs such as Folklore, American Studies, Cultural Studies, and Women's Studies, as well as work in Anthropology, Education, and History. Visitors to our classes may include: Creative Writing professor and Director of the Creative Writing Program, Marianne Gingher, an acclaimed writer of the personal essay; English professor Maria Deguzman and Art History Professor Jill Casid who create performances linking text and photographs, and English professor, Linda Wagner-Martin, respected biographer: all experts in producing accounts of others' lives.

### Required Texts:

Coursepack available at Student Stores  
Mary Karr, *The Liar's Club*  
Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*  
Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*  
Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*  
Louise Erdrich, *The Blue Jay's Dance*  
Cathy Davidson, *36 Views of Mount Fuji*

### Recommended Texts:

Donald Murray, *Composing a Life*  
Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

### Required Writing:

You must write all four unit papers (but will choose three for the final portfolio). In addition, there will be ongoing in-class writing and homework exercises (listed on the syllabus; bring to class the day they're listed). By the end of the semester, you will post one of your pieces on the class's on-line anthology.

### Grading:

I will be using an evaluation method called "contract grading." This method entails an agreement between students and teachers about the work necessary to achieve a minimal guaranteed final grade. In a course with a great deal of writing (like this one), I would like you to concentrate on your writing without worrying constantly about how it will be evaluated or judged. I would like to encourage you to plunge into all the exercises without fear. In many cases, completing the exercises, working through the difficult ones, will benefit your writing most. Therefore, if you participate fully in the list of activities, assignments, and behaviors that follow, we guarantee that you'll receive a final grade of a B. In other words, I will not be judging the quality of your writing but rather the completeness of your participation to receive a B. This method will relieve some of your fears about grading and your writing will improve if you complete every activity as specified (my standards will be high: four pages means four pages, significant revision means significant revision). This means that you will receive a B even if your unit papers aren't the "best" writing in the world as long as you have completed the requirements. To help you improve your writing, I will give you extensive feedback on your papers.

Keep in mind, however, you will receive a lower course grade for not fulfilling your contract. If you do what I ask you will get a B; if you don't complete any aspect of the contract your grade will be lowered accordingly.

I expect and hope that many of you will achieve an A in the course. In order to receive an A, we will judge the quality of the writing that appears in your final portfolio due at the end of the semester. Throughout the semester, you will receive plenty of feedback about your writing from peers and your teacher, but you will not receive any grades. If you are concerned about where you stand in the course, after mid-semester portfolios, I will have conferences to review your progress and, if you wish, to discuss my best estimate of your grade at this point in the semester.

Contract grading eliminates a great deal of anxiety since you are guaranteed a B by fulfilling the contract. The contract is as follows:

1. Not missing more than two classes during the semester
2. Not having more than one late major assignment for which you receive a prior extension
3. Completing all reading and homework assignments
4. Substantive revision on all major assignments
5. Excellent copy editing on all final revisions
6. Sustained effort on peer feedback work
7. Substantial effort and investment on each draft
8. Sustained class participation (includes speaking in class discussions, participating in group activities, completing all in-class informal writing assignments, being group spokesperson, asking questions when assignments or reading material is unclear, freewriting, focusing activities, etc.)
9. Attending conferences
10. Contributing one essay to the on-line class anthology
11. Turning in a mid-term and final portfolio
12. Participating intensively with your group in the on-line discussion forum (sharing papers, commenting on drafts, answering peer questions)

#### Course Calendar

(1) Tuesday, January 9

\*UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION\*

What does it mean to be active participants in a class that emphasizes community and participation, process instead of product? How is that form of learning related to questions of gender? Does a focus on “the personal” somehow demand this form of learning (Adrienne Rich suggests that once you say “my body” you become incapable of making the same old abstract and grandiose claims)?

(2) Thursday, January 11

\*UNIT 1: AUTOBIOGRAPHY\*

Readings and Discussion:

Adrienne Rich, “Taking Women Students Seriously”

bell hooks, “Writing Autobiography”

Susan Waugh, “Women’s Shorter Autobiographical Writings”

Patricia Hampl, "The Invention of Autobiography: Augustine's Confessions" from *I Could Tell You Stories*

(3) Tuesday, January 16 Meet with Groups

Readings and Discussion:

Louise Erdrich, "Fall," from *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* (read as much of the book as you can beyond this one section)

Share first version of autobiographical writing

(4) Thursday, January 18

Autobiography:

What difference does gender make in the writing and reading of autobiography? In what ways are certain cultural patterns of women's lives—as repetitive, fragmented, other-directed—reflected by the autobiographical form? How does the act of autobiography itself modify or reject such assumptions? How does the essay form effect such considerations?

Readings and Discussion:

Gail Godwin, "A Diarist on Diarists"

Anne Tyler, "Still Just Writing"

Donald Murray, "Why I Write" (Introduction), "Before Writing" (chapter 1) from *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*

Revisit Louise Erdrich, *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*

(5) Tuesday, January 23

Writing Workshop (bring draft of autobiography)

Readings and Discussion:

Donald Murray, "Starting to Write" (chapter 2) from *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*

(6) Thursday, January 25

Identity:

Is identity grounded in experience? What is experience? Does experience produce our accounts of it, or do those accounts produce experience? How might what we think of as foundational experience already be an interpretation of something else? Rather than being the origin of our explanations and our understandings of the self, how might experience be what we need to explain?

Readings and Discussion:

Joan Scott, "Experience"

Linda Brodkey, "Writing on the Bias"

(7) Tuesday, January 30

**\*UNIT 2: THE PERSONAL AND THE SOCIAL: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY\***

What is Autoethnography?

How is the personal essay also more than just personal? How do we begin to think the self outside the individual? How are we, as individuals, also spokespeople (anthropologists might call this “informants”) for cultural and social practices? How do our memories provide cultural as well as personal histories? What social units are meaningful, and how might these extend beyond the traditionally personally-defined unit of the family? How do we begin to relocate narratives of the self in terms of significant cultural and social space? How do we make use of the forms given to us by those in power? How do others make use of the forms we give to them?

Readings and Discussion:

Sidonie Smith, “The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics”

Linda Brodkey, “I Site” (Revisit “Writing on the Bias”)

(8) Thursday, February 1\* Autobiography Due

UNIT 1 PAPER DUE: Autobiography; a 3-5 page self-reflexive autobiographical account.

Embodied Identity

What shapes do our bodies give to our senses of self? Does the physical set limits on the possibilities of self? How do we accept or overcome such limits? In what ways do we—as humans—share physical identities? In what ways are they different?

Readings and Discussion:

Kay Cook, “Medical Identity: My DNA/Myself”

Nancy Mairs, “On Being a Cripple”

(9) Tuesday, February 6

Readings and Discussion:

Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*

(10) Thursday, February 8

Identities:

Does the traditional notion of the self as whole, integrated, sovereign always adequately account for our sense of ourselves? In what ways do we actually exist within and take for granted lived contradiction? In what ways are we divided, fractured, contradictory in our feelings and our psyches? What role does the unconscious play in unsettling any fixed sense of ourselves and our intentions? What cultural and social pressures also divide us within? In what ways are we always strangers to ourselves? Need such divisions always seem negative, threatening, destructive? Are there any ways they can be generative?

Readings and Discussion:

Gloria Anzaldua, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” from *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Joan Didion, “On Keeping A Notebook”

(11) Tuesday, February 13

Readings and Discussion:

Patricia Hampl, “The Need to Say It” from *I Could Tell You Stories*

Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips”

Bring first version of autoethnographical writing

(12) Thursday, February 15

Writing Workshop

Bring second version of autoethnographical writing

(13) Tuesday, February 20

Readings and Discussion:

Mary Karr, “Part 1: Texas, 1961,” from *The Liars’ Club*

(14) Thursday, February 22

Writing Workshop

Readings and Discussion:

(Revisit Mary Karr, “Part 1: Texas, 1961,” from *The Liars’ Club*)

(15) Tuesday, February 27

\*UNIT 3: BIOGRAPHY AND THE CONTACT ZONE\*

The Contact Zone: How do different disciplines, realms, or cultures understand one another when they come into contact? What are the varieties of rules and conventions that come into play, some always unreadable by the other groups? How do such thresholds or borders of contact necessitate incomprehension, conflict? Can one group take over the other’s forms for its own ends (as some feminist literary critics have argued that women have done with traditional male autobiography, as some anthropologists argue colonized subjects have done with dominant culture) to some degree controlling what they adopt from the dominant culture through transculturation? What kind of reciprocity or collaboration is necessary for understanding, even given highly unequal relations of power? What kind of rhetorical devices—parody, irony—are effective in communicating both directly and indirectly? In what ways does this produce heterogeneous texts that read differently to different audiences? How might such heterogeneity be useful and productive, as well as risky and threatening?

Readings and Discussion:

Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”

Jamaica Kincaid, “On Seeing England for the First Time”

(Revisit Joan Scott’s “Experience” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*)

(16) Thursday, March 1\* Autoethnography Due

UNIT 2 PAPER DUE: Autoethnography; a 3-5 page autobiographical text (perhaps but not necessarily the one from the last unit) recast in terms of how cultural factors have

shaped the story (and person). How does the explicit foregrounding of culture change the story (if at all)?

Biography:

What is the relation between biography and history? What relation to history have women traditionally had? When we think of history as the telling of great public events, how often do we hear women's stories? To hear women's stories, what new definitions must we give to where history resides?

Readings and Discussion:

Linda Wagner-Martin, "Introduction," "Chapter 1," "Chapter 2," from *Telling Women's Lives: the New Biography*

(17) Tuesday, March 6

Biography/Autobiography:

What are the stakes for the writers of biography? How is biography another version of autobiography? In what ways can the biography take this into account? In what ways does it remain unknowable? What does it mean to write another's life that attempts to make it more than simply an autobiographical reflection of ourselves? Does grounding that subject within a larger cultural context prevent such self-reflexiveness? What are the effects of writing a social biography--biography that focuses on a single individual to foreground (not always to extol) the normative experience of a larger society? What does it mean for a self to become representative—rather than distinguished or extra-ordinary? What are the benefits, what the risks, of conceiving of the self in this way?

Readings and Discussion:

Linda Wagner-Martin, preface, "Childhood," "Beginning Smith College," "Conquering Smith," "Smith, A Culmination," from *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (read intervening chapters if possible)

(Revisit Linda Wagner-Martin's *Telling Women's Lives* and Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*)

(18) Thursday, March 8

Writing Workshop

(19) Tuesday, March 13 Spring Break

(20) Thursday, March 15 Spring Break

(21) Tuesday, March 20

Visit by Professor Linda Wagner-Martin

Readings and Discussion:

Patricia Hampl, "The Smile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath's Ambition" from *I Could Tell You Stories*

Linda Wagner-Martin, "Marriage," "The Colossus and other Poems, 1960," "Babies and Bell Jars" "I am Myself," "Resolution, 1962-3" from *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (read intervening chapters if possible)

(22) Thursday, March 22

Writing Workshop

(23) Tuesday, March 27

Readings and Discussion:

Lynn Bloom, "Growing up with Dr. Spock: An Auto-Biography"

Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston"

(24) Thursday, March 29

Writing Workshop

(25) Tuesday, April 3 \* Biography Due

UNIT 3 PAPER DUE: Biography/Transcultural Writing: You—singly or in groups—will produce an archive of documents (interviews, newspaper articles, photographs, history books, cultural studies articles) that allows you to write about another person (or group), keeping in mind that person's cultural grounding and the inescapable drive to read others in terms of ourselves; what can't this biography say or understand? From this archive, write a biography. 3-5 pages.

Visit by Professor Maria Deguzman and Professor Jill Casid

(26) Thursday, April 5

\*UNIT 4: SHAPES AND FORMS\*

Does an experience change when we change the way we tell it? If we have experienced it directly or rendered someone else's account (another way to ask this is: if it is told in the first or third persons)? How do the words and patterns we use shape our sense of ourselves? How do they shape our sense of the possible?

Personal Essay:

What is the essay? What are the conventions of the essay as a piece of writing? How is it different from a journal or diary? What makes the essay personal?

Readings and Discussion:

Cynthia Ozick, "She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body"

Joseph Epstein, "The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery"

Francine Du Plessix Gray, "I Write for Revenge Against Reality"

(27) Tuesday, April 10

Readings and Discussion:

Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories* “To the Reader,” “Red Sky in the Morning,” “Memory and Imagination,” (and choose one other essay we haven’t read)

Donald Murray, “Trying on the Essay” (all of Chapter 3) from *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*

(28) Thursday, April 12

Visit by Professor Marianne Gingher

Bring first version of essay

(29) Tuesday, April 17

Writing Workshop

Readings and Discussion:

Barbara Christian, “Black Feminist Process: In the Midst of ...”

Patricia Williams, “Crimes Without Passion”

Anais Nin, “The Personal Life Deeply Lived”

(30) Thursday, April 19

Writing Workshop

(31) Tuesday, April 24

Portfolio Preparation Workshop

(32) Thursday, April 26\* Personal Essay Due

UNIT 4 PAPER DUE: As a class, we have been trying to define the personal essay in terms of elements or features that characterize the personal essay. Write a 3-5 page personal essay that reproduces some aspect of form or one specific element that defines an essay as “personal.” Attach a 1-2 page analysis that defines the genre of the personal essay and explains how and why your piece could be considered “a personal essay.”

Support your claim by referring to the essays we’ve read and/or by writing in ways that perform as well as simply state their contentions.

(33) Tuesday, May 1

Last day of classes; performance, evaluation, and feedback

(34) Tuesday, May 8, 12:00 Noon Final Exam

Bring final portfolio and check posting of pieces on the Class Web Page