Nicholas Hengen
hengen@umn.edu
Office: 306A Lind Hall
Office Hours: T: 1000-1100
W 130-230 & By Appt.

**ENGL3027: The Essay**
Credits 4
800-955 T/TH
Amundsun Hall 240
https://moodle.umn.edu/course/view.php?id=8384

## Course Objectives

You've written plenty of essays for school. In this course, we'll focus on how to apply those skills to a broader audience, drawing on the long historical role of "the essay" as a social text. Thus, much of our discussion will deal with how we communicate in a multicultural, mass-mediated democracy: how we share our ideas or air our grievances; how we tell people we disagree with them or convince them to see things our way; how we solve problems. My goals for this course include that you leave with:

-a sense of what kinds of essays exist today (and where they are published)
-a sense of the roles the essay plays in U.S. culture

To these ends, much of our course will consist of reading and discussing essays drawn from a variety of contemporary sources. We'll read essays—about everything from eating contests to financial policy, from racism to state fairs—written by some of the best essayists around, mixed in with a sprinkling of classics from the 20th century.

For most class meetings we will read an essay or two. We'll discuss content—the essay's argument, whether we agree or disagree—but just as much, we'll discuss the essay as a form: how it makes its argument, for many of these essays are as subtle and complex as novels or poems and reward close analysis. This formal analysis will, I hope, help you

-develop an ability to write in diverse essayistic forms
-adopt different voices and positions as a writer

You'll write five essays over the course of the semester. You will do research, you will try on the hat of the reporter, the critic, the artist—to note just a few of the possibilities afforded by the essay today.

## Expectations

I firmly believe a student-driven classroom produces the best learning experience. You are responsible for reading the assigned texts before class and sharing your ideas (or uncertainties) about them in our meetings—whether essays from the course packet or those of your classmates. I will do the same. To say something in class is always a risk; if we all enter our meetings with the understanding that this is a mutual venture—one in which most of us will make some "mistakes"—we can, I hope, have productive discussions. I will ask that you come to class with a willingness to take risks, to suspend closure, and to accept that asking questions is often more important than being "right."

Be especially wary of attendance. The learning that transpires in the classroom can't be "made up." If you need to miss class, please be in touch in advance—talk to me or send an email. It is your responsibility to find out what you miss and your responsibility to turn in what was due; the grades of late papers drop one step every day they're not turned in. Please note: For each absence after your **third**, your final grade will decrease one step (B+ becomes B); if you miss more than **five** sessions, you will not pass this course.

**Office Hours & Communication**

I strongly encourage you to visit me early and often during office hours on the third floor of Lind Hall. Unsurprisingly, students who visit tend to write stronger papers, get higher grades, and go on to lead lives of profound fulfillment.

I'm not always in my office, so the easiest way to reach me is email, which I check regularly. Please check your U of M email regularly as well, as I will contact you with assignments and updates on occasion.

**Texts**

To save you money (I promise!), I have made a course packet, available at Alpha Prints in Dinkytown (1407 4th St SE; 612-379-8535). This is the sole required text. You cannot pass this course without it. If you don't already have it, get it now! We will also read a handful of essays online. Though not in the course packet, such readings—always linked on Moodle—will be required as well.

**Schedule of Reading**

| | Tuesday | Thursday |
|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | | Hardison, "Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay" |
| *The Manifesto* | | |
| 2 | Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" | "The Ten Point Program" [online]<br>"Contract With America" [online] |
| 3 | Singer, from Animal Liberation | Workshop [Manifesto due Friday] |
| *The Op-Ed* | | |
| 4 | "The Opacity of Hope"<br>"The Oath of Office"<br>Whitehead, "The Year of Living Postracially" | Dunlop, "It's Too Hot for Dog on the Menu"<br>Krugman, "Decade at Bernie's" |
| 5 | Workshop [Op-Ed due Friday] | Parker, "Why Me?" |
| *The Portrait* | | |
| 6 | Kinkaid, from A Small Place<br>Davis, from City of Quartz | Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair" |
| 7 | Boyer, "Eviction" | Kaufman, "Fat of the Land" |
| 8 | Baldwin, "Me and My House" | Boo, "The Factory" |
| 9 *Spring Break* | | |
| 10 | [NO CLASS] | Workshop [Portrait due Monday] |
| *The Analytic Essay* | | |
| 11 | Swansburg, "The William F-ing Buckley of Stand-up" [online]<br>Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" | Klein, "Disaster Capitalism" |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 12 | Kozol, "Still Separate, Still Unequal" | Grann, "Trial by Fire" |
| 13 | Pollan, "Power Steer" | "The Giant Pool of Money" [audio online] |
| 14 | [NO CLASS] | Workshop [Analytic Essay due Monday] |
| *The Experimental Essay* | | |
| 15 | Griffin, from A Chorus of Stones | [in class films]<br>Morris, "Stairway to Heaven"<br>[one more TK] |
| 16 | Sacco, "Down! Up!" | Workshop |

**Graded Assignments**

I will not assign topics. If you need help picking one, let me know and I'll be glad to make suggestions. That said, each of these writing assignments will draw on the models we've read. I'm not encouraging you to "copy" someone, but to use our reading and class discussions to guide your writing; as you read and discuss, let yourself develop ideas about what you might want to write about—and about what approaches will (or will not) yield successful results for you.

MANIFESTO (DUE: Week 3)(10%)

You may choose any mode of address to produce your manifesto. I will evaluate your work predominately by thinking about this as a "public" document; the clarity of its position, its rhetorical force.

It should be no more than 1000 words and, if it is very short (eg. 500 words or less) it should be accompanied by a substantial explanation of why this length is appropriate to its ambitions. Sources (if you use them) should be cited in a separate document.

OP-ED (DUE: Week 5)(15%)

The op-ed is not just a short essay. I will evaluate your op-ed on the grounds of how well it fits the conventions of the genre: it should have a clear argument, some use of evidence, and speak to an immediate concern. Put another way: I'll consider it as a submission to a newspaper op-ed page. Would I publish it?

It should be between 800 and 1000 words. All sources should be cited in a separate document. Please note: It should tackle a different issue than your manifesto.

PORTRAIT (DUE: Week 10)(20%)

You may approach the portrait from many perspectives. I expect it to describe something—person, place, thing, era—with precision. In the end, the reader should not just recognize, but understand the object of the portrait in a new way. It should draw on sources—historical, cultural, personal, whatever.

My evaluation will focus, in particular, on how clearly you define your object, how successfully you translate it into words, and, of course, whether the portrait answers the "so what?" question. Your portrait should be about 1750 words long and should include citations—include them as you see fit.

ANALYTIC ESSAY (DUE: Week 14)(20%)
Like the portrait, analysis allows for many approaches. What yours must contain is the clear delineation of a complex "problem" or "issue" and an explanation of what's at stake in the issue. It should showcase considerable knowledge and, unlike the portrait, must stake out a clear "position" (perhaps a solution to the problem; at very least a criticism or affirmation).

Your analytic essay should be about 2000 words long and should include citations—perhaps as footnotes, perhaps in a separate document, depending on what you feel serves your purposes or fits your audience.

Note: It should cover an area substantially different from the portrait.

EXPERIMENTAL ESSAY (10%)
This final essay should revisit one of your previous efforts—it is a "revision" in a new, experimental form. We will look at graphic, video, and verbally experimental essays; you may emulate one of these forms or develop another of your choosing.

Given its experimental nature, there is no expectation of "length" but it should be a substantial revision of the previous work in a wholly new form. In evaluating it, I will consider how the new form is adapted to the issue you chose to revise as well as your effort in revision. It should be accompanied by a brief explanation of the revision process; a consideration of which form suits the issue better. Sources (if you use them) should be cited in a separate document.

EXTRA CREDIT FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
I don't give extra credit. However, in keeping with our consideration of the essay as a social text, I will strongly encourage you to publish your writing. "Public" is part of "publication," of course, and I will define publication as your writing appearing in an established publication from The New Yorker to the Minnesota Daily to local websites like MinnPost. If you do this, I will raise your grade on the assignment two steps (eg. B becomes A-). Start early! This takes time.

PARTICIPATION (20%)
Participation is not just showing up in class! You should be active, sharing your ideas—both in the big group and in small group work—as well as participating in small "daily" assignments. The most key of these is NOTES. As you read, you should write down thoughts or questions you have (from "What does susurrate mean?" to "This reminds me of the Koran."). Your participation includes submitting these thoughts before class, either via Moodle (follow the NOTES link in the top frame) or by writing them on the board when you get to class. We won't engage them directly every day, but seeing what you're thinking about helps me make the class more about your interests and less about mine. I'll expect to see substantial participation in NOTES from each student each week—maybe one longer post, maybe a few shorter ones. Whatever suits you.

CURRATING "NOTES" (5%)
Most weeks, groups of two or three students will be in charge of leading the NOTES discussion on Moodle. That means getting online early, starting the discussion thread for that week's reading, asking useful and provocative questions, perhaps pointing us to other sources, and responding to what others post.