



Cornell **CAU**
Education Vacations

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Dear Participants,

Welcome to CAU's "The Personal Essay"! I'm excited to work with you on your writing and to explore a vibrant, engaging genre. In this workshop, we'll read and discuss published writing, looking for inspiration and technique; read and discuss your drafts; and experiment with drafting and revision processes. Below is a short summary of how we'll spend our week together and how you can prepare.

What we will do in our week together

Each morning, we will discuss the essays included with this packet. These essays exemplify various elements of engaging writing in the personal essay, and they also offer models of technique and subject matter. My goal for our discussions of these essays is not to hunt for hidden meaning. Instead, we will focus on what engages us (or doesn't) as readers and to explore techniques we can use in our own writing.

About the readings: all essays come from *The Contemporary American Essay*, edited by Phillip Lopate. It retails for under \$20 and can be purchased online at Bookshop and Amazon. We won't read even half of the anthology, but in past CAU sessions, attendees have preferred to have their own copy. If you would prefer to receive pdf files of the essays, please let me know, and I will email them to you.

We will also discuss each other's writing in the workshop format. Each day, participants will read aloud from their work, and we'll discuss what engages us and why, as well as what doesn't yet engage us and why, or what questions we have. Our goal as workshop participants is to provide supportive, constructive feedback.

We will also work on brief writing exercises to help generate new content, so bring a laptop and/or pen, pencil, and paper.

What you should do to prepare

The week will go by quickly, so writing and reading before you arrive will be important. Please read the assigned essays before you arrive; if possible, re-read them the night before the class when we discuss them. Don't feel you have to analyze the writing, but as you read, be mindful of what engages you and why.

Also, please start writing. Before our week starts, write at least four pages (roughly 1200 words), the bones of an essay you'd like to develop, and send the pages to me at the email address below. You're also welcome to send me a longer draft. Start a project you'd like to work on while you're here and that you'll be comfortable sharing with others. The material you produce doesn't have to be polished; the writing can be rough as all rough drafts are. And be easy on yourself in the writing process—in my experience, most of what we call "writer's block" is just

harsh self-judgment and fear of failure. In the first draft, just write, and don't delete a thing. Trust the impulses to follow whatever narrative thread or stray thought you have, no matter how weird or unlikely it seems; the personal essay allows for a great deal of engaging strangeness.

A quick note about subject matter and the form of the essay: the personal essay can be about anything and everything, from the profoundly tragic and world-changing, to the small and mundane. The personal is that the material is filtered through (and maybe even reflects) the perspective and experience of the writer. Among our readings, you'll encounter essays that deal with the earth-shattering (Aleksandar Hemon's "The Aquarium") to the intimate (Alexander Chee's "Girl"; not all of the readings will be by writers named Alexander) and varying things in between. The full list and schedule of our readings is below. To get a fuller sense of what the personal essay can do, read Jill Talbot's "The Admissions Essay vs. the Permission Essay."

The last bit of preparation: I'd like to hear from you before our week begins. By Wednesday, July 18, please email me at crg95@cornell.edu. Include your writing as an attachment, and tell me about yourself: where you're from, what you hope to achieve during our week together, a few scattered details of your choosing (for example, favorite thing you've ever read, favorite movie, pet peeve).

I'm looking forward to meeting and working with you.

Schedule of readings, to be read before the class meetings

Mon., July 17 Jill Talbot, "The Admissions Essay vs. the Permission Essay," Floyd Skloot, "Gray Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain" (The Contemporary American Essay [CAE] 569–582) and Rivka Galchen, "The Case of the Angry Daughter" (CAE 250–265)

Tues., July 18 Alexander Chee, "Girl" (CAE 97–108) and Patricia Hampl, "Other People's Secrets" (CAE 289–306)

Wed., July 19 Ross Gay, "Scat" (CAE 266–268)

Thurs., July 20 Aleksandar Hemon, "The Aquarium" (CAE 307–324)

Fri., July 21 Margo Jefferson, "Negroland" (CAE 360–368)

All best wishes,
Charlie Green