

# Sample Syllabus for *Stepping on My Brother's Head and Other Secrets* *Your English Professor Never Told You*

In this syllabus, a standard fourteen-week course is divided into three sections: Strategies of Engagement, Research Perspectives, and Truth and Consequences. Each section pairs readings from the text with a specific writing assignment, as well as writing prompts that can be used for in-class writing exercises/journal assignments.

Strategies of Engagement focuses specifically on craft—style, tone, and structure in particular.

Research Perspectives discusses research. Many students may be surprised to learn that creative writers are actively engaged in research and that research can be as essential to belletristic writing as it is to more traditional scholarly writing. Several of the essays in *Stepping on My Brother's Head* contain a list of works cited; these sections are useful examples of documentation and how it is formatted.

While ethical considerations will likely arise in connection with any of the essays in *Stepping on My Brother's Head*, Truth and Consequences tackles ethics issues head-on. The act of writing, any kind of writing, carries risk, but what about writing that purposefully sets out to disclose? And what happens when that disclosure involves not just the writer but other people in the writer's life?

The Instructor's Manual includes useful supplemental author commentaries: excellent and insightful discussions of craft, as well as behind-the-scenes examinations of challenges—and joys—the authors experienced while completing their “assignment.” A number of the prompts below are pulled from these commentaries.

The three major writing assignments in this syllabus—revelation essay, researched personal essay, and family interview—are for longer essays that will undergo extensive peer review during class. While all three may be classified as personal writing, each highlights a different aspect of writing or the writing process that is pertinent beyond the form. If preferred, a more traditional academic essay or literary analysis that calls for a close reading of one or more of the works might substitute for one of these assignments or be added as a fourth major essay.

Journal writing can supplement the more formal assignments—writing exercises (completed in/out of class) meant to help prepare students for class discussion, jumpstart their thinking about the larger writing assignments, and experiment with ideas and style and form.

In his creative nonfiction courses at Brigham Young University, essayist Patrick Madden directs his students to the nitty-gritty of good writing, to sentences and how they're put together, by having them contribute to a "beautiful sentence project." The activity adapts well to this course. After reading each essay, have students record one sentence that stopped them short for its beauty or its profundity, that made them feel a twinge of jealousy—I wish I'd written that! Students can then share their sentences with one another in class and discuss what makes them examples of good writing.

### Strategies of Engagement

Week 1     Sondra Perl & Charles Schuster's "Introduction" & Perl's "Revealing Secrets, Writing Poems"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Consider a time when you found it necessary to separate yourself from your family, a time when you might have found your own values clashing with those of your parents or other family members. Write about that conflict, incorporating as much detail as possible. You may want to include some lines of your own poetry if they are appropriate.
- What worlds have you had to leave behind to come to college? What worlds are you now outgrowing? Is there a struggle involved?
- Write a poetic portrait of someone you know. List all the details you can recall about this person, the way the person walks and talks, the things this person says and does, and then use these details to shape a poem.
- Perl suggests in her essay that some writing *must* be kept private. For her, it's the writing about "pleasure and intimacy" as they relate to her new relationship. What subjects, for you, must be kept private, and why?

Week 2     Jenny Spinner's "Leaving Home" & Bruce Ballenger's "Theories of Intelligence"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Make a list of all the teachers you've known. Choose one and write about a moment, situation, or conversation you associate with that teacher.
- Make a list of what you would consider turning points in your experience as a student or learner or in your attitudes toward school.
- During what period in your life were you the "best" student? The "worst" student? Write about one or both situations.
- Describe in detail someone you went to school with at any point in your life whom you considered a "model" student. Or write about a student who modeled how *not* to be a student.
- Write about a moment during your first week in college that epitomizes/epitomized your experiences. Was the transition an easy one? Difficult? Somewhere in between? Include as much detail as possible.

- In her commentary in the Instructor's Manual, Spinner wonders if the ending to her essay is “too packaged? Too pat? Or does it satisfy?” What do you think? Explain your response.

Students often struggle with how to end their creative nonfiction pieces. After they have read a number of the essays in the text, ask your students to examine the ending paragraph (or ending sequences) to all of the essays. Are there any familiar patterns? What do the most satisfying endings have/do? Do a similar exercise with introductions.

Week 3 Lad Tobin's “Sneaking into the Movies”

- Why doesn't Tobin stay to see the last movie of the day? Would you have stayed? Let's pretend he did stay. How would that have affected the ending of his essay, the conclusions that he draws about himself?
- In his commentary in the Instructor's Manual, Tobin asks: “Is my narrative persona flawed and neurotic enough to be amusing as a comic character but still trustworthy and ‘likeable enough’ (to borrow Barack Obama's damning-with-faint-praise description of then-rival Hillary Clinton) to be taken seriously as I reflect in the expository sections on the more serious implications of my actions?” Analyze his persona in terms of its likability, reliability, psychological stability, etc.
- Consider the structure of Tobin's essay. It does not move in a linear or chronological fashion. Instead, the structure contains what Tobin calls “cinematic jump cuts.” How does this structure affect the telling of his story?

Tobin recommends John McPhee as a model for essays written in a similar structure. Pair “Sneaking into the Movies” with any number of McPhee's essays (from his *Pieces of the Frame*, for example) to give students another example of the “segmented or episodic form” Tobin employs. Students might also examine the structure of other essays in *Stepping On My Brother's Head* that they've read to date.

Week 4 Workshop for Essay 1 (Revelation Essay)

It's your turn to tell a secret, to grapple with the challenges of truth-telling in a creative, and public, enterprise. Your assignment is the very one that Perl and Schuster gave the English professors who contributed to *Stepping On My Brother's Head*: write about “something hitherto private, untold, or personally prized”; “explore a secret [you] recently discovered about [yourself]”; “describe a secret passion”; “reveal something new . . . a life lesson, a moment of surprising insight, a sudden turn from childhood toward adulthood.” As the essays in *Stepping On My Brother's Head* demonstrate, secrets come in all shapes and sizes, in all levels of intimacy and exposure, so don't feel pressured to disclose what you don't wish to disclose at this point in your life to the students and professor in your class who will serve as your immediate audience. Play with tone. Want to be funny? Be funny. Want to be serious? Be serious. Or be both. Your goal is to engage your audience with whatever material you choose, to get them to care about something that you care about, that has, in

small ways or large, shaped your life. As the essays in the book highlight, revelation often triggers an intense moment or moments of awareness for the writer. In other words, revelation inevitably leads to self-discovery. What does your secret say about you? About who you were, are, or hope to be? What do you gain from the act of revelation? What do you risk? Consider these questions as you write. The answers might even become a part of your essay.

### Research Perspective

#### Week 5 Schuster's "Stepping On My Brother's Head"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Consider the outside research that Schuster includes in his essay, the material from psychologists Jane Leder and Frank J. Sulloway in particular. How does this research serve Schuster's creative efforts? Does it help or hinder? Explain.
- One of the last acts of research documented in Schuster's essay is the phone call he makes to his brother, Marty. What does Marty say about the incident that Schuster has described? How does Schuster's inclusion of this conversation with his brother affect the narrative?
- In his commentary in the *Instructor's Manual*, Schuster includes his brother's response to this essay. Read Marty Schuster's response. Does it change the way you respond to Charles Schuster's essay?

Schuster says that several writers influenced the humorous tone in his essay, among them Bruce McCall, Ian Frazier, and James Thurber. Pair a work by one of these writers with Schuster's essay. Two other contemporary essayists who often use humor and whose work students generally enjoy are David Sedaris and Charles Simic. Students may particularly value analyzing the ironic, wry tone that Schuster deploys through much of his essay.

#### Week 6 Mary Pinard's "Hep"

- Consider the research that Pinard includes in her essay, including the history of trapeze artistry and studies in personality research and anthropology. Read through Pinard's essay and identify those areas that you think rely on outside research. How does Pinard's research affect your overall reading of her essay? How essential is it to the story she is trying to tell?
- Part of Pinard's essay is an exploration of her own interest in flying on a trapeze. What does she figure out about herself, about her passion for flying?
- Pinard is a poet, and in her commentary in the *Instructor's Manual*, she articulates her initial impulse to write in this genre with which she is more familiar and comfortable. She wanted to engage poet's tools: "vivid language," "swift shifts in tempo and voice," "economy, rhythm, sound patterns, line breaks, and the use of white

space to enhance meaning and metaphor.” Pinard soon realized, however, that she could use many of the same tools in prose as she did in poetry. Find moments in Pinard’s essay that you think are poetic, moments where Pinard has adeptly adapted her poetic expertise to a work of prose.

Week 7 Lynn Z. Bloom’s “Surfacing: Secrets of the Women’s Locker Room”

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Bloom’s essay is, in many ways, about relationships, particularly the relationships between women in locker rooms. How does she see/define those relationships? What do these women mean to her—and to each other?
- The women in the locker room with Bloom bare themselves without worrying that they may be exposed, physically and emotionally. How does Bloom incorporate their bodies and their stories into her essay without exposing them against their will? Or do you find that she *does* exploit them? Explain.
- Bloom doesn’t stand in the locker room shower with a pen and waterproof paper, recording the details of conversations. Much of the “research” that Bloom does for this essay is really life lived and remembered. Do you find her memory reliable? Authentic? What details stand out to you as effective?
- Toward the end of her essay, Bloom writes about being the victim of an attempted rape in a locker room in Sweden. What impact does this revelation have on her essay?

Week 8 Harriet Malinowitz’s “E-Love”

Sample Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Do you know any writers personally? What are they like? Do they stand out in any way? If not, is there one (living) writer you would like to meet someday? Who? Why? If not a writer, how about a movie star or sports or other famous figure whose persona you know—or feel you know—through their work rather than through direct interaction?
- To what extent does one’s individual personality get accurately expressed in online interactions such as e-mails or instant messages or Facebook exchanges?
- Have you ever “slanted” or “shaped” the truth about yourself online (or elsewhere) to impress someone? If so, describe what you did, why, and the outcome of your efforts.
- How does Malinowitz present herself to Kerryn Higgs? Why do you think she makes the choices she does in terms of the information she includes and excludes and in terms of the tone in which she presents that information? Do her choices seem reasonable? Fair? Explain.
- Why do you think Malinowitz includes actual parts of her correspondence with Higgs in her essay? How do those snippets from her e-mails impact her essay?

Week 9 Workshop for Essay 2 (Researched Personal Essay)

For this assignment, you will delve into the world of creative research, digging and discovering, then artfully weaving that research into the final product. Almost all personal writing requires research, but this essay will make it a priority. As evidenced by the essays in *Stepping On My Brother's Head*, personal essayists use a range of research tools. You might search local and national newspapers or almanacs and yearbooks, focusing on the time period your narrative spans, to remind yourself what was going on in the world at the time. You might interview people involved in your narrative—whether those people were participants in or witnesses to events recounted or simply were alive at the time and knew you. (What these outsiders contribute does not have to appear in the final essay, but it might, in some capacity.) You might research a place/landscape that figures prominently in your narrative, looking at anything from its history to its demographics. You might pursue more traditional research, using databases in your library's electronic catalogue, for example, to find studies that relate to your subject. Or you might consult an encyclopedia to fill in background about some historical event. The point is to look beyond yourself for material, even if your self remains the primary focus of your essay.

### Truth and Consequences

Week 10 Janet Eldred's "The Time of Lies"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- If you were to give someone else permission to write the story of your life, to whom would you give permission and why?
- If someone else were to write the story of your life, would you want the final edit? Should you have it? Do you owe others the same? If we allow such editing, can we get to the truth, the whole truth, the real truth, the unvarnished truth—pick your cliché—with this much authorial power handed over to the subject of a piece?
- In her commentary in the *Instructor's Manual*, Eldred writes: "Some creative writers feel that worrying too much about ethical treatments of subjects will stifle creativity. Journalists, who work by a well-defined professional code of ethics, feel a commitment to truth, even if at the expense of an individual who is, say, a cheat and a crook. Essay writers have to find their own ethical lines." Where do you, or will you, draw your own ethical lines at this point in your writing life?

Doug Block's documentary *51 Birch Street* raises excellent questions that would fit well with Eldred's essay and the essays that follow in this section of the course. Students can respond to the film by way of various prompts. Here's one: How well do you know your parents, not just as your parents but as individuals, as people with lives that were

lived before you were born, with desires and passions that (gasp) have nothing to do with you? Do you really want to know your parents in this way? Why/why not?

Week 11 Mimi Schwartz's "Just Like in Benheim"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- Choose a family member and make a list of all the things you might want to know, or find out about, this person. What are you curious about? What don't you know? What would you like to discover?
- Make a list of interview questions for that family member but avoid any questions that can be answered yes or no.
- In her commentary in the Instructor's Manual, Schwartz advises: "Every writer needs the hook to shape a mass of facts. Otherwise you get an "and-then-this-happened-and-then-that-happened" narrative that is deadly boring. Sophie's repeated exclamation "It's just like Benheim!" becomes Schwartz's hook. Look back over the essays from *Stepping On My Brother's Head* that you've read thus far. What are the hooks in each essay? What keeps them from being "deadly boring" narratives that simply chronicle fact?"

In her commentary in the Instructor's Manual, Schwartz offers the following exercise as a warm-up to a larger interview essay: "In class, have students interview each other in pairs. I allow five minutes, say 'Switch,' and allow another five minutes. Students are to take notes including at least two direct quotes. Then I give them ten minutes to write up a profile that is both factual *and* interesting. That is the challenge: to avoid a 'shopping list' profile with no point of view. Instead they must find a hook that shapes and selects the facts—and captures the personality of the interviewee and uses at least one direct quote. The partners share their profiles, adjust the facts, and then we share as a class."

Here is another exercise from Schwartz: "Invite someone into class for a class interview—a writer (read something they wrote), a school personality, and so on. Ask students to freewrite beforehand to capture their expectations—and bring in some questions. They take notes (some can record if they want), including descriptions, direct quotes, and so on. Everyone writes up a profile, and we share in class to see who best combined facts and point of view. *Tip:* I ask students to write at least two titles for their essay before they start; that helps them get 'the hook.'"

Week 12 Mike Rose's "The City in the Back of the Mind"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- What do you know about the city of your birth? Describe it to someone who has never been there.
- How has the place where you grew up affected your current perceptions, likes, and dislikes? In other words, how have you been shaped by the place of your childhood?

- In his commentary in the *Instructor's Manual*, Rose writes about the challenge of interesting an outside audience in personal stories. How do you get readers to care about what you care about? For Rose, one solution is to connect personal stories to broader themes that tap into readers' shared ideas and experiences. What are the broader themes in Rose's essay? How does he connect with a reader who does not know or care about Rose's family/has no knowledge or interest in Altoona, PA?
- Write about a family story your relatives often tell, something about a person, event, or place you heard about often while you were growing up. Describe the story's impact on the way you see yourself/your family/the world today.
- Who is the family performer of stories in your family? Who likes to tell the stories? Describe that person's typical performance. Rose concludes his essay with the discovery that the performance of stories often affects their substance, slanting it. In his family, humor often masked what was "sober and stark." How does your family performer shape or slant the stories he/she tells?

Week 13 Rebecca Faery's "Ella: Family Stories, Family Secrets"

Sample Writing Prompts for In-Class Exercises/Journals

- What are our obligations to our families, to our various relatives—either to keep secrets or to reveal them in the service of telling the truth about those things that matter to us and could matter to readers?
- Toward the end of her essay, Faery quotes James Baldwin, who wrote: "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." What does Baldwin mean? What does Faery mean by quoting Baldwin?
- In the absence of concrete evidence, Faery makes several guesses about what may have become of her great-grandmother Ella. What are those possibilities? Which one do you find most credible and why?
- How does the story of Faery's great-grandmother, what she knows and doesn't know, continue to impact her today?

Week 14 Workshop for Essay 3 (Family Interview)

Interview a parent, grandparent, or other close relative and find out something from him/her that you've always wanted to know or wanted to know more about. Some of you, like Rose, may be filing in partial or fuzzy memories from your own lives; others, like Schwartz, may be asking about moments before you were born. Consider what it means to tell someone else's story, the responsibility that such an act entails. Beyond the obvious ethical challenges this assignment poses, you will need to rely on your creative skills to capture the story, and the person telling it, in the most engaging possible way. Details, details, details. Make the story, and the storyteller, come alive for your reader. But again, consider the impact of that story on you, the recorder, the writer. In the course of writing someone else's story, what do you discover about yourself?