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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Experiments in the psychology and neuroscience of learning show that learning that sticks—the kind that leads to the changes we expect of college, what we call higher learning—requires rich engagement with new material, not just memorization, and that the outcome of this engagement is a concrete and tangible change in the mind—a change in how one thinks and makes sense of the world.*

—Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersch  
(*We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*)

*As someone who has felt a lot of trouble being clear, concise, and/or cogent, I tend to be allergic to academic writing, most of which seems to me willfully opaque and pretentious. There are, again, some notable exceptions, and by “academic writing” I mean a particular cloistered dialect and mode; I do not just mean any piece written by somebody who teaches college.*

—David Foster Wallace (“Introduction:  
Deciderization 2007—A Special Report,” *The Best American Essays 2007*)

What must American students learn to succeed as writers in college and beyond? What role can essay-writing in particular play for twenty-first century students in their intellectual development? Today, American high school and college teachers are expected to prepare students to write across a broader range of disciplines and in more discursive environments than ever before. Current national initiatives for curricular reform define literacy entirely in terms of skills acquisition, while in the process, essay-writing as its own comprehensive learning goal has been marginalized. To focus first on skills in writing asks students to compose for purposes that masquerade as genres—for example, a “summary,” “description,” “analysis,” or “narrative.” However, these skills do not carry intrinsic motives for writing. Put another way, when students write primarily in order to exercise skills they may not understand why those skills are valuable. Writers do not compose “descriptions” for their

own sake; we do write essays. To devalue the essay also reveals troubling assumptions about the capacities of student writers and the future we imagine for them. A skills approach imagines students as protean workers who need to be readied to fulfill others' goals for their thinking and writing: intellectual "stem-cells" for the world beyond school. Teaching students to write essays acknowledges them as people who can—indeed must—construct and contribute original ideas to the world in many registers and guises while they are still in school.

There are several pedagogical values and beliefs that are foundational to this book and the composition programs in which these ideas have driven curriculum design and professional development. I offer them to reveal immediately my own orientation toward the essay but also to encourage my colleagues to do so both with one another and with their—your, our—students. To teach the essay acknowledges writing as a technology for original thought and deep engagement with texts, with the self, and with the world. The essay as a genre relies on those intellectual, ethical, and creative capacities we most need students to cultivate in order to thrive inside and outside of school. Essay writing over time and across disciplines teaches students to:

- modulate self-expression and social commentary
- situate themselves historically, intellectually, and culturally
- engage rigorously and ethically with ideas, data, and texts by others
- reflect on and revise their ideas, values, and sense of self
- develop discursive, aesthetic, and rhetorical awareness
- document shifts in their thinking, commitments, and modes of expression

In the chapters that follow, I pursue two inter-related arguments: one pedagogical, one theoretical. Pedagogically, I argue that the past 30 years of debate about the essay among scholars and practitioners of the form has left educators in composition and English literature uncertain about the value of essays for academic work, and creative writing faculty largely to focus on teaching craft. By extension, composition teachers who foreground the essay in our courses must demonstrate that writing essays will prepare students for every future writing task or context they are likely to encounter in or out of school. The essay fails this test, as naturally it might. While learning the discourse conventions of one discipline or genre can help students to "learn how to learn" others, writing essays cannot alone prepare students to write lab reports, dissertation chapters, memoranda, or policy statements. Calls for a profound rethinking of the content and approach of writing curricula by David

Smit, Elizabeth Wardle, and Douglas Downs focus on how to address failures in knowledge and skills transfer from first-year writing courses—often presented as essay writing courses—to future occasions. However, as writing studies scholars, including Douglas Hesse, Kurt Spellmeyer, Paul Heilker, Wendy Bishop, Pat C. Hoy II, Joan Retallack, and Lynn Bloom, have argued for over a decade, the genre's association with the tradition of *belle lettres* should not lead us to jettison essay writing in composition and literature courses nor impoverish the practice to fulfill the requirements of standardized curricula and tests from secondary school onwards. Our colleagues working across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM areas would understand the centrality of the genre if we all acknowledged that the essay already has a home in many disciplines, but as the more public forum of our fields. We may write articles and reports for our colleagues within our disciplines, sub-disciplines, and sub-sub-disciplines, but when we need to write about our work in order to reach multiple audiences, we write essays.

Essays feature qualities that we need pedagogically and curricularly in this age of increased specialization *and* interdisciplinary work: they require writers to make their work comprehensible to others, but they also must attempt to make those ideas, the questions, and the consequences of that work *compelling* to others. Essays also rely on writers orienting themselves in relationship to their materials, and this act of self-representation is not neutral and cannot be driven solely by genre or disciplinary conventions. Writers “need not say ‘I’” in essays, as Susan Sontag averred in 1992, in order for their work to be understood as crafted by specific individuals (Sontag 1992). However, for every essay writers must ask anew how they will represent themselves, other thinkers, and the world. The intellectual force of essay emerges from reckoning with Montaigne's question, “What do I know?” The ethical force of the essay arises when writers answer the question, “Who shall I be?” The choice of presentation is one without a pre-determined answer, a “live” question in every sense of the word.

My pedagogical argument relies on a theoretical one that can help us as teachers to understand more fully the central aspects of essay writing that make them rewarding and challenging to teach, and which cannot be taught in isolation as skills. Three formal qualities distinguish essays from other modes of nonfiction writing: *presence*, *evidence*, and *idea*. Among these qualities, the most ephemeral is what Gordon Harvey, Robert Atwan and Donald McQuade, and Peter Elbow have called the “presence” of the writer. This quality is least understood, frequently subsumed into other elements of writing (e.g., “voice” or “argument”), but

central to how essays work at conceptual and formal levels. Close analysis of contemporary essays can highlight how accounting for presence provides a flexible and rigorous heuristic for reading that can help us to teach students in composition, creative nonfiction, and English literature courses to appreciate essays (a critical practice that has fallen out of favor but is worth reconsidering) and write strong essays for themselves.

To offer a historical perspective, I focus on works published since 1986 in the popular anthology series *The Best American Essays*, which provides a chronicle and artifact of the contemporary essay originally written for North American periodicals. Each volume offers a snapshot of its year in terms of key ideas and cultural preoccupations; for example, only a few months after the United States' invasion of Iraq, *The Best American Essays 2003* featured both Michael Pollan's "An Animal's Place," which was later repurposed for his best-seller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, as well as Susan Sontag's "Looking at War," which became a chapter for her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The essays from the series that I feature here respond to questions that invite both self-examination and social commentary: how can we make sense of our histories and find our places in them? How can we be more responsible readers and responders to others' ideas and experiences? What does it take for us to re-see our selves and act on those insights?

The literary history that the series documents intersects with changes in the status of essays and essay-writing both as a public intellectual form and as the basis for a field of study. Examining collectively how the essay is theorized in the editorial forewords and introductions to *The Best American Essays* can help us to anticipate the changing fortunes of the essay in the field of composition and rhetoric as well as the newer fields of creative nonfiction, writing studies, and essay studies. While many of the editors see essays as a genre for exploring ideas, other literary qualities are more highly noted (e.g., voice or image), and several editors make clear that they see as distinct the notion and role of "essayists" and "scholars," as well as "essay" and "academic discourse" (including their language, conventions, and readers). In spite of these disclaimers by some of the genre's most well-known practitioners, I argue that the American essay in the twenty-first century increasingly is idea-driven and that current practitioners are finding new approaches to making arguments through their formal and rhetorical choices. Jonathan Lethem's essay chosen for *The Best American Essays 2008*, "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," provides one dramatic example. Lethem assembles his essay primarily from excerpts of other writers' work on intellectual property and the creative process; he takes care in the body of the essay to

make the pieces cohere stylistically and conceptually, and only acknowledges his sources in a “key” at the end, rather than a more conventional bibliography or list of works cited. Essays such as Lethem’s bring to essays written in traditional media—that is, in a magazine and published in hard copy—the sensibilities and epistemologies of new media, and raise some of new media’s most challenging questions about how we define authorship and citation.

Ultimately, *Crafting Presence* seeks to provide a portrait of the contemporary American essay that will overcome the ambivalence many teachers have about teaching essays in high school and college. More of us in high school and college would teach the essay without the prompting of formal standards initiatives if we better understood how central essays can be to students’ (and teachers’) development as thinkers in our fields. We would teach it with greater purpose and more effectively if we thought students capable of writing work that passes muster as “real” writing. However, it is unlikely that more teachers will embrace essay reading and writing as a rich pedagogical practice until more of us become readers of essays as they are composed in the world outside of school.

#### DEVALUING THE ESSAY IN THE AGE OF THE STANDARDS

Two recent initiatives in the United States—neither designed nor implemented directly by the Department of Education—have sought to determine what students should learn to write in K–12 contexts and in college. In June 2010, the National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) launched the “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects” (also known as the “Common Core Standards,” henceforth CCSS). The CCSS seek to identify literacy skills and “understandings” students require in primary, middle, and secondary schools in and across subject areas. The skills have been chosen based not only on their importance to subject-area learning at each grade level but also with an eye toward “college and career readiness in multiple disciplines” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010:3). In the first five years after their completion, the CCSS were adopted by 44 states and three territories.

The CCSS garnered strong support by key figures in American public education, including the secretary of Education, Arne Duncan; initially, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of

Teachers was also a supporter but reversed her position in 2014. The CCSS have met with more mixed responses from classroom teachers both at the K–12 level and their colleagues teaching in two- and four-year colleges. Attitudes range about the effects of the CCSS on curriculum and the teaching of writing. Proponents believe with David Coleman, the president of the College Board, has been called the “architect” of the CCSS that its changes will increase the rigor of the literacy curriculum for K–12 students, and they value how the CCSS include writing as a component of teaching across disciplines. Some teachers express fears that they are already juggling too many curricular requirements; some ask how school administrators can implement the CCSS without reducing their ability to run their classrooms as they see fit including designing their own writing assignments. It is important to focus specifically on assignments since what we teach students to write shapes their day-to-day experiences in school and defines for them the fundamental purposes and values of school.

According to the CCSS, students in grades 6–12 should learn to write three types of “texts”: “arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts,” “informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas,” and “narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010:41–47). A sub-section of the CCSS titled, “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing” codifies both what students are expected to write and why they should write these things. The language used in the section includes a dozen words that are meant to evoke properties of academic discourse including argument, claims, analysis, information, and explanation, among others. Foregrounding these concepts signals a shift from previous curricular standards in which self-expression, student engagement, textual comprehension, and grammatical correctness were the markers of student achievement in writing. This shift is among the features that have made the CCSS the cornerstone of the Obama administration’s education platform, “Race to the Top.” The CCSS also communicates a shift in priorities in the teaching of writing through its taxonomy of writing into the three textual types. The three “types” emphasize the functions of the texts students write rather than their genres or topics; for example, teachers may assign a “book report” or have students write a story on a “a key turning point in life,” but the assignment will only align with the standards if it can fulfill one or more of the textual functions. Each type also offers a complicated motive for its functions. Thus, students should be taught “arguments” in order to

“support claims,” create “an analysis,” and identify “substantive topics or texts” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010:42) Although foregrounding function potentially gives teachers greater range and agency over what they teach, the divorce of function from genre reduces genre to an occasion or site for skill-performance without other intellectual value. The twenty-first century student the CCSS imagine does not enact, extend, or revise genre-conventions but points his or her skills “at” them.

For all of the studious avoidance of genre in the CCSS, most of the skills that students are meant to acquire are closely associated with essay-writing. Essays are invoked if not stated as the most-likely expression of these skills. On the CCSS there are listed five expectations for “arguments” and six for “informational/explanatory” texts. On each of these lists, three recall formal—even formulaic—aspects of traditional essay writing in school. Regardless of genre, 11th and 12th graders must “introduce [topics or claims],” “develop [topics or claims],” and “provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports [the topic or argument]” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010:45). In the CCSS, the requirements of academic prose are abstracted away from the essay; this distance may reflect how vexed and even toxic the associations are around essay-writing in secondary school. Prior to the CCSS the essay in school was understood as the soul-less, mechanistic quasi-genre required by standardized exams that prompted the curricular corrective of experientially-based assignments for K–12 students in the forms of narrative, memoir, and poetry. Without understanding the fundamental value of the essay as a genre, writing in high school will increasingly become a protracted entrance examination without other intellectual, ethical, or civic merits.

Ambivalence about the essay also arises in recent efforts to codify goals for writing in college. In 2011, the three largest professional organizations in English education and composition—The Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Writing Project (NWP)—outlined what students need to learn to write in college in their 10-page white paper, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011). This document, which has been widely distributed through professional list-servs and on these programs’ websites, has received considerable attention, much of it positive, from teachers and writing program administrators. The goals of the “Framework” are to identify “the rhetorical and twenty-first century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are

critical for college success” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project 2011:1). Students should learn eight habits of mind including “curiosity,” “openness,” “engagement,” “creativity,” “persistence,” “responsibility,” “flexibility,” and “metacognition” (4–5). The experiences they should have in school involve developing “rhetorical knowledge,” “critical thinking through writing, reading, and research,” “flexible writing processes,” “knowledge of conventions,” and “composing in multiple environments” (6–10). The “Framework” imagines expansively how and where writing is taught in “postsecondary” education (“postsecondary” itself a term that has an unintended and largely unexplored eschatological resonance to it). The word and concept of “essay” either as a genre or activity appears only twice in the 66 pages of the CCSS, and only then to be included among other types of “literary nonfiction” students might read in their classes from grades 6–12 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010:57). In the “Framework,” direct references to essays appear three times but only in passing as an example of many kinds of assignment that could teach the skills, habits, and experiences mentioned elsewhere (11, 13, 14). At least in these documents, reading and writing essays as independent goals are now passé, subsumed into broader notions of helping students to acquire rhetorical and discursive awareness and skills.

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The role of essay writing in the teaching and intellectual development of American high school and college students has been a subject of debate since the institution of the common schools in the 1830s; concerns about composition in education revived in the Progressive Era at the beginning of the twentieth century; discussion has only expanded with the emergence of rhetoric and composition studies from the 1970s until the present to examine the merits and limitations of teaching students to write essays in high school and college. Key to these debates have been questions about what the term “essay” means and what kinds of relationship the essay imagines and produces among the student writer, his, her, or their materials, and an imagined (or real) audience. The essay has often been a synecdoche for teachers’ and other stakeholders’ beliefs about the varied aims of writing in high school and college, and arguably even for the broader cultural functions of education. Regardless of educational level, there are few more illuminating ways to inquire into our ideas about the nature and purposes of schooling than to explain what is good about an exemplary student essay or to discuss

with colleagues a published essay that we like. The term “essay” is often used—happily or not—as a synonym for compositions ranging from one paragraph to five that students write for standardized exams, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Advanced Placement Test; this usage foregrounds “basic skills” acquisition, especially in analytical writing.

However, when we like and share or “like” and “share” an essay we have encountered in a book, newspaper, print or online journal, blog, or in other forms such as video “TED Talks,” or a radio essay featured on *This American Life*, we do so because we value some combination of the writers’ ideas and their approach or style. We enjoy these essays because they are, to echo the name of a popular mixed-genre anthology edited by Dave Eggers, “non-required reading.” They are pieces that fulfill our sense of what essays are and can do, and just as often they test those expectations: they refuse what we might consider to be features of “school writing.”

These two common associations with essays epitomize qualities either that we dislike about school and school writing or suggest an impossible model for writing in school. The essay-as-test reduces writing to a rehearsal of others’ expectations, with little room for students to invent or think new thoughts for themselves (regardless of whether or not that is actually the case, and there have been articles for years about the fact that a five paragraph essay need not be simply an exercise in competencies). When we imagine the essay as creative writing or as the province of public intellectuals—in literary nonfiction, lectures, or long-form journalism—the essay becomes an elite or eccentric form, thereby disqualifying it as a “useful” mode of writing for college undergraduates. To write a “real” essay at this level could be perceived, not unfairly, to require expertise in a discipline, in the craft of writing, or in life. So students in high school or college cannot realistically be expected to write essays of the kind that we might value in the public sphere because they don’t know enough, they aren’t skilled enough writers, and they aren’t old enough.

The essay has also struggled with its reputation for being the genre of the dilettante. Michel de Montaigne, known as the essay’s founding practitioner, developed the form partially to resist modes of disciplinary writing. However, in contemporary practice, one’s authority as an essayist can be closely aligned with one’s expertise in a subject area. For example, both Oliver Sacks and Atul Gawande have made their reputations as essayists from work that draws frequently on their research: Sacks as a neurologist, Gawande as a surgeon. By contrast, other widely read and anthologized essayists may be more known for their writerly

skill than their association with a particular subject matter, such as James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, David Sedaris, Alice Walker, and Richard Rodriguez. The essays from these writers reverberate from what André Aciman has called “the hidden nerve,” a dilemma that threads across their writing in different forms (Aciman 2000, E1). So if readers seek essays on photography, they are likely to consult Sontag’s *On Photography*, but they might be less aware of Sontag’s particular questions about the ethics of representation in the photograph. If, in the case of Sacks or Gwande, the writer’s ethos emanates from his discipline (which disciplinary specialists often have to overcome in order to be read as “real” writers), writers such as Sontag and Rodriguez garner ethos from the act of “taking on” subject matter and demonstrating their ability to make it their own. Without the imprimatur of a professional title or the gravitas of a reputation as a public intellectual, young essayists have two challenges to overcome before they ever begin writing: how to establish that they are able to be trusted as thinkers and writers, and how to find material that might interest them to engage as writers. Standards documents do not yet directly account for how the writing tasks they advocate help students to develop ethos as writers.

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However, these reasons—or perhaps what we could more properly call anxieties—may speak to a failure of our collective imagination and ambition for writing in school. Standards codified for high school and college, however well intentioned, will not be able to name what students need learn no matter how granularly we parse our goals. So we teachers need to get back to our own basics and answer a few questions: what makes any essay interesting and valuable to a writer or reader? How can the “essay” in school share any formal, rhetorical, or conceptual qualities with those written by influential and popular writers such as E. B. White, James Baldwin, Annie Dillard, James Wood, bell hooks, or Joan Didion? How can having students read and write a range of essays develop analytical abilities alongside creative ones? In the age of the CCSS and the “Framework,” in the majority of courses where students are taught writing they will be expected to “produce” (plan, draft, revise, and submit) something called an “essay.” We may not be able to decide what essays *are*, but it is clear that we will continue to depend upon both the word and the activity in and out of school. It is both possible and necessary to ensure that these essays are worth reading and worth writing beyond the abstract promise of college and workplace readiness, beyond simply to fulfill others’ requirements and policies. If students will write essays, we need better reasons than these to keep them on our curriculums.

How and where the essay—and other forms of creative nonfiction—has been situated in undergraduate writing curricula has been the subject of persistent interest particularly by scholar teachers in composition studies, including Kurt Spellmeyer, Douglas Hesse, Paul Heilker, and Wendy Bishop. They are among the most visible proponents of a more integrated vision of writing studies teaching and research—one that would support teachers and researchers who wish to traverse the borders of composition, creative writing, and English literature. At the moment, however, they are working against the tide of composition scholarship that is more preoccupied with teaching rhetorical and discursive awareness as their own ends (epitomized in the “Framework” document). As Hesse proposes, “creative writing and composition studies would do better by keeping more open borders, if not sharing a departmental house then at least being friendly neighbors with fenceless backyards” (Hesse 2010:44). We sustain these boundaries to our detriment: “When creative writing and composition studies have little to do with one another, the division truncates not only what we teach and research but how writing gets understood (or misunderstood) by our students, our colleagues, and the spheres beyond” (Hesse 2010:35). These more open borders might encourage a richer idea about what a life in writing within college settings might entail.

Paul Heilker suggests what essay-writing can make possible for teachers and students in the academy: “I have pushed for a polarized definition of the essay as contradistinct from exposition because I want to assign, foster, and read something that might last, that might have meaning and life outside the course requirements, even outside the university experience” (Heilker 2006:202). The university experience, as Heilker understands it, does not offer student writers the space to try on the literary methods that essays invite and promote, some of which echo directly the goals of liberal education that Andrew Delbanco (2012) and others have espoused. Heilker emphasizes the essay’s flexibility and range; the essay “may offer multiple perspectives on its subject, weigh alternative (even contradictory) points of view, broaden rather than narrow one’s vision.” Imbuing the genre itself with agency, Heilker reminds us that the essay “may be skeptical (if not subversive) of conventional wisdom about its subject,” “cross disciplinary boundaries,” “utilize multiple discourses, multiple voices,” and “pose difficult questions that the writer attempts to work through on paper” (Heilker 2006:193). He also notes, not as a small matter, that essays are often more pleasurable for him to read and respond to as a teacher.

Wendy Bishop sees the liberatory possibility of teaching creative nonfiction, and particularly the essay, in composition courses:

We need to get serious about creating new, fused pedagogies, ones that include rhetoric, composition, creative writing, and literature as partners in instruction. We particularly need these for *undergraduate* essayists. We must understand that ‘creative’ is already in the composition classroom. And finally, in order to write well, for us and with us, students have to believe that we believe they can succeed. (Bishop 2003:274)

The notion of a “fused pedagogy” is particularly powerful and appealing to the many teacher researchers in composition who come to the work of these writing classes from backgrounds in creative writing, literature, or other disciplines. Bishop’s emphasis on undergraduates also resists the familiar assumption that creativity comes only after a writer has “learned the basics.” There are no basics in essay writing, but there are fundamentals, creative thinking and expression are among them.

For the past 40 years we have been trying to move the essay toward meeting the needs of a varied curriculum, and it has been a losing proposition. In the years in which the CCSS and the “Framework” documents have been drafted and released there also have been renewed calls among college faculty and leaders to protect and, where possible, to reinvigorate and extend the values and practices of a liberal arts education. Much of what is suggested in these books involves ambitious structural changes in staffing and compensation, use of institutional resources, faculty governance, assessment, and curricula. Several of these books insist upon a greater role for writing across the curriculum. Andrew Delbanco, in *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (Delbanco 2012), identifies qualities that students need for what he calls “reflective citizenship”: skepticism informed by historical awareness, the ability to draw “connections among seemingly disparate phenomena,” “appreciation of the natural world,” striving to imagine others’ experiences, and “a sense of ethical responsibility” (3). Richard Keeling and Richard Hersch emphasize the importance of a developmental orientation in higher education and on assessment in *We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*. They note specifically the role of writing: “Higher learning . . . requires harder work by everyone . . . Writing intensive assignments and courses, regularly assessing the quality of students’ work and giving frequent feedback . . . are more rigorous and demanding” (Keeling and Hersch 2011:55). However, they are not only concerned with the labor but also what can and cannot be achieved in any given course: “One or two required writing courses, for example, do not produce competent writers” (Keeling and Hersch 2011:133). While teachers of writing in any discipline might not be surprised by this idea, it is significant (and heartening) that Keeling and

Hersh announce the fact that writing must be taught across a student's experience with the energy of a new insight. For them, and many faculty we know (and even like), it is.

I argue that the essay is the genre that most reveals a liberal arts education's concerns, values, and habits of mind. Rather than moving the essay toward the curriculum, we need to move the curriculum toward the essay. There would be significant benefits to making this move. As college teachers of writing we would not only be fulfilling the goals of the "Framework," but could bridge curricular and philosophical gaps both between K–12 and college education, among faculty within our educational settings, and between the world of school and the larger worlds within which the cultures of school exist.

This pedagogical and curricular argument, however, depends upon teachers having approaches to reading essays that reveal how they work, and we can only develop such approaches if we understand the single most important quality of the essay as a literary form: the writer's "presence." I have dedicated most of *Crafting Presence* to demonstrating strategies for richly reading essays by some of our most well-known contemporary essayists in order to highlight the essay's unique role in contemporary American literature. Exploring the rewards of attentive reading for an essay's form can help us as teachers to choose texts for our students to provide them with textual mentors—writers whose work reveal essay-writing as the richest intellectual enterprise we can offer students in college. Educators and students should want an essay-based curriculum if we truly want students to contribute their ideas rather than merely their opinions in the "knowledge economy" of the twenty-first century.

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This book identifies key conceptual, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of the essay as they are reflected in contemporary examples that were published in *The Best American Essays*, from its inaugural issue in 1986 to the present. This investigation grows out of the current state of affairs in essay studies and pedagogy, in which essays are studied primarily for their cultural and historical value to specific audiences of readers or writers or for their compositional strategies. Few studies bring together the perspective of teaching the essay in composition or creative nonfiction courses with an extended examination of the cultural functions that essays have played in contemporary American letters and culture. *Crafting Presence* seeks to establish common ground among literature, creative writing, and composition's approaches to essay analysis so that teachers and students can articulate more precisely and consistently their understandings and

expectations for essays. In addition to the contribution this book makes to genre theory, it also holds significant implications for writing pedagogy. Teachers of writing need new approaches to help us—teachers, our colleagues, and our students—become more insightful and confident readers and writers of essays. To enlarge our capacities we must understand the central acts of mind the form requires of its practitioners and how those acts manifest simultaneously in a whole text and in its parts: words, sentences, paragraphs, sections. If the current scholarship about the essay agrees on anything it is this: the essay is distinct from other genres of literature by virtue of what Robert Atwan, Donald McQuade, Peter Elbow, and Gordon Harvey have called the *writer's presence* on the page.

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The central chapters of *Crafting Presence in American Essays* tuck between close analyses of essays from *The Best American Essays* series and pedagogical reflections on those readings. Chapter 2 introduces the concept of “presence” as a heuristic that will help readers to account for how writers’ formal choices embody the original ideas they derive from their work with evidence. I provide an overview of how practitioners of the essay and scholars have defined presence, briefly review debates in the literature about defining the key characteristics of the essay, and argue that presence—a term that has been embraced both by composition scholars and the editor of *The Best American Essays*—is one of the few conceptual bridges that currently exist between rhetoric and composition and the creative nonfiction approaches to reading and writing essays. Finally, I emphasize the importance of reading essays in quantity, across time, and across kinds of sources.

In chapter 3, I track how three essayists—Kenneth McClane, Jamaica Kincaid, and Richard Rodriguez—not only report or reflect on personal losses, but create polymorphous essaying presences through their work at the sentence level, particularly in their work with pronouns and their transformation of their materials into evidence. Their formal work within individual essays has a collective cultural effect, which enacts how American Studies as a field has continued to expand the processes, objects, and goals of cultural investigation. The three essays I consider in this chapter all work with familiar American concepts, stories, and myths, but in their particular treatment they counter a narrative of nation that emphasizes expansion and genesis. The move to a national “we” in each essay is premised on the writer’s (and his or her audience’s) capacity to inquire into our losses.

Chapter 4 considers the work of another three essayists—Gerald Early, Susan Sontag, and Franklin Burroughs—who dramatize the

ethical challenges of reading in their encounters with different materials including the Miss America Pageant, war photography, and a poem. These essays demonstrate replicable practices of inquiry-driven reading. I argue that the practice of reading in school misses an opportunity to teach students how to develop reading theories and ethics.

The fifth chapter examines ongoing concerns about the role of so-called “personal” essays in high school and college curricula. While we may permit students to read essays from this end of the essay spectrum, we are uncertain about their value for students to write. Gordon Harvey and Phillip Lopate—to name just two scholars and essayists—have noted that these essays are some of the most difficult to read and write, but they can provide writers with opportunities to re-see themselves and revise their senses of self in the process of constructing a self in a given essay. Essays by Charles Simic and Mary Gordon show how essayists working from first-hand experience depend on recursive work with images to explore their ideas and express that new consciousness in their essaying presence.

The final chapter of the book explores the challenges of learning to write essays in school. I juxtapose portraits of two kinds of student writers many teachers will encounter with an autobiographical sketch from my own history as a writer to show why students need to learn not just skills, but also writing practices. The practice of essay writing is scalable, and we can ask for students to craft their presence in essays much earlier than college. Teaching students “the rules” of essay writing so that they can break them later comes at too high an intellectual cost for them even in the short term.

## ON “SHOWING UP”

A teacher who is committed to helping students improve their writing—let’s call this teacher “you”—gets ready to work. It’s two or three weeks into the term/semester/quarter. You’re sitting at your desk in your office. Of course, this “office” might be a table at a café or in your kitchen. Depending quite a bit on luck, rather than, say, your talents, your office could be a seat on a bus, shuttling between the colleges or campuses where you teach. The “desk” then might be your lap with a folder on it. We also know that “sitting is the new smoking,” so maybe you’re standing. You might even be smoking—some still do, but let’s agree to rethink that one for all the obvious reasons. In any case, nearby is a stack of students’ essays—their attempts—for you to comment on and, perhaps, to grade. (Already? We’ve only just begun.) Have you ever worked a restaurant job? Everyone really should at least once work for tips; it’s an education; you won’t undertip ever again. Anyway, if you have, you’ll know what I mean when I say that you might be feeling “in the weeds” already. This means that you are in the thick of too much and a bit overwhelmed or stuck. It means you’re busy, there is work to do, and that many moving parts need to get back into sync.

You have been teaching for a while, perhaps a long while, so you have familiar associations with what it means to begin commenting on essays. Some of us love it; some pretend to love it in posts on social media; some of us don’t, and maybe we post that, too. Most of us feel some ambivalence; our loins are girded against our own bad habits of reading and responding to students’ work that we’ve fought hard to substitute with good habits. So you try to remember the principles, the practices: don’t write too much; say back the project; there is no such thing as “cruel but fair”; make it useable—task oriented; encourage the student, based on what they, she, or he already knows how to do; be specific but not over-determining; give the student plenty of agency—there is no ideal text; help them, him, or her to prioritize. Okay.

You may have a rubric. But rubrics are trouble (and I use one too sometimes, so I feel all right about saying this). They don’t always help us to get what we most want from essays. And what we want—at any rate, what I want—rightfully or not, is this: to find moments, even just flashes, when the writer, my student, shows up as a thinker, about their materials, about

their own first (not best) thoughts. Glimmers, where the writer attempts to invite us—their real-life readers—into an experience through words, one worth having spent some precious life on creating. You can make a list of things you taught to help your students increase the likelihood that they will show up. You have created “scaffolds” for their development as writers, which gives your students ways to work within Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” by acting as their classmates’ “proto-publics,” as Rosa Eberly imagines them (Vygotsky 1986; Eberly 2000). You have taught them close reading; what counts as a fruitful question or an interpretive problem; how to make claim-driven transitions between paragraphs. You assigned exercises designed to help students practice reflection, pose counter-arguments, devise metaphors. The list is infinite and mutable.

You are reading, but also, as Peter Elbow has said, you’re “listening” for moments when the student sounds most like a specific, real person (Elbow 1994), given the task, and even though you don’t know her or him very well yet; so this listening for the writer is an act of bravado, it takes experience but also gumption. When we encounter a piece in which we discern the writer’s presence, we may call its virtues by other names: individuality, investment, invention, purposeful use of form, confidence, compassion toward readers. Crafting a presence requires all of them. And so we wait for the writer. Often, the writer shows up late.

Then again, perhaps, so do you and I. We mark up students’ papers to let them know we appreciate that their writing is complete (it fulfills the assignment more or less), correct (there are minimal typos and infelicities), adheres to conventions (in citation, syntax, grammar, and page layout), and clear (we understand what they are saying, even if we might wish it were more interesting). But when you and I really show up to the student in our comments, I suspect it is because we have discerned their presence, or feel acutely its absence. The trouble is that we may or may not be sure how to ask for them to show up, to offer them something different from what we have said to them before, or written before. It’s the right problem for us to have. Urgent, too, because the moment of commenting connects the dots between their work and ours, and sometimes these dots form a constellation. To help students show up in their essays, you craft a presence of your own to respond to theirs; this intersection forms the crux of teaching and learning to write essays, regardless of whether yours is a literature seminar, a creative writing workshop, or a composition class. Now if only there were already a lot of literature out there that could help us to do it more effectively . . . a website, something . . . if only we were already almost doing it without quite realizing it. There is, and we are.