

**The I's Have It**

Reading and Writing the Personal Essay

English CIHR

Fall 2024

Michael Pollan

Class session: Monday 3-5:45

Location: TBD

Office hours: Tuesdays 3-5, by appointment, Lamont Library 411

NOTE: The class guests listed are not confirmed and likely to change.

There are few literary forms quite as flexible as the personal essay. The word comes from the French verb *essai*, “to attempt,” hinting at the provisional or experimental mood of the genre. The conceit of the personal essay is that it captures the individual’s act of thinking on the fly, typically in response to a prompt or occasion. The form offers the rare freedom to combine any number of narrative tools, including memoir, reportage, history, political argument, anecdote, and reflection. In this writing workshop, we will read essays beginning with Montaigne, who more or less invented the form, and then on to a varied selection of his descendants, including George Orwell, E.B. White, James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, David Foster Wallace and Rebecca Solnit. We will draft and revise essays of our own in a variety of lengths and types, and write pastiches of others, including one longer essay of ambition. A central aim of the course will be to help you develop a voice on the page and learn how to deploy the first person—not merely for the purpose of self-expression but as a tool for telling a story, conducting an inquiry or pressing an argument.

Books we will rely on:

\*Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*

\*Phillip Lopate, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay* (anthology)

\*Phillip Lopate, *To Show and To Tell*

\*Tracy Kidder & Richard Todd, *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*

\* Andre Aciman, ed. *Best American Essays 2020*

\*please purchase in hard copy. On order at Harvard Coop:

<https://tinyurl.com/F21-ENGL-CIHR-1>

**Google drive for class materials:**

**TK**

**Expectations:**

In addition to several brief assignments and exercises, each student will complete one full-fledged personal essay of between 1,500 and 2,500 words. Students will also be expected to write a reading response to the weekly readings, to be added to their essayist journal, which will be submitted at various unpredictable times.

Intermediate deadlines—for pitches, outlines and overtures—are as important as final deadlines.

Students will be paired for editing purposes, and you will be evaluated on your editing as well as your writing and class participation. You will be expected to lead the workshop discussion of your writer's drafts.

All students will be expected to schedule at least one appointment with me during office hours *before* the middle of the term.

No absences or late arrivals without prior permission, except in an emergency. No use of laptops, tablets or phones during class, unless the professor explicitly gives permission.

Deadlines and submissions: Missing a deadline is a serious infraction in journalism and so it will be in this class. All assignments should be submitted to me at Michael\_pollan@fas.harvard.edu by midnight on the date specified, or to the list serve if indicated. All assignments should be in the form of Microsoft Word files and *should have your name—not mine!—in the file name*.

**Attendance:**

We only meet once a week, so it is imperative you come to every class, not only in body but in mind, i.e., prepared and ready to offer us your best energies and full attention. Unavoidable absences must be cleared with the instructor at least 24 hours in advance; you will be expected to get notes from a classmate and complete any missed assignments. Students who don't complete an assignment will receive an incomplete. More than one excused absence will affect your grade; more than two may result in failing the class.

**Grading:** Evaluations will be based on the following formula:

50% Writing. The quality of your written assignments and final essay.

25% Editing. The quality of your editorial contribution to your colleague's essays.

25% Class participation and conduct. The quality of your engagement in class discussion, as well as any formal oral presentations.

### **Academic Dishonesty & Plagiarism:**

The high academic standard at Harvard is reflected in each degree that is awarded. As a result, it is up to every student to maintain this high standard by ensuring that all academic work reflects his/her own ideas or properly attributes the ideas to the original sources.

These are some basic expectations of students with regards to academic integrity:

Any work submitted should be your own individual thoughts, and should not have been submitted for credit in another course unless you have prior written permission to re-use it in this course from this instructor.

All assignments must use "proper attribution," meaning that you have identified the original source of words or ideas that you reproduce or use in your assignment. This includes drafts and homework assignments!

If you are unclear about expectations, ask your instructor.

### **Use of Artificial Intelligence:**

Handing in assignments written by anyone other than the author—you—is plagiarism; that goes for Chatbots as well as other humans. Using AI as a research tool is encouraged, however any facts produced by an AI must be checked by you. Finding creative ways to use AI in your work is fine, but must be disclosed to the reader.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the [Accessible Education Office](#) (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*

### **Biography of instructor:**

Michael Pollan is the author, most recently, of *This is Your Mind on Plants* (2021). His earlier book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, was named one of the ten best books of 2006 by both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. He is also the author of *How to Change Your Mind*, *Cooked*, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, *Food Rules*, *A Place of My Own*, and *Second Nature*. A longtime contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine*, Pollan is the recipient of numerous

journalistic awards, including the James Beard Award for best magazine series and the Reuters-I.U.C.N. 2000 Global Award for Environmental Journalism and the Washburn Award for science communication. His articles have been anthologized in *Best American Science Writing*, *Best American Essays* and the *Norton Book of Nature Writing*. In 2010 he was named to Time Magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Pollan served for many years as executive editor of Harper's Magazine. He has been the Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at UC Berkeley (2003-2021) and a Professor of the Practice of Non-Fiction, as well as the Lewis K. Chan Arts Lecturer, at Harvard, since 2016.

## **Tentative Schedule of Classes**

### **Class One — Introduction**

September 9, 2024

Goals of the class; expectations and procedures; introductions

What is the essay form and what is it particularly good for?

Varieties and narrative strategies of the first person.

Read together and analyze "Names" by Paul Crenshaw in *Best American Essays 2016* (Franzen, ed.) Or "Snakebit" by Alia Volz in *Best American Essays 2017* (Jamison, ed.)

First Assignment: Adopt-a-Tree exercise in attention. Choose a specific tree in Cambridge and visit it weekly, observing it as closely as you can for at least 20 minutes. Each week write a few notes about it or sketch it in your journal. What can you learn about it? Consult a field guide. How does it change? How do you change observing it? What story can it tell? What is your tree's point of view? You're collecting thoughts and facts for a future essay, and learning the art of attention.

Start essayist notebook.

Write a 750-word essay about a particular food or food practice that tells a story about you and where/what/who you come from. Email to me no later than Saturday, September 14 at midnight.

### **Class Two — The Reader Over Your Shoulder**

September 16, 2024

Readings: "Politics and the English Language" by George Orwell

*The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White

"The Problem of Style" in *Good Prose* (CH. 5)

Deprogramming the academic essayist. A fresh look at leads, voice, structure, conceit. How to spot and kill off clichés, stale language and "journalese." Cultivating your literary superego.

Workshop food essays. Discuss trees.

Sign up: for essay presentations. (Pick the week you will select one of the assigned essays—or another—and present it to the class, leading the discussion for 10-15 minutes.)

Assignment: Rewrite your food essay, scrupulously following—or deliberately violating—the prose rules set forth by Orwell, Strunk and White, and Kidder and Todd (and Pollan). Due Saturday, September 21, at midnight.

### **Class Three — Getting Limber: Essay Exercises**

September 23, 2024

Readings: Virginia Woolf, “The Death of The Moth”; “Street Haunting” (anthology)  
Editor’s Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*  
Kidder & Todd, “Essays” in *Good Prose*

Workshop food essays, continued. Approaches to revision.

Assign peer editors

Assignment: Write a pastiche of Virginia Woolf, using Harvard Square or the campus for your stroll, or some meticulously observed phenomenon a la “The Death of The Moth.” Mimic and emphasize some aspect of her approach to the essay form: to attention, to daily life, to walking, to nature (your tree?), to English prose, etc. Make it yours. No more than 1000 words. Due to me and your editor Saturday, Saturday September 28, by midnight.

### **Class Four – Varieties of the First Person (Part I)**

September 30, 2024

Readings: Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne* (pp. 1-22)  
Michel de Montaigne, “On Books”; “Of a Monstrous Child” (anthology)  
Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That” (anthology)  
Zadie Smith, “Some Notes on Attunement”

What is “voice” and “persona” and how is it created on the page and in a life?

Workshop Woolf pastiches

Assignment: Rewrite pastiches for next class. Submit to peer editor October 5. Peer editors should mark up and comment on rewrites and then submit to me in class Oct. 7.

## **Class Five— Varieties of the First Person (Part II)**

October 7, 2024

Readings: Sei Shonagon, “Hateful Things” (anthology)  
Phillip Lopate, “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character”  
(in *To Show and to Tell*);  
Richard Rodriguez, “Late Victorians” (anthology)

The multiplying of first-person personae and uses of irony.  
Workshop Woolf pastiches.

### Assignments:

1. Write your own 750-word version of “Hateful Things” that, in addition to listing things you hate, opens a narrative window on you and your world. Due to me and your editor Wednesday 10/16 at midnight.
2. For next class, bring a powerfully effective lede from an essay you’ve found; write a one paragraph character sketch of the narrator as revealed in that lede.
3. Give some serious thought to a topic for you final essay.

## **OCTOBER 14 NO CLASS UNIVERSITY HOLIDAY**

## **Class Six — Beginnings: Leads and the Overture**

October 21, 2024

Readings: Kidder & Todd, “Beginnings” in *Good Prose*  
Food essays: M.F.K. Fisher, “Once A Tramp, Always....”  
([www.newyorker.com/magazine/1968/09/07/once-a-tramp-always](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1968/09/07/once-a-tramp-always))  
David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”  
Jiayang Fan “The Gatekeepers Who Get to Decide What Food is Disgusting”. New Yorker May 17, 2021 (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/17/the-gatekeepers-who-get-to-decide-what-food-is-disgusting>)

When and where to begin the longer essay? Teasing themes, finding a structure.  
Beginning in the middle. “Nut” graphs, “Overtures” and the “Promise.” Creating suspense. Discuss classic leads from essay anthology.

Read in class a query letter for a reported essay. (Mooallem or Pollan or Weightwatchers)

### Assignment:

1. Write a 750 word essay either about the object of your attention exercise. Due October 26 at midnight.
2. After consulting outside of class with your peer editor, write a one-page pitch letter for your final essay project, a 1,500-2,500 word personal essay on a theme of your choice.

The idea should require reporting or research of some kind. Come to class prepared to present your idea at the “editorial meeting” during October 28 session.

### **Class Seven — Out in the World: The Reported Essay (I)**

October 28, 2024

Readings: Phillip Lopate, “Research and Personal Writing” (*To Show and to Tell*)  
John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Upon This Rock”  
Leslie Jamison, “Devil’s Bait”  
Philip Gerard, “The Upright Pronoun”

Gathering information (global and local); sources and resources; reading and interviewing technique; organizing your story file (show article files on laptop).

Workshop nature essays. Editorial meeting on ideas for final essays: verbal pitches.

Assignment: Write a 750-word essay about an animal due November 2, midnight. Work on your final essay - make notes, read, outline, begin: Draft a lede or, ideally, overture (first section), for your final essay project. Due to editor and me November 9 by midnight.

### **Class Eight—Out in the World: The Reported Essay (II)**

November 4, 2024

Charles Siebert, “What Does a Parrot Know About PTSD?”  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/magazine/what-does-a-parrot-know-about-ptsd.html>

John Berger, “On Looking at Animals”

GUEST: Charles Siebert, contributing writer, *New York Times Magazine*

Workshop animal essays with our guest

First draft of final essay due November 16 at midnight. Editors to write cover memos, outlining strengths and weaknesses and proposing a strategy for revision. Those due to me November 18.

### **Class Nine — The Essay as Memoir, The Memoir as Essay**

November 11, 2024

Readings: George Orwell, “Such, Such Were the Joys” (anthology)  
James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son” (anthology)  
Mary Gaitskill, “On Not Being a Victim” (*Harper’s*)

NOVEMBER 16 Essay drafts due!

### **Class Ten – The Memoir as Profile: The Self Reflected in the Other**

November 18, 2024

Readings: Natalia Ginsburg, “He and I” (anthology)  
Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence” (anthology)  
Jill Lepore, “The Deadline: On Losing a Friend” (*New Yorker*)  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/the-lingering-of-loss>

Writing about other people.

Workshop selected drafts and cover memos.

**Second draft due November 23, midnight.**

### **Class Eleven — The Personal Essay as Argument**

November 25, 2024

Readings: Philip Lopate, “Exploration or Argument?” (*To Show and to Tell*)  
Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me”  
(<https://www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>)  
Teju Cole, “A Reader’s War”  
Michael Pollan, “An Animal’s Place” or “Why Bother?”

Workshop second drafts

### **Class Twelve — Endings, Revision and the Role of the Editor**

December 2, 2024

Readings: Phillip Lopate, “How Do You End an Essay?” (*To Show and to Tell*)  
Seymour Krim, “For my Brothers and Sisters in the Failure Business”  
(anthology)  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up” (anthology)

What the editor and writer-as-editor do:

Robert Gottlieb interview (*Paris Review*)  
Kidder & Todd, “Being Edited and Editing” in *Good Prose*  
George Saunders, “What writers really do when they write”  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/what-writers-really-do-when-they-write>)

How to sneak up on your own work to read it with the eye of an editor.

Workshop second drafts



**FINAL DEADLINE: final draft of your essay to me by the end of the week**