

Course Proposal: English 308  
From: Terry Brogan  
Title: The Personal Essay

Abstract (for posting):

Raising our consciousness is a good thing. How do we go about it? By Becoming Aware. When we become aware of new things, of new ideas, of new perspectives on old things, we feel fresh, and alive, and sensitive; our minds are quickened, sharpened; our seeing is more acute, more focused, more varied. And when we see things, fully, as they exist before us in their fresh uniqueness, and as we become mentally aware of new things, then we have thoughts, and perceptions, and feelings; then, we have something to say. The problem in writing is always having something to say. Therefore, in this course we want to focus our attentions on some first-rate books, where writers such as James Agee, Thoreau, and Annie Dillard are being very Aware of things around them, so that we can try to learn how they do it. To that end, I will ask each student to keep a notebook, and write in it often. In class, we will discuss the texts, and everyone should feel free to contribute. I will ask for six essays to be written over the term, as well as several small written exercises on grammar, style, diction, and language in general. These games and exercises I hope will "sensitize" readers to the author's use of language, and thus improve their own command of words. I will also give a few short lectures. The grade will be negotiated between the student and the instructor, via a contract and self-evaluation, supported by the written work. The books we are going to read are amazing, and if you don't mind giving serious and sustained attention to your own writing, while learning from the writing of others, join us.

Introduction: Perhaps the subtitle for this course should be, "Writing as a Mode of Consciousness." What I want to focus on here is the intensely-careful reading and writing of "High-density prose", a variety of prose which is particularly reliant upon sensory perception of the external world for its substance, more so at any rate than on ideas or issues or arguments or persuasion. That perception produces an intense, direct, and reflective response in words. Probably our type for this mode is Thoreau, and Annie Dillard follows directly in his wake with her deep seeing, but there are other forms as well, and I hope to show throughout the semester that in fact Nature is not an indispensable subject for the process of Awareness (both sensory and verbal) in humans. Lewis Thomas is illustrative: any profession, any set of surroundings will do.

Of course, I am aware that Freshmen at U.T. are not Thoreaus, by any stretch of the imagination, but then again I also believe that the texts themselves are arresting and compelling, and also that Imitation is a useful early form of learning. So, I

propose to focus, relentlessly, on the texts, and on that variety of most-attentive Reading which the texts require, and that most-attentive Awareness of the world that the texts contain.

### Texts

required:

James Agee	<u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u> <u>A Death in the Family</u>
Annie Dillard,	<u>Pilgrim at Tinker Creek</u>
H. D. Thoreau,	<u>Walden</u>
Ranier Maria Rilke,	<u>The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge</u>
Lewis Thomas,	<u>The Lives of a Cell</u>
Joan Didion,	"On Keeping a Notebook"
Donald C. Stewart,	<u>The Authentic Voice</u>
the <u>Harbrace</u> and a good Dictionary	

optional (choose one):

Richard Selzer,	<u>Mortal Lessons</u>
Janet Burroway,	<u>Raw Silk</u>
Michael Herr,	<u>Dispatches</u>

uncertain:

The Norton Reader, Fourth, Longer

## Syllabus

Assuming a term of sixteen weeks:

Introduction and overview:		1 week
<u>Perception:</u>	Dillard	2 weeks
	Thoreau	2 weeks
	Writing Exercises	1 week
	Lectures: New Ideas, Other Values; <u>Seeing</u> ; Learning	1 week
<u>Reflection:</u>	Agee	2 weeks
	Rilke	2 weeks
	Writing Exercises	1 week
	Lectures: Self-Deception; Growth; Uncertainty and Risk	
<u>Profession:</u>	Thomas et al	2 weeks
Concluding Self-evaluations:		1 week

This syllabus operates on three levels simultaneously: the basic format for classtime is discussion of the texts--they are central. Interspersed with that text-focus will be "lectures" on relevant problems in learning how to learn, think, and respond, such as accepting perspectives and values different from one's own, questioning, opening up, living with uncertainty, taking risks, deciding what you think, saying what you think, growth, self-deception. At the same time, there will be intermittent exercises in specific writing problems, such as sentence patterns, tone, and organization, as well as word games, dictionary exercises, and general language awareness.

Objectives: (1) Awareness, Reflectiveness.

Probably we don't need too many Thoreaus around at any given time, but we could use as much reflective thinking as we can get. I will encourage students to be both introspective and also externally-perceptive.

(2) High-density writing.

I will stress the virtues of compression, clarity, and authenticity (and will also make it clear that I will not tolerate basic grammatical errors at all).

How will I know Authenticity in writing from its opposite? I might reply that any teacher who cannot recognize authentic writing from self-deception and plain old bullshit ought not be teaching at all, much less proposing new courses. How will I teach Authenticity to the students? (Stewart's book discusses this subject at length.) First, by showing that probably all really honest and intense writing is at least a little tense, not relaxed, because it involves challenging personal values and assumptions and beliefs. So, I will look for a certain tone in the journals, and if it isn't there, I can easily show a student in conference that it isn't there. (I will also expect journal entries to focus closely on the texts being read.) Then again, there is Reflectiveness, which is fairly easy to teach students after they have read Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook." Thus, I don't think it will be a problem, informally, to know where the students' heads are.

The sort of writing I am looking for lies between the extremes of unreflective unthought and formal intellectual discourse, in a region where personal response is melded with perceptual experience and with abstract idea. Obviously this kind of product requires students who are willing to work at their writing, day after day. But then this course could never become the regular E308 or 306 anyway; it is inventive, and its proper audience is small.

For the essays, I hope to attend to the mechanics of Prewriting, by asking for a finished rough draft before the final draft. I think that students prefer prewriting to rewriting--I do--and if the classes are small, I can look at (comment on) a polished rough draft and return it before the final draft is turned in, always stressing revision, revision.

The texts themselves will show that high-density prose can be written on a variety of subjects, perceptual, personal, ideational, professional. Or, more obviously, Reflective thinking can be done on any subject. Thus I might suggest at some point that the student write an essay arising out of his major, or job, or career, and another essay arising out of experience. To their objection that they don't yet have a career or aren't very perceptive, I will reply with a suggestion that they focus on, and write about, the texts.

(3) Responsibility and self-evaluation.

Probably this course will place more responsibility on most students than they will like. By removing all but the most rudimentary paper deadlines, I hope to encourage students to

speak (turn in a paper) only when they actually have something to say. Insincere writing--indeed, "themes"--we can do without. (I will have to assume, regardless of whether it is true or not, that Freshmen in fact have things they want to talk about.) I will expect their initial contracts to be fairly detailed, and the final self-evaluation extensive, so that they can see the full meaning of Self-Direction.

#### Grades and Writing:

1. The student must write out a contract at the outset, after conferring with me, stipulating in detail what he will accomplish (prob. in Quantity) over the term for what grade. Perhaps midway through the semester, I could have a Renegotiation period, when students have had a chance to discover their own limitations.
2. A lengthy, required essay at the very end of the term wherein the student evaluates his progress, accomplishments, and failures, explaining in detail what grade he wants in the course for what reasons. A justification of the grade, and a rigorous self-evaluation. (By that point, I expect to have all the dead-beats gone, so that I will rest heavily on students' own self-evaluations.) If the grade differential (what they think they deserve vs. what I think) is more than +1 letter grade, I probably won't dispute it; if the request is flagrant or outrageous, then I will try for a compromise, and failing that, make an arbitrary decision (which prerogative I will reserve, in writing, at the outset of the term), since I have to sign my name to the final recorded grade in good conscience.
3. A required journal, with extensive writing every week required, perhaps commented on, but not graded. (I want to make a real commitment to Quality rather than Quantity in this course, but I recognize that Quantity is in fact the first step to Quality for uneasy writers.)
4. I will ask for about six essays over the term, but will not set due dates, contrary to my normal practice; they are to be turned in when the student decides he is ready. But I will have a very broad expectation; I might for example state that if three of the six essays have not been turned in by 2/3 or 3/4 of the way through the term, then automatic drop, or some such.
5. I will also expect near perfect attendance, once again contrary to my normal modus operandi.

In fact, the whole design of this course is radically different from the requirements and assumptions about pedagogy that I usually make in teaching. For myself, this is an exercise in Judgment, as opposed to mechanical deadlines and criteria and punishments and coercions, subtle or direct. For my students, this will be an exercise in Responsibility and Self-direction. (In fact, more so than many of them may care for; most people prefer to let other people make decisions and take responsibility. So there may well be some kicking and squirming.) But I believe this course will be good for them, I believe it is in no wise inferior to the regular offering, and I want to know, really, just what freshmen are capable of.