

Essay #4: Close Reading: Understanding a Single Author

The editors of your textbook claim in the preface that “[w]hether by design or default, the composition course also functions as an introduction to the life of higher education. . . .” (vii). I agree, and I would further argue that to get beyond the introduction to higher education, to a place of true comfort, it is necessary that you develop a real relationship with at least some of the authors you have considered this semester. Thus, the goal of this assignment is that you independently dig into the works of just one author and come up with your own conclusion about him or her as a writer.

Here’s how the assignment works: As a class we will consider the essays in our textbook written by a handful of especially well known and well recognized essayists and journalists working today. Having read one piece by each of these authors, you will then choose to write an essay on the author who most intrigues you, whether that be as a result of agreeing or disagreeing with him or her, or just the result of your interest in the topics or style. You will then track down at least two other pieces written by that author (I will give you lots of help on this), and you will read and annotate these. You will then write an essay that explores what you have discovered. Here are some of the questions you may decide to consider:

- How does this writer organize ideas? Can you find any patterns in the introductions and conclusions or in the way he or she chooses to arrange information?
- To what ends does this writer use figurative language?
- What kind of support does the writer use?
- If the essays you are considering, are essentially the same essay, revised for a different audience or at a different time, what changes has the author made? why? Alternatively, can you discern an evolution in the writer’s approach over time?
- What is the author’s voice? What elements in the writing contribute to that voice?
- What sorts of ideas does the author write about? From what point of view does the author write; how does this viewpoint affect the writing?

Requirements:

- An introduction which identifies the essayist about whom you are writing, the pieces you are considering and your attitude toward the subject;
- A (level 3) thesis which makes a claim about some aspect(s) of the essayists’ writing style, and which attempts to bring some relevance to the discussion;
- Several body paragraphs (some of which use the Tell me, show me, so what pattern) which analyze the issues which interests you.)
- Smooth transitions to move us from one part of the essay to the next;

- A conclusion which establishes why it is necessary/wise/wrong/a waste (something else) to focus on this particular author.
- In this particular essay, of course you will need to summarize, quote and paraphrase appropriately, and you will need a works cited page.
- Your essay should be about 5 pages properly formatted according to MLA guidelines

Below I have listed the essays you may want to consider and some information to help you track down other pieces by the same author. Each of these authors has his or her own website which I was able to find easily.

<p>"Looking at a Woman" Scott Russell Sanders (294)</p>	<p>Sanders is from the South and has been a professor in Indiana since the 1970s; his writings are often about male/female relationships and about nature. He has published many essays on line, especially at <i>Orion</i>. Also, it should not be hard to find his three frequently anthologized essays: "Homeplace," "The Men We Carry in Our Minds," and "Inheritance." NB: "Looking at a Woman" is my least favorite of his works. I have electronic versions of the other essays if you are interested.</p>
<p>"The Pursuit of Happiness," Andrew Sullivan (217)</p>	<p>Andrew Sullivan is a gay conservative who writes primarily about political issues. He has a blog, and, as he was the editor for <i>The New Republic</i>, you should be able to find some of his works there.</p>
<p>"The Story of My Body," Judith Ortiz Cofer (323)</p>	<p>Judith Ortiz Cofer writes most frequently about her experience of the United States as a woman who is from Puerto Rico. She has a collection of essays, <i>Silent Dancing</i>, which would be easy to get for this project and from which you could lift just a couple of pieces.</p>
<p>"How Do You Think It Makes Your Mother Feel?" James Frey (378)</p>	<p>James Frey caused a literary storm last year when he published his book, <i>A Million Little Pieces</i> as a non-fiction memoir. The book, which he famously touted on the <i>Oprah Winfrey Show</i>, turns out to have been highly fictionalized. (There are still articles about the "scandal" at <i>The Smoking Gun</i> website.) If you write about this, you will want to pick up the book and read at least several chapters to get a sense for his voice. And you won't want to write about the controversy at all, except perhaps in the introduction. Instead, you will want to focus on this style. He has written a few other books which you might want to consider as well.</p>
<p>"Big and Bad," Malcolm Gladwell (440)</p>	<p>Malcolm Gladwell writes extensively for <i>The New Yorker</i>, most often about consumer issues. His most frequent technique is to take one type of knowledge and apply it to another field, often with interesting results. He has at least two complete works of non-fiction (<i>Blink</i> and <i>The Tipping Point</i>), from which you could lift chapters, or you could search <i>The New Yorker</i> archives for some interesting pieces. (I especially like an essay he did about the "profiling" of pit bulls.)</p>
<p>"Serving in Florida," Barbara Ehrenreich (483)</p>	<p>Barbara Ehrenreich is a left-leaning political writer whose work can often be found in <i>Mother Jones</i> and <i>The New York Times</i>. She has an extensive bibliography, but I believe her most recent works are <i>Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America</i> and <i>Bait and Switch</i>. Chapters from either of these would be a good complement to the piece in <i>Open Questions</i>.</p>
<p>"Strange Tools," Richard Rodriguez (597)</p>	<p>Richard Rodriguez has at least two full-length memoirs—<i>Hungry for Memory</i> and <i>Days of Obligation</i>—and he has several essays available on-line at PBS where he is an on-air essayist. His writing is also available in <i>Time</i> and <i>U.S. News & World Report</i>, and at <i>Pacific News Service</i> where he is an editor. He tends toward a conservative viewpoint politically.</p>

"The Casualty" Dan Baum (232)	Baum writes for the <i>New Yorker</i> primarily, and most of his recent work has had to do with the war in Iraq, particularly from the soldiers' perspective.
"Designer Genes" Bill McKibben (360)	<p>Here's the language from McKibben's website: "Bill McKibben is an American environmentalist and writer who frequently writes about global warming, alternative energy, and the risks associated with human genetic engineering. Beginning in the summer of 2006, he led the organization of the largest demonstrations against global warming in American history. McKibben is active in the Methodist Church, and his writing sometimes has a spiritual bent.</p> <p>Bill grew up in suburban Lexington, Massachusetts. He was president of the Harvard Crimson newspaper in college. Immediately after college he joined the New Yorker magazine as a staff writer, and wrote much of the "Talk of the Town" column from 1982 to early 1987. He quit the magazine when its longtime editor William Shawn was forced out of his job, and soon moved to the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York."</p>