

Thinking and Writing in Honors:
Focus on the Essay

Honors 100
Fall, 2008
Tuesdays and Thursdays: 2:30-4:30
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Honors 100 is a foundational course in the Honors Program, preparing you to do the kind of thinking, reading and writing you will need for your other courses and particularly for the final Honors thesis project. It is also a course on the essay both as a literary text and as a vehicle for reflection and self-exploration. Throughout the semester we will read classic and contemporary essays, think about them, write about them, discuss them, and use them and the issues they evoke as jumping off points for our own essay writing. Honors 100 uses thinking and writing—a practice developed at the Proprioceptive Writing Center in Oakland, California and at the Writing and Thinking Institute at Bard College—to provide a space in the classroom for writing as a vehicle for reflection as well as a forum for community-building around writing (see <http://www.pwriting.org/> and <http://www.bard.edu/wandt/>)

The course is designed around the following eight thematic areas: RELATING; PLACING; INTERPRETING; SEEING; LEARNING/DISCIPLINING; REMEMBERING/FORGETTING; BELIEVING/DOUBTING; SELF-FASHIONING; and ESSAYING. Each theme includes a group of essays to read and an essay to write. Each thematic area introduces a new context for exploring meaning and for analysis; your writings will both articulate and analyze events in your own life through the tools introduced and utilized by the reading materials. Thus you will be learning to read texts—essays, places, events, memories, photographs, etc.—critically, closely and imaginatively through and by writing. Most of the course readings are in The Art of the Personal Essay, edited by Philip Lopate, or in the Course Packet (CP) available in the Honors House. You will need to purchase the Lopate text along with Hacker's A Writer's Reference and Strunk and White's The Elements of Style.

Focusing material is provided for each thematic area to be used as a jumping-off point for your essays. But in order to write an effective essay you will have to choose a particular focus from all of the possibilities suggested. Specificity is a crucial element of a successful essay: an essay that is about everything is about nothing. It is important that you consider carefully what your particular essay is about in its own terms—apart from the assignment. It should reflect the thematic area—but should have its own focus and integrity. The title you choose needs to incorporate this thinking.

All classes will include time for thinking and writing. This process writing is never collected or evaluated, and thus it is free from surface structure concerns. The essays you hand in, however, are products. They need to be ready for a reader and thus they should reflect your best work. The surface structure should be well edited and organized. Errors on the surface distract the reader away from your ideas and the deeper meanings you are trying to convey. We will therefore spend time covering the basics of grammar and style. You will be expected to master ten elements of surface structure in your writing by the end of the semester. Make sure you receive a copy of **"Ten Sacred Points of Basic Grammar and Style."** This guide along with Hacker and Strunk and White are the central references for this study. Because grammar is important intellectual work, these texts should be consulted often throughout the semester.

Course Objectives

1. To develop your own thinking in writing by giving you an exploratory writing process to use, apart from product writing, in which you will learn how to think out on the page, to explore your subjectivity, the ideas, stories, questions and concerns that emerge and reflect on their meaning as well as to think through various ideas for papers, unravel any thinking knots and have fun in the process. Contrary to common belief, thought does not spring from our minds fully preformed, like Athena from the head of Zeus. Rather thinking comes into existence through a process of articulation in language. In a writing class that means through the work of writing.
2. To develop fluency with written language, both product and process.
3. To develop confidence and expertise in writing in the following areas: grammar; organization and coherence, including how to set up an essay, how to attend to the reader, how to construct a paragraph and how to conclude an essay; thinking risks, how to expand the boundaries of ideas and stories, away from the stereotypical and toward the more complex, ambiguous and imaginative; and revision, thinking over the thinking that has been generated in a draft, making decisions about the content and developing it further.
4. To develop oral literacy, reading writing out loud, both product and process; the class functions as a community organized around writing: hearing what my thinking sounds like, then hearing others, both creates connection/dissonance and strengthens writing.
5. To develop writerly motivation. Writers notice and engage just about everything in relationship to themselves. But their subjects are not chosen at random. Writers have histories out of which they have developed concerns, and it is these concerns that drive their writing. These considerations will help you as a writer to begin to tap into your own history and to define your own concerns. If we write about what we care about, the overall quality of our writing improves. Upon completion of your Honors course work, many of you will do a thesis. This kind of study will prepare you for that undertaking.
6. To develop an understanding of personal experience as a form of knowing and as a kind of evidence. In essay after essay we will see how writers continually use their own experience to make sense of the world. Through this kind of study the relationship of personal material to subjects of study as well as social and political issues becomes more visible.

Required Course Materials (Available at the University Bookstore)

- The Art of the Personal Essay, editor, Philip Lopate.
- Course reading packet, available at the Honors House (Designated in assignment schedule as CP).
- A Writer's Reference, Fifth Edition, by Diana Hacker (You will need this text for all the writing you will do at USM).
- The Elements of Style by Strunk and White

Assignment Schedule

Sept 2: Introduction to the essay, to Thinking and Writing, to grammar study
Begin: RELATING

Sept. 4: Introduction to Close Reading
Seneca, "On Noise," p. 5
Montaigne, "Of cannibals," (CP)
Benchley, "My Face," p. 511
Writing 1 due (RELATING): **Autobiography of a Face**

Sept. 9: Begin PLACING
Woolf, "Street Haunting," p. 256

Sept. 11: Benjamin, "Hashish in Marseilles," p. 370

Sept. 16: Writing 2 due (PLACING): **The Streets of Portland**

Sept. 18: Begin INTERPRETING
Freud, "On Dreams, chapter 3

Sept. 23: Writing 3 due (INTERPRETING): **Analyze This**

Sept. 25: Begin SEEING
Sontag, "In Plato's Cave" (CP)

Sept. 30: Writing 4 due (SEEING): **Our Photos/Ourselves: What Would Susan Say?**

Oct. 2: Begin LEARNING/DISCIPLINING
Mayberry, "The Runaway Pancake and Tom Sawyer" (CP)

Oct. 7: Orwell, "Such, Such Were the Joys," p. 268

Oct. 9: Writing 5 due (LEARNING/DISCIPLINING): **School Stories**

Oct. 14: No Class

Oct. 16: Begin REMEMBERING/FORGETTING
Hampl, "Memory and Imagination" (CP)

Oct. 21: Aciman, "In Search of Proust"; Sheffield, "love is a mix tape"

Oct. 23: Writing 6 due (REMEMBERING/FORGETTING):
A Walk Down Memory Lane

- Oct. 28: Begin BELEIVING/DOUBTING
 Ginzburg, “He and I,” p. 422
 Short excerpt from Elbow’s “Methodological Doubting and Believing:
 Contraries in inquiry” and Montaigne’s “On Books”
- Oct. 30: No Class: Independent Assignment: Writing in Beautiful Places
- Nov. 4: No Class: Independent Assignment: Writing in Crowded Places
- Nov. 6: “Academy” Awards: Best Story of Writing in a Beautiful Place &
 Best Story of Writing in a Crowded Place
 Writing 7 due (BELEIVING/DOUBTING): **Janusian Thinking**
- Nov. 11: Begin SELF-FASHIONING
 Baldwin, “Notes from a Native Son,” p. 586
- Nov. 13: Phippen, “Finding Out” (CP)
- Nov. 18: Writing 8 due (SELF-FASHIONING): **Your Border-Crossing History**
- Nov. 20: Begin ESSAYING
 Dillard, “Seeing,” p. 693 or Borges, “Blindness,” p. 377
- Nov. 25: E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake,” p. 533 or
 Wendell Berry, “An Entrance to the Woods,” p. 670
- Nov. 27: Thanksgiving: No Class
- Dec. 1: Course Dinner/Celebratory Readings, both classes together
 6:00PM (Jerry Conway’s class comes after class, 6:30), 51 Coyle St., Portland
- Dec. 2: Turgenev, “The Execution Turgenev of Tropmann,” p. 306
- Dec. 4: Hoy, “The Art of Essaying” (CP)
- Dec. 9: Writing 9 due (ESSAYING):
- Dec. 11: Last Writes/Rites

Writing Assignments

RELATING

Writing 1: *Autobiography of a Face*

Due: Sept. 4, 1 page

Benchley describes himself as a "constant metamorphosis." He writes that, "Each day I look like someone, or *something*, different. I never know what it is going to be until I steal a look in the glass." In this essay Benchley captures a picture of himself as an identity that is not static but shifting and changing.

For this assignment you are asked to present yourself in writing. Steal your own glances in the mirror. What do you look like? How does what you look like change from encounter to encounter?

In some ways the mirror represents the imagined perception of others. How do you imagine others see you? Montaigne wrote that "we must remove [our] mask[s]"; on the other hand, Oscar Wilde suggested that it isn't really a question whether we wear a mask or not; we all do that; the question is whether or not the masks we choose are interesting. What characters do you remind yourself of? How would you describe your mask(s)? What are you like when you are alone? How is this different than when you are with others?

Slip in something you wouldn't normally reveal about yourself. For example, Benchley reveals his secret obsession with always searching for images of himself in any pile of snapshots.

PLACING

Writing 2: *The Streets of Portland*

Due: Sept. 16, 3-4 pages

In her essay "Street Haunting" Woolf suggests that the street offers a kind of anonymity. She writes that, "As we step out of the house [or dorm]," and into the city, we shed the self our friends know us by" (256). This anonymity creates a kind of opportunity. This assignment is a foray into the city of Portland. If you are new to the Portland area, your directive is to make the strange, familiar, or, if you are from the Portland area and familiar with it already, the reverse, to destabilize the familiar and see it anew—in either case unlike Benjamin, however, without any intoxicating influences!

The place in your photograph is your starting point. Go to this place. Allow at least an hour to two hours. Bring note cards and a pen. Ramble and wander wherever interest or impulse takes you. What stories do you run into either real, remembered, or

imagined? Take in your surroundings as you move along. What is running through your mind? Take notes. Look for important or interesting details. Make note of both the unexpected and the typical.

Out of this material write your own street narrative. We ask that you push your thinking beyond merely organizing and presenting what happened and include reflection on this material. What is your essay really about? Make sure your title reflects this focus. Make sure that once you've figured out your focus that you double check your essay for coherence, you add material that will help develop this focus and you leave out material, interesting though it may have been to experience, that no longer fits in.

INTERPRETING

Writing 3: **Analyze This**

Due: Sept. 23, 5 pages

The world of the unconscious mind operates within a reality of its own. It is more non-linear than conscious life and deeply associative. Meanings are more indirect, hidden and elusive. Things are always standing in for other things, often manifestations of unexpressed desire and/or fear.

“Analysis” is a word heard at a range of sites throughout a university. It is clearly an important activity: something we do in thought, in discussion and in writing. But what do we mean by “analysis?”

To prepare for your essay write up a paragraph summarizing a dream you remember having. Be clear and concise (see Freud's summary on p. 10 as an example). Include relevant details. Describe the setting, the people and any objects. Describe the sequence of events.

The substance of your essay, however, should be an exploration of the latent content of your dream, the chain of associations, of some of the important constitutive elements comprising your dream. Following Freud's method, present an element, then analyze and explore the latent content, present/analyze, present/analyze. What conclusions do you then draw from this exploration? Make sure you give your analysis a title.

SEEING

Writing 4: **Our Photos, Ourselves: What Would Susan Say?**

Due: Sept 30, 5 pages

Choose a photograph from your family photograph album or from your personal photograph album that interests you now that you've read Susan Sontag's essay. The focus of this assignment is an analysis of your photo in terms of what Susan might say about it.

Following the previous essay assignment, write up a short preliminary paragraph, contextualizing your photograph. What is going on in this photograph? Who are these people? Include what someone who is not a member of your family would need to know in order to understand your photo's significance. Explain your family mythology and history only as needed in order to bring this imagined reader appropriately into the situation or scene depicted. Who/what is the central focus? How is the photo framed? What is the meaning of any "props?"

The substance of your essay will be to use ideas in Sontag's essay to explore your photo in broader terms. Try utilizing this analytical structure:

1. Cite a particular passage/idea from Sontag's essay that you find insightful.
2. Explain ("translate") this passage into your own words. This explanation should answer the question: what is she really talking about here?
3. Link this citation/idea to your photo. Discuss your photo very specifically in these (Susan's) terms.
4. Speculate/question this finding: this idea of Sontag's/this aspect of my photograph leads me to wonder the following. . .

LEARNING/DISCIPLINING

Writing 5: School Stories

Due: Oct. 9, 5 pages

For this assignment, you can choose between two possible subjects.

Inspired by George Orwell, Choice 1: The Hidden Curriculum

Orwell's essay raises questions about schooling as a site of social regulation. We are sent to school ostensibly to learn: reading, writing, math and science. But school is primarily a social place, where we come into contact with others, our peers, teachers et al. for sustained periods of time. Thus in school we are also learning social lessons: what to value, what to condemn, how to be a boy or girl, how to speak and conduct ourselves, how to be good or bad, how to be an American, etc. Lots of sorting and categorizing occurs in school as groups of students are formed and reformed for an array of purposes. For this option, tell a story from this hidden curriculum.

Inspired by Bob Mayberry, Choice 2: Literacy Stories

Literacy is the ongoing process of learning how to read and write. It begins early in childhood in our families as we interact with picture books. And it continues throughout schooling and includes such activities as handwriting in elementary school and writing papers in high school.

Think back over your own history learning how to read and write, including this class. What do you remember? What seems significant? Jot down notes. Ask family members about their experiences learning how to read and write as well. Use some of this material to then draft out your essay.

Whichever option you choose, do more than simply present your findings or tell what happened. What questions does your story raise? Deliver the meaning of your story. Your title, your introduction and your conclusion need to reflect these insights.

REMEMBERING/FORGETTING

Writing 6: *Walking Down Memory Lane*

Due: Oct. 23, 5 pages

In our thinking module “Seeing,” the family photograph/snapshot—foregrounding certain stances, relationships and ways of being within its framework and backgrounding others—became implicated in the organization of memory. This interplay of presence and absence is perhaps the most basic, yet most perplexing, characteristic of memory: we remember certain things and forget others. This remembering and forgetting happens for many psychological, social and even economic reasons. Hampl, for example, shows us how a false or fabricated memory reveals a concealed wish or desire.

For this assignment we will follow the progression of Patricia Hampl’s essay. Your essay will have two sections.

First, choose a scene (or moment) of memory that you are pulled toward. Hampl supposes that we store in memory only images of value. Present this scene following Hampl’s version of a first draft. This means that your scene could be anything, that you write with abandon, that you let go of any need to absolutely only transcribe “the facts” and instead follow intuition, feeling and imagination. Think about detail. Think about sense of place.

Second, turn back toward what you’ve presented. Where did you invent? Where did you stay closest to actuality? What feelings emerge from this scene? Think symbolically about the details you’ve included: your version of Hampl’s red music book or sneezing nun; Aciman’s cheap and tattered edition of *Swann’s Way*. What do they signify? Hampl writes that “in the act of remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself.” What is your scene really about? Can you frame your analysis in more archetypal terms, e.g., a story of loss, renewal or coming of age?

BELIEVING/DOUBTING

Writing 7: Janusian Thinking

Due: Nov. 6, 5 pages

The god Janus had two faces, each looking in an oppositional direction. Thinking becomes Janusian, more complex, as we consider and include multiple perspectives. The Romanian essayist Cioran describes a process of “thinking against oneself.” F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests “that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still remain able to function.”

For this assignment, choose a subject to explore in terms of its contradictions, not something abstract, but something that matters to you. Believe in your subject. Argue, present specifics, examples and evidence to back up your belief. Doubt in your subject. Argue and present specifics, examples and evidence to substantiate your doubt. Make sure that your essay has these two faces, that it includes both thinking and counter-thinking, thesis as well as antithesis. Rather than resolving your contradiction, work towards articulating and exploring its complexity.

SELF-FASHIONING

Writing 8: Your Border-crossing History

Due: Nov. 18, 7 pages

Baldwin and Phippen write what might be termed “social histories.” In a social history larger social and cultural forces are considered as shaping influences on the family as well as on individual identity. These forces include gender, race or ethnicity, class and geographical location, among others. But inevitably the psychological and the individual always interact with and are affected by the social. It is not easy to draw a line between the two.

The focus of this assignment is your own social history. Who are your parents? What are their ethnic roots? What is their educational background? What kind of work do they do? What kind of house or neighborhood did you grow up in? Who was or is your family in the community?

You might include story material that conveys how you formulated your social identity, how you came to know that your family came from wherever they came from, that you were a girl in your family, not a boy or a boy, not a girl; white, not black or vice versa; French Canadian, Italian American or not American; from a rural area, not a city; from the upper, middle or working class.

The key to understanding your social identity is to identify moments when you had to cross a border: something happens that disrupts and challenges the security of the familiar and has to be dealt with.

What are your border-crossing moments to date? Did you have to change schools? Did your parents move, separate or change their work? Have you traveled to or moved from another country? How have you come to feel differently from any accepted norms? How did these border-crossing moments change your understanding of who you thought you were? Be on the lookout in particular for any contradictions, ways that you might feel divided. There should be no resolution; don't try to tie things up too neatly

Format a separate cover/title page that includes your name, course title and section and the title of your essay. This title page may also include an illustration, photograph or other creative materials.

ESSAYING

Writing 9: **Bend Me, Shape Me—But Define Me!**

Due: Dec. 9, 7 pages

What is an essay? This is a question we have explored throughout this semester and will be the focus for this last assignment.

This is a reflective essay in that you will need to go back over and consider the essays we have read as well as those you yourself have written. How is an essay different from a paper? What makes an essay, an essay? Pat Hoy, for example, discusses the importance of constraints and images.

Your essay needs to be inter-textual. This means that you will need to directly cite from at least three essayists in your essay. These inclusions mean that you will need a Works Cited page (see Hacker on MLA style guidelines for properly citing material). To avoid the pitfall of simply dropping in these citations in order to fulfill the assignment, utilize the cite/explain/link/speculate structure to integrate them into your presentation.

Phillip Lopate, the editor of our primary course text, suggests that “. . . the writing of personal essays not only monitors the self but helps it gel. The essay is an enactment of the creation of the self” (xliv). An added degree of difficulty for this assignment is that you must enact your essay, make it distinctively, personally, materially and stylistically yours—and no one else’s. This enactment is to include the voice, form, tone, content, theme, and even the appearance of your essay.

Course Requirements and Grading

There are nine writing assignments for this class, one for each thematic area.

All assignments must be completed on time. Bring your essay material to class, printed out and with enough copies to pass out to the other class members. Be ready to read your essay material out loud. These will be discussed and written about in class by the instructor and your peers as a community.

Attendance, thorough preparation, organization and effort are really the bedrock of this course.

Thorough preparation means coming to class having read the assigned essays. It means having passages ready to share that brought out the meaning for you. Thorough preparation means completing writing assignments on time.

Taking risks, creative ingenuity, going the extra mile and really digging in around the various assignments, as well as, most importantly, improvement across the semester will all have an impact on your final grade.

Attendance Policy:

Attendance at each and every class throughout the semester is assumed. As Honors students, something as basic as attendance should be axiomatic. In this particular class, your absence has a negative impact on the others. If you know here at the beginning of the semester that you will be absent later on, please consider dropping the class now. Schedule doctor, dentist, counseling, car appointments, etc. for other time periods. I take attendance at the beginning of each class.

Tardiness is also noted. **BE ON TIME.** Keep in mind that your tardiness has a disruptive effect on the class already in session. For example, one of your classmates, who has organized themselves to be at class on time, could be in the middle of reading his or her work.

As Woody Allen once said, “98% of life is showing up.” Please note that attendance and preparation and overall quality of your participation contribute to 50% of your grade.

If you must be absent for some unavoidable reason, make arrangements to get notes from a classmate. You are allowed one free absence. Use it wisely. Subsequent absences will be calculated into your grade. Taking this responsibility is part of learning how to be a student. However, keep in mind that the nature of this class is such that any absence is impossible to make up because so much of what is important happens in class.

Your Final Grade

1. Attendance and overall level of engagement: enthusiasm and motivation, active class participation, in-class thinking and writing, quality of comments to classmates and improvement during the course of the semester (50% of grade)
2. Completion of nine essay assignments (50% of grade)

These essays will be evaluated and/or assessed from the following three vantage points:

- a. surface structure (including grammar, punctuation, spelling, sentence construction and paragraph formation).
Is the paper relatively free of sentence level error?
- b. organization and coherence (how the essay is put together, the relationship of the parts to the whole).
Has the structure of the essay, as well as the introduction and conclusion, been well thought out?
Does the essay articulate a clear point of view?
Are the ideas clear?
Does the title adequately capture the central focus of the essay?

“Every discourse, like a living creature, should be so put together that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor feet, middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole,”
Socrates, in Phaedrus (NY: Macmillan, 1956, p. 53)
- c. content (willingness to take thinking risks, to probe).
Have you delivered the significance of your presentation, the so what?
Is the essay convincing?
Does the essay have enough detail, specificity, evidence?

Guidelines for Thinking and Writing

Take a few minutes before each “Think and Write” to settle down. Use these moments to begin to turn inward. Think to yourself: “I am about to begin to write. What has been on my mind lately? What questions do I want to contemplate? What stories do I want to tell? What do I want to focus on? What feelings shall I explore? What ideas might I dissect?”

You may have brought an agenda to the Think and Write, something that is on your mind, that you want to explore through thinking and writing, or I may direct the group with a thinking question or ask you to begin with a passage from an essay we are studying that brought out the meaning for you. Whatever the case, the art of Thinking and Writing is to let go of this agenda as other material emerges.

Write what you hear. Be ready to ask the Proprioceptive Question (what do I mean by _____?).

Once the music stops, finish getting down your last few sentences. Then write out and answer each of the following questions:

1. Thoughts heard but not written?
2. How do I feel now?
3. What story am I telling?
4. Directions for future Think and Writes?

The reading of your Think and Write is always an option, not a requirement. The content of a Think and Write is confidential. Writers are asked to respect each other's privacy and never to discuss another person's Think and Write with a third party. It is a privilege to be able to hear/overhear other students' writing. As a writer reads—whether a Think and Write or his or her own essay—**attentive listening is always the goal**. It is important that writers respect certain boundaries in relationship to one another and not seek to help others, advise, correct, contradict, enlighten or guide.

Something in someone else's “Think and Write” may strike you strongly or raise questions for you, may delight or distress you, confuse or irritate you. Think of this as writing material. Do not try to work out feelings or ask questions directly in conversation with other writers. That is not the goal of Thinking and Writing; **its primary purpose is to give each writer time and space to follow and explore his or her thinking in writing, while in the company of others doing the same.**

(Drawn from the pamphlet “Guidelines for a Proprioceptive Group Write,” by Linda Trichter-Metcalf, published by The Proprioceptive Writing Center, 88 Lexington Ave., NY, NY, 10016, 1999)