

21W.731.01

Spring 2004

Writing and Experience: Exploring Self in Society

(A Communication-Intensive (CI) course in Humanities/Writing)

Tues.-Thurs. 11-12:30

Dr. Andrea Walsh

“If you want readers to breathe life into your writing..., then you must breathe experience into your words as you write”- Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power*

“Good writing is about telling the truth”- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

“Life is an endless recruiting of witnesses”- Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries*

Our reading and writing for this section will focus on what it means to construct a sense of self—and a life narrative—in relation to the larger social world of family and friends, education, media, work, and community. What does it mean to see ourselves as embodying particular ethical values or belonging to a certain ethnic, racial, national or religious group(s)? How do we imagine ourselves within a larger “family narrative”? In what ways do we view our identities as connected to and expressed by our educational and work experiences? How do we see ourselves as shaping and shaped by the popular media culture of our society? How do we think about our social responsibility to our smaller and larger human communities? Readings will include works by authors such as James Baldwin, Andre Dubus, William Faulkner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Toni Morrison, George Orwell, Amy Tan and Alice Walker.

Throughout the semester we will explore the craft of storytelling and the multiple ways in which we can employ the tools of fiction (e.g., character, setting, dialogue) to communicate a central idea or perspective in creative nonfiction narratives. We will also discuss some of the ethical issues involved in defining the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. In some of our reading, we will have the opportunity to analyze both nonfiction and fictional works by the same author.

This course offers a **service-learning option** so that you can address some of the social and psychological issues within the community (such as poverty, health care issues, educational inequality or other issues of interest) that we read about and discuss in class. Students often find that they do their best writing when they focus on the experience of active engagement with real-world problems. The service-learning option reflects MIT’s mission that the Institute “seeks to develop in each member of that community not only the ability to work wisely, creatively and effectively for the betterment of humankind, but also the passion for doing so.” While service-learning is not mandatory to fulfill course requirements, it is encouraged. (See **handout** on the service- learning option.)

Required Reading

*new edition—do not buy a used copy!

*Nancy R. Comley, et al (eds.). *Fields of Reading: Motives for Writing*. Seventh Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Tom Bailey (ed.). *On Writing Short Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Andrea A. Lunsford. *Easy Writer: A Pocket Guide*. Second Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2002.

Students should bring *Fields of Reading* or *On Writing Short Stories* with them to class as required.

In class you will also receive various handouts and articles. A materials fee of \$5.00 for photocopying is collected for this material during the second week of classes; you can submit it as cash or check made out to MIT.

You should also have on hand a college dictionary and thesaurus. *The Oxford English Dictionary* is available online for MIT students. For general writing reference, also see Easy Writer. There are valuable writing and research aids available online to MIT students.

Writing Assignments

The primary goal of this course is to develop your ability to translate the material of life experience into vivid, reflective, well-organized and persuasive prose that expresses a clear perspective or central idea. By the end of the semester, you will have written about 25 pages of revised prose, as well as your regular journal writing assignments.

We define “experience” quite broadly in this class. In your writing for the course, you can draw upon a wide variety of types of experience:

- your own life story
- life narratives of or interviews with family members, friends, co-workers, mentors
- observed or witnessed experience
- experiences that you've read or heard about in books or viewed in films or on television

In writing from experience, it is crucial that you shape your material to motivate a wider reading public. In other words, there needs to be something at stake for readers in your writing about, for example, your annual Halloween rituals or your grandmother's dedication to her job. The motive for readers might be the desire to meditate on some universal human fears, desires or developmental stages or to understand a particular social problem or issue from an individual's perspective.

There will be four major writing assignments; you will submit each assignment in a first version (not a “rough draft”) and later, in revised form. In the first three creative nonfiction essay assignments, you will have the opportunity to write autobiographical (or biographical) narratives. In the first essay, you will focus on a significant aspect of personal identity. The second and third essays, in which you will connect your experiential narrative with outside research, focus on topics of your own choice. For outside research, students will draw upon both primary and secondary sources. In writing a specific essay, a student may do library research, conduct interviews, engage in field observation or do service learning. For the fourth and last writing assignment, you can choose to write either a short fiction

piece or another creative nonfiction essay. These four major assignments, as well as other writing exercises in your **reader/writer notebook** (see **handout** to follow), are at the center of the course. Each writing assignment will build upon the skills of the previous piece(s) that you've crafted. In each unit, reading assignments and preliminary writing exercises will prepare you for the essay or short fiction piece that you will be crafting. Over the course of the semester, you will revise each piece that you write. Throughout the semester, our class will focus on writing as a process of initial crafting and revising to create works that are lively, clear, engaging and meaningful to a wider audience.

You will also keep a typed **reader/writer notebook** of writing exercises and will give at least one **oral presentation** and a reading from one of your pieces of writing at the end of the term. As the semester ends, you will submit a final portfolio of all four writing assignments, first versions and revisions. The portfolio is due at the last class with the revision of the fourth piece.

Class Participation and Attendance/Writing Workshop:

To foster a sense of intellectual community, this course is structured as a seminar. Throughout the term, we will be discussing the work of professional, as well as student, writers. It is crucial that you come to class prepared to offer thoughtful comments on assigned readings as well as helpful feedback to your peers. A vital, ongoing intellectual conversation—about our writing and that of published authors—is at the heart of the course. To be effective as a seminar participant, you will need to complete reading and writing tasks by their due dates. Please arrive at class on time and bring assigned texts with you.

The writing workshop—in which students respond to their peers' essays and stories—is a very important part of the course. For all four major writing assignments, we will have an in-class workshop after first versions have been submitted. We will also workshop some shorter pre-draft writing assignments. My expectation is that you will respond to each other's work seriously and critically and approach each essay or story with sensitivity, insight and imagination. For each workshop, you will be asked to read several essays or stories, discuss them in groups with your classmates and respond to each piece in the form of a individual letter to the writer. The ethical norm of our class is that all student writing (including your comments) is considered confidential; you should store other students' works-in-progress in a secure place and not discuss your peers' writing outside the classroom. This ethic enables us to develop the trust and security we need as a small writing community.

Since our class functions as a writing community and the first "public" for your essays and fiction, it is essential that you attend class faithfully. **If you have more than two unexcused absences, it will affect your final grade. Under Writing Program policy, you cannot pass the course if you have more than five unexcused absences.** Three latenesses (more than ten minutes) count as an absence. If you miss class because of a personal or medical emergency, please contact me (or have a dean contact me) as soon as possible. Save your absences until the later part of the term. Do not miss workshop classes except in cases of emergency; workshop absences count as two absences.

Commenting and Grading:

This semester you will write four pieces, each with a different focus. Each piece will be initially submitted as a first version and later, in revised form. In reviewing first versions of your essays and stories, I will make extensive comments and suggest some options in revision. I am also available to meet with you to discuss your writing. Only the revised versions are graded. Pre-draft exercises will be acknowledged with a check and/or brief comments. **It is important that you submit work on the due**

date. In the event of a personal or medical emergency, please contact me (or have a dean contact me) as soon as possible. Late submission of work without an extension may result in a lowered final grade. To pass the course, all required work must be submitted. Your final grade will reflect the quality of your revised essays, the thoughtfulness of your reader/writer notebook exercises, your oral presentations, your attendance, preparation for and participation in class, and your contribution as a reader for your peers. Class attendance and participation count for about 20% of your final grade. For students who entered MIT before summer 2001, receiving a B- or higher in the course means that you have passed Phase I of the Writing Requirement. For students who enrolled in MIT after summer 2001, the Communication (CI) requirement replaces the Writing Requirement.

Writing Objectives:

In commenting on your writing, I will encourage you to:

- *draw upon life experience to create vivid and readable prose
- * address an intelligent, public audience in a graceful style
- *adapt the tools of fiction (setting, character, dialogue) to creative nonfiction
- *develop your ideas and narratives in an interesting, original and coherent manner
- *support your arguments with evidence and use sources creatively and appropriately
- *express yourself clearly in language that uses the conventions of grammar, punctuation, word usage and source citation
- *experiment with different narrative styles and structures
- *title your work in a thoughtful and entertaining fashion

Manuscript Form

Essays and stories should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper, with margins of about an inch all around. In the upper right-hand corner of page 1, type your name, course title, the date, number and type of assignment (e.g. First Version, Essay #1), single-spaced. Your title should be in UPPER CASE, centered and placed about two double spaces beneath this block of information. Paragraph 1 should begin about two double spaces below the title; please number pages! Each essay should be submitted with two copies and a cover letter describing what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your piece.

SAMPLE ESSAY FORM

Tony Sanchez
 21W.731.01:Writing and Experience
 Revision, Essay 1
 Date

TITLE GOES HERE

Conferences

Over the course of the semester, I am available to meet with you in conferences to discuss a particular piece or more general strategies for improving your writing. My role is as a writing coach, to offer feedback and suggest options to you as a writer, as you make decisions about how to plan and revise your work. Conferences offer a rich opportunity to extend the conversations of the seminar about strategies for successful writing. You should come well prepared to conferences to discuss your strategies for a particular essay or type of writing. You may find it helpful to see me in conference at the pre-writing stage of brainstorming and idea generation, at the stage between the first version and revision, or at the midterm point to discuss your progress for the course and your goals for the rest of the term. You can schedule conferences with me in class or through email. **Two conferences are required for the semester.** I will schedule one with you early in the semester; you should also plan on setting up a conference time later on in the term.

Academic Honesty and Originality

As a MIT student, member of our class and the larger community of writers, you are expected to abide by the norms of academic honesty. Borrowing someone else's language and/or ideas without proper acknowledgement is academically dishonest and a form of **plagiarism**, which can have serious academic consequences at MIT.

In class, we'll discuss how to acknowledge sources and how to avoid plagiarism. For different styles of citing sources (MLA, APA), see *Easy Writer, The Mayfield Handbook*.

Writing Center/Writing Resources

The Writing and Communication Center, also offers consultations on student writing. You may visit the Writing Center at any point in the writing process: prewriting, drafting or revising a piece of writing. In addition, The Writing and Communication Center offers advice on preparing oral presentations. It's best to schedule an appointment by calling the Center.

The Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies website also has information on a range of topics of interest to writing students: other writing classes, program advising, requirements for majors, minors and concentrators, and lectures and readings by authors on campus. Each spring the Program awards the Ilona Karmel Writing Prizes for student writers. More information on the Karmel prizes can be found on the website and at the Program office.

Writing Portfolio

Please keep all four assignments (first versions and revisions) and my comments together in a writing portfolio. At the end of the semester, with your final revised piece, you will submit your portfolio, together with a final writer's letter, in which you will reflect on the themes in your writing, the ways in which your writing process and style have changed throughout the course of the semester

and your plans for the future. Please note: your writing portfolio should be kept separately (in a binder with pockets or ring notebook) from your other material for class.

Publishing Your Work

Students are strongly encouraged to craft their essays and stories with a goal of publication. During the semester we will discuss strategies for planning for publication. Some MIT student publications include:

**Counterpoint* -- The main college campus magazine at MIT and Wellesley, published eight times a year. Since 1991, this magazine has served both academic communities--a combined population of 15,000--addressing topics from a broad spectrum of social, political, and cultural issues. Visit *Counterpoint* on the web at <http://counterpoint.mit.edu/>.

**The Tech* – MIT's newspaper at <http://www-tech.mit.edu/>.

**Rune*- A biannual journal of arts and letters containing original work by MIT students, staff, faculty and affiliates at <http://web.mit.edu/rune/www/>.

*The publication websites will include information on submission guidelines. Students can also browse through back issues of *Counterpoint* and *Rune* in the instructor's office.