

## Assignment #2: Critical Autobiography/Memoir

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ADVANCED DRAFT DUE DATE: SEPT 11

### OVERVIEW

Your task is to craft a personal essay that analyzes the ways in which a particular experience or series of experiences contributed to your present interest in, understanding of, or attitude toward a particular idea or topic. The “critical” aspect of this assignment is crucial – this personal essay will not be a mere recounting of events, but will instead analyze how those experiences have shaped your identity and, by extension, your participation in a community.

### REQUIREMENTS

In short, your personal essay should:

- *be roughly 1,000 words in length* – this is the equivalent of about four typed, double-spaced pages (with one inch margins). You may also choose an alternate format for your essay, so long as it still runs about 1,000 words in length.
- *establish a specific focus or theme* – do not try to present your entire life’s story in 1,000 words! Instead, try narrowing your focus to a specific experience, object, or person.
- *incorporate critical reflection* on the events described (for example, what specific lesson/value/behavior/interest did you develop as a result of the experience(s) you are discussing? How has this shaped your present interests or behaviors?)
- *be organized in an interesting, yet logical, fashion*
- *be appropriately developed with specific examples, description, and vivid imagery*

### STEP 1: READ AND GET INSPIRED

Read the sample essays assigned for homework, and take note of their approaches. How are they similar? How are they different? How does each author pinpoint a focus for his/her narrative? How is each autobiography organized? How much detail is included? How do the narratives begin? How do they end?

### STEP 2: DEVELOP A THEME OR FOCUS

It’s important to find a focus that will anchor your autobiography. You may want to think ahead to how you want to use your writing portfolio. For example, if you are approaching your portfolio as something you might use to represent your professional identity, then you might use your intended career interest as a focus (e.g., pinpointing a moment where your interest in a particular field started – what experience/event/person first inspired you?). Some other ideas for approaching this assignment:

- Focus on a moment of enlightenment: an event that helped you see some truth about yourself, your family, or the world for the first time
- Focus on a moment of confrontation with the unknown or with people or situations that tested your values or challenged your identity in some way
- Focus on a situation where you found yourself included in or excluded from a particular group or community
- Focus on a moment of conflict between your own experience and conventional wisdom: doing something that couldn’t be done, failing or struggling with something described as easy, finding value in something rejected by society, etc.

### **STEP 3: DRAFTING**

Getting Started: When you *start* drafting, it's a good idea to let everything spill onto the page – turn off your “editor” voice for now. Write down everything that comes into your mind, no matter how irrelevant it may seem. Include descriptions of your emotions, both past and present. Include dialogue and words from other “characters” in your story. Use descriptive words and vivid imagery. Use your senses to describe settings, events, and people. Write until you simply cannot write anymore. Then, take a break and give yourself some distance from your draft.

Focusing your Draft: When you return to your draft, bring a different set of “eyes” to your writing. As you read over what you've already written, which parts seem to be the most compelling? Are there any sentences that stand out as being particularly powerful or interesting? Are there any sentences that would make for a great first line, or “hook”? Which parts seem irrelevant, repetitive, or “boring,” now that you've had some time away from the draft?

### **STEP 4: CHOOSE AN ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY**

Once you have an idea of what you might cover in terms of content, you'll need to decide how you want to organize and present that content. In every story, events are ordered in some way. While you cannot alter the order that events occurred in your experience, you have *many* options for how you might present those events and commentary to readers. Remember, the sequencing of events need not be chronological – you may, for example, choose to organize your autobiography by topic instead of by chronology. Choose an organization strategy that will help you to advance your main idea, or the “point” of your essay. You may want to return to some of the sample essays read for homework and note the different strategies for organization each of those authors take.

### **STEP 5: GET FEEDBACK AND REVISE, REVISE, REVISE**

Writing is a social process; therefore, it's very important for ALL writers to get feedback on their works-in-progress, to get a sense of how the text is being perceived by readers. Consider finding one or two students in class to share your early drafts with – set a date to exchange drafts and offer feedback on what aspects of the draft seem to be going well and what aspects could use further revision. You will also receive feedback on your advanced draft from me and from your peers during Studio Review on Sept. 11, but remember: this draft will receive a grade, so you'll probably want to do some considerable workshopping and revising in advance to make sure you've met all criteria for the assignment.

## GRADING STANDARDS: CRITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### *FOCUS/THEME* – 15 Points

The autobiography establishes a clear focus and effectively connects the narrative to that focused idea. The essay is more than a simple recounting of life events; instead, events are developed in the context of a narrow controlling idea and purpose.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT* – 15 points

The narrative offers a clear analysis of the ways in which the experiences/objects/people presented shaped the author's identity, including (but not limited to) spurring a lifelong interest in a certain hobby, leading to a particular choice of career, changing the author's perspective on a particular idea, marking the author's inclusion in a particular community, etc. In other words, the author answers the "so what?" question by explaining the larger meaning of the experiences presented.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *ORGANIZATION* – 15 Points

The essay's events are sequenced in a logical fashion that is effective for conveying the ideas presented. The organization pattern enhances the subject matter by keeping readers engaged and leading them seamlessly through the narrative. The analytical and descriptive elements of the essay avoid compartmentalization and are instead effectively integrated into a cohesive whole.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *DEVELOPMENT* – 15 points

The autobiography adheres to the length requirements (roughly 1,000 words, or 4 double-spaced pages, or equivalent in an alternate format). The narrative uses specific examples and imagery to illustrate the experiences being discussed. The essay incorporates vivid language and sufficient detail to effectively develop important characters, scenes, and settings. The essay effectively develops both descriptive and analytical elements of the essay.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

### *COHERENCE* – 10 points

The autobiography demonstrates a solid command of written standard English. Entries are generally free of sentence-level errors, none of which impede the communication of ideas.

Poor Fair Good Excellent

**TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 70**