I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.  
— Gandalf (J.R.R. Tolkein’s *The Hobbit*)

**English 300B**  
**Expository Writing: The Informal Essay**  
Fall 2014

Section 90672 – H1  
Orlando 113  
4:00 – 6:30 PM (T)

**Dr. Matthew Forsythe**  
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**Conference Hours:** Monday (12-1), Wednesday (12-1), Thursday (2:30-3:30)  
*Additional Times Available by Appointment*


**Course Description**

This course assumes that writing is a critical way to understand, organize, and provide meaning to human experience . . . an integral part of a liberal studies curriculum. The class will examine a wide range of published essays, considering their strategies and forms, but the central, defining feature will be the conversations and workshops about writing produced by the students themselves.

“We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”  
— Anaïs Nin

Our section of Expository Writing will emphasize the Informal Essay, a style of writing that is often characterized by its self-reflection, open form, and engaged, conversational manner. Note that “Informal” does not imply “Careless” or “Unedited.” On the contrary, the shortage of forms and conventions actually *increases* the challenge for the writer: every choice must be examined, and the quality of the sentence-level prose must be superb. On a tightrope of words, you entertain and instruct the audience, performing for readers without a net.
In this class, students will study the work of their predecessors, including well-established masters of the Informal Essay. We will discuss their narrative strategies, the flexible structure & design, the subtle techniques of unity & order, and the rhetorical intent & tone. We'll adopt a liberal approach to the genre, welcoming many forms of Creative Nonfiction into the fold. The Informal Essay is a provocative mode of writing, and exploring its possibilities can provide students with an enlightening and satisfying experience, a method of self-discovery that few other courses can offer.

**Course Goals**

1. Explore the genre of the Informal Essay by reading the texts of professional and student writers. Examine their technical facets and design, discuss their themes and ideas, and refine analytical skills through written responses to these works.

2. Improve writing skills by creating a series of original texts in the genre of the Informal Essay. Gain a stronger command of technique, including a focus on the design & structural framework, the specificity & significance of the content, and the control of the sentence-level delivery.

3. Develop a commitment to the writing process, including the creation and revision of multiple drafts before the submission of the finished product. Demonstrate a high degree of competence in the following aspects of college-level writing: Concept, Design, Content, Presentation, and Editing.

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**Texts & Materials**

*Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*
Dinty W. Moore  
ISBN: 978-1-58297-796-6 ($17.99)

*Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*
Eds. Lex Williford and Michael Martone  
ISBN: 978-1-4165-3174-6 ($20.00)

A significant number of readings will be archived on the course Blackboard site, and students should anticipate the time and cost required to print copies of their two workshop essays for the entire class.
Course Requirements

Workshop Essays: Your most significant assignments will be the two Informal Essays that you design, draft, revise, and edit for presentation in workshops. Each of these essays will require a unique form, style and emphasis, demonstrating the range in your writing. Their precise length will vary, depending on the topic and approach, but they tend to average 8-12 pages each.

Written Exercises (“Short-Short Essays”): Throughout the session, you will also complete a series of two to four “Short-Short Essays” (the exact number you write will depend on their combined length – a minimum of 2,000 words). Many of these will stem from prompts in Moore’s book or specific tasks that Dr. Forsythe provides. These assignments will average 2-4 pages in length, and they should be revised and edited before submission.

Portfolio Revisions: At the end of the semester, you’ll select your best work and revise it a final time, considering the advice and suggestions that you received from your peers and the instructor. To showcase their primary accomplishments of the term, most students will select their two Workshop Essays, but others will elect to revise one Workshop Essay and two of their Written Exercises. A series of four Talking Points (see below) will accompany the Portfolio and discuss its contents.

Talking Points: The opening weeks of the course will involve a significant amount of reading. You will respond to the texts in many ways, but the most important will be a series of Talking Points that you compose for each class. These short but lucid observations (usually a paragraph each) will exercise your skill at presenting analytical insights in an informal style. In addition, they will prepare you to participate in our vigorous class discussions. Your final set of Talking Points will comment on the work that you revise for the Portfolio.

Reading Quizzes: You will complete two reading quizzes that require you to demonstrate your comprehension of the course readings. Taken in class, they will involve objective questions (especially quote identifications), short answers & paragraph responses. The second quiz will also include a take-home response.

Workshop Critiques: You will provide informal comments on the workshop drafts submitted by your peers, offering them encouragement, ideas, and suggestions . . . in other words, engaging their work in a thoughtful conversation. These comments will be collected by the instructor and evaluated as evidence of both your commitment to our writing community and your understanding of the basic features & possibilities of this genre. After Dr. Forsythe reviews the comments, he will give them to the author of the essay, who may choose to heed or ignore this advice when revising their work for the Portfolio.

Miscellaneous Work and Participation: Your active and positive contributions to our sessions will also be factored into my evaluation. This category includes class discussions and group work, in-class writing about the readings, handouts based on Crafting the Personal Essay, posts on the Discussion Boards, and two informal presentations (Endorsements) on readings you encounter in the second half of the course.
Attendance Policy: The success of our course will hinge on the reading and writing community that we establish, so regular attendance is essential. It is impossible to earn strong marks for Participation if you are not present to participate. In addition, if you are absent for more than two of our class sessions, your final average will be penalized by one step on the grading scale (for example, from a B- to a C+) for every additional class that you miss. All absences count toward this total: they are neither excused nor unexcused. The only exceptions involve students who are travelling on official, documented Rollins business or students who must be absent for a religious holiday. These students are required to notify the instructor of the absence in advance.
Grading Criteria for Essays & Written Exercises: Each piece of formal writing will be assigned a letter and number grade, marks that stem from the grading criteria that follows. All grades are final; however, students will revise several of the works for inclusion in the Portfolio, demonstrating their progress this term. These revisions constitute a new project and do not replace the earlier mark.

The Rollins College catalogue provides the following definitions for student grades:

• The grade of A is reserved for work that is exceptional in quality and shows keen insight, understanding, and initiative.
• The grade of B is given for work that is consistently superior and shows interest, effort, or originality.
• The grade of C is a respectable grade. A C average (2.00) is required for graduation. It reflects consistent daily preparation and satisfactory completion of all work required.

When marking your essays this term, I will apply these standards when determining a grade for your writing. In particular, I will be using them to evaluate your performance in many of the following categories:

I. Concept Does the essay have an original topic, a significant objective & an interesting approach? Is there a clear purpose? A specific focus and central thesis (whether implicit or explicit)?

II. Design Is the organization successful? Is the structural framework thoughtful and complete? Does each body paragraph play an important role in the overall design? Are the transitions graceful and natural, rather than forced or absent? Are the introductory and concluding passages effective?

III. Content Is there clarity and quality in the content? Is the detail vivid, memorable, and significant? Is there adequate reflection and discussion? Is the commentary natural and insightful? Is the coverage thorough? Does it explore the topic in sufficient depth?

IV. Presentation Is there skill in the sentence construction? Are the syntax and diction effective? Does the author demonstrate a command of grammar and mechanics (punctuation), reinforcing their ethos (credibility) as a trustworthy source?

V. Editing Is the editing effective, or do major errors distract the readers from the essay’s purpose?

A detailed set of instructions will accompany each assignment, and observations on grading in the course as a whole will be available on Blackboard in the handout “Frequently Asked Questions.”

Grading Criteria for Miscellaneous Work: Some daily work (such as Talking Points) will be evaluated using a basic rubric: Exceptional, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, and Below English 300 Standards. On occasion, students will receive an update (a letter grade) of their overall mark in these categories.

Excellent: First-rate work that stands apart due to its superior vision and execution.
Very Good: Strong work that exceeds the goals of the assignment.
Good: Effective, competent work that clearly fulfills the assignment’s objectives.
Satisfactory: Acceptable work that meets the basic, minimum requirements of the assignment.
Below E300 Standards: Work that falls short of the assignment’s requirements or expectations.
Classroom Etiquette: Consider yourself a participant rather than a spectator. Quality teamwork takes many forms, though all invest in the community. Maintain a professional standard of conduct: arrive on time, prepare for class in advance, keep your cell phones silent, and respect the contributions of your peers. Excessive tardiness will be counted as an absence, and students whose behavior disrupts the learning experience of the class can expect to receive poor marks for class participation.

Laptop Policy: You may utilize laptops or other tablets for activities directly related to our course, but only if you refrain from multitasking. Not only is such behavior rude, disrupting the educational experience of the other class members, but it damages your Ethos, undermining the credibility of the work that you submit. I will not always interrupt class to correct unprofessional behavior, such as texting, sleeping, or surfing the web, but these actions are a clear sign of your disinterest in the course.

Late Work: Unless prior arrangements have been made, I’ll apply a penalty for each class period that assignments are late — consult the appropriate assignment sheet for specific details. It is especially crucial that you provide workshop drafts on the days that you have arranged to bring them. If you are absent for a class period, your work must be submitted during the class session that you return to avoid this penalty.

Conferences: I encourage you to meet with me throughout the semester to discuss your work. I will not predict a grade that a piece might receive, but I’ll be eager to offer advice that should help you improve the writing. I’ll bring a sign-up sheet to most classes: please make an appointment if you have questions about your work or the course as a whole.

The Writing Center is a helpful and worthwhile resource that I encourage you to utilize this term. It provides a comfortable setting where students, faculty, and trained peer writing consultants can collaborate at any stage of the writing process (http://r-net.rollins.edu/twc/).

Communication: I will use the email tool on Blackboard, which links to your Rollins email address, to provide announcements throughout the semester. Students are responsible for checking their Rollins email account for class information on a regular basis.

Last Date to Withdraw Without Academic Penalty: October 31. Students should contact the Holt School Office if there are questions regarding withdrawal deadlines, policies, or procedures.
**Academic Honor Pledge:** Membership in the student body of Rollins College carries with it an obligation, and requires a commitment, to act with honor in all things. The student commitment to uphold the values of honor — honesty, trust, respect, fairness, and responsibility — particularly manifests itself in two public aspects of student life. First, as part of the admission process to the College, students agree to commit themselves to the Honor Code. Then, as part of the matriculation process during Orientation, students sign a more detailed pledge to uphold the Honor Code and to conduct themselves honorably in all their activities, both academic and social, as a Rollins student. A student signature on the following pledge is a binding commitment by the student that lasts for his or her entire tenure at Rollins College: “The development of the virtues of Honor and Integrity are integral to a Rollins College education and to membership in the Rollins College community. Therefore, I, a student of Rollins College, pledge to show my commitment to these virtues by abstaining from any lying, cheating, or plagiarism in my academic endeavors and by behaving responsibly, respectfully and honorably in my social life and in my relationships with others.” This pledge is reinforced every time a student submits work for academic credit as his/her own. Students shall add to the paper, quiz, test, lab report, etc., the handwritten signed statement “On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.” Material submitted electronically should contain the pledge; submission implies signing the pledge.

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**Rollins College is committed to equal access and does not discriminate unlawfully against persons with disabilities in its policies, procedures, programs or employment processes. The College recognizes its obligations under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to provide an environment that does not discriminate against persons with disabilities.**

*If you are a person with a disability on this campus and anticipate needing any type of academic/medical accommodations in order to participate in your classes, please make timely arrangements by disclosing this disability in writing to the Disability Services Office at (Box 2772) – Mills Building, 1000 Holt Ave., Winter Park, FL, 32789. Appointments can be scheduled by calling 407-646-2354 or by emailing: gridgeway@rollins.edu*

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**The course syllabus is a general plan for the course. Deviations announced by the instructor will be necessary and inevitable.**

**English 300 – Course Overview**

*Consult the Course Calendar for each month to determine the reading and writing assignments for each class session. Distributing the calendar in this manner allows me the flexibility to respond to the unique needs and interests of each class, and it allows students to select workshop dates that best fit their schedules.***

**The Informal Essay – An Introduction:** Tuesday, August 26 – Tuesday, September 30

• Class sessions will focus on the intense series of reading assignments that open the course. Each period, students will respond to these readings through a series of Talking Points and posts on the course discussion boards. They will practice the craft of the Informal Essay through worksheets and in-class writing assignments, and they will revise and edit two of their Written Exercises.
Workshops (Round I): Tuesday, October 7 – Tuesday, October 28

- Our primary attention will shift to the Workshop Essays that students in the class have created. One class period prior to your workshop date, you will provide the class with seventeen copies of your essay (a draft that you have already revised and edited). We will read the work, provide written feedback, and discuss our observations during the following class session. In addition to these workshops, students will select a reading from a list of options and report on their reactions (both to the class and using the Discussion Boards) in their initial endorsement of the term.

Workshops (Round II): Tuesday, November 4 – Tuesday, November 25

Class Showcase, English 300 Portfolios: Tuesday, December 2

- On the final class session of the term, students will share their favorite passages from their Portfolios, and the class will consider the potential of the Informal Essay to enrich their lives on three levels: in their remaining coursework, in their current and future careers, and in the world beyond their workplace and the classroom.

An Expectation & A Challenge

I expect you to work hard, both individually and as a community, analyzing professional and student work for technique as well as meaning. Students should be committed to the enterprise, eager to talk about reading and writing, and willing to revise their work. Given our focus on the Informal Essay, I assume that the topic interests you, whether it’s a field you’ve previously explored or you’re considering it for the first time.

Approach your work seriously, but not so seriously that you won’t take risks or engage your imagination. Demand excellence, both of the course and your own contributions to the endeavor. Work hard, pay attention, and balance your industry with a sense of humor. I’ll do my best to make this an interesting, challenging, and memorable session.

“When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,” said Piglet at last, “what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

“What’s for breakfast?” said Pooh. “What do you say, Piglet?”

“I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting today?” said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s the same thing,” he said.

A.A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh
For the first week of the course, I will provide copies of all readings, including readings from the course textbooks, in the folder “Course Readings” on Blackboard. By September 9, you need to have purchased or rented copies of the required texts.
Assignments for Tuesday, September 9:

1. Complete the Workshop Survey and email it to Dr. Forsythe.
2. Read Chapters 4-5, 19, & 21-22 of *Crafting the Personal Essay* (38-58, 200-207, 214-225). Complete the handout “*Crafting the Personal Essay* – Chapters 4-5, 19, & 21-22” (available on Blackboard).
3. Read the following essays:
   - “The Death of a Moth” (Virginia Woolf): Pdf on Blackboard
   - “The Art of Failure” (Malcolm Gladwell): Pdf on Blackboard
   - “The Pain Scale” (Eula Bliss): *Touchstone Anthology* (28-42)
   - “High Tide in Tucson” (Barbara Kingsolver): *Touchstone Anthology* (265-274)
   - “Guilty Pleasures” (Peter Travis): Pdf on Blackboard (Student Essay)
4. Complete your next set of **Talking Points** for the semester. Following the instructions on the assignment handout, complete a Talking Point for **four** of the essays that I’ve assigned for September 9 (four Talking Points in all). If you wish, you may complete a talking point on the 5th essay for a small amount of extra credit.
5. By Tuesday, September 9, you should have drafted and revised your **first Written Exercise**.* Submit a final, polished version to Dr. Forsythe, along with the handout “Written Exercise #1 – Checklist and Honor Code” (available on Blackboard).

   *This first Written Exercise may also be submitted on Tuesday, September 16, without penalty.*

In-Class Readings for Tuesday, September 9:

   “Leap” (Brian Doyle): *Touchstone Anthology* (165-166)

Assignments for Tuesday, September 16:

1. Read Chapters 7-10 of *Crafting the Personal Essay* (75-131). Complete the handout “*Crafting the Personal Essay* – Chapters 7-10” (available on Blackboard).
2. Read the following essays:
   - “Beauty” (Scott Russell Sanders): Pdf on Blackboard
   - “The Date” (Brenda Miller): *Touchstone Anthology* (381-388)
   - “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” (Dinty Moore): *Touchstone Anthology* (389-395)
   - “Ah, Wilderness! Humans, Hawks, and Environmental Correctness on the Muddy Rio Grande” (Dinty Moore): *Crafting the Personal Essay* (114-131)
3. Complete your next set of **Talking Points** for the semester. Following the instructions on the assignment handout, complete a Talking Point for **two** of the essays that I’ve assigned for September 16 (two Talking Points in all). If you wish, you may complete a talking point on a 3rd essay for a small amount of extra credit.
4. Go to the Discussion Boards on Blackboard, and enter the Forum “**Favorite Quotes – Part I**.” Take a few minutes & discuss your thoughts on two of your favorite quotes from any of the essays that we have read since the beginning of the semester.

5. **Your initial Reading Quiz of the semester will occur on Tuesday, September 16,** and cover the assigned readings and in-class readings from August 26 – September 16. It will follow the format described in class, and sample quizzes will be available for practice on Blackboard.