

auto BIO graphy

This is the beginning of your Autobiography Bookart Project. A full version of your project will be due for critique week 5, October 30th.

We've chosen the book form because we are used to storing our memories in books and because book formats can incorporate many different media—photography, drawing, printmaking, painting, collage, origami, pop-ups, computer graphics, etc.

The first stage of the autobiography is to create some text.

Text will be a central feature of your autobiography. Language is the most common medium with which we share our stories. Beyond a minimum expectation that your final project contain a “signature” of significant text, it is up to you how much more of your work contains or is driven by text. You will read your text piece, or a significant portion of it, at the program retreat.

THERE ARE MANY APPROACHES TO TELLING YOUR STORY

We would like you to choose some of the approaches on the right to begin. If these do not suit you, check in with one of us with an alternate plan.

PEER REVIEW:

We will engage in small group reviews on Friday of week two, by which time you will have completed a considered draft of least one text piece.

Writing skills are essential to communication, self-expression, intellectual inquiry, and so on. Autobiographical writing, though personal, though uniquely reflective of your identity even in its flaws and flubs, requires and benefits from critique and revision just as all other writing does.

You will be guided in your peer review process through two basic stages: reader-based response, and criterion-based response. The first is focussed on what the reader's direct and open experience of your writing was. It requires attentive and sensitive readers, careful reflection (as readers) on what was being said, and willingness to describe personal responses to the work. The second compares the writing to standards, ideals, and models, asking whether it conforms to expectations of form and grammar, and how it utilizes conventions of writing.

Readings and Guides on Reserve at the Library

Smith, Keith A. *from* Structure of the Visual Book, Sigma Foundation, '92.

Marcus, Ben. *from* The Age of Wire and String, Dalkey Archive Press, '95.

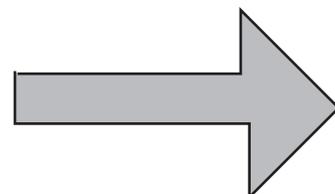
Sedaris, David. ... *from* Naked, Back Bay Books, '97.

hooks, bell. . . *from* Talking Back, excerpted in Writing Women's Lives, ed. S Cahill, Harper Collins, '94.

APPROACHES

The following approaches, detailed on the reverse, are recommended as challenges to start writing. Incorporate as many of these or other ways of telling your story as you like. Experiment with storytelling; imagine the physical form of your book, the page, and the words on the page.

- Critical Moment
- Multiple Perspectives
- Interview
- Portrait
- Dialogues
- Anecdote/Sequence
- Genre-Piece
- Timeline
- Yesterday
- Encyclopedia/Dictionary
- Metaphor/Dreamspace



• CRITICAL MOMENT

A “critical moment” is a time when you experienced a dramatic shift in how you think, perceive the world, or who you are. As you write about a critical moment, consider all the factors that “create” the moment.

• MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Describe yourself or an event in which you participated from multiple perspectives, real or imaginary. Think carefully about how people you know might observe you and how you “fit” into the lives and thoughts of others. If you are so inclined, choose a real event, real people, and ask them what their perspective was.

• INTERVIEW

Allow yourself to be interviewed by a friend or classmate or interview yourself on paper. Ask yourself all the right questions.

• PORTRAIT

Write with as much detail as possible about your physical presence, your mannerisms, etc. Focus on appealing to both the senses and the intellect. Avoid telling stories.

• DIALOGUES

Write fictitious or real dialogues between yourself and others. Label them accordingly: “What I should have said when my boss treated me like sh**,” or “My Conversation with Jon Stewart” or, in the case of real dialogues from memory, identify the time and place of the conversation (and give it a catchy title). Utilize conventions for creating dialogue from fiction: use quotation marks, line breaks & tabs, attributive phrases (she said, he snorted, she screamed), and interludes of prose that communicate body language, movements, setting, and other ambience.

• ANECDOTE/SEQUENCE

An anecdote is typically a tightly contained sequence of events, often a single stream of events in a short amount of time. They’re the kinds of stories we relate in casual conversation to reveal funny or painful experiences, tastes, and attitudes about the world. Write several anecdotes of approximately the same length. Consider how the sequence of anecdotes work all together.

• GENRE-PIECE

Convert (imaginatively, with creative license) a part of your life into a genre piece (mystery, science fiction, romance, fantasy, etc.). While conforming your story to conventions of the genre, don’t let the significance of the story be lost; rather, find ways to use the conventions to amplify what you think is important about your experience.

• TIMELINE

Draw a long line and start putting points on it: personal memories, images, important events in your life, things you remember that happened in the world in your lifetime, and so on. Detail these events above and below the time line as you would historical events on a traditional timeline. You may find it interesting to work with multiple lines for different aspects of your life.

• YESTERDAY

Describe yesterday (or any recent day) with as much detail as possible. Even more detail than that.

• ENCYCLOPEDIA/Dictionary

Write the encyclopedia or dictionary of your life and who you are. Define words/ideas/places by what they mean to you. Make up you own words, places, concepts and define them.

• METAPHOR/DREAMSPACE

Describe in great detail some of your dreams, or describe your experiences through metaphorical or surrealist devices. Don’t lose track of what you’re trying to get at by telling these stories: you may find it interesting to write an interpretation of what your choices signify, the meaning of the symbols and images that you come up with.

SOME IDEAS

quoted in Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write* (Oxford Univ.Press '00)

"Writing for self does not exist in any real sense . . . [U]ltimately all discourse is intended for an audience other than the self who is doing the writing.." —Thomas Mallon

"...when we go off by ourselves to put pen to paper or to read what someone else has written, we displace into solitude acts that are essentially social and collaborative. Writing is not a private act. It is an aspect of social adaptation. When we write, we return conversation, displaced and internalized as thought, to the social sphere where it originates." —Ken Bruffee

"Every human word implies not only the existence—at least in the imagination—of another to whom the word is uttered, but it also implies that the speaker has a kind of otherness within himself." —Walter Ong.

Elbow offers (on the other hand):

"writers often fit their words better to outside readers when they put those readers out of mind for a while and write privately to try to make sure their words fit themselves and their own experience of things.

point: begin your autobiographical work by writing something that you WILL NOT turn in or let anyone else read ever.

from Ben Marcus's *The Age of Wire and String* (Dalkey Archive Press '95)

"There is no larger task than that of cataloging a culture, particularly when that culture has remained willfully hidden to the routine in-gazing practiced by professional disclosers, who, after systematically looting our country of its secrets are now busy shading every example of so-called local color into their own banal hues. A catalog of poses and motions produced from within a culture may read, then, like a form of special pleading, or, at the very least, like a product that must be ravaged of bias by scholars prepared to act as objective witnesses. It has, however, been demonstrated by Sernier (and others, although without violence) that the outer gaze destroys the inner thing, that by looking at an object we destroy it with our desire, that for accurate vision to occur, the thing must be trained to see itself, or otherwise perish in blindness, flawed. . . . Let this...be the first of many forays into the mysteries, as here disclosed but not destroyed. For it is in these things that we are most lost, as it is in these things that we must be better hidden."

Consider Marcus's words in the context of the autobiography (though his novel purports to be the "catalog of a culture" most reviewers and critics make the interesting assumption that it is autobiographical, at least at heart). In this context, the writer's life, his environment, is the "culture," and we readers are the "in-gazers." Marcus is simultaneously giving us a way in to his life and pushing us out, making sure that we do not destroy it, ruin it with our biases, ravage it with analysis. In fact, the book effectively thwarts analysis, with inconsistency, opacity of language and image, and by continually shifting the meanings of words.

The invitation in and simultaneous pushing away can add to our thinking about private writing. Marcus maintains a kind of privacy, but seems at the same time to suggest intimate and powerful stories, which the reader comes to know through many an imaginative leap: here's the trick: these leaps of imagination are so wild and weird that the reader is always very aware that they are their own leaps, and the chances of "getting it right," or knowing "what the author meant" are nil. point: let's presume this: that we cannot know each other through our writing. We will talk about our writing and what we've written, but what your imagination does with someone else's story is your own story, unique and isolated. Therefore, we must talk about what we read, and how we think about it. We are not words, we were not words yesterday, nor can we be reduced to words.

In this project, you begin the journey from deep within to deep without. From reflection and writing, to sharing with a small group of peers, to the whole group, to displaying your final book project in a critique.

PEER REVIEW INTRO

An important part of your work in this course will be the discussion you have with your writing tutor and other members of the class about your own writing and about their writing. It is essential that you share your responses to your classmates' work and listen to their responses to yours. Your growth as a writer will depend in part on your ability to learn from your classmates and to help them learn from you.

HERE ARE SOME THOUGHTS TO PREPARE YOU FOR THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

In "Writing Without Teachers," Peter Elbow makes a useful distinction between "criterion-based" feedback and "reader-based" feedback.

Here are some excerpts from Elbow's chapter on FEEDBACK:

Some people don't need to be encouraged to seek feedback; indeed, they need to be restrained. To some of you, that is, I would like to say, "Stop worrying so much about how your words work, about how good they are; just keep your mind on your writing, have fun, get confident, write lots." In short, if you are a compulsive worrier, and keep leaking your attention away from what you are doing to how well you are doing it, forget about feedback till you have done enough writing and sharing and feel more secure.

But some of you need to be encouraged to get feedback. Probably you have been burned in the past. After all, getting feedback on an early draft usually means getting criticized before you've had a chance to make your piece as good as you can make it.

Once we've begun the feedback process together, gotten a little more comfortable with each others' language and kinds of questions that need to be asked and answered, you'll want to think carefully about how feedback fits in to your writing process. You may find one or the other of the two kinds of feedback either extremely helpful or extremely hindering at different stages of the process. As you begin to recognize your creative process as a writer, you'll also want to ask yourself if you are satisfied with it. Does it work well for you? For all that we like to recognize different learning and working styles, our appreciation of difference should not leave us thinking that we have to be whatever way we happen to be right now. We can change. I encourage you to try different methods of working. If you are surprised by how someone else writes their stories or essays, try to do it yourself and see how it works for you.

More from Elbow:

READER-BASED FEEDBACK tells you what your writing does to particular readers, instead of telling you how your writing measures up to preestablished criteria.

fundamental questions

- a. What was happening to you, moment by moment, as you were reading the piece of writing?
- b. Summarize the writing; give your understanding of what it says or what happened in it.
- c. Make up some images for the writing and the transaction it creates with you.

CRITERION-BASED FEEDBACK helps you find out how your writing measures up to certain criteria.

fundamental questions

- a. What is the quality of the content of the writing: the ideas, the perceptions, the point of view?
- b. How well is the writing organized?
- c. How effective is the language?
- d. Are there mistakes or inappropriate uses of language?

For Peer Review, you will be divided into small groups and given a specific process to follow to give each other feedback on a draft of autobiographical text. Some components of the process will require you to produce a document that will be turned in to your seminar faculty.

CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY BOOK PROJECT

- completion of a draft of autobio text by Friday, week 2
- full participation in the peer review process, Friday, week 2
 - turn in a revision of autobio text by Friday, week 3
 - revision of writing with writing tutor, weeks 2-4
- completion of a book “mock-up” by Thursday of week 3
 - Participation in mock-up process discussion/critique
- completion of a revised autobiographical book by week 5
 - exhibition of final project for critique

Address the following challenges:

- to use images, text, and the book form to create narratives
 - to experiment with self-expression in multiple media
- to integrate diverse aesthetic challenges into a unified book form
- to give, receive, and use constructive feedback on your writing
- to give, receive, and use constructive feedback on visual artwork
 - to explore the nature of identity
 - to explore how stories shape our lives
 - to explore how our environment shapes our lives
 - to explore our place in history
- to explore the differences between making art for the sake of art/self/ others