

ENGL 2089 Honors Essay #1 (Literacy Narrative and Analysis)

Adapted from *Writing about Writing*

Background:

As I have mentioned in class, this course has a three-pronged approach (literacy analysis, genre study, and research as a lived and studied practice). To begin the first part, we have been discussing the meaning of “literacy,” the concept of multiliteracies, the idea of “reading” as making meaning, and the realization that a “text,” then, is something that can be read (not just an alphanumeric text, but a defense in a sport, a rock formation, an artwork, an architectural marvel, even people). We have also read about other people’s literacy experiences and realizations about literacy. Now it’s time for you to look inward and consider your own literacy development.

Assignment:

Drawing upon what you have been reading in this course, closely examine your own literacy experiences, history, habits, and processes. The purpose of this inquiry is for you to get to know yourself better as a literate person and to gain a stronger understanding of literacy in general. As Malcolm X argued, awareness gives power and purpose: the more you know about yourself as a literate person, the more control you are likely to have over your literacy. You will write an essay of at least 5 to 7 pages in which you narrate the story of your literacy development and analyze the story’s meaning. Do NOT provide a month-by-month telling of your literacy development (“In the fifth grade I ...; then in the sixth grade I...”). Instead, narrow down to one or two specific BIG MOMENTS that you SHOW in vivid, relevant detail; a good writer makes the specific speak for the general. You should also include an illustration or two to support your narrative/analysis (or you could bring an appropriate artifact). You should also make connections to the readings we’ve done for class, making sure to incorporate at least two direct quotes from two different readings. Even if your literacy is different from the literacies discussed in the readings, you should find an interesting image, choice of words, or an insight that you can relate to your own experience. Your essay must also show an analysis of your experience – the significance of it all – and you should have an explicit or implicit thesis. We will work on this writing project with prewriting and drafts for peer discussion over the next couple of weeks. (The due dates are stated on the Daily Schedule). After you turn in your completed essay (in MLA format with a correctly done Works Cited page) on the due date, you will receive a letter grade and I will go over your essay with you during an individual conference in my office. Then, if you want, you may revise your essay for a *possible* higher grade. When you turn in your revision (stapled on top of all your previous work) you will receive a grade on the revised essay that I will average together with the first grade for your final project grade.

Audience:

Think of your audience as not just the teacher but also your classmates and anyone with an interest in the meaning and value of literacy.

Invention, Research and Analysis:

Begin your discovery process by considering your history as a literate person. Remember that “literacy” means fluency in a given skill or practice, so besides reading and writing, the concept of literacy can be extended to many other areas of fluency (art, advertising, dance, music, photography, communication, computer programming, web design, business, science, technology, engineering, math, foreign language, sailing, sport, hobby, parenting, cooking, spirituality, social science, and more). Think of your memories related to generating an interest in that skill, building it, and whatever literacy sponsors may have helped you. Do not settle for bland generalizations like, “I really love to write.” Mine your memory, thinking carefully about where you’ve been and where you are going as a literate person. You might begin by answering questions such as:

- How did you learn to read and/or write or develop whatever literacy you want to examine?
- What kinds of reading/writing (or other literacy events) have you experienced in the past?
- What is your earliest memory regarding your literacy?
- What particularly vivid memories do you have about your literacy activities?
- How much have you enjoyed or been pleased by the pursuit of your literacy?
- What obstacles/frustrations did you overcome in the development of your literacy?
- What do you sense is the *value* of your literacy, and where did that sense come from?
- What are your current attitudes/feelings about your literacy?
- How might your literacy impact your life (or others’ lives) in the future?
- Do you think of any people, institutions, experiences that were your literacy sponsors?
- How do the readings we’ve been doing connect to your own literacy development?

Questions like these will help you think deeply about your literate past. Your essay will not include answers to all these questions, but thinking about these questions should stimulate your mind. When you plan your narrative/analysis, you will select from all the memories and information you have gathered. *The question then becomes, how will you decide what to talk about out of everything you COULD talk about?* This depends on your *analysis* of what you’re remembering and your *purpose* in conveying your information to your audience.

As you consider the meaning of your literacy experiences, you should be looking for an overall “so what?” – a main theme, a central “finding,” an overall conclusion that your inquiry leads you to draw about your particular literacy and the value of literacy in general. It might be, for instance, an insight about why you have developed and practiced that literacy. It might be an argument about how society can improve literacy education, on the basis of your own experience. It might be a resolution to do something differently, or to keep doing something that’s been working. It might be an understanding about a past or an ongoing conflict regarding your literacy and how you resolved or plan to resolve that conflict. Those are just some possibilities; there are many more.

Planning and Drafting:

Your consideration and analysis of your previous experience, one way or another, will lead you to a *main point* – what you’ve learned about literacy – that your essay will demonstrate and support. Because your literacy narrative tells the particular story of a particular person – you – its shape will depend on the particular experiences you’ve had and the importance you attach to them. Therefore, it’s difficult to suggest a single structure for your essay that will work for all of you. The structure that you use should support your particular intention and content.

You should, of course, have an introduction that hooks your audience. There are many possibilities, but you might begin with an epigram – a famous quote that sums up your overall point, or you use a brief anecdote to set up your purpose, or you could start with an interesting moment in your life and then broaden to your focus and then return to your narrative. Your thesis (whether explicit or implicit) might not come to you right away but could evolve as you’re drafting, but don’t forget to have one. In the body of your essay you could tell the story with your one or two big moments and then bring in your analysis, or you could braid your analysis in with the narrative. You should place your illustration at an appropriate location, center it, and label it. Likewise, work in the references to the readings at relevant spots. Remember to not just drop in a quotation from thin air, but to introduce the author and work, quote fairly and accurately, and explain the connection you’re making between the quotation and your experience. Your conclusion, of course, should satisfy your readers, give them the significance of what you’ve written, what they should take from it. Thus, your essay should not just end with you but with a larger connection to literacy. In case you’re wondering, it’s quite appropriate to use first person (“I”) in this essay because you’re writing about yourself. Like any good essay, yours should have an eye-catching title, although you might find that creating a good title might come after you’ve been working on the essay over several drafts.

Revising:

Revision means “to see again,” so as you work your way through your drafts think of how you might improve the content, development, organization, and style – the big things, saving the smaller things for later.

Proofreading and Editing:

This is the time to focus on smaller issues like grammar, sentence structure, mechanics, and making sure you’ve correctly used MLA format, including for in-text citations and the Works Cited page.