Unit 3. Engaging an Analytical Problem and Synthesizing Your Voice

In this final, culminating unit, you have the opportunity to explore analytical problems of your own choice, and, if you wish, to incorporate your own experience and personal voice. You’ll draw upon assigned essays as source material, but you’ll also be able to pick an essay of your own—again, if you wish—as a source. You’ll put to use the several skills we’ve been developing during the term: close reading, engaging in an intellectual debate, synthesizing a critical approach to text through framing, employing keyterms. You’ll develop your own questions to explore in these samples.

The essays we’ll read together include those by Twain, Adams, Sontag, Thomas, Gould, and Bellow. Each engages a different topic; together they open a vast range of possibilities for your thinking. In “Corn-pone Opinions,” Mark Twain remarks on the social pressures that shape, even determine how we think: we’re all subject to “corn pone opinions” that really allow us to wrap ourselves up in “self-approval” (4). Henry Adams, in a chapter, “The Law of Acceleration,” from his well-known if not well-read book, The Education of Henry Adams, thinks about progress—acceleration—in scientific epistemology and refers to an array of scientists we have and haven’t heard of. His objective, at times frustratingly obscure but fascinating to consider, is to develop a theory of history that might draw somehow on scientific explanations but remain sensitive to the vagaries of human conditions. “To historians,” he says, “the single interest is the law of reaction between force and force,—between mind and nature,—the law of progress” (23). Susan Sontag attempts to define an aesthetic “sensibility” she calls “camp,” and she does this with a list of fifty-eight characteristics in a notorious essay called “Notes on Camp.” In “The Lives of a Cell,” Lewis Thomas ponders the complexity of biological organisms and thinks it foolish to believe that man is removed from other beings. “Man,” he intones, “is embedded in nature” (358). Drawing on his primary interests, biological evolution and baseball (especially the New York Yankees), the late Stephen J. Gould remarks, in “The Creation Myths of Cooperstown,” on our culture’s desire for simple, knowable origins, a desire that manifests itself in happy stories, “creation myths,” about how things come about. What’s the problem with that? he asks. And finally Saul Bellow, in “Graven Images,” contemplates fame and the loss of privacy in our media-saturated culture. “Now,” he complains, “we look at and not into” (567). These essays raise questions about the individual’s place in society, the writing of history, the function of science, the function of art and aesthetics, the composition of biological life, the power of stories to explain, the familiarity of renown, the creation of knowledge.

I hope you find these topics interesting, and can focus on a topic to explore further on your own. For your essay, I suggest—but don’t absolutely require—that you choose at least two of these essays as source material. You may also add as a source an essay you find on your own. We’ll have a session in the library to help introduce you to the tools you might use to help find an essay. You are also welcome to draw on one of the essays we’ve already read. Or you may choose another essay from Best American Essays that we haven't read in class. For your paper, you should draw on at least three, and no more than four source essays. Working with multiple
sources and the complications that come up with multiple ideas is part of the objective of this assignment.

Because this topic is open, we will have to discipline ourselves. What is the issue that you find most interesting? Do you want to write about a novel, a play, a poem, a film, music? A historical event, a political problem, a figure in popular culture? A contemporary social or political or scientific issue? Your own experiences? Think of what interests you most, as soon as you can.

**Library Research Instruction, Wednesday, 27 July, 2:30 PM. Please meet in the Larsen Room in Lamont Library.**
This is a session in the library conducted by members of the library staff. You will become familiar with library resources and begin a search for essays and other materials for use in Essay 3.

**Online Exercise 3.1 due Tuesday, 2 August, 5 PM.**

a) Describe the topic you want to explore in your new essay.

b) Why is this an important or interesting topic? Is it something that no one considers? Something no one considers in the correct way? Something that needs to be seen in a fresh way? (This will help you think of your motive.)

c) Do you have any personal experience with the topic? Will you draw on your personal experience in your essay? Why? What will your personal experience add? Will your personal experience help you to argue with or against—or both—one of more of the source essays? (Questions b) and c) might together help you formulate a motive.)

d) Do you have any materials relevant to your topic that you might incorporate in your essay? These might be quotations from the text, which we’ll actually expect of course. But what about pictures, diagrams, maps? Something else? Will you need to describe your topic to your audience, orient your audience?

e) What are the important questions you want to address in your essay? Be specific. These will help you to formulate the analytical question that will drive your essay. Think of the questions we explore in class, the questions I’ve put on the previous assignments. Can you come up with an assignment for yourself? Questions whose answers will lead to an argument, a thesis?

**Oral Presentations Wednesday, 10 August, in class**
These will be very short, first of all—about five minutes or less. In your presentation, you will want to stand up and give your audience a brief taste of your argument about your topic. What have you chosen and why? This will give us the opportunity to really immerse ourselves and our audience in our thinking. Articulating an idea out loud for an audience is different than writing; in some ways it demands that we be even more clear and concise. These demands can help our writing.

You’ll probably have time only to talk about a limited aspect of your argument. You may want to do a “close reading” of a text or an example of the material you’re studying in your project. Perhaps you’ll already have something like a theory of your own (based on your reading) to tell us. Perhaps you’ll give us your analytical question and a sample of your reading of evidence that will answer the question.
Your style of presentation will be your own, and you can use whatever visual, aural or other sorts of aids or media you’d like; in fact, aids are encouraged. Let me know what you’ll need to make a presentation (copies, the VCR, laptop projection, puppet theater, something else) and we’ll see if we can get it.

These presentations will be casual. I won’t formally grade them; they’ll fall into your general participation grade. So have fun, and, as always, take big risks with your thinking. Good luck.

Essay 3 Assignment
Rough draft due Monday, 8 August (5 pages, 3 copies)

Conferences Monday, 8 August-Wednesday, 10 August

Final draft due Monday, 15 August, 1 PM, in my mailbox, 8 Prescott Street (6-9 pages). For final review, please place in folder containing the Essay 3 rough drafts and instructor and peer evaluations and the two previous essay final drafts only.

Folders and final grade returned Wednesday, 17 August, 1-3 PM, my office.

Choose two essays (strongly suggested) from among those by Twain, Adams, Sontag, Thomas, Gould, and Bellow. Add a third essay of your own selection. The selection may come from your independent research or from other essays in Best American Essays. You may add a fourth essay of any sort as well, but use no more than four essays. Address an intellectual problem of your own choice. You may add your personal experience to your essay.

For this last paper, rather than receiving possible questions to pursue, you’ll generate your own. You should try to write an assignment for yourself. Can you use ideas and keyterms from your sources to talk about an intellectual problem you’ve chosen? Again, you are welcome to add your own experience to your approach to the intellectual problem.