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## Fall 2022 James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

We are pleased to invite applications for the James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize. This prize of \$500 will be awarded to the graduate student instructor submitting the best sequence of writing assignments for a First-Year Writing Seminar (second place winners, if any, will receive \$150).

Assignment sequences in a writing course are built around a series of essay topics. These sequences probably represent work assigned during a portion of the course rather than all of the essay assignments distributed over an entire semester. Submissions should include a rationale and a description of your plans for eliciting and responding to student drafts and revisions, as well as a description of how you prepare students for each essay assignment, for example by engaging them in preparatory writing exercises, including informal writing designed to help students understand the material on which they subsequently write formal essays. Reflections on what worked well, and why, and what you would change another time, are welcome.

The winner will be announced to the Cornell community. Winning entries will be deposited in the Knight Institute's web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org) for more information about cc licensing.)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute's archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like "rhetorical situation," "style," "citation," etc. **Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.**

Submissions are due by Tuesday, January 3, 2023. No exceptions can be made.

## Fall 2022 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

~Please type or print clearly. Do **not** staple. Use paper clips only~

Instructor's name Stephanie Sang

Dept & Course # ENGL 1134 Course title True Stories

copies of the assignment sequence, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the assignment sequence in a web accessible archive and make it available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Amanda Munson ([anm94@cornell.edu](mailto:anm94@cornell.edu)) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning sequence upon submission of the electronic text.

Assignment Sequence for The Braided Essay

Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature Stephanie Sang Date 1/1/2023

*A Submission for the James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize, Fall 2022*

Stephanie Sang  
Assignment Sequence for The Braided Essay  
ENGL 1134: True Stories  
Fall 2022

**Abstract:** This assignment sequence was created for the unit in latter half of the semester entitled: “Unit 3: More-than-human Creative Non-fiction.” In this unit, students read a range of creative non-fiction essays—a genre requiring both good research skills and narrative storytelling. Collaborating with peers in close reading exercises, consulting course texts as “mentors” for craft moves, and completing multiple rounds of brainstorming and revision activities, students crafted their own braided essay pertaining to the course theme: “True Stories of Lands and Waters.”

**Keywords:** braided essay, creative non-fiction, mentor texts, craft

**Overview and Rationale:**

In the course True Stories: of Lands and Waters, units are organized around a set of central questions. In units 1 and 2, the class engaged with questions 1-3, focusing on improving close reading skills and participating in class discussions to craft good, thesis-driven literary analysis essays. In Unit 3 entitled “More-than-human Creative Non-fiction,” more focus is given to questions 4 and 5 (underlined below):

- 1) How do we understand the reality of others? What readerly orientation allows us to listen and learn from others’ experiences with curiosity, compassion, investment, and a sense of connection?
- 2) What happens when the reality of others includes more-than-human creatures or landscapes and waterscapes?
- 3) What is the role of power in constructing truth and knowledge? –especially about space, place, land, and water? What if the “true stories” of one person/group limit or violently erase the “true stories” of another?
- 4) How do lands and waters (our ecologies) shape how we know and understand ourselves?
- 5) How do we convey our perspectives and experiences effectively in writing? How do we invite readers in? How are we building connection?

Unit 3 focuses on the genre of creative non-fiction specifically emphasizing the braided essay as the culminating paper that students will produce (see Appendix 1). The braided essay is a type of essay which uses 2-3 separate storylines or topics (called narrative strands) to create an essay around a central theme, emotion, lesson, or question. Weaving 2-3 separate narrative strands together adds depth, energy, layers, and tension to the piece. The braided essay allows writers to embrace non-linear storytelling. The energy of the piece is fueled by juxtaposition and connecting ideas and images, not plot. Braiding disparate stories together allows writers to see life through different lenses. One notices connections and nuances which may have escaped notice before.

As this was a new genre for many students in terms of both reading and writing, it was important for me to explicitly introduce the form of the braided essay. Across the course of three weeks, students engage with a series of eight creative non-fiction texts or “mentor texts.” I explain early on that in addition to reading these texts closely for meaning and content, the texts ought to be regarded as “mentors” who harbor lessons on craft that they can then apply to their own braided essays. The first mentor text students engaged with was Nicole Walker’s “The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action”—a brilliant piece which discusses the strengths of the braided essay as a form while simultaneously crafted in the form of a braided essay. Accompanying the readings, Canvas discussion posts allowed students to reflect on both the content of the piece along with the craft prior to in-class discussions. Below is an example of the first of eight Canvas discussion prompts followed by a student’s reflection:

***Preparatory Question:*** *In the essay, Nicole Walker writes: "A problem for both memoir and nature writing is that some authors assume nature and hardship inherently signify meaning: an addiction overcome must be meaningful; a bird, flying, must be meaningful. I do think, depending on how you write it, that birds and addictions can make meaning, but I think meaning often lies in what F. Scott Fitzgerald called, "first-rate intelligence": the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time. The tension between two unlike things working against each other does, with enough stress and repetition, press out meaning."*

*Content question: What is an example in Walker's essay where she holds two opposing ideas in her mind at the same time? What are the two ideas? How do they press out meaning by being thought about together?*

*Craft question: How does Walker use craft or the form of the essay to hold two opposing ideas? Point to a creative move you see her using or point to a place where she explicitly explains her creative process.*

***Student Response:***

*Content Question Answer:* *An example of two opposing ideas that Walker holds in her mind simultaneously within her essay is self v. world. By alternating between knowledge about herself and information about the outside world, Walker finds comparisons to her own character. The example she noted was how she is similar to geological formations in that her bad habits or unattractive character traits are not permanent just like how geological formations can weather and alter in physical form due to environmental conditions. Bouncing ideas between herself, a subject area she is mostly familiar with, and the boundless world, a subject area that is mostly unknown to her, allows Walker to draw out the full potential her writing can achieve by learning more about how the vast world can lead to self discoveries she never thought of before, thus enhancing her creative scope.*

*Craft Question Answer:* *Walker utilizes personal examples to hold two opposing ideas together in order to make sense of the overarching message she is trying to convey. An instance of this is when she points out how the political and the personal are always trying to reach a level of mutual understanding, and if that understanding is achieved, a certain shock factor can be implemented within a work. She starts by citing the time she wrote an essay about geothermal energy in Iceland and asks this question: "Although geothermal power is sustainable, green energy, is it infinite?" She then recalls the time she and her husband had a quarrel over the faith*

*of a church on a hill, and that her husband had no desire to learn the faith of that church which deeply upset her. After some personal reflection from both sides, they eventually forgave each other and let the issue go. The essay on geothermal energy led Walker to the realization that she and her husband's relationship might be elastic, strong, and infinite in its resources, similar to geothermal energy in Iceland. At first, it seemed as though geothermal energy and a relationship between husband and wife had no relevant connection. However, personal background added the context necessary to give the comparison between opposing ideas shape within the essay. This is a technique that Walker employs many times within her essay and it is certainly effective.*

Each of the eight mentor texts is accompanied by a reflection on both content and craft prior to in-class discussion so that students become attuned to this type of reading and deeper conversations can occur in class. To further demonstrate and develop their ability to read texts simultaneously for content and craft, students are assigned to facilitate a 15-minute close reading exercise for their peers, eliciting more tools the class can collectively use in their braided essays (see Appendix 2). Some insightful observations from these discussions include: using clichés in order to subvert them, using rhythm to convey emotion, and switching verb tenses to signal a transition into a different scene. To modify this assignment in the future, I would ask students to compile a list of craft moves they notice across the texts in a living word document so that they can have access to this “tool box” when composing their essays.

In addition to learning from our mentor texts, students began writing, rewriting, and trying out their ideas week by week. I developed a series of prompts and writing exercises to push students to brainstorm early and revise their original ideas over the course of three weeks. The exercises are set up to meet the parameters set for the braided essay which requires students to have at least one narrative strand and one research strand braided cohesively together. The exercises are broken down into 1) Brainstorming the Braided Essay; 2) The Research Strand; and 3) The Personal Strand (see Appendices 3, 4, and 5). Each student received written feedback on exercises over the weekend so that they might push their ideas further and see what landed well with another reader. These writings provided the basis for 1-on-1 conferences once students felt like they had solidified their ideas. Additionally, reading several student attempts early on allowed me to notice issues which warranted additional class time. These issues became the topics we addressed in workshops which included: 1) Central Questions; 2) Rhythm; and 3) Using Craft to Connect with Your Reader (see Appendices 6, 7, and 8). For future iterations of this course, I would continue reading and commenting on student work early on in the process so that workshops can be tailored to fit the concerns and issues of the writers.

After refining their ideas over the course of three weeks, completing their drafts after individual conferences, and addressing specific concerns in workshops, students completed an in-class peer review session with a partner and were asked to give significant feedback on drafts. Given the variety of paper topics, I partnered students with someone whose style or content matched their own writing. To improve this process for the future, I would include a second round of revisions with a different set of questions explicitly aimed the topics covered in workshops. For example, since this group of writers wanted to work on rhythm, I would dedicate a portion of peer review to have students read their essays aloud while the class suggests ways to vary, change, or alter the rhythm of the piece for a particular effect.

Unit 3, culminating in the braided essay, allows students to learn and practice a variety of creative techniques to combine personal experience with research on a topic of their choice. Breaking away from thesis-driven papers which they learned to write in the early half of the

semester, students learn other ways to craft and cohere an essay using emotional, symbolic, and/or thematic throughlines across a form that connects juxtaposing narrative strands and ideas. Overall, students turned in thoughtful, clever, and surprising essays—weaving together their personal narratives alongside broader issues, pressing meaning from opposing ideas, images, and stories. On the final day of the unit, we spent time discussing how they might use creative non-fiction as a genre in their future endeavors whether as a scientist communicating findings to the public or in their activism to communicate a cause that is dear to them. My hope is that students ultimately see writing as a tool which shapes thought as much as it is a product of thought. In the future, I would include a reflective element at the end of the unit to assess how the process of writing the braided essay shaped or changed students' initial thoughts and ideas about their chosen topic as well as about academic writing in general.

### **Works Cited**

Walker, Nicole. "The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action." *Creative Nonfiction* 64 (2017).

## Essay #4: The Braided Essay

**Mentor Texts:** All texts from Unit 3

Throughout Unit 3, we will examine how persuasion might be achieved using creative techniques. For this assignment, you will practice utilizing these techniques to craft a braided essay on a topic of personal interest and significance to you as it aligns with our class theme of “True Stories (of Lands and Waters.)” A central theme, emotion, question, or lesson that you’ve learned and want to convey to others should drive and cohere the essay.

### Parameters for writing the braided essay:

- At least one of the narrative strands should be personal and involve details from memory and/or personal experience;
- At least one of the narrative strands should include researched factual information;
- A third narrative strand is optional.
- Use connecting ideas, images, words, and/or events to get these narratives to speak to each other;
  - Refer back to the moves used by our mentor texts as they braided separate narrative strands together into a unifying theme;
- Your topic for the braided essay should be related in some way to our class theme of “True Stories of Lands and Waters”

### Potential Topics:

- a) Lessons from Marine Animals *a la Gumbs, Nezhukumatathil, and Imbler*. Choose a Marine Animal (or any animal) and do some research about them (this could mean observing them up close, watching videos/documentaries about them, reading scientific journals, or scouring the internet.) What interesting facts do you find about this animal? What do you find that you can take as a life lesson? How does this lesson work in your own life? or Do these facts mirror anything you’ve experienced in the past? How does observing and thinking about this animal reshape a personal memory or experience?
- b) An Observant and Meandering Walk *a la Vuong* – Take a walk. What do you observe? What do you notice that you’ve never really noticed before? Architecture? Fire Escapes? Telephone Poles? Leaves? Cars? Streams? Geological features? Why do you notice *it*? Why do *you* notice it? What thoughts come to mind as you notice features of your surroundings? What questions? How do your thoughts speak differently when you are on a walk? Is there a different rhythm? How can your essay weave together the meandering thoughts and observations on your walk?
- c) Setting things in context *a la Biss*. Take an ordinary feature of a place like Biss does for “telephone pole” and search for instances of it in the archives. What surprises you about what you find? How can you connect seemingly unrelated contexts together using this item? How can you insert your own experiences and thoughts alongside those contexts? How is land, water, and/or place reshaped by the new contexts you’re weaving together for this feature?
- d) Interrogating my Hometown *a la Walker*– What are you just now questioning about the place you grew up? What sparked this interrogation? How does your hometown,

- neighborhood, or region get its name? Do some research about areas that you've never stopped to ask about. How can you write anew concerning a place that feels so familiar?
- e) Interrogating my Travels—What are you just now questioning about destinations/ lands/ places/spaces you've been to as a tourist? As a traveler? As a student? Think about Haunani Kay Trask's "Lovely Hula Lands" article. How did the place you visited become an attraction in the first place? You might even think about Cornell's history and your arrival in Gayogohó:nq' lands.

**Audience:** Let's set your reader as someone who is genuinely interested in what you have to say—someone who is delighted by unexpected juxtapositions, deep questions—someone with an ear for tone and rhythm in writing.

## *Appendix 2*

### **Student-Led Close Reading Facilitation #2 (Unit 3)**

In Unit 3, we will be looking at a number of creative non-fiction texts and think about how craft/creative moves are also a form of persuasion. Your role, for this close reading, is to provide discussion questions and specific passages for the class to look at closely together. Keep in mind we are now more interested in discussing the creative moves that the authors use to convey their message.

Groups should e-mail me 3-4 well thought-out discussion questions and 1-2 passages for the class to read together no later than **8 p.m.** the night before their session.

#### **A. What to do before the assigned date:**

- Sign-up for a date for close reading facilitation; for this facilitation, the task is to model productive discussion of 1 – 2 passages in class.
- Complete the readings prior to meeting with your close reading facilitation group;
- Meet with your close reading facilitation group to decide which passage you would like the class to read together. Ask yourself:
  - Which passage best illustrates the author's creative moves that you want to highlight for the class? Why did this passage strike your group as important and/or particularly well-written?
  - What discussion questions would prompt the class to give more than just simple yes/no answers?
  - What discussion questions will help the class think about the craft elements in this piece? How can we highlight creative moves that can be used in the upcoming braided essay?
  - What discussion questions will help the class think about the piece and the unifying theme more deeply?
    - What is my answer to these questions? Facilitation groups should be prepared to give thorough answers to their own questions.



-Send the discussion questions and passages to [ts638@cornell.edu](mailto:ts638@cornell.edu) no later than **8 p.m. the night before** your session.

### **B. What to do during the Close Reading Facilitation**

-The instructor will bring up the passages suggested by the group. Group members will be responsible for keeping the conversation going as their discussion questions are presented to the class.

### **C. You will be assessed on the following:**

1. **Close Reading (1 pt)** –During class discussion, group members pointed us to creative moves in the text in order to 1) better understand the author’s purpose and 2) highlight ways we can incorporate them into the braided essay;
2. **Participation (2 pt)** – all group members actively participated in the class discussion and had well-thought-out answers to their own discussion questions, prompting others to join in when appropriate;
3. **Preparation (1 pt)** – 3-4 discussion questions and 1-2 passages were sent to the instructor on time;
4. **Depth (1 pt)** – the passage(s) and discussion questions were well thought out and helped us to get to a deeper understanding of the role of craft together.

## *Appendix 3*

### **Brainstorming The Braided Essay**

The Braided Essay is a type of essay which uses 2-3 separate storylines or topics (called narrative strands) to create an essay around a central theme, emotion, lesson, or question.

Weaving 2-3 separate narrative strands together adds depth, energy, layers, and tension to the piece. The Braided Essay allows writers to embrace non-linear storytelling. The energy of the piece is fueled by juxtaposition and connecting ideas and images, not plot.

Braiding disparate stories together allows you to see into your life through different lenses. You notice connections and nuances you may not have noticed before.

Now is also a time to think about what stories need to be told and which you are best positioned to tell, and how they might best be told, and who needs to hear them. Think about the mentor texts we’ve been reading in Unit 3. Whose style and which essays do you hope to mimic and engage further with? Why? What about their style appeals to you?

Pick **1 prompt**. This can be in the style of free-writing. Get your ideas out on the page without worrying about grammar and mechanics. The point is to explore your thoughts in writing. You’ll have time to sift through them and use them as a starting point for Essay 4 later.

a. **Set the scene.** Go to a place that is visually stunning (or watch a clip of a place that is visually stunning). Some options near campus include walking along Cascadilla Gorge Trail or the Beebe Lake Loop; going to Cornell Botanical Garden; or taking the bus to Cornell’s Lab of Ornithology. What do you observe? What memories or thoughts does this space inspire? What creatures share these spaces with you and what thoughts come to mind as you notice features of

your surroundings? Set the scene for your reader who will never experience the scene you are experiencing now and report back some of thoughts that the scene inspired in you. (300 words minimum)

b. **Lessons from Marine Animals** *a la Gumbs, Nezhukumatathil, and Imbler*. Choose a Marine Animal (or any animal) and do some research about them (this could mean observing them up close, watching videos/documentaries about them, reading scientific journals, or scouring the internet.) What interesting facts do you find about this animal? What do you find that you can take as a life lesson? How does this lesson work in your own life? or Do these facts mirror anything you've experienced in the past? How does observing and thinking about this animal reshape a personal memory or experience? (300 words minimum)

c. **Central Questions.** Gumbs & Foster begin their writing with a set of questions. For Foster's documentary, it all started with the question: "What would happen if I went to see [the octopus] every day?" For Gumbs, it was "who can give us lessons on breathing in difficult contexts?" What are some questions you've been wondering about and would like to explore through writing? Think about central questions that could drive your research or be the basis for an essay. These questions do not have to be deep, profound, life questions but something you actually would want to explore more—even something as simple as "Do I really want to study this?" works. Craft 10 questions (with elaborations if appropriate so that I know where these questions are coming from).

**Due by 5:00 p.m. Friday, October 21<sup>st</sup>.**

Advice for brainstorming:

Do this brainstorming in a way that allows your body to be relaxed. Some of the best ideas come to us when we are just deeply enjoying our lives and doing something we love (like Craig Foster swimming in the Cape of Storms). If you find it helpful to brainstorm aloud with a friend, feel free to connect with a peer from class and transcribe each other's thoughts (a much easier way to write no?). This could give you the added advantage of seeing how your ideas land with someone else—a good way to get out of your own head. If you'd rather write in a notebook and upload pictures of your writing, that is acceptable too—just make sure that your handwriting is legible.

Additional Challenge:

Rather than choosing 1 prompt to engage with, you can choose **to incorporate bits and pieces of all 3 prompts**—especially seeing as 1) setting the scene, 2) selecting a lesson, and 3) having central questions are all useful elements to have within the braided essay. If you choose to take on this additional challenge (which will allow you to be further along in the writing process for Essay 4), choose elements of each prompt that are useful to you and write a minimum of 300 words.

## The Research Strand

*“What is creative non-fiction writing but the shaping and reshaping of self against fact? You take a personal story and give it syntax, grammar, language, punctuation. The simple fact of putting it on paper reshapes it. But now you’ve got to give it context, associate meaning to it. So next to that personal story, you set a paragraph about apples, or condoms, or chickens, or gun violence. Suddenly, your personal story is reshaped by these new facts, and the facts of your personal story cut into the hard statistics of your paragraph about imported apples or the failure rate of condoms”*

---Nicole Walker

In the past two weeks, we have come across multiple examples of authors weaving in fact and research-based narratives alongside their personal narratives. For this assignment, you will brainstorm and develop the research strand of your essay. If you have already chosen the personal strand of your narrative, you might want to think about what type of research topic might complement, complicate, or push against the personal strand to ask better questions and create novel meaning. Don’t worry if you haven’t decided on a personal strand yet. Oftentimes, the best personal narrative is driven by the research. Often, deciding the research aspect of the braided essay first allows easy integration of a personal experience/memory—a more natural weaving of the two.

First, brainstorm a list of **5 specific topics** you can research further. Some examples include:

- 1) Facts about (animal);
- 2) The history of (place);
- 3) The scientific process of (leaves changing);
- 4) The behavior of (animal) during (hunting/evening);
- 5) Effects of (natural phenomena) on humans;

Next, choose **one** research strand idea and list **at least 5** places you might find more information. Examples include:

- 1) Scouring the internet;
- 2) The reference desk walk-in hours @ Olin library (they are a god-send! I highly encourage you to visit them for this and future research projects that you have);
- 3) The name of a particular book, magazine, newspaper;
- 4) Specific YouTube videos, Netflix documentaries;
- 5) Browsing Cornell library website;
- 6) Plaques erected near historic sites;
- 7) Observing this animal’s behavior in their habitat (like geese);

Then, **research your topic** using a few of the places you’ve brainstormed.

Finally, after gathering information from your research, **choose 1 prompt to complete:**

- 1) **Describe a process in your own words.** You might take Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s “My Cephalopod Year” passage where she describes the sequence of events of how a squid makes itself disappear as an example. By process, I mean anything from the process of evolution, to leaves changing color, to a mosquito’s process for incubating eggs, to a

scene of a pack of dogs hunting. Remember that Nezhukumatathil describes the squid's disappearance in particular to mirror her personal experience of wanting to disappear in high school. Think about how you might narrate this process in a way to connect to other strands in your braided essay. (300 words minimum)

- 2) **Describe a set of facts in your own words.** Take a look at Brian Doyle's introduction and look how he presents the facts creatively: "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..." Take a set of facts about your object/area of research and creatively put them into your own words. (300 words minimum)
- 3) **Write a paragraph consisting of questions that the research brings up for you.** Nicole Walker says she "used the research itself to catapult the essay's questioning." After looking up facts about wolves and seeing how intertwined they are with facts about humans, she asks: "are wolves only a reflection of human fears, violent capacities, love of wilderness, ability to adapt?" Furthermore, she asks, "should humans save them to save these elements of ourselves, or does the wolf existence matter for reasons beyond its relationship to the human?...Who are wolves? Are humans wolves? Can facts exist without humans? If the wolf changes, does the very being of wolf change?...How is the wolf and human already a braided idea?" In the course of research, what questions come up and how can you sequence them in a way that flows well both logically and rhythmically? (10 questions minimum).
- 4) **Bits and pieces of all 3.** Choose elements of each prompt that are useful for you and write a minimum of 300 words.

**DUE by 5:00 p.m. Friday, October 28<sup>th</sup>.**

## The Personal Strand

*The personal story asks the reader to hear you say, “Isn’t this what it’s like to be human?” The research-based story says, “See how being human is like being everything else in the world?”*

-Nicole Walker

In the past few weeks, we’ve come across authors (Vuong, Walker, Nezhukumatathil, Imbler, Kimmerer, etc.) who use personal memories and experiences to illustrate, think through, and reflect on the major concerns and questions in their essays. These authors show the power and persuasion of including personal experiences and memories to get at larger societal questions. For this assignment, select a memory or personal experience you would like to write about. For your own benefit, if you already have a solid idea for the Research Strand or if you already have a central question you are working through, think about a memory or experience that could speak to, complicate, or add to either the Research Strand or your central question.

Choose and complete **one** of the following prompts:

1. **Enter a memory through a picture.** Look the first paragraph of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “Asters and Goldenrod.” She takes us into a scene of memory by describing a photograph of herself in college. She first describes details of the photo so readers can see it in their mind’s eye. Then, she reflects on how she feels in the present moment when viewing the photo. Finally, the photo is the portal which takes us into her memory of what occurred in her freshman year of college. Select a memory and allow readers to enter it using a photograph (real or imagined). Describe the photograph visually so that readers can imagine exactly what is happening and see the details in their mind’s eye (emphasize the details that will matter to your overall narrative). (minimum 300 words)
2. **Set the memory in the here and now.** Using present tense, rhythm, and detail as Vuong does in his introductory paragraph, describe a particularly visceral memory as if it is unfolding in the present moment. Take your reader into the memory as if they are experiencing it not only visually but emotionally (the emotion does not have to be morose, in shock, and disorienting like Vuong’s...it can just as easily be calm, tranquil, and peaceful—whatever is true to the memory). (minimum 300 words)
3. **Transition from a research concept into a personal memory or experience.** Aimee Nezhukumatathil transitions between 3 paragraphs describing the Vampire Squid to the rest of her essay focused on her “cephalopod year.” Take a look at her 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph which transitions from the research strand into the personal strand: “I wished I was a vampire squid the most when I was the new girl in high school. We had moved around for so much of my childhood, but the most difficult move I ever made was between my sophomore and junior years...”; Use an idea from your research strand to transition into a personal memory. Weave aspects/vocabulary from the research to describe the memory like Nezhukumatathil does when connecting the squid’s ability to hide with her own memory of hiding during lunch: “I ate lunch in the library. I ate lunch in a stairwell hardly anyone used. I ate lunch in the dark enclave of the only elevator, hidden outside

anyone's eyesight, except for the occasional student on crutches or in a wheelchair.”  
(minimum 300 words)

4. **Using research for personal musings/observations.** Brian Doyle's essay stands out from the others because the way he uses the “personal” is much more discreet and less direct. He does not use the first-person at all in the essay. Instead, he hides his personal musings and observations about life within his descriptions of the hummingbird's heart. Take a look at paragraph 3 where he writes “Their hearts are stripped to the skin for the war against gravity and inertia, the mad search for food, the insane idea of flight. The price of their ambition is a life closer to death; they suffer more heart attacks and aneurysms and ruptures than any other living creature. It's expensive to fly. You burn out. You fry the machine. You melt the engine. Every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. You can spend them slowly, like a tortoise and live to be two hundred years old, or you can spend them fast like a hummingbird, and live to be two years old.” Insert your personal voice in the way you describe various facts from research. Use the way you present and emphasize certain facts to transition into your own personal reflections on a question, theme, or idea.  
(minimum 300 words)
5. **Mimic any mentor text.** Choose a paragraph from a mentor text which brings in the “personal” experience or memory of the author. Mimic their style and approach using your own experience. (minimum 300 words)

**DUE by 5:00 p.m. Friday, November 4<sup>th</sup>.**

## *Appendix 6*

### **Central Questions**

Think of the central question/set of questions in the braided essay as the “thesis” or throughline connecting all strands of your braided essay. Your central question(s) may come to you as you're writing and pressing research against the personal, or you might have begun with a set of questions already formed. Central question(s) do not always have to be explicitly stated though it should give your essay something to cohere around. While your questions may stem from the personal, they should be presented in a way so readers feel like they have a stake in following along as you unpack, think through, and reflect on your own questions. Take a look at the way our mentor texts have worked with central questions (both personal & larger/societal):

From “How an Octopus Helps Me Think About My Mother's Eating Disorder” by Sabrina Imbler:

**Imbler's personal question:** How do I make sense of my mother's eating disorder and its effects on me?

**Imbler's larger question:** What are the broader societal and generational contexts that might help explain the ways our mothers act?

Notice that because Imbler's questions are centered around her mother, she selects the specific study of the record-breaking 53-month gestation of *Graneledone boreopacifica* –not just any study on any octopus.

From “The Weight of our Living: On Hope, Fire Escapes, and Visible Desperation” by Ocean Vuong

**Vuong's personal question:** Why did my uncle kill himself? How do I make sense of my uncle's death?

**Vuong's larger question:** How did we come to live in a culture in which it's taboo to speak of the unpleasant? What aspects of language would make it easier for us to say, “I am hurt. I am scared. What happens now?”

Using research and pondering on fire-escapes, Vuong is able to reshape and make sense of his uncle's death by suicide as a broader societal problem. Likewise, Vuong's personal memory and personal question allows readers to see fire-escapes in a completely new, original, and interesting light. The different strands mean much more together than apart.

Let's see how Vuong structures a chunk of his essay to address/think with his central questions:

P17: It's winter in New York. It's January 8, 2014. It's been a year.

P18: “I wonder what would happen if I were to bring the fire escape back inside...”

P19: “*Ocean, what do you think...*”

P20: “Boston. July 22, 1975.”

P21: “In the photo, Bryant...”

P22: “I think of the plotted plants...”

Our shared Global/Local Structure sheet breaks down, point-by-point, the way Ocean Vuong connects vastly different ideas. Feel free to borrow and adapt creative moves that will be useful for your own essay. There is no easy way to outline the essay sentence by sentence like we did for the analytical one, but it may be helpful nonetheless to attempt to outline a structure once you have all of your ideas.

Take a minute to read this exemplary paragraph from one of your peers. Mark where they successfully incorporate craft to show that this is a creative non-fiction piece and not a page from their diary:

Paragraph A:

What makes us continue? As kids we develop dreams, goals, or an ideal vision of the life we one day hope to live, but what keeps that desire alive through countless setbacks...?

Brisk air flows through the muzzle-like pattern that encloses my face. This structure makes up the vital piece of equipment separating me from weeks of pain and suffering. Jogging onto the field of battle I feel the warmth of the sun engulf my body. With a deep breath I think about my job, “catch the ball, and run”. Keeping it simple keeps me calm. I've found that too much

thought clouds the mind of what may lie directly in front of it. I believe this holds true in all things, but I know of its true value in football, a game of instinct and passion. The grass gives way under my feet. It rained two days earlier and the field isn't completely dry. While it's hard to make precise movements due to the unsolidified ground, the stains of mud and grass on my uniform are worn as badges of honor and I can feel a sense of toughness and pride wash over me. I feel taller, I feel stronger. I. Will. Win. The kickoff is about to commence. I breathe deeply, sharply inhaling and slowly exhaling, simultaneously loosening and tightening muscles across my entire body. I feel the sting of the cool fall air sail into my lungs and gently drift from my lips while breathing out. The ball is kicked, and I'm here to catch it. I gently receive the ball into my chest, it softly presses across the center of my chest and the inside of my arms before I tuck it away and begin to sprint forward. After about 10 yards, I am hit, and hit hard. The great prize of this game which I hold dear is dislodged from my grasp, and I drop the ball. A wave of pain surges down my arm, through my shoulder, and into my neck, as the opponent drives my limp body to the ground. My body, that I had worked to strengthen, that I had been proud of, now felt foreign, felt feeble. The other team recovers and cheers with excitement while I am coming to terms with the pain that I feel. Face down in the dirt I know this is the end of my season, and my dream is to play Division 1 football. (377 words)

What is their personal question? Larger question? After reading their paragraph, how would you refine and/or complicate their question(s)?

#### Paragraph B:

How does this author use elements of craft to present a memory that readers can enter into?

I dig through the memories that are my old ruled composition notebooks. The pages are lined with eager and messy handwriting, scribbled sketches, and dissolved ideas. As I enter a section labeled: "My Inventions", I am reminded of the spark that had incited the designs that follow.

I am ten years old on my corduroy living room couch, leaned over my knees, eyes wide, encapsulated in the movie, *Meet the Robinsons*. I stare in admiration at Lewis, the kid inventor capable of designing and building his own time machine, creating idea after idea in his bedroom. My innocent mind races a mile a minute, and as soon as the movie finishes, I snatch an empty ruled notebook and begin my own invention sketches. I am not just fascinated by Lewis, I want to be him. I want to learn more about inventing, engineering, designing my own genius contraptions and seeing them come to life. I could learn about electronics, motors, and technology, and in a whirlwind of excitement, I realize I could create something that has never been created before!

Two days later, I didn't want to do it anymore. I no longer dreamt of time machines, circuit boards, and sketches in my invention notebook. Maybe I was overestimating my ability to be a child engineer, but I had completely given up. I didn't feel like filling more pages with ideas and I had lost the spark that excited me. Two days ago it had seemed so fun, so thrilling, so *easy*.

Flipping past the *Meet the Robinson*-inspired inventions to the other pages in my composition notebook, a theme clearly forms. Each idea I had, each new thing I wanted to learn, and each goal I had set seemed to gradually fade away after capturing my attention for a motivating couple of days. I want to know where the waves of magic disappear to.



What is their personal question? Larger question? Is this question relatable to you? Do you also have moments in your life that you feel inspired to do something only to give up an idea a few days later?

**List a few questions that you can see your essay exploring. Make sure there is a mix of both personal questions and larger questions:**

Circle the ones that are the most compelling.

*\*\*remember, your questions can always be changed and refined as you progress through your writing*

### **Incorporating Your Central Question(s) Creatively—inviting readers to think alongside you:**

Now, you have a few ideas for your central question(s). Let's take a look at how mentor texts use craft to creatively incorporate their central questions into the essay:

From "Slow Down" in *Undrowned* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

**Gumbs' personal question:** Why do we live with an internalized time clock? Why am I, why are we always in a rush?

**Gumbs' larger question:** What can we learn from marine mammals about slowing down?

*Where do you think you are going so fast? This section offers slowing down as a strategic intervention in a world on speed, and an appropriate response to the exact urgencies that make us feel we cannot slow down. It is the speed, the speedboats, the momentum of capitalism, the expediency of pollution that threatens the ocean, our marine mammal mentors, and our own lives. What if we could release ourselves from an internalized time clock and remember that slow is efficient, slow is effective, slow is beautiful?*

1. This is the first paragraph of Gumbs' essay "slow down." What is the effect of starting her chapter with a question?
2. How does the first underlined question function differently from the concluding question?
3. What type of thinking do her questions invite?

From "Asters and Goldenrod" in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

*Why do these stand beside each other when they could grow alone? Why this particular pair? There are plenty of pinks and whites and blues dotting the fields, so is it only happenstance that the magnificence of purple and gold end up side by side? Einstein himself said that "God doesn't play dice with the universe." What is the source of this pattern? Why is the world beautiful? It could so easily be otherwise: flowers could be ugly to us and still fulfill their own purpose. But they're not. It seemed like a good question to me.*

1. What is the effect of placing so many questions side by side on the reader?

2. Look at the length and number of questions. What does this do rhythmically for the paragraph?

### **Your Central Question(s)**

Think about the central question(s) that you'd like to work through with your reader in the braided essay. Pick and construct one or all of the following:

- 1) A question which can act as a hook, drawing readers into your essay;
- 2) A question addressed to "you" followed by a question addressed to "we";
- 3) A "what if" question that directs your readers mind on what to ponder;
- 4) A string of 2-4 questions of varying lengths that contribute to the rhythm of the piece.

## *Appendix 7*

### **Rhythm**

On the most basic level, rhythm keeps reading interesting because whether we realize it or not, we read with our inner ear. Did you hear that? Your mind turning this phrase into a question? More than this, rhythm can also direct the intensity (rise & fall) of a scene. You can use it to shape the intensity (rise & fall) of action, emotion, and even thought. Below are a few examples of the way writers have effectively used rhythm:

**Vuong:** Everyone's here. My mother, my aunts, cousins, my uncle's friends and co-workers. About 20 people crammed into the living room. The couches and various furniture pushed flush against the walls, or stacked on top of one another. We are all kneeling before the makeshift altar. It's been seven days. A soft, silken mound of ash from hundreds of incense sticks has accumulated in front of my uncle's photo. More food. Plates of rice and vegetables. More incense. More chanting. We bow when the monk directs us to. We bow in unison, the items of my uncle's life still scattered all about us: socks, single shoes, green packs of Wrigley's gum, cigarettes, DVDs fallen from their cases, receipts, bars of chocolate, Levi's, dress shirts, underwear—much of it disheveled by us, the mourners, trying to make room for ourselves in an empty house. With my finger coiled around the wire of my uncle's Xbox video game console, I lower my head and listen to the sounds of the Lotus Sutra, my favorite. Its deep droning rises from our collective despair. I let it enter me: a warm constant vibration crowding out that silent note on the piano of the dead. I close my eyes.

**Your classmate:** Where am I? How did I get here? It's 3 a.m. on December 29, 2016 and I've just woken up. I'm lying in the guest bed at my grandparents' house. I shouldn't be awake now but what can you do when your body was on the other side of the globe 24 hours ago? I can see things in the room almost clearly, though it's very dark. It's snowing. And the whiteness of the ground is reflecting all the moonlight into the room. I haven't seen snow in years. It's silent, except for the gentle hum of the coal stove in the background. Too still. What do I even think

about to put myself back to sleep? Then all my thoughts come rushing to me: decision to move, telling people about it, giving away things, farewell dinners, last goodbyes, trip to the airport, flight delayed, takeoff, touchdown, rental car stress. I cry, not knowing what to feel. Then I fall back asleep.

**Nezhukumatathil:** I ate lunch in the library. I ate lunch in a stairwell hardly anyone used. I ate lunch in the dark enclave of the only elevator, hidden outside anyone's eyesight, except for the occasional student on crutches or in a wheelchair. Once I ate lunch—my sad peanut butter and jelly sandwich—while standing up in a scratched and marked-up bathroom stall. To pass the hour, I read the often vulgar, sometimes funny graffiti scrawled on the stall door, just so no one could see that I had no one to talk to.

Re-write your paragraph using only short sentences.

Re-write your paragraph using only long sentences.

Show all 3 paragraphs to your partner.

Partners, with attention to rhythm, give advice to your partner on how they might re-write their original paragraph. Play around with combining a mix of short/long/medium-length sentences. (This rhythm activity is adapted from Instructor Asey Koh)

## Appendix 8

### Using craft to connect with your reader:

Unlike a diary entry or personal statement, the personal strand of your narrative should creatively use memory and/or personal experience in order to invite readers into your essay using elements of craft. This can include using details to transport readers into the scene, narrating a memory as if it is unfolding in the present moment, allowing readers into a dialogue or train of thought, and/or using rhythm to control the intensity of the scene.

### Instead of this:

Initially, I was excited to be accepted as a violinist in the Honors Performance program which gives us a chance to perform at the Sydney Opera House. My family even took me to celebrate with sushi. I had so many thoughts running through my head after finding out the good news. However, on the first day of the program, I met a plethora of people who all seemed to have more impressive achievements than I did which dulled my excitement. (77 words)

### Try this:

I remember feasting on slabs of salmon sashimi and eclectically assembled sushi - topped with emerald cucumber slices, neon orange fish eggs, and gold bits of crispy onion - with family to celebrate my acceptance as a violinist into the Honors Performance program. *I'm going to perform at the Sydney Opera House!* I was brimming with anticipation, resolutely concluding that this was *the* opportunity – the one some would coin “once-in-a-lifetime” - to expand my horizons. *I'm going to learn new music! I'm going to make new friends! I'm going to... I am...*

And then, as swiftly as they came, these resolutions - the *I'm going to's* - halted. There was simply no space. No space as my mind was seized by self-doubt and loathing. On the first day, I discovered the boy I had joked with during orientation was the concertmaster. I was in the

back of the section. The girl sitting adjacent to me on the bus was a potential future “Olympian” in archery. I did zero sports. Her friend was planning to major in math at Harvard. I had yet to learn calculus. Any shred of excitement faded as these persistent comparisons embedded their roots into the crevices of my mind. I wanted to *leave*. (208 words, writing from your peers)

**Instead of this:**

Many beings on the planet are in danger, in need of care—frogs, honeybees, polar bears, salmon, elephants, and of course, so many humans. We need to be willing to be vulnerable and heroically open our hearts to turn toward them and hold on.

**Try this first:**

As my mother curled into a ball on the passenger side, the mare’s front feet crashed through the windshield, crushing the dashboard down. The male horse had veered at the last minute to the right, and because they were connected by a harness, his momentum pulled his partner back out of the car. The glass tore her chest open before they tumbled to the ground. Moments later, Terry arrived on the scene. He shouted to my mother and John to confirm they were okay and then turned to the horses. They reared and whinnied wildly, blood everywhere. He grabbed onto the harness of his wounded horse near her neck and was flipped into the air, his body like a rag being shaken as she lifted off the ground, over and over, terrified. But Terry held on. He held on with one hand, and with the other began tearing off his clothes and stuffing them into her wound. “GET A VET!” he shouted.”

**Instead of** just being didactic and trying to lecture your reader who is now wondering...why am I reading something only to get lectured at? Who is this person trying to give me a lesson like I need it?

**Try** using a personal memory to first get your reader’s attention before illustrating your lesson more subtly. This invites readers into the wisdom and lessons you’ve gained from your personal experiences and allows readers to understand why you are invested in passing on this lesson.