



A Teacher's Guide to

The Eloquent Essay

An Anthology of Classic and Creative Nonfiction

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INTRODUCTION

The Eloquent Essay is a collection of short nonfiction works from the late 1930's to the 1990's by several canonical authors and some equally talented, but less well-known, contemporary writers. I have selected these works because they provide the widest possible definition of the words "eloquent" and "essay."

One fact of life all bright students notice, sooner or later, is the gap that exists between the kind of writing they are asked to do in school and the kind of writing their teachers give them to read. The expository essay, the emphasis on a set number of "body paragraphs" and a thesis-restating conclusion, the analysis of literary themes and personal responses to characters: these forms and topics serve a purpose and provide models for one approach to sound composition. But in the pages of books and periodicals, dramatically different values apply. In those contexts, forms are often more elastic, even digressive. Passion matters. A studied neutral tone is not the highest good, and the unexpected always triumphs over the predictable and the redundant. Works of nonfiction assigned in school frequently display qualities that have little to do with the rigid patterns students take for granted-through no fault of their own-when the word "essay" is invoked.

The premise of The Eloquent Essay as a classroom text is that students in English classes write too much, and in too proscribed a fashion, about the fiction, drama, and poetry in the reading curriculum and need to work in a variety of forms about a wider range of topics. Most of the assignments suggested by the readings in this book are designed to guide students away from an understanding of an essay as the product of a ready-made formula (introduction-body-conclusion), a grid to be filled in with an immediately evident and provable thesis.

While it is possible, and even desirable, to have students write about the essay they have just read in this text, the majority of the suggested assignments ask that students devise their own topics and base the form of their essay on the model suggested by that particular writer. In developing an anecdotal essay, open letter, portrait, or Socratic dialogue of their own, students will have the opportunity to learn about how much analytical and creative writing have in common, how style and structure play a vital part in the success of an essay as they do in a novel or a poem. They will also be using words-and becoming attuned to their power to stir, persuade, and even unsettle-in new and surprising ways.

I. AN ANECDOTAL ESSAY

A Hanging / Space is Numeric

George Orwell and Ellen Ullman are good starting-points for introducing students to the idea that thought-provoking essays come in many guises. In fact, most class discussions of these two works will have to begin with the obvious: even if the authors themselves did not regard "A Hanging" and "Space Is Numeric" as short stories, why don't we see them in that light? They have plots (minimal as they are), dialogue, characters, dramatic momentum, and little if any explicit analysis of ideas the writers want us to think about. Why call them essays at all?

Some questions to raise in class about "A Hanging" (to lead to a view of Orwell's anecdote as essentially a political and philosophical argument against capital punishment):

- Why don't we ever learn the charge against the man being hanged?

- How does Orwell characterize the representatives of law-and-order (e.g., the superintendent of the jail, the head jailer)? What does he make us feel about their right to judge, to take a life?
- Would it make a difference if Orwell had set his anecdotal essay in his native England rather than in a colonialist setting in Asia?
- What role does the dog play in making the reader think twice about what is going to happen on the gallows?
- Why does Orwell dwell on a small moment like the one in which the prisoner avoids the puddle?
- What details at the moment of execution are most important to Orwell's purpose of having his reader question such executions?
- Why did Orwell choose Francis's ghoulish anecdote as his conclusion?
- Why is the title so blunt?
- What might be different about the writing or structure of "A Hanging" if it were a true short story rather than an essay?

Questions to raise in class about "Space Is Numeric" (to lead to a view of Ullman's anecdote as a reflection on the double-edged nature of technology, a creative but dehumanizing development—almost an obsession in America—that paradoxically helps human beings):

- Why doesn't Ullman tell us at the start who the project is being designed for and whether all of these hours at work are for a good cause?
- Why does she use so much technical jargon that non-computer people will struggle over?
- How does Ullman describe the experience of working all through the weekend with her colleagues on this project: in this scene appealing, disturbing, passionate, neurotic?
- Why doesn't Ullman tell the woman she meets at the book-signing that her project is a database to help AIDS patients? What is she telling us about the world of technophiles versus "end users"?
- Who, if anyone, is in the right and who is in the wrong in the confrontational session between the "end users" who need the program to help their clients and Ullman, who has developed it? Could the problems at this meeting have been avoided, or are they inevitable when laymen interact with professionals from a highly specialized field?
- How does Ullman show us in this scene that she knows that language is part of the problem, that the "end users" and the programmers live in different worlds? How do the references to viruses (AIDS, computer viruses) reinforce this gap?
- Do the benefits of a computer-driven world outweigh the cost, in Ullman's view? Can we determine her view with the same certainty that we determined Orwell's?

For both essays: did the class end up thinking more actively about the state's right to take human life or the strange ways computers have altered our lives because the forum was an anecdotal rather than an expository essay?

Some discussion would also be helpful in noting how Orwell and Ullman established themselves as engaging characters in their own vignettes (e.g., Orwell as the odd-man-out, an ambivalent British colonial officer among Burmese natives; Ullman's obsessiveness when in cyberspace, her sexual orientation, her humanity compared to that of the woman she meets at her book-signing, her good will toward her colleagues and the people who will be using the program). If the narrator remains a vague or abstract presence in an anecdotal essay, we are less likely to be caught up in the urgency of the story of the underlying issue.

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT

Write an anecdotal essay with Orwell's and Ullman's models in mind. Remember that you are aiming to do three things: to tell a very short, plausible story, a vignette; direct your reader to think about an issue that has meaning for people beyond the narrator of the anecdote—preferably without stating outright what that issue is; plant enough clues along the way to suggest to the reader what attitude toward that issue you believe he or she should adopt or consider.

To the teacher. As much as any other assignment in this guide, this one will involve a prolonged period of brainstorming and revision. In my experience, some students quickly come upon the essence of the anecdote they want to tell, while others are blocked until they hear about the different kinds of material their peers are trying out. Other students benefit from peer review and teacher responses at various stages, even when they have an excellent premise. They need feedback about the clarity or subtlety of the issue they want to emerge from the way they are shaping their minimal plot and describing their characters. Students should also be reminded that if they are using an event from personal experience, they don't want to worry about fidelity to "the way it really happened." The "truth" is in the material they have included or excluded, not in the facts of their actual experience. A fictitious anecdote is going to fulfill the assignment as well as an authentically autobiographical one.

I have also found it useful to tell students about other anecdote essays from previous classes that worked well.

Examples: One student wrote about her difficulties in finding a meaningful summer job and the influence of a family friend in securing her work as an assistant in a lab of a major corporation. She effectively described many things: her enhanced self-image as she pleased her boss and her parents, the lab itself, the medical advances the company was known for. Only by degrees did the nature of the some of the work in the lab become apparent to the reader (just as it became apparent only gradually to the narrator), and a moral dilemma presented itself when the student realized that some experiments were being performed on animals. Rather than writing a polemic about "animal rights," though, she was dramatizing in her anecdotal essay—like Ellen Ullman in "Space Is Numeric"—the difficulty of accepting the fact that most situations are rarely black and white, and that productive scientific advances might come at an ugly price. (In one version of the essay, she ended by leaving her job to the dismay of her family; in a later draft, she decided to stay and live with her qualms as she had in real life.)

Other students wrote essays about their involvement in school athletics that were ultimately about the nature (good and bad) of competition, or the role and motivation of overzealous parents in promoting competition; about their college-admissions interview experiences and learning to play a role or adjust to absurd pressures that say more about society's values than they do about the college applicant; about the different ways in which counselors at a summer camp treated (sometimes unconsciously) students of racial backgrounds and cultural beliefs (see Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue").

II. A SEGMENTED ESSAY

The Guilty Vicarage

In contrast to the usual mode of essay writing in which the "seams" don't show, W.H. Auden has placed the seams front and center. Like a sleuth himself, he takes apart his object of study step by step. His wish to analyze detective novels and the method he has chosen for that analysis imply that our tastes, even our hobbies, are never random or inconsequential—and, when probed deeply enough, say a great deal about us.

Questions and topics for discussion about "The Guilty Vicarage":

- How many separate headings, or subtitles, has Auden used? Are they all essential? Could any be combined into larger headings?
- Why does he begin with the personal "Confession" before moving on to the more precise quality of his "Definition"? Would it have been a mistake to begin with the "Definition"?
- Auden is aware that too abstract a tone throughout will make detective novels seem less juicy than they really are. How does giving certain detectives their own headings (Sherlock Holmes, Inspector French, Father Brown) deal with that problem? What has he said about these famous detectives that would make his readers want to try one of the stories they appear in?
- Auden analyzes himself in the essay ("A Confession"), the topic in an overall way ("Definition," "The Murderer,"), and the topic in its aspects ("The Milieu," "The Victim," "The Murderer," "The Suspects"), but he goes a step further when he offers comments about those who share his passion for detective novels. What does he say about detective-novel readers in his concluding segment? What advantages is

there to writing about fellow fans?

- Are any of Auden's conclusions debatable? Why, for instance, does he conclude that the execution of the murderer is preferable to his suicide at the end of a novel? Or why should subsequent victims be "more innocent than the initial victim"?
- What does the title mean? Why such a cryptic title for an essay that purports to be an open and direct?
- The use of "I": in the realm of classroom writing absolutes, avoiding the first person pronoun is usually at the top of the list. When and why does Auden refer directly to himself? What are the advantages of a sparing use of "I" in this type of essay?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT

Write an essay that discusses something—a pastime, a sport or instrument you play, a genre of film or literature—that gives you a great deal of pleasure but isn't something everyone you know likes or even understands. In the style of "The Guilty Vicarage," break down the component parts of that subject for the purpose of clarifying its exact nature and appeal—to throw light, as W.H. Auden writes, on what for you is "its magical function." The final result should be to make your reader feel that there are more dimensions to that subject than he or she had originally supposed. Devise as many separate headings as you need and provide some comment about your fellow aficionados.

III. ANALYSIS / SELF-ANALYSIS

Writing and Analyzing a Story / Becoming a Doctor

In "Writing and Analyzing a Story" and "Becoming a Doctor," Eudora Welty and Lewis Thomas offer insightful commentaries on their respective professions—fiction-writing and medicine—that go beyond criticism or inspiration. They aren't afraid to be personal, to reveal their doubts, to make demands on their readers. They aren't writing to convince anyone to join their ranks, though the way in which they express themselves make their work sound both complex and exhilarating. In subtle ways, they are also analyzing themselves in front of us (Welty is no ivory-tower genius, Thomas is not the impersonal scientist); their essays aren't cool, "objective" commentaries, but reflections by individuals who see themselves as part of the wider world. Students might take note of the ways in which the personality of the writer is present throughout the analysis.

The Welty essay will obviously work better if the class has read the short story, "No Place for You, My Love," that she writes about in detail, but it is not essential.

Questions and topics for class discussions about "Writing and Analyzing a Story":

- Welty begins by saying, in effect, that she would rather not write this essay about her work as a story writer. Why does she feel this hesitation? Why does she tell us about her hesitation if she is going to write the essay anyway? And so why does she write the essay, given those reservations?
- To the limited extent that she is willing to generalize at all, where does the inspiration and impulse to write a story come from, according to Welty? Can you think of any other writers for whom this might be true? Can you think of some writers whose purposes aren't as gentle, who don't seem to be trying "to praise, to love, to call up into view"?
- The critic (or critical reader) and the writer are different beings, Welty insists. What are those differences?
- What does the reader learn from Welty's commentary on "No Place for You, My Love"—about the development of the story, about the nature of creative writing, about Welty's outlook, temperament, and imagination? Would the essay have worked as well if she hadn't analyzed a specific story?
- In what ways is Welty still acting as a story writer, rather than a literary critic, in this essay? Were there any phrases or sentences that seem to come from the pen of a creative writer, that are more lush,

descriptive, or “story-like” than tersely analytical?

- Some writers are monumentally vain about their accomplishments; their ego is the wellspring of their talent. Is this the case with Eudora Welty or not? What does she mean by invoking in the last paragraph a third element (an “underlying third character”) that is a part of the process along with the writer and the published work? Why doesn’t she end the essay with a statement about herself and her stories?

Questions and topics for class discussion about “Becoming a Doctor”:

- What is the “dilemma of modern medicine, and the underlying central flaw in medical education” that Lewis Thomas draws our attention to at the beginning of the essay? What does he mean by calling the drive “to do something” a problem in his profession? Aren’t doctors supposed “to do something”?
- Outline the brief history of the profession that Thomas provides. What highlights does he focus on? Why does he feel it necessary to give the reader a thumbnail sketch of how his profession evolved?
- In what ways does Thomas feel medicine has progressed? In what ways is it still groping in the dark?
- What are his two proposals for improvement?
- What picture of Lewis Thomas emerged from this essay? Is he the sort of physician you would want to consult? Why or why not? What is your view of his feelings about being a doctor? Can you point to particular sentences or phrases that clarified your view?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT

Write an essay about a hobby you enjoy or an occupation (a fantasy or otherwise) you could imagine devoting your life to. Write about this pursuit and the pleasures it provides, borrowing some of the methods illustrated by Welty or Thomas. Can you step outside your own interest for a moment and consider what questions those who do not share our interest might have about this society? You might include a brief history of the activity and the criticisms that could be made of it, as Thomas does, or focus on a highly specific aspect of it, like Welty when she studies a particular story. One goal: to provide an analysis of the activity that explains its qualities to the outsider, while offering a self-portrait that suggests the ways in which you and that beloved pursuit are a good match.

IV. PROVOCATION

The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank / The Cowboy and His Cow

Most writers work hard to be ingratiating, and students are taught to avoid giving offense in their own essays. Controversial ideas are fair game, but no one is supposed to be set on edge in the process. Bruno Bettelheim and Edward Abbey operate from a different intellectual framework. A thinking audience for them is an audience that has been provoked, roused out of its complacency. They can accept an angry response, but not an indifferent one.

In “The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank,” Bettelheim deals with a vast, troubling topic—how timidly most of us react in the face of uncontainable evil and violence, how urgently we try to preserve “normal” life when life itself is no longer normal, and how naïve and dangerous that approach can be. By focusing on Anne Frank and her family, he has chosen an instantly and universally recognizable symbolic context for his argument. However, he has also been critical of a postwar “sacred cow,” a story everyone knows and has been moved by.

Questions and topics for class discussion about “The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank”:

- What does Bettelheim mean at the beginning of the essay when he calls Nazism a “blow dealt to

modern man's narcissism"? Are the events of the Holocaust different from acts of violence and hatred in contemporary America?

- Given the popularity of the diary, Bettelheim knew that he would be accused of blaming the Franks for their own death. Is he doing that, in part or in full? How does he try to avoid that accusation?
- Mark those sentences that give the clearest expression of what Bettelheim feels the Franks did that was wrong.
- Why does Bettelheim bring up the story of Marga Minco? Why is her book not as famous and beloved as *The Diary of Anne Frank*?
- What angers Bettelheim about the ending of the play and the movie based on Anne Frank's diary?
- What other examples of suicidal inertia and active resistance does Bettelheim provide?
- Is the fact that Bettelheim was a concentration camp prisoner himself relevant to this argument? Does it make his views more acceptable, or is it in part an unfair advantage?

In many ways, Edward Abbey in "The Cowboy and His Cow" is a tricky model for young writers. Asking students to write—and, best of all, deliver before the class—a bold, direct speech that isn't afraid of insulting people flies in the face of most public-speaking instruction. The axiom "don't alienate your audience," though, often engenders in student work bland prose and suffocating politeness. Some speculation about Abbey's popularity might be productive in class discussions. If Abbey was known to be outrageous, even rude, in his writing and public speaking, why did he enjoy such a large following? Why did the University of Montana invite him to speak if the organizers knew what they were getting? Vivid expression and ruthless honesty have an automatic appeal in some quarters. No one ever daydreamed or dozed off while reading or listening to Abbey.

Questions and topics for class discussions about "The Cowboy and His Cow":

- Why does Abbey begin an analysis of a public issue like land use with a personal anecdote? How does this vignette clarify the personality of the speaker and foreshadow some of the ideas to come?
- At what point does Abbey begin to get seriously nasty? Does this rough tone come out of the blue, or has the audience been led to expect strong views and strong words?
- Why does Abbey include the audience response as interjections in his text?
- In the midst of so much invective, is it possible to lose sight of how much dispassionate analysis Abbey is providing in his speech. Mark some of the passages that depart from his "shock value" technique and simply offer reasonable commentary.
- Is Abbey's hyperbole ever funny? How can a wild exaggeration hint at a serious thought (e.g., when Abbey says that he would stock every water hole in the West with alligators, what is he driving at?)
- Like most critics, Abbey is not only against something; he is for something. What solutions does he offer to the problem of overgrazing? Why isn't he concerned that his listeners will miss the sense of his argument and remember only the provocation?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

In the spirit of Edward Abbey, choose a radical viewpoint about a traditionally accepted opinion. Write a speech that says something about your interest in or involvement with the topic, bluntly articulates your perspective and the logical failings of the other side, and characterizes the oppositions in critical, even sarcastic terms. Assume that if you haven't offended or astounded someone, your speech is not a successful one.

In the spirit of Bruno Bettelheim, write an essay about a traditionally revered figure. Offer an alternative view of that too-universally respected person—Washington, Lincoln, a contemporary sports, political, or entertainment star—that suggests the failings of that person's outlook, influence, or achievements and comments on what our unquestioning regard for that individual says about us. Unlike Abbey, you are not aiming to insult anyone, but you should (like Bettelheim) shock some readers by your refusal to go along with the common view of that figure and what he or she represents.

V. AN OPEN LETTER

Letter from a Birmingham Jail

In a time when letter-writing itself is not as common as it once was, the idea of an “open letter”—a communication supposedly written to another individual or group of individuals, yet actually meant for wider distribution—might strike some students as odd, but Dr. King’s example of this form of essay is a perfect expression of its rich potential.

Given the essay’s length and complexity, a chronological outline on the board (preferably prepared by the students) will be essential for manageable discussions of King’s style and purpose.

For example:

- King begins by acknowledging his reader-adversaries and their concerns (i.e., the criticism of him as on “outside agitator” are probably sincere, he notes in paragraph 1); he establishes a link to the people he is addressing, even though the “letter” is obviously meant for the world.
- He provides the “small answer” to the criticisms raised by the people the letter is ostensibly directed to (King: I was asked to come to Birmingham, I am affiliated with an organization in this city).
- He moves quickly to the larger answer to the criticisms (“I am in Birmingham because injustice is here... Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider”).
- He then articulates a history of the deeper issue—from its specific and pragmatic side (i.e., the civil rights workers waited to begin their protest until after the city election for sheriff to avoid influencing the voters) to the philosophical heart of the matter (St. Augustine: “An unjust law is no law at all”).
- He reverts to the personal: King questions the religious leaders themselves (is their “lukewarm acceptance” of desegregation very different from the “outright rejection” of the vocal racists?); he moves back to a more frequent use of “I” in this part of the essay (i.e., “I must make two honest confessions to you...”).
- He warns about what will happen if the position argued in the letter is rejected (“If [the Negro’s] repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history”).
- He provides statements about the benefits that will follow from adopting his arguments (e.g., a revitalized church, a revitalized country).
- He concludes with a pointed contrast (the violent police force of Birmingham pushing and cursing elderly black women and the “disinherited children of God” who have chosen to fight back), a combined criticism/compliment (i.e., if you could only see what was happening on the streets, I know you would not side with the police), and some studied self-deprecation (i.e., I have taken up too much of your time with this long letter).

Beyond noting (by way of the outline) King’s ambitious goals, an advanced writing class might be able to talk in detail about one or more aspects of his prose. Distinctive features of the writing include:

- A style that is both concrete and oratorical

Focusing on a few paragraphs that illustrate this quality would be useful. Between paragraphs 2 and 5, for instance, how does King move from discussing the nature of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its local affiliates to proclaiming that we are all “tied into a single garment of destiny”? Does the shift work? What kept it from being too abrupt or artificial?

- Numerous changes in tone with his audience

King’s tone toward the ministers—or, by extension, toward any readers who might agree with them that blacks in the South should not practice civil disobedience in their quest for civil rights—fluctuates a great deal over the course of the thirty eight paragraphs. Students might focus on several of these variations.

Referred to in the first paragraph as “men of genuine good will” who are surely the kind of thinkers who would want to go beyond a superficial study of the issue (paragraph 5), the ministers are later

implicitly criticized for their “appalling silence” in the face of evil, not unlike the law-abiding Germans under Hitler, and aligned with those who mouth “pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities”(paragraph 29). Along the way, whites who urge blacks to wait for change and justice are equated with the doctors who prescribed thalidomide to pregnant women—a pointed allusion that will require explanation for students today but would have been the most brutal accusation of the letter at the time. Yet King ends with a mixture of sarcasm (“If I have said anything in this letter is an understatement of truth...I beg you forgive me”), a flourish of politeness, and an implied call for the ministers to join the side of the right.

A key question to consider in class: Why doesn't King stick to one unified tone—either ingratiating praise (we are always taught that compliments win more people to our side than denunciations) or direct confrontation? What is accomplished by interspersing a little of both throughout the letter?)

- The extravagant use of allusions

Why does King make reference to so many names, both ancient and more contemporary? And how does he avoid sounding too didactic and pretentious? (Certainly most of his readers, then and now, will not be familiar with all of his references.) Students can be asked to find out a little about a few of the names that are unfamiliar to them, and categories of allusions could be put on the board.

Biblical and early Christian: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Jesus, St. Paul, St. Augustine

Modern religious: Buber, Niebuhr, Tillich

American Political: Lincoln, Jefferson

Cultural and literary: Socrates, Bunyan

Such a list would make clear another tactic King uses: the way in which the letter is designed to appeal to an audience beyond the Protestant ministers of Alabama who spoke out against civil disobedience—to Catholics and Jews, secular intellectuals, idealists, and moderate but concerned citizens.

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

Pretend that you are one of the recipients of King's letter, a white Southern Protestant minister in the early 1960s who wants America's racial problems solved in a non-violent way. Either reluctantly or out of genuine conviction, you support integration, but you do not approve of marches and boycotts or King's militancy. Write your own open letter to the world, using some of King's rhetorical strategies, in which you answer King and argue your own position. Consult the outline of King's letter we discussed in class.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Edward Abbey were both men of passion and principle, but they had radically different approaches to language and the audiences they were addressing. Write about these differences. What elements of Abbey's style in “The Cowboy and His Cow” would King have rejected? Why would he have rejected them? How might Abbey have addressed the religious leader who criticized the tactics of the Birmingham protest?

Apply some of Carl Sagan's terms in “The Fine Art of Baloney Detection” to an examination of King's letter. Does King ever engage in “ad hominem” arguments? At any point, does he practice “special pleading,” “begging the question,” or “observational selection”? Does he set up a “straw man” in his argument?

Write an open letter modeled on King's to a friend, a teacher, administrator, or local political leader about a pressing issue in the school or community.

VI. A PORTRAIT

Georgia O'Keeffe / How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life

In literature as in art, good portraits are about the individual whom the writer or painter is observing or remembering and—at the same time—about some other, equally absorbing and more universal topic. Write about a coach you worked with, and you might in fact be writing about the nature of competition or some other hidden issue of modern sports. Write about an actress you like, and you might also be

writing about role-playing in daily life or glamour and illusion. Joan Didion and Barbara Kingsolver raise serious and subtle questions about feminism and freedom in their literary portraits of a beloved painter and a school librarian.

Questions and topics for class discussions about “Georgia O’Keeffe”:

- Georgia O’Keeffe, the artist: How effective is Didion’s portrait of the painter as a painter? Has she made you share her enthusiasm for O’Keeffe’s art? What qualities of O’Keeffe as a painter does she most admire?
- Georgia O’Keeffe, “the successful guerrilla in the war between the sexes”: How does Didion make O’Keeffe a gender-political figure? What does Didion celebrate about O’Keeffe the woman?
- Hardness: What aspects of O’Keeffe’s hardness seem appealing or admirable to you? Is there anything about O’Keeffe—as we see her through Didion—that you don’t like, even if Didion does?
- Are men too purely the villains in this scenario? Does O’Keeffe ever generalize about men the same way men do about women?
- What do we learn about Didion in this portrait? How do those fragments of the writer’s presence in the essay—her bond with her daughter, her pleasure at her daughter’s reactions to O’Keeffe, the fact that she is museum-goer, her interest in O’Keeffe’s gun-toting sister—connect to the theme of women finding a place for themselves in a man’s world?

“How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life” is more explicitly personal than “Georgia O’Keeffe.” It is also an example of a genre—the person-who-influenced-me-most essay—that has enormous potential to go wrong, lending itself to sentimentality and an excessive concern with the details of a purely private bond. (I always ask students not to write about an immediate family member; it is too difficult to be critical in a literary way about a student’s view of his grandmother and her sacrifices on his or her behalf.)

As writers, the most important qualities for students to absorb about Barbara Kingsolver’s foray into the field are the ways in which she manages to avoid the pitfalls of sentimentality and excessive detail. They should also take note of the fact that “How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life” isn’t really a pure example of that category. Miss Truman Richey, the small-town Kentucky librarian who snatched young Kingsolver “from the jaws of ruin,” is worthy of remembrance, but she serves another purpose, leading us to a spirited reflection about censorship in America and the opening of young minds everywhere through books. In a sense, Kingsolver almost appears to leave her initial subject (the portrait) behind as she begins a sharp digression in the second half of the essay.

The notion of a “digressive essay” is apt to be a new one to many students. They are often taught to develop one point and stay with it. An unswerving line of thought is a common goal. But with Kingsolver’s essay, it wouldn’t work to say that censorship is a secondary theme in relation to the portrait of Miss Richey, just as it would be wrong to conclude that Miss Richey herself is irrelevant to the topic of intellectual freedom. The two are vitally connected. The digression has meaning only in relation to Miss Richey and vice versa, though it could be argued that the digression is the weightier—certainly more universal—issue. One of the pleasures of “How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life” is how nature Kingsolver makes the shift appear. Trying their hand at a meaningful digression can benefit students as they learn that an essay does not have to be about one and only one topic.

Aspects of Kingsolver’s essay to discuss in class:

- the way in which the author provides some context before introducing the individual she will describe (she writes about her hometown, which tells us why she needs a helpful influence and why she is open to that possibility);
- her blunt but funny self-portrait (Kingsolver tells us what she was like before Miss Richey took notice of her);
- her description of the influential person, with spare but effective details, and her influence;
- a consideration of why this person, rather than any other, became the formative influence (Kingsolver points out, after all, that her parents read books, too; she didn’t come from a household without books);
- the transition to the next, or larger, issue (students should be asked to reread this part of the essay; how

does the author take us from Miss Richey to the subject of books and censorship without seeming to have gone off course?);

- the passionate tone of the anti-censorship passages, ending with a brief, final link back to Miss Richey.

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

With Joan Didion's example in mind, write a portrait of a well-known individual. Feel free to do any outside research about that person, but remember that you are not writing a detailed informational report. By the end of the essay, your reader should be thinking about three things: the vivid image you have created of your subject; the impression you have created of yourself, the portrait-maker (with a sense of why you have been drawn to that famous figure); and a larger issue you have raised in calling attention to that person.

With Barbara Kingsolver's example in mind, write a portrait of an individual who played a significant role—positive or negative (or still evolving)—in your life. Remember to include early in the essay a portrait of yourself before that influence took hold. At some point the essay should cease to be exclusively about that person and become a reflection of the wider issue the influential figure has brought to mind.

VII. AN ARGUMENT

Huck at 100 / Is Hunting Ethical? / The Fine Art of Baloney Detection

Leo Marx, Ann S. Causey, and Carl Sagan are all engaged, to one degree or another, in argumentation, defined by the dictionary as “the process of developing or presenting an argument; a discussion, debate, or disquisition; a discussion dealing with a controversial point.”

In “Huck at 100”, Leo Marx aims to mediate the fierce debate between those who want *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* removed from school curricula because it is a racist text and those who defend it as a classic of anti-racist values. Marx argues for a proposal that takes into account the beliefs of both sides. Ann S. Causey's title neatly summarizes the issue that concerns her, though “Is Hunting Ethical?” does not provide a simple answer, focusing instead on the way we phrase questions and frame a debate, and how that in turn influences the nature of our answers. Carl Sagan's argument in “The Fine Art of Baloney Detection” is with charlatans and manipulators, who surround us in many guises (presidents, comen, tobacco companies), and those of us too naïve to fight them. Students should note that none of these writers begins by stating his or her position in an introduction followed by paragraphs justifying that viewpoint. This is a method that usually works best only when preaching to the converted.

Questions and topics for class discussions about “Huck at 100”:

- Why does Marx begin with a history of the issue and a description of the gulf that separates the two sides? Does that kind of beginning predispose the reader to think favorably of the author before learning the author's views? How, for instance, would Edward Abbey have started an essay on the same topic?
- How does Marx explain or justify his view that Twain's novel is not a racist book?
- How does Marx characterize those who disagree, who see the book as an example (not a study) of racism?
- If Marx believes that *Huckleberry Finn* is a work of art and not a book excusing racism, why doesn't he go all the way and align himself with those who want the novel life in place as required reading?
- Is this solution acceptable to you? Why or why not? Is it likely to be accepted by school boards and others involved in the dispute? Why or why not?
- What are the advantages of waiting until the end of an essay, as Marx does, to offer a “side”, or “solution,” to the argument?
- Has Marx found a pleasing tone in which to analyze this heated issue?

Questions and topics for class discussions about “Is Hunting Ethical? ”:

- Causey begins with an anecdote. But it could be said to be a misleading vignette. Most readers assume by the middle of her story about Sandy that they know Causey's answer to the question of their title. If that impression turns out to be false (Causey is not anti-hunting in an absolute sense), why did she set us up to think she was writing against the shooting of deer?
- What is the "moral conundrum" at the heart of the hunting debate?
- What are some of the important philosophical distinctions Causey makes (e.g., obligation/ conscience, legality/ moral, facts/values)?
- What does Causey have to say in favor of hunting? Under what conditions, and in what spirit, is she opposed? When is she disgusted by it? In her view, what is "truly ethical hunting"?
- Students are sometimes impatient that Causey wants to philosophize rather than pick a side and go with it. It might be useful to name another topic for which her approach would seem more valid. If the topic were "Is killing unethical?," would the need to make distinctions—to philosophize—be more apparent and acceptable? Obviously, yes. Students would want to complicate the debate by introducing the ambiguities of self-defense, the state's use of capital punishment, or the "mercy killing" of an individual in pain, possibly leading to the conclusion that the question as stated cannot be answered with an unconditional yes or no.

Questions and topics for class discussion about "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection":

- Why does Carl Sagan begin by writing about his parents and his feelings about their death?
- What tone does he adopt in his criticism of channelers? Compare his voice to Marx's calm, measured prose and Abbey's angry sarcasm. How would you characterize Sagan's style in relation to that of other writers in this book?
- Like Kingsolver and other writers in this collection, Sagan begins his essay with several paragraphs that are later seen to be a subdivision of his principal topic. At what point does the reader determine that the author is really writing about language and deceit in general and not the fakery of channelers in particular?
- Why does Sagan quote Hume, Paine, and Huxley on religion, and how does that discussion lead us into the topic of advertising in a commercial culture? (This is a useful essay for studying variety of transitions.)
- What does he mean by "proved or presumptive baloney"?
- What do you think of his use of a "baloney detection kit"? Should these terms have been discussed in separate paragraphs? Why a list? Why call it a "kit"?
- Can you think of other examples of the terms he provides in his kit?
- Sagan ends by going back to the specific from the general. What is his complaint about the tobacco industry? Does it weaken the essay to end with so highly specific an example instead of wise generalization or a restatement of his thesis?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

Write an essay about a controversial issue that employs the approach of Leo Marx (a review of the history of the controversy, an acknowledgment of the concerns of each side, ending with a carefully phrased solution to the dispute) or the approach of Ann S. Causey, which questions exactly what we are debating before offering a side or an answer to the dispute.

Write an essay that argues a particular viewpoint on a controversial issue, using some of the rhetorical tricks and strategies analyzed by Carl Sagan. Ask your readers or your audience, if the essay was read aloud as a speech) to evaluate your techniques. How many of Sagan's terms did your readers or audience notice? Did any of them sway your audience more than others?

VIII. A DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY/ A PAEAN

In Praise of the Humble Comma

Pico Iyer's short essay is proof that anything can be made interesting if the writer knows his subject well enough and has a passion for it that he or she needs to share. Like any lover, Iyer wants us to

understand the object of his joy and affection but knows that too openly analytical a style (e.g., Auden's in "The Guilty Vicarage") would defeat his purpose. This essay works best if it is read aloud, more than once, in class.

Questions and topics for class discussion about "In Praise of the Humble Comma":

- The largest question is: Why is the comma so important to Iyer? Mark some of the sentences in which his own use or avoidance of commas illustrate his point about their value. How do these illustrations work better than a grammar-text explanation?
- Students often express amazement that anyone could devise so many metaphors for any one thing. To how many different things does Iyer compare punctuation? Is this strategy of bedazzling us with a bombardment of similes and metaphors effective or counterproductive? Why does he feel he should be theatrical instead of earnest and calm?
- Which of Iyer's metaphors are most plausible? (Students often point to the image of a run-on sentence as "a sink piled high with dirty dishes" or a period as a red light and the colon as a STOP sign.) Are there any that seem excessive and self-indulgent? And is this excess really a problem, given that we are listening to a hymn of praise in the spirit of Shakespeare's sonnets?
- Does the essay have some structure, even subdivisions of its thesis? How has Iyer grounded or stabilized a stream of images and ideas by the use of classic topic sentences at the beginnings of his paragraphs?
- The use of allusions: Iyer's essay is a good forum for examining references that students may not understand. Which require explanation (possibly Gary Gilmore, Tom Wolfe's ecstatic style)? Could some part of his idea still be understood even if the allusion remained unclear? Which of his allusions can be deduced from context (e.g., that the reference to Molly Bloom is about an unpunctuated soliloquy in a famous novel by James Joyce; that e.e. cummings violated the rules of punctuation in his poetry?) Why does Iyer refer to "the gloomy Dane" instead of simply naming Hamlet? What purpose do allusions serve, anyway?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT

Think of something small—an object, a smell, a fabric, a minor aspect of a friend's personality, an undramatic event or place, a moment in the day—that most people are not likely to dwell on or appreciate, or that generally "gets no respect" (as Pico Iyer says of the comma). Using the beginning of Iyer's title, "In Praise of -," as your starting point, write a short essay that extols the virtues of that neglected subject. Can you make the reader feel its specialness in the way you do? How would the world be different for you without it? One goal: to be as lavishly descriptive, even metaphorical, as possible.

IX. A SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

When Free Speech Was First Condemned

In our time, the question-and-answer format is not one that suggests great literary skill. We are apt to think of news conferences in which politicians evade tough questions, television interviews that demand sound-bite responses, or (any less frequently?) teacher's efforts to fish for the "right" answers in the class discussions we lead.

Journalist I. F. Stone appropriately turned to the style of Socrates himself—a dialogue—when asked by Harper's Magazine for a summary of his book, *The Trail of Socrates*. In lieu of a traditional essay, he provided answers to his own questions about the theme of the book and his reasons for believing that the Greek philosopher did not mount a serious self-defense and in fact courted a death penalty. Those students who have studied Ancient Greece in their history classes will be better prepared to grapple with Stone's novel argument, but the essential background information can be quickly summarized in class or simply inferred from the facts Stone provides at various points in his essay.

The key questions to begin with in class: Why this format? Why not a straight-forward essay about the trial? To whatever extent students can perceive “When Free Speech Was First Condemned” as a finely calibrated piece of courtroom rhetoric itself, an example of intellectual oratory that has fundamentally different tone from an expository essay, the better. In conversation, when we asked questions and then answer them ourselves, we play the same strategic game with our listeners. Stone’s interrogative style forces his audience into a less passive, more alert stance, turning us into jurors ourselves rather than mere readers. By the end, he even implies that we could, in effect, rectify the wrong done by the earlier jury if we ourselves take a stand, opposing in the here-and-now any censorship whatsoever of unpopular ideas.

Aspects of Stone’s style to discuss in class:

- the deceptively relaxed, conversational tone of the opening (e.g., the short, sentence-fragment responses to the first questions), which is useful in not sounding too ponderous too soon;
- the practice of anticipating the questions and objections the audience might raise, and then proceeding to answer them;
- the way the author allows himself the opportunity to expand on his thoughts (“What do you mean?” his imaginary interlocutor asks);
- the terseness of the questions, even as the responses gradually become lengthier and more complex; the questions are easy to understand even if the answers are not;
- the contemporary references (e.g., the “un-Athenian Activities Committee” alluding to the 1950’s House Un-American Activities Committee; the comparison of the anti-democratic Athenian aristocrats to the Nazi storm-troopers) to imply a link between Socrates’ trial and the twentieth-century discomfort with nonconformist ideas;
- the refusal to sugar-coat the philosopher’s offensive beliefs, opinions about democracy that are even more distasteful now than they would have been in Ancient Greece;
- a highly oratorical conclusion (Stone allots himself several paragraphs to make a speech—his own summation to the jury).

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT

Having students write their own dialogue on an issue that matters to them will probably seem to them, at first glance, quiet easy. The format appears uncomplicated. The challenge comes from trying to use a few of Stone’s techniques listed above, while keeping his larger goals in mind: an attempt to steer the reader toward a particular viewpoint on a subject that can arouse disagreement (i.e., many people do not believe Socrates went out of his way to be convicted) and to link the specific issue to a universal concern (in Stone’s case, a trial in 399 B.C. to free speech in modern America, or anywhere in the world).

Students might write about the teaching of evolution versus creationism in high schools, the monitoring of film or reading matter available to adolescents, or any of the issues raised by essayists in this volume (Is civil disobedience justifiable? Is capital punishment ethical? Is hunting ethical? Should books that include racial epithets be required reading?)—issues that involve facts as well as opinions, issues that are both locally important and relevant to all societies.

It is worth reminding students that they can write against something in their dialogue as well as for something. At its best, even the most bitter criticism advances certain positive values. For I. F. Stone, writing critically of the Athenian jury’s verdict and Socrates’ narrow ideas actually meant writing on behalf of what Stone cared about most passionately—tolerance for all products of the human intellect, including the crankiest and least enduring.

X. A MEMOIR

Mother Tongue / Lying in the Tall Grasses, Eating Cane

“Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan and “Lying in the Tall Grasses, Eating Cane” by Opal Palmer Adisa could have been included in the section on portraits in this guide, just as Barbara Kingsolver’s “How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life” or Ellen Ullman’s “Space Is Numeric” would easily fit with Tan’s and Adisa’s essays as memoirs. These categories overlap. Like the portrait and the anecdotal essay, the memoir has an ostensible purpose—narrating a moment (or many moments) from a writer’s life—and another purpose that touches on larger issues of social criticism. In a writing class, students will want to talk about Tan’s wonderfully described relationship with her mother and her distinctive, funny style, but should also consider how she has managed, without being solemn, to make some pressing points about language, perception, and racism in modern America. How is Opal Palmer Adisa delightfully re-creating her childhood in the Caribbean for us and establishing herself as a voice in the multicultural debates of our time?

Questions and topics for class discussions about “Mother Tongue”:

- Tan creates a potent image of herself at the beginning of the essay: a lover of words, a public speaker, a best-selling author. How does she manage to bring her immigrant mother into this picture and turn the essay into a memoir of their life together?
- How does Tan make sure that the reader won’t misjudge her mother’s intelligence on the basis of her “broken English”? Why was Tan ashamed of her when she was a teenager, and how did she overcome that shame?
- The stockbroker story is comical and the CAT scan vignette is disturbing, but they both illustrate the same point. What point is that, and why does Tan include both memories?
- In what sense was Tan, a Chinese-American girl in California, experiencing the same limitations that Opal Palmer Adisa knew as a girl in Jamaica?
- Why wasn’t Tan “steered” into math or science as a career like so many other Asian Americans, given her aptitude in those areas?
- Tan quotes a line from an early draft of *The Joy Luck Club*. How might a sentence like that be fairly described as “broken English” of a different kind? What would Carl Sagan have to say about that kind of prose?
- What makes the end of the essay so satisfying?

Questions and topics for class discussion about “Lying in the Tall Grasses, Eating Cane”:

- Writing is often perceived as an intellectual exercise, but Opal Palmer Adisa wants the reader to think of it as something deeper, more visceral. How does she manage to convey that feeling in the opening of her essay?
- After the first few paragraphs, we have the sense that Adisa must have been a “natural” writer, one to whom writing came easily from her first wish to compose stories. Why wasn’t this the case?
- What were the principal events and influences that over time enabled Adisa to become a writer?
- Her metaphor of writing as her paramour, her lover: what is apt about this image? What does it say about society that she finds herself in this position, with a lover, so to speak, rather than a spouse? Compare her life and self-image as an artist with Georgia O’Keeffe’s as we read about it in Joan Didion’s essay.
- Offer some interpretations of the poem with which she ends the essay. What do you think of its punctuation and capitalization, its images and rhythms? Why has she decided to end a memoir with a poem?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

Whatever your racial, ethnic, regional, or religious background, or whatever your politics, sexual orientation, or style of dress, you have probably had occasion to evaluate yourself in relation to other groups and to assess the images other people have of the group you are a part of. Write a memoir (based on actual events, based on the experience of a friend or relative, or entirely made up) that deals with the theme of stereotyping and its impact. Keep in mind Amy Tan’s memoir about how people viewed her Chinese mother because of her “broken English.” You want to tell a personal story, with the momentum

and texture of a good brief narrative, but you also want to draw your reader's attention to the varied and far-reaching social consequences of stereotyping others.

Opal Palmer Adisa's memoir is about, among other things, overcoming obstacles. Write a short memoir about some kind of limitation you have confronted—self-imposed or imposed by forces outside your control (family, peers, school, society)—and the way in which you dealt with that obstacle. Like Adisa, you might try to characterize your “before” and “after” self. How did overcoming that limitation leave some problems unresolved? Can you convey, as she did, a sense of why it was vital for you to overcome that obstacle and invent a new self-image?

About the Editor:

John Loughery, editor of *The Eloquent Essay* and author of this guide, teaches high-school English and art history at The Nightingale-Bamford School in New York City. In his twenty-year career, he has taught writing to sixth-grade students through college freshmen. Mr. Loughery is also the art critic for *The Hudson Review* and has written a number of books, principally history and biography. His book *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography in 1996, and his anthologies, *First Sightings: Contemporary Stories of American Youth* and *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories*, are used in many schools.