

Unessay Assignment

Twice during the semester you will further develop the ideas from a reflective journal entry or lab report into an unessay. You can read details about this assignment below, but in brief:

- I *highly prize* creative takes on this assignment. Before jumping into typical paper writing mode, consider other media, presentation styles, and modes of critical engagement you might employ instead.
- This is a hands-on course about media and technology—I would be thrilled to see unessays that *do* rather than simply describe. Consider using your unessay assignment to get your hands dirty (perhaps literally) with one of the mediums we discuss in class.
- Take advantage of me and our resources on campus as you develop your unessay ideas. We're here to help.

Model Unessays

Here is [a set of model unessays from previous classes here](#). Here are a set of web-based unessays:

- [ESSAIS1580](#)
- [The Evolving Album Cover](#)
- [Culture Jamming as Palimpsest](#)
- [Ada on Ada: A Programmer's Manifesto](#)
- [Operation Critique](#)
- [Skeuomorphic](#)
- [Graffiti and New Media](#)
- [Which Text\(s\) Work\(s\)?](#)
- [15 Arguments Against Plato and Ong](#)

These examples don't necessarily model the *content* of your assignments, as some were completed for classes covering very different topics, but hopefully they will give you a sense of what kinds of work you might complete.

Unessay Details

Thanks to [Daniel Paul O'Donnell for this brilliant assignment](#), which I've only slightly modified for our class. For more on the research behind the Unessay assignment, see [the work of Emma Dering and Matthew Galea](#).

The essay is a wonderful and flexible tool for engaging with a topic intellectually. It is a very free format that can be turned to discuss any topic—works of literature, of course, but also autobiography, science, entertainment, history, and government, politics, and so on. There is often something provisional about the essay (its name comes from French *essai*, meaning a trial), and almost always something personal.

Unfortunately, however, as [the Wikipedia notes](#),

In some countries (e.g., the United States and Canada), essays have become a major part of formal education. Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve

their writing skills, and admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants and, in the humanities and social sciences, as a way of assessing the performance of students during final exams.

One result of this is that the essay form, which should be extremely free and flexible, is instead often presented as a static and rule-bound monster that students must master in order not to lose marks (for a vigorous defense of the flexible essay, see [software developer Paul Graham's blog](#)). Far from an opportunity to explore intellectual passions and interests in a personal style, the essay is transformed into a formulaic method for discussing set topics in five paragraphs: the [compulsory figures](#) of academia.

The Unessay

By contrast, the **unessay** is an assignment that attempts to undo the damage done by this approach to teaching writing. It works by throwing out all the rules you have learned about essay writing in the course of your primary, secondary, and postsecondary education and asks you to focus instead solely on your intellectual interests and passions. In an unessay you choose your own topic, present it any way you please, and are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are. Here are the basic guidelines:

1. You choose your own topic

The unessay allows you to write about anything you want provided you are able to associate your topic with the subject matter of the course and unit we are working on. You can take any approach; you can use as few or as many resources as you wish; you can even cite *the Wikipedia*. The only requirements are that your treatment of the topic be *compelling*: that is to say presented in a way that leaves the reader thinking that you are being accurate, interesting, and as complete and/or convincing as your subject allows.

2. You can present it any way you please

There are also no formal requirements. Your essay can be written in five paragraphs, or three, or twenty-six. If you decide you need to cite something, you can do that any way you want. If you want to use lists, use lists. If you want to write in the first person, write in the first person. If you prefer to present the whole thing as a video, present it as a video. Use slang. Or don't. Write in sentence fragments if you think that would be effective. In other words, in an unessay you have complete freedom of form: you can use whatever style of writing, presentation, citation, ... even media you want. What is important is that the format and presentation you do use helps rather than hinders your explanation of the topic.

3. Be evaluated on how compelling and effective you are

If unessays can be about anything and there are no restrictions on format and presentation, how are they graded?

The main criteria is how well it all fits together. That is to say, how *compelling* and *effective* your work is.

An unessay is *compelling* when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)

In terms of presentation, an unessay is *effective* when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable (i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation)
- it is appropriate (i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach)
- it is attractive (i.e. it is presented in a way that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions).

Why Unessays are Not a Waste of Your Time

The unessay may be quite different from what you are used to doing in English class. If so, a reasonable question might be whether I am wasting your time by assigning them. If you can write whatever you want and present it any way you wish, is this not going to be a lot easier to do than an *actual* essay? And is it not leaving you unprepared for subsequent instructors who want you to right the real kind of essays?

The answer to both these questions is no. Unessays are not going to be easier than “real” essays. There have fewer rules to remember and worry about violating (actually there are none). But unessays are more challenging in that you need to make your own decisions about what you are going to discuss and how you are going to discuss it.

And you are not going to be left unprepared for instructors who assign “real” essays. Questions like how to format your page or prepare a works-cited list are actually quite trivial and easily learned. You can look them up when you need to know them and, increasingly, can get your software to handle these things for you anyway. In our class, moreover, I will be giving you separate instruction on what English professors normally expect to see in the essays you submit to them.

But even more importantly, the things you will be doing in an unessay will help improve your “real” ones: excellent “real” essays also match form to topic and are about things you are interested in; if you learn how to write compelling and effective unessays, you'll find it a lot easier to do well in your “real” essays as well.

Due Dates

Unessay One is due on Friday, October 7, by 11:59 p.m. Unessay Two is due on Friday, November 11, by 11:59 p.m. If your unessay does not require an electronic submission on Canvas, please meet with me before the due date to arrange a submission time.