

Composition I: The Writer's Craft

Coursebook



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Lesson

1

Letter to Self

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Identify specific words that express your sense of self.
- Explain your word choices.
- Write a self-reflective essay.

At the heart of writing is the need to communicate and, specifically, to express yourself. Consider what this means, to express your “self.” In order to authentically express your self, you need to understand who you are. This, then, is your starting point and guiding question for this course: “Who am I?” By examining your response to this question, you can begin to place yourself into the context of the world you inhabit and identify what you want to share with others in order to influence the world in some way. Searching for your own identity can help you better relate to the challenges, uncertainties, purposes, quests for knowledge, and ideas shared by other human beings.

Reading

1. In *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, read the following essay:

- “In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer

Notice how the author uses subtle humor, historical references, and analogy to impart valid writing instruction.

2. Read the following section of Part II: Expository Writing in *Write It Right*.

- General Formatting

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Read “In Praise of the Humble Comma” by Pico Iyer.
- ☐ Read a section of *Write It Right*.
- ☐ Choose three words to express who you are.
- ☐ Write a letter to yourself exploring the question, “Who am I?”

The Writer's Craft

A run-on sentence, its phrases piling up without division, is as unsightly as a sink piled high with dirty dishes.

"In Praise of the Humble Comma" by Pico Iyer

Using proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, and writing technique is not just an academic exercise; it actually helps you express yourself more effectively. At the core of all writing is a desire to share your ideas. For readers, stumbling over errors in a piece of writing can be distracting and frustrating. Improving your writing technique will help your readers focus on your message and walk away with something to think about.

Writing

1. Writing is an expression of self, so your first assignment is to spend some time thinking about who you are. You might find a quiet place to sit, outside or in your favorite spot. You might take a walk, just pondering the question of your identity and how you came to be the person you are. You might try walking into your bedroom as though you are seeing it for the first time. What does this space say about the person who lives in it? Look at your favorite possessions, the activities you like to do, the ways you like to spend your time alone. Use this information to help crystalize your sense of self. Choose three words to express who you are.
2. After spending some time thinking, write a one- or two-page letter to yourself, reflecting on the essential question, "Who am I?" Feel free to write your letter by hand, if that feels more natural to you or helps you get your ideas on paper more clearly. (If you are writing by hand, doodles are encouraged!) Use your three words in your letter and explain why you chose them.

You might want to jump right into your letter, or you might want to gather your thoughts first with a prewriting exercise. (See the section, "Prewriting Exercises," in *Write It Right* if you aren't sure where or how to start.) Here are some additional questions that might help you explore this topic:

- What am I really good at?
- What do I need to work on about myself?
- What do I really know well?
- What do I want to learn or do?
- What do I worry about?
- What makes me feel happy or content?

Since you are writing to yourself, you can write either in journal form (“I like how I always notice . . .”) or in letter form (“Dear Me, I like how you always notice . . .”). When your letter is complete, proofread it to correct any errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar.



(Image credit: CCO Public Domain/Max Pixel)

SHARE YOUR WORK

When you have completed this lesson, share your letter to yourself with your teacher, and then continue to lesson 2.

If you are a student enrolled in Oak Meadow's distance learning school, be sure to look closely at the Google course doc your Oak Meadow teacher shares with you because the assignments or course requirements may have been modified.

Lesson

2

Essay #1

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Analyze two pieces of writing.
- Support your statements with textual evidence.
- Reflect on yourself as a reader.

Words, sentences, paragraphs—these are the writer’s basic tools. Most people take these tools for granted, and don’t give them much thought. But writers need to pay careful attention to every detail of a piece of writing to make sure the ideas expressed serve the intended purpose: to delight, intrigue, inform, persuade, entertain, provoke thought, or simply draw attention to the common bonds of humanity.

In this course, you will become a better writer. Part of that process is carefully examining what you like and don’t like about other writers’ styles. Everything you read can help you learn how to express yourself in your own personally meaningful way.

This week, you will read two essays that describe emotional experiences. In “Suspended” by Joy Harjo, the third sentence tells the reader what the essay is about, so the message or purpose is clear. How, then, does the author convey this “revelatory,” life-changing moment? Notice the use of sensory details to ground the reader in the experience of this “rite of passage into the world of humanity.” It is not the child’s first time hearing the music, but it is her first time *really* hearing it. Similarly, “Museum Piece” by David Huddle describes seeing something familiar in a new light.

In each of the essays you’ll read in this course, notice what makes the writer’s voice unique. What makes their writing powerful? What writing techniques do they use to express themselves so powerfully? Analyzing what works well can help you become a stronger writer.

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Read sections of *Write It Right*.
- ☐ Read “Suspended” by Joy Harjo and “Museum Piece” by David Huddle.
- ☐ Write an analytical essay in response to the reading (Essay #1).
- ☐ Reflect on and describe your reading process.

Reading

1. Read the following sections of Part I: Writing Basics in *Write It Right*. Keep this information in mind while reading the essays in the next assignment and writing your own essay this week.

- Elements of Good Writing
 - Writing Style
- Sentences and Paragraphs
 - Varied Sentences
 - Dependent and Independent Clauses
 - Run-On Sentences
 - Concise Writing
 - Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers
 - Strong Paragraphs

2. In *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, read the following essays:

- “Suspended” by Joy Harjo
- “Museum Piece” by David Huddle

Take active notes as you read. Use your notes to help you understand what you read. Write down any ideas the reading sparks in your mind. Underline, ponder, disagree. Look up words you don't know and write down the definitions in your own words. Taking notes about a text is your chance to interrogate it as much as enjoy and learn from it. Active note-taking helps you translate for yourself what the text means to you.



A Lady Writing by Johannes Vermeer, 1665
(Image credit: National Gallery of Art)

The Writer's Craft

Here is the opening paragraph of Brian Doyle's essay, "Joyas Voladoras":

Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird's heart beats ten times a second. A hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird's heart is a lot of the hummingbird. Joyas voladoras, flying jewels, the first white explorers in the Americas called them, and the white men had never seen such creatures, for hummingbirds came into the world only in the Americas, nowhere else in the universe, more than three hundred species of them whirring and zooming and nectaring in hummer time zones nine times removed from ours, their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests.

Notice the evocative language Doyle uses. Consider this phrase: "their hearts hammering faster than we could clearly hear if we pressed our elephantine ears to their infinitesimal chests." The hummingbird's chest is not really infinitesimal, and our ears are not really elephantine, but feel how much more expressive that phrase is than simply saying "if we pressed our big ears to their tiny chests."

Writing

1. Using your notes about the two essays you read, write a one- or two-page response (this will be called Essay #1). What did you like or dislike about the essays? What were the authors trying to convey? Did the essays share a common thread? Which writing techniques did the authors use? Were they effective?

Here is a list of some of the features that define a writing style:

- Are there a lot of adjectives? Are the verbs strong?
- Are the sentences long or short? Does their structure vary? What structure does each author prefer?
- Are the paragraphs long or short? Does their structure vary?
- What sort of rhythm is achieved within the sentences and paragraphs?
- What is the tone of the writing? Is it intellectual, poetic, authoritative, or humorous?
- What kind of language do the authors use? Formal? Informal? Do they employ dialect or slang?

- Are the descriptions elaborate or subdued?
- Is the emphasis on plot? Character? Setting?
- Do the authors use metaphor or simile?
- What narrative point of view is used? Is it effective?

In your writing, reference at least one specific line, phrase, or word choice from each essay you read; make sure to cite the author's name and the title of the essay and enclose any direct quotes in quotation marks. When you have completed your essay, proofread your work. Share your essay with at least one other person (this can be a teacher, another adult, or a peer) and ask for feedback.

2. Think about your experience reading the essays assigned in this lesson. Reflect on your individual reading process: your strengths, challenges, and approaches to reading. Do you read things once and only once? Do you go back and reread lines and passages that you like or that confuse you? Do you take notes as you read? If so, how and why? What do you do when you come upon a word that is unfamiliar to you? What do you do when you come upon a passage that delights you or resonates with you? What happens when you read an idea you object to or that baffles you? Reflect on how you read in general, how you read the two essays assigned in this lesson, and how your reading process differs depending on what you are reading. What are your reading strategies? What is your approach to reading?

Here are some of the things you may notice and focus on in your essay:

- your note-taking style
- your stylistic preferences for writing and reading different kinds of essays
- the kinds of writing you find confusing, frustrating, or annoying
- the kinds of writing you find appealing, exciting, or intriguing
- how you connect what you are reading to your own life

Write one or two paragraphs about yourself as a reader. Alternately, you might choose to complete this assignment as a discussion, as an audio or video log, or in a creative, visual, or artistic form.

Further Study

Note: All Further Study readings are optional.

Social relationships have an ebb and flow. Even with casual relationships, the push-pull of emotions can sometimes be inexplicable, or at least hard to fathom. For one take on the impact of social relationships, read "On the Street" by Vivian Gornick (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*). Try to figure out how the author expresses her conflicting emotions.

Lesson

3

Revision and Photo Essay

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Pair images and words in a photo essay.
- Incorporate feedback into a revision.

An essential part of writing is revising. The first step—the rough draft—is used to get all the ideas down on paper in a basic order. The revision stage of the writing process is when we get a chance to work with the words, and play with the words, until they are shaped into something more meaningful and expressive. Like a jeweler cutting facets into a gemstone to bring out its hidden depths of light, writers use revision to make their writing shine.

In this lesson, you will continue your exploration of self with a photo essay, and revise the essay you wrote in the previous lesson.

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Read sections of *Write It Right*.
- ☐ Read “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone: The Play” by August Wilson.
- ☐ Create a photo essay using objects that are meaningful to you.
- ☐ Revise Essay #1 based on feedback.
- ☐ Assess yourself as a writer.

Reading

1. To prepare for your first revision of the course, read the following section of Part I: Writing Basics in *Write It Right*.

- The Writing Process
 - Prewriting Exercises
 - Writing a Rough Draft
 - Revising
 - Editing
 - Proofreading

Read the following section of Part II: Expository Writing in *Write It Right*.

- Citing Your Source

Read the following section of Part IV: Writing Rules and Conventions in *Write It Right*.

- Multimedia Presentations

2. In *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, read the following piece:

- “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone: The Play” by August Wilson

This was written to set the scene for a play. Notice the careful word choices the author uses to create an atmosphere with phrases such as, “sun falls out of heaven like a stone,” “fires of the steel mills rage,” and the barges “trudge up the river.”



Jones and Laughlin Mill, Pittsburgh by Johanna Woodwell Hailman, 1871
(Image credit: Carnegie Museum of Art)

The Writer's Craft

Choosing words with deliberate intent is the essence of the writer's craft. Consider the following passages that exemplify the power of a thoughtfully chosen word or carefully crafted phrase.

From "The Shock of Teapots" by Cynthia Ozick:

"Here one enters not landscapes or streetlit night scenes, but fragments of drama; splinters of euphoria that catch you up when you are least deserving."

From "Across the Street" by Bia Low:

"I assumed all this was the onset of old age, or of senility—the nerves tangled inside the skull like the knot of a root-bound plant."

From "Decoy" by Franklin Burroughs:

"Late one stubborn, unyielding winter . . ."

Writing

1. Select at least five objects or belongings that are meaningful to you and represent who you feel yourself to be as a person. You might choose a book, painting, piece of jewelry, special rock or crystal, musical instrument, sports equipment, or any other object that is relevant to your life. Take photographs of each of the five objects, and then write a few sentences about the meaning of each object. Why did you choose this object? How does it represent you? How, if at all, do these objects connect to one another? Use precise language and sensory details to convey a vivid description. Create a photo essay by pairing each photograph and text in a cohesive visual manner—it could be a paper collage, a handmade book, a slide presentation, or any format you choose.
2. Revise your Essay #1, using the feedback from your teacher or someone else you have shared it with. **Save your first version before revising.** Copy it into a new document before you begin your revisions. (You may need both versions for your final portfolio.) First, reread your entire essay. Notice if the information and ideas flow smoothly from one to the next. Make sure key points are highlighted, and paragraphs are organized around these key points. Find ways to use expressive and detailed language instead of bland generalizations, and use a variety of sentence types and lengths to shape the content in a way that is engaging for your reader. Aim for writing that is succinct.

When you have made your revisions, let the piece rest overnight. This allows you to come back to it with a fresh mind and eyes. The next day, read your new draft aloud, looking for places that sound awkward or have errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Make any necessary

corrections, and then proofread your work one final time to fix any lingering errors. Your final version should feel like your best work.

3. In the previous lesson, you reflected on yourself as a reader. Now you'll reflect on yourself as a writer. Answer the following questions using a five-point scale:

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Somewhat Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Somewhat Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

Carefully consider each question before answering. Write down your answers.

- a. Through writing, I can express myself clearly and eloquently.
- b. I like the creative process of brainstorming ideas before beginning a writing project.
- c. I enjoy doing research and writing about what I've learned.
- d. I regularly use the writing process of revising, editing, and proofreading to make my writing stronger.
- e. I'm good at finding and correcting mistakes during the editing and proofreading stages.

Be honest in your answers—you won't be graded on this assignment; it is just an exercise to help you recognize your strengths and challenges as a writer.

Further Study

For another example of building atmosphere through careful detail, read Maxine Kumin's essay, "Enough Jam for a Lifetime" (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*). Notice how the author conveys a clear sense of her mother through the details she chooses to share. (All Further Study readings are optional.)

SHARE YOUR WORK

You will submit your work for lesson 3 at the end of the next lesson.

Lesson

7

Revision and Book of Self

Learning Objectives

In this lesson, you will:

- Demonstrate succinct writing and careful word choice.
- Incorporate feedback into a revised piece of writing.
- Creatively combine images and text in a meaningful way.

Have you ever met someone who had a certain characteristic or mannerism that, for you, illustrated their character? In order to describe an individual's personality, writers often draw upon telling details that reveal the person's inner life. This week, you'll read one essay and excerpts of three others (found in The Writer's Craft section) that demonstrate how to create a strong portrait in words.

Reading

1. Read the following section of Part II: Expository Writing in *Write It Right*.
 - The 100-Word Essay
2. Read "Last Shot" by Tobias Wolff (*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*). This essay presents a strong portrait of a man, illuminating who he was and what his presence (and absence) meant to the author. Notice how readers get a sense of Hugh. What does the author choose to relate about Hugh? Why does the author wait two paragraphs to introduce him? How do these opening paragraphs influence the reader's experience and understanding of Hugh and his role in the author's life?

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- ☐ Read a section of *Write It Right*.
- ☐ Read "Last Shot" by Tobias Wolff.
- ☐ Write a 15-word essay about yourself.
- ☐ Revise Essay #3 based on feedback.
- ☐ Begin constructing your Book of Self.

The Writer's Craft

In “The Last Shot,” author Tobias Wolff uses a snippet of memory to build a sense of his friend’s character. Below are excerpts from three other essays that show how other writers have faced this task when describing their fathers.

In “Hands” by Ted Kooser, the man’s hands give a sense of his inner self, and connect him to men in his profession around the world:

As a young man my father had been a drapery salesman in a department store and his hands were ever after at their best when smoothing fabric for display—the left one holding a piece of cloth unrolled from a bolt while the right lovingly eased the teased the wrinkles from it, his fingers spread and their tips lightly touching the cloth as if under them was something grand and alive like the flank of a horse . . . There are pairs of hands like these—some brown, some black, some white—in every bazaar in the world—hands easing and smoothing, hands flying like doves through the dappled light under time-riddled canvas.



Cloth merchants in Paltan Bazaar, India
(Image credit: Paul Hamilton)

In “Buckeye” by Scott Russell Sanders, the way the author’s father reacts to another person gives us a clear picture of who he is:

The box where I keep the buckeyes also comes from Ohio, made by my father from a walnut plank he bought at a farm auction. I remember the auction, remember the sagging face of the widow whose home was being sold, remember my father telling her he would prize that walnut as if he had watched the tree grow from a sapling on his own land.

In “The Fine Art of Sighing” by Bernard Cooper, the contrast between the mother and father speaks volumes:

Where my mother sighed from ineffable sadness, my father sighed at simple things: the coldness of a drink, the softness of a pillow, or an itch that my mother, following the frantic map of his words, finally found on his back and scratched.

Writing

1. Write a 15-word “essay” about yourself. Begin by brainstorming words that resonate with you. Write them down, and then play with adding, changing, and replacing words. Rearrange them. It might help to write each word on a piece of paper and then move the pieces (words) around to see how they might fit together. Just because you only have a few words to work with doesn't mean this is easy! You can think of this as a short poem, something with few words but an abundance of meaning. You don't have to stick to exactly 15 words (you might have a few more or a few less) but the idea is to make very careful word choices to come up with a snapshot of yourself. Follow the writing process—write, revise, edit, and proofread—to help you create something that authentically expresses your thoughts.
2. Revise your Essay #3, using the feedback you've received. (Remember to **save your first version before revising**.) Use all your revision skills to improve the clarity and flow of your work. Consider the following elements:
 - **Authenticity:** Are you presenting your own ideas or what you think your teacher wants to read? Does your writing reflect your own truth?
 - **Clarity:** Are you using the English language with intention and precision to help your reader better understand your ideas?
 - **Economy:** Does each sentence add something new rather than restating or repeating what's already been written? Can you find ways to eliminate superfluous phrases so your writing is streamlined and purposeful?
 - **Voice:** Does your unique voice come through in your writing? Do your word choices and phrasing sound natural to you when you read them aloud?

Let your work rest after your first round of revision, and then go back to it to edit your essay to correct technical errors. After all the changes have been made, proofread your work.

3. Collect your supplies and begin constructing your Book of Self. Notice what types of images and words you are drawn to. You don't have to analyze each one with reason and logic; your emotional response is equally valid in terms of creating this project of self-expression. (You may want to consider including your 15-word essay.)