

Creative Writing: Nonfiction
San Jose State University

ENGLISH 242
Spring 2015
Andrewqlam@gmail.com

Thursday 7-9:45PM

Office: FOB 118

Office hours: 6-7pm Thursday or by appointment -- Thursdays only, unless we meet in SF.

Instructor: Andrew Lam

Email: andrew.lam@sjsu.edu or

Cell phone: (415) 310-0155

Required Text:

The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present, [TAPE] Phillip Lopate. A couple essays from *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*.

Course description:

The personal essay is polymorphous, ranging from being expressive to informative, persuasive to instructive, argumentative to satirical, but it is always intimate and striving. In this writing workshop we will discuss and critique each other's work, and read essays from well-known practitioners, and we will explore the personal essay's various shapes, ranges and tones. Students will demonstrate increasing skill at writing, and learn to revise. Three substantial essays are required, with a fourth as an option, or an extensive revision and expansion of one of the previous three in lieu of final exams. They will also write weekly critiques of their peers' work, and share perceptive and critical responses to the supplemental reading. Essays are expected to be between 2000-3000 words in length and turned in 2 days before class.

Goal: Learn to improve your skill at writing the personal essay, its key elements, and learn to revise, to hone your literary voice and deepen your insight. By the end of this course students will have deepened their understanding of what a personal essay can do, its reaches and possibilities.

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed to be absent for no more than two classes, and a third will seriously jeopardize passing the class. Contact me if you have good reasons.

Syllabus: (Subject to Change)

Thursday, January 22: Introduction. Epistolary narrative: Personal essays masquerading as letters. In class: Write a letter to someone important or close to you, or to your younger self on a topic of your own choosing. We can discuss various options. I will read "Letter from One Refugee to Another" from *Perfume Dreams*.

Thursday, January 29: MFA Faculty Open House reading 5-7pm. Read Phillip Lopate's introduction, "Consolation to His Wife" by Plutarch, and "Some Blind Alley," by E.M. Cioran from TAPE. Read some of your letters out loud and workshop the pieces. Send first draft in by Tuesday January 27th.

Thursday, Feb 5: Continue with exploring and discussing the epistolary letters in class, its ranges. Read Baldwin "Notes of a Native Son" from TAPE, and "The Story They Carry" from "Perfume Dreams" to prepare for the next assignment: Write an essay about an important historical event or social phenomenon, something that is both socially impactful and personal at the same time.

Thursday, Feb 12: Turn in final version of letters Tuesday Feb. 9 and workshop the pieces. Read "Late Victorians," by Richard Rodriguez and "Under the Influence" by Scott Russ Sanders in TAPE. Discuss second assignment, and have an outline/draft of your second assignment ready for discussion. Talk about personal essay writing in relation to world events.

Thursday, Feb 19: Read "The Execution of Tropmann" by Ivan Turgenev, and Mary McCarthy's "My Confession" from TAPE. Continue to discuss your outline of second essay and discuss topic matters and approach. If students are willing to turn in early essay of second assignment, we will workshop that assignment tonight.

Thursday, Feb 26: "Read Entrance to the Wood," Wendell Berry and "On Being American," by H.L. Mencken in TAPE. Turn in first draft by Tuesday Feb. 24. Workshop first drafts of second essay and explore ideas and techniques that can deepen the work.

Thursday, March 5: Read Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joy." Continue with workshop of first draft of second essay.

Thursday, March 12: Teacher absent –Tentative. Will know for sure by feb. 5th. He will make up for it up during Finals Week, or Spring recess, or a day to be discussed. Or most likely will be teaching.

Thursday, March 19: Workshop the second draft of second essay. Explore ways to revise and deepen the piece. Read "The Knife" by Richard Selzer. Prepare for third assignment: memoir writing.

Week 10, March 26 – Recess. Use this time to write your memoir or to deepen your previous work.

Week 11, April 2: Andrew Lam's reading and reception as arranged by the MFA program. We need to figure out a time to meet before the reading at 7, if possible. If not figure out another time to meet. In any case send outline to your memoir.

Week 12, April 9: Turn in first draft of memoir. Discuss first draft of memoir. Read "Some memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self," by Gore Vidal from TAPE. Also any additional revision of first two essays is welcome at this juncture.

Week 13, April 16: Read "How I started to Write" by Carlos Fuentes from TAPE. Continue to workshop first draft.

Week 14, April 23: Read Joan Didion's "Goodbye to All That" from TAPE. Read "Child of Two Worlds" from Perfume Dreams. Turn in second draft of memoir. Workshop memoir. Discuss fourth essay writing assignment, a theme of your own choosing. Discuss possibilities in class. Or optional revision of the previous pieces.

Week 15, April 30: Reading: tba. Continue to workshop memoir. Outline revision of one of your essays or your fourth essay.

Week 16, May 7: Reading: tba. Workshop revised essays.

Week 17, May 14 reading: tba. Read some pieces out loud.

Thursday May 21: No finals but we will use this date during finals week as instruction. Turn in your final draft. All revised essays must be turned in by Sunday May 24 at the latest.