

Do.

Black mountain was freedom.

And within that freedom I and others developed a discipline in drawing and writing that involved listening and seeing with such continuous intensity it became my way of life. [...] Black Mountain was not something you grew out of. Like freedom, you grew into it.

—Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book*

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future.

—John Dewey

The hands are the instruments of [our] intelligence.

—Maria Montessori

Amateurism is an emptiness and I accept it because it has no preconceived ideas or rules to be applied. This is for me [as art teacher] a most welcome situation and I like to keep my students amateurs and dilettantes.

—Josef Albers

A painting to me is primarily a verb, not a noun, an event first and only secondarily an image.

—Elaine de Kooning

It's almost as if art, in painting and music and stuff, is the leftover of some activity. The activity is the thing that I'm most interested in. Nearly everything that I've done was to see what would happen if I did this instead of that.

—Robert Rauschenberg

If a dancer dances—which is not the same as having theories about dancing or wishing to dance or trying to dance or remembering in his body someone else's dance—but if the dancer dances, everything is there [...] Our ecstasy in dance comes from the possible gift of freedom, the exhilarating moment that this exposing of the bare energy can give us.

—Merce Cunningham

Home cooking is good for you, and I eat out less. But that's the least of it. What has surprised me is how stimulating it is. How satisfying. You learn a lot about plants and animals. You begin to recognise your place in the world.

—Michael Pollan

These young people [...] bear the brunt of being cultivated into unnourished, oversensitive lives. They have been shut off from the common labor by which they live which is a great source of moral and physical health. They feel a fatal want of harmony between their theory and their lives, a lack of coördination between thought and action.

—Jane Addams

There is no expectation that many students will become artists; in fact, the College [Black Mountain College] regards it as a sacred duty to discourage mere talent from thinking itself genius: but there is something of the artist in everyone, and the development of this talent, however small, carrying with it a severe discipline of its own, results in the student's becoming more sensitive to order in the world and within himself than he can ever be through intellectual effort alone.

—John Andrew Rice (Founder of BMC)

For your second essay, I ask you to *do*.

Go do something(s). Do something(s) you can't see the end result of. Do something(s) without an end (all means). Make something(s). Do something(s) you don't have the skills for. **Do something(s) you've never done before.**

Do something(s) you don't think has anything to do with writing, or with education. Ideally, do it over and over, rather than just once.

While you do your something(s), think. Dream. Associate. Let things happen in your mind. Observe what's going on around you and inside you. Try to allow yourself to get into the space cognitive neuroscientists call 'creative flow'. (Listen to this: <https://www.wnyc.org/story/neuroscience-creative-flow/>—it's eight minutes long.) Allow yourself not to be distracted by easier things (like your phone). Take notes as appropriate and as frequently/as much as you can, in visual and/or textual forms.

Later, set the experience of *doing* next to another image, idea, or experience. This will likely be something that occurred to you while you were *doing*. It might feel weird at first. It might seem to have no connection to what you *did*. Ignore those parts of your brain that want you to prioritize a definite connection. If some part of you suggests there's a resonance, there probably is. Write until it makes itself emerge. Don't settle for easy answers.

You could: carve a spoon. Go for a hike. Use a letterpress. Cook a meal from scratch. Sew a piece of clothing. Work in a garden. Screenprint posters. Play a guitar. Learn to throw a pot and fire it. Whatever you do, do it regularly and repetitively (that's not to say 'sew a dozen garments'; you could very slowly, by hand, for example, sew one garment over the course of several weeks).

You can look to *Hammer Head* and *H is for Hawk* for explicit examples of people whose process of learning a new skill led to thinking and writing about things we might otherwise not see as related to those skills.

Fine print

Practicalities

Your essay should feel complete, realized, and fully developed. You may work in any form that makes sense to the project as long as it is a form that thinks about the essay as part of a prose tradition. You may use fragments, sections, movements; you may use non-literary forms. Your essay should be about eight pages long without any filler. You may incorporate images, but the text should fill the intended pages before any images are inserted. Image/text relation should be a formal consideration if images are used.

Mechanics

Before turning in your first draft, proofread and correct all errors. Set your essay in an 11- or 12-point, **serif** typeface. Make it a beautiful object. Title it. For workshop, attach a separate sheet to your essay with three well-considered, developed, thoughtful questions you have about your essay. ("Does it work" is not an example of such a question.)

Other resources (not a limited set!)

<https://www.pickwickindependentpress.com/> <https://www.haystack-mtn.org/>

<https://black-mountain-research.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiener_Werkst%C3%A4tte <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus>

<https://www.littlebrown.com/titles/mary-gabriel/ninth-street-women/9780316226196/>

The practice of everyday life

There is no such thing as pure objective observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be subjective. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he [sic] be poet or philosopher or man [sic] of science. The man [sic] of most science is the man [sic] most alive, whose life is the greatest event. Senses that take cognizance of outward things merely are of no avail. It matters not where or how far you travel—the farther commonly the worse—but how much alive you are. [...] Every important worker will report what life there is in him [sic].

Anything living is easily and naturally expressed in popular language. I cannot help suspecting that the life of these learned professors has been almost as inhuman and wooden as a rain-gauge or self-registering magnetic machine. They communicate no fact which rises to the temperature of bloodheat. It doesn't all amount to one rhyme.

(Henry David Thoreau, from "Observation")

It's easy to dismiss the places we live. Easy to stop looking at them. Easy to take them for granted. Easy not to be curious. Easy to dismiss our lives as small, or ordinary, and thereby to relegate the small and ordinary to the dustbin of history. Easy to say what is ordinary is somehow uninteresting. Time passes. What do we lose when we don't pay attention to our ordinary surroundings?

The writers we're reading this semester are models of curiosity, wonder, questioning, and experiment for us as writers. They take the materials, places, and relationships of their ordinary lives as part of their writing, even as its genesis. Their work reminds us that "genius" isn't solitary but is a result of relation to others and the world, and that we don't work alone. It also reminds us that moving, deep work inheres in attention to the smallest parts of our daily lives, and it calls attention to the way our ordinary lives are *always* political, *always* part of systems larger than ourselves. (Think of Krug's collages of flea-market detritus, or the way Chee has kept a record of the most ordinary parts of his life, and how those parts add up to a history that is both personal and public.)

David Whyte, a philosopher, wrote this poem:

Everything is Waiting for You

After Derek Mahon

Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you freedom.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

While I feel uncomfortable with the way Whyte imagines the world of objects as “waiting for” us (to me that’s the logic of settler-colonialism), I love the possibility of relationship with the world he draws. We are never alone in the world. *What’s that like? What does it make possible? How do we accept our responsibility toward the world?*

Your mission, should you choose to accept it

The third essay for this course is actually the first essay you will begin, but you will not begin it, or work on it for the most part, in the computer or in the form of continuous narrative prose: I ask you to **make a semester’s-worth of observations of the natural and built environment that surrounds you here in Farmington into an essay about what it means to be alive, as yourself, right now.** In this essay, I’d like you to take notice of, and record, the accompaniment of the world right here in Farmington.

(Those are big things. Being *alive*. Being *you*. *Here*. *Now*.
All four matter to this essay.
Take care with them.)

The challenge is that I’d like you to do this **without telling the reader about your feelings.** Other sensations (sight, sound, temperature, texture, touch, taste, smell), yes, tell us and show us. But in this essay, don’t *narrate* your emotions. (That absolutely doesn’t mean “don’t feel”. PLEASE FEEL! PLEASE FEEL DEEPLY! But find ways to give us that feeling without *telling* us. Show us in the colors, the light, the actions, the observations, the order of things. And feel outside of yourself, too—toward and about the world. Show us that feeling by the nuance and detail of your observations.)

Your drafts of this essay, until a draft is due for workshop, can and should be notes, lists, drawings, photographs, sound recordings, transcripts, paragraphs.... Your draft for workshop should be at least eight pages, and will ideally be the full length (it’s easier to cut, and harder to generate meaningful work when rushed). Your second draft should be twelve to sixteen pages, all of which should feel necessary. You may include images, but they should add to the length rather than constitute it.

If you think about this as an ongoing project of noticing and thinking, observing and documenting, it will (I think) feel less daunting than if you get to week eleven and have done no groundwork. Fourteen pages is a page a week all semester, starting now. You could spend fifteen minutes every day walking, looking, and annotating and an hour on the weekend writing. Similarly, you might spend an hour a week reading and walking and looking and asking questions, and beginning in week eight or so spend a couple of hours writing and reading on the weekend, generating a few pages each time to come up with twelve pages by workshop. We will also be doing writing, looking, walking, and being exercises in class that will be aimed at helping you develop these practices.

Fine print

I am looking for you to put care and time and consideration into your work.

I am looking for a thoughtful, deliberate, attentive engagement with the world and your interior life.

Essays that appear rushed or hasty or half-hearted or careless will not be successful.

Your second draft should not have any errors, even on the sentence level.

This essay will benefit from slow work.

Try not to begin with a preconception of what you will say or mean; let yourself uncover and discover meaning as you go.

No man's land

“In the United States, it is very easy for me to forget that the people around me are my people” (Eula Biss)

Eula Biss, Camille Dungy, and Kiese Laymon all think, in different ways, about the myths on which the United States are built. One that is peripheral to all their considerations is the myth that renders certain metropolitan centers (New York, LA) interesting, alive, vital—and everything in between or outside these centers barely exists. This is an extension of the ways in which whiteness is centralized, wealth is centered, masculinity is normatized in our culture. It is exclusive. It says, certain kinds of lives are *real* lives. The rest are just waiting to become like the *real* ones. This is a flattening logic and a dominating one.

But here we are, on the edges of everything. And we know: there is richness and beauty here.

And we know: there is difficulty and complexity here.

And we know: people are making art here.

And we know: this is a landscape that can be known intimately and well.

And we know: we are our own subjects. Our lives are not less interesting for their setting.

Let us defend the margins. Let us insist on their particularity. Let us resist their flattening (even our own tendency to flatten them, let us resist).

For this essay, I ask you to write something that has at its core a close, detailed, attentive relation to the place you actually spend much of your time: Farmington. I am looking for real-time, lived attention. You will need to go out and make observations. You absolutely must not summarize, assume, or guess. Your observations should use all of your available senses. You should NOT begin this essay with an idea of what it will be about. It should arise from a practice of regular (ideally daily) slow time, slow observation, slow relation to the place you are.

This is not an essay that needs a *telos*. It is an occasional essay. It happens in response to a moment (a prolonged moment maybe) in time. **Try not to look for something that will wrap itself up in a moral at the end.** Instead, allow meaning to arise as you set things next to one another. Allow the essay to structure itself via repetition, braiding kinds of observation and reflection together. (Eula Biss is an expert at this: think about “Babylon”, for example.) Pay attention, as you draft, to motifs, ideas, themes that could echo and develop one another. Try to prioritize physical and material observation (via any of your senses) over extrapolation, estimation, supposition. I’m trying to say: for this essay you need to GET OUT OF YOUR ROOM/THE LIBRARY and GET INTO THE WORLD. Make recordings using your phone. Take pictures. Go on walks. Sit on a public bench and write down/type up what you hear/see/feel/smell. Get away from thinking of the 8.5x11 computer page (with its tacit demand that everything follow from the last thing to the next) and toward a logic of notes and scraps. Set things next to one another and *see* what happens.

You should begin preparing for this essay immediately. It will be more difficult (though not impossible) to write it in a week. (That said, it could certainly be an essay that thinks about a place over a limited duration such as a week!) Seek feedback from peers and other collaborators early and often.

Your essay should be graceful, smart, tonally aware, formally inventive while employing the prose paragraph, aesthetically pleasing (on the terms of its own aesthetic), and mid-length: six to eight pages (whatever the spacing; 11- or 12-point type, please, unless form demands otherwise). It has to feel *complete*.