Continuing the Conversation:
(Local or Regional) Inquiry and the (Informal, Narrative) Essay

Overview: Throughout the semester we have been listening to a number of voices contributing to conversations about food and food writing: voices popular and academic, journalistic and political, rural and corporate, famous and underappreciated, and so on. We might engage other voices, had we enough time to do so. Our fundamental questions—How should we feed ourselves? Can personal essays and other kinds of nonfiction involving storytelling also offer arguments?—have generated a number of texts that continue to engage audiences: fellow students, government officials, readers of our bibliographic wiki. A simple question or a couple of search terms, we have discovered, can illuminate vast branches of knowledge and opportunities for further inquiry.

The communities surrounding an institution like the University of South Dakota highlight the interconnectedness of these discourses. More complex than any of us probably realize, USD and the pathways that intersect Vermillion resemble an ecosystem through which networks of individuals interact and depend on one other in the pursuit of work, play, learning, friendship—and if we are to be honest, money and influence. By drawing on this ecosystem’s resources, our final assignment gives us an opportunity to (1) investigate “something edible” generated in Vermillion or the region; and (2) compose an informal essay about that topic for a public audience.

In our most recent project, your team presented and evaluated a series of essays using a wiki. Earlier you borrowed another writer’s ideas to shape and support an argument suitable for a government audience. In this project, you’re on your own, so to speak. You will investigate, narrate, and reflect upon a topic of your choosing: your community’s reliance on Wal-Mart for groceries, for example, the launch of a small food coop, debates over the Farm Bill among farmers, the prevalence of diabetes in Sioux Falls, or the future of ranching. The topic must be pertinent to South Dakota or neighboring states, and your point of view should engage a regional audience. You’ll investigate why the topic is drawing attention, when did it become important, who is involved, what is at stake, where tensions arise, and how we should conceive of solutions. To do this, you’ll conduct field research with some of the following methods: (1) participant observation, (2) interviews with sources important to your essay, (3) surveys and questionnaires, or (4) other collection and analysis of primary data.

This field research will prepare you to write an informal essay—think explanatory narrative, newspaper column, or personal story—oriented toward a “readership” of your choice. You might select 605 Magazine, an alternative monthly that invites submissions, The Volante, our campus newspaper, or Vermillion Literary Project, USD’s only student-run literary journal. Alternatively, you may focus on an online publication. As a resident of South Dakota, you might raise awareness about a problem you uncover or draw your audience’s attention to something downright strange, ironic, or inspirational. There will be at least as many possibilities for this assignment as there are debates among food writers; as you conduct different kinds of inquiry, take careful notes on possible angles your essay will take. What exactly does that word mean? We’ll continue to discuss this in class, but to “essay,” says the dictionary, is “to make an often tentative or experimental effort to perform.”

After you’ve written your essay, you will design a piece of visual rhetoric that illuminates a key aspect of “something edible” that you’ve investigated. For example, this visual might take the form of a photograph with a caption, a chart illustrating statistics, a charcoal sketch, or a map. It should complement your writing—explaining something not easily conveyed in words—and it should be your own creation.
Finally, you will present a reflexive analysis of your work—your understanding of how your rhetorical situation affected the choices you made throughout the inquiry and writing process—on our last day in class.

**Purpose:** The goal of your local inquiry is to learn everything you can about “something edible” through field research. Gather observations, quotations, survey data, personal experience, copies of records, and other evidence that you will bring to bear in your essay. The goal of the informal essay, meanwhile, is to introduce your audience to your topic through a narrative that centers on the writer’s inquiry, and to advocate in reflective ways for a certain kind of understanding. This often involves a relationship among people, resources, businesses, government, or other stakeholders in a community. Think of how a good nonfiction story unfolds: the writer approaches an issue with a certain frame of reference and a set of values in mind, but this perspective emerges gradually—usually in a narrative that “shows” more than it “tells.” The goal of the visual rhetoric is simply to illustrate an aspect of the issue to your audience in ways that complement your essay. Finally, the goal of the reflexive analysis is to demonstrate that you understand your own rhetorical situation as a writer—in other words, that you can analyze and reflect upon the effectiveness of choices made in the world and in writing.

**Audience:** Think of the audience for your informal essay/visual rhetoric as the readership of a publication of your choosing, and secondly, your instructor. You aren’t required to submit your work for publication, but you should think of your readership in specific terms—young or old; progressive or conservative; urban or rural. As in all of our writing, the choices you make should create relationships among the text, its purpose, its audience, and its context. The audience for the reflexive analysis is more limited: your instructor and classmates. This community of writers will be interested in understanding how and why you wrote your essay the way you did.

**Author:** Present yourself as a writer who is part of a community affected by “something edible” under investigation—an observer or a participant trusted to lead us on some kind of narrative inquiry. Show in precise language an open-minded investigation backed by certain conclusions about the issue based on your field research and the experiences it entailed. Convince your readers that you have spent time gathering evidence, becoming familiar with stakeholders, and reflecting on “the truth” or “multiple truths” of the matter, as you see it.

**Example:** Say you chose the focus of this course, ENGL 201, as the focus of your investigation. The question guiding your inquiry could be: Why does ENGL 201 ask college writing students to write persuasively, using a variety of rhetorical strategies? Alternatively, you could ask why writing for ENGL 201 usually requires research and collaboration involving modern, technology-based tools. To conduct inquiry, you might:

- For context, find a book or some journal articles about teaching composition (pedagogy) at the library.
- Use our Undergraduate Catalog to find out what ENGL 201 is supposed to contribute to USD’s core curriculum. Then research the South Dakota Board of Regents’ System General Education Requirements to learn how ENGL 201 meets goals for writing courses in state schools.
- Interview the English Department’s Director of Writing to find out more about his teaching philosophy and why ENGL 201’s curriculum has adopted a thematic approach.
- Interview another writing director in South Dakota for comparison with other advanced composition classes.
- Write field notes about a particular day in class and take photos. Afterwards, interview your instructor.
- Create a survey and hand it out to other ENGL 201 students to find out what they’re doing in their classes.
- Survey older students about how they have applied ENGL 201 skills in other coursework or at work.
- Ask the English Department for copies of course evaluations from past ENGL 201 students.
Your essay might run several pages but later undergo revisions so as to meet submission requirements at our student newspaper, *The Volante*. You profile your own experience or that of another student, describe how this person encounters the course’s curriculum, and lead your readers, in the process, to a certain question, argument, or appreciation. Your accompanying visual rhetoric—a diagram explaining the sequence of ENGL 201 writing assignments or a captioned photo from a workshop—illustrates for your readers how the course’s students practice writing. Your reflexive analysis presents the choices you made while drafting these texts.

**Some Questions and Guidelines**

In choosing a topic to investigate and a readership for your essay or column, ask:

- What food-related places, people, and issues are making local news?
- Could community calendars point to an event related to a topic worth pursuing?
- What kinds of controversies have always intrigued you?
- What things do you feel too strongly about—issues you want to avoid writing about?
- How does food production, distribution, or consumption relate to your own expertise or academic major?
- Which local issues lend themselves to a newspaper column, and which are more suitable for an essay in a magazine, literary journal, or Web site featuring food writing?
- When do you envision your essay or column being published, and how will that affect your writing?
- What experts on campus might you enjoy interviewing?
- What kinds of stories are you best at telling?
- Does the issue you’ve chosen have sufficient tension to tell a story?
- How does your own lifestyle hamper or help your investigation—will you need to arrange travel or a free weekday that you can devote to field research?
- What tools will you need? A notebook? An audio recorder? A camera? Should you ask permission before using them in the field? Are your methods appropriate for children or other at-risk persons?
- Beyond “something edible,” does the issue you’ve chosen meet the “qualities” criteria for this assignment—personal significance; local or regional context; a manageable scope; and narrative and visual dimensions?
- What opportunities for inquiry are you overlooking?

Then, in drafting your essay or column:

- Keep in mind the specific kind of text you’re writing—its sub-genre, purpose, audience, and context.
- Choose the best medium (newspaper, magazine, journal, or online publication) to reach your audience and achieve your purpose. Specific purposes might include suggesting a cause-and-effect relationship, pointing to a certain disparity, or arriving at a preferred solution or outcome.
- Capture and maintain your reader’s attention, and leave him or her with a “nugget”—a metaphor or lesson you imagine will lodge in the reader’s mind the rest of the day.
- Introduce and maintain some kind of conflict or tension.
- Adequately explore the context of the issue—its causes, history and stakeholders
- Effectively support your position with reasons and evidence based on personal experience, field research, and to a lesser extent, library research.
- As appropriate, use narration or storytelling and first person prose.
- As appropriate, incorporate classic appeals discussed by Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz: ethos, pathos, logos.
- As appropriate, acknowledge and respond to self-doubts, counterarguments, or alternative viewpoints.
• Cite sources as appropriate to the genre and context. For informal essays, this usually means avoiding parenthetical references in favor of signal phrases or in-text references to sources. However, for purposes of this assignment, you should include an MLA-style list of every source your essay references (“Works Cited”).
• Submitting your essay for publication is not required. For extra credit, however, pay attention to the guidelines of particular publications. Will a maximum word count or other submission requirements necessitate creating two different drafts? How will you submit for publication on or before our deadline? By way of a certain website? In an e-mail? What will the publication expect you to include with your submission?

As you craft your visual rhetoric, consider the following:

• How can you use imagery, quotations, examples, facts, statistics, or other information to show readers what this issue is about?
• What is something so unique about this issue that it deserves a graphic?
• How can you capture readers’ attention and convince them to read the accompanying essay?
• What kind of aesthetic do you want to project?
• How will your visual resonate with your text?
• What is the best way to organize the information visually, in order to meet your audience’s needs?
• What are the most important details to include, and what should be left out?
• What elements of design make a graphic unappealing?
• What tools will you need? An online image editor? A scanner in the library?

Some Fine Print

Due: __________ or __________ December 2013.

In a manila folder, please turn in (1) an essay or column of at least 2,000 words that reflects MLA style appropriate to the genre; (2) a list of works cited; and (3) visual rhetoric intended for publication alongside your essay. For extra credit, also include (4) some evidence of your submission, such as an e-mail printout; (5) any shorter essay or column that accompanied your submission, in order to meet guidelines; (6) an MLA-style reflexive analysis of at least 500 words on the effectiveness of your field research, drafting process, and submission for publication. Because any magazine or other outlet that decides to publish your essay will also determine its design or layout, please avoid merging your essay’s text with your visual rhetoric in printouts for your portfolio.

From the above portfolio, please submit items (1), (2), and (3) to Desire2Learn → Dropbox → Inquiry/Essay: Final Draft. On our due date you’ll also deliver your reflexive analysis of inquiry, process, text, and visual as a short presentation to the class. Any related media should be uploaded to Drobox → Inquiry/Essay: Presentation.

Details: Your essay or column needs to incorporate at least two methods of field and two secondary sources. Your particular combination of methods and sources will depend on the inquiry you undertake. We’ll examine several kinds of research methods described earlier and review primary and secondary sources in class.

Worth: 35 percent of your semester grade or 350 points.
## Evaluation Rubric: Inquiry + Essay + Visual + Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent (10)</th>
<th>Needs Work (8)</th>
<th>Unsatisfactory (6)</th>
<th>Pts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INQUIRY AND ESSAY</strong> Purpose, Audience, Context, Scope: The essay centers on “something edible” that has significance both for the writer and a local or regional community, and proper scope. Establishment of history or context feels appropriate. By the text’s conclusion the writer’s inquiry and point of view emerge in reflection that shows more than it tells. The essay also appeals to the diverse needs of a readership and fairly addresses opposing views.</td>
<td>The essay centers on an issue that displays most of the necessary qualities, although one or two may have been overlooked. Some contextual information is lacking, or it overwhelms the text. The writer could better consider his or her audience, because the essay’s purpose is either too overt or too obscure.</td>
<td>The essay centers on an issue that fails to display necessary qualities. The writer ignores his or her audience because the essay makes either an alienating argument or lacks purpose.</td>
<td>X8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Research and Sources: The essay clearly depends on at least two attempts at careful field research, incorporates at least two secondary sources (more when appropriate), and references evidence, including direct quotations, in ways appropriate to the genre.</td>
<td>The essay incorporates at least one field research method and two secondary sources, but could do a better job at referencing sources in ways appropriate to the genre.</td>
<td>The essay fails to show evidence of meaningful field research, lacks sufficient sources, or fails to reference evidence in ways appropriate to the genre.</td>
<td>X8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeals and Arrangement: The essay draws on ethos, pathos, and logos. The essay also appeals to its readership with a story that portrays the issue, when appropriate, in compelling, narrative terms that show the writer conducting inquiry. The essay maintains coherence by way of careful transitions.</td>
<td>The essay draws too heavily on one type of appeal over another, it avoids narration, or at times its structure feels haphazard and unsupported by transitions.</td>
<td>The essay fails to make effective appeals to its readership, establish a narrative, or maintain a coherent structure.</td>
<td>X8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citations, Conventions and Process: While the essay’s sources are cited in ways appropriate to the nonfiction genre, the text adheres to other MLA guidelines, includes a list of works cited, and is free from errors. The writer fully participates in online and in-class workshops during drafting. For extra credit, evidence of submission is included.</td>
<td>Source citations include too much information for purposes of a literary journal or newspaper, or are not always included. Occasional errors can be found but there is evidence of submission and workshop participation.</td>
<td>Source citations completely disregard the conventions of literary journals and newspapers. Sentence-level errors hinder the text’s clarity or evidence of submission and workshop participation is missing.</td>
<td>X3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VISUAL RHETORIC</strong> The visual is developed carefully, with attention to aesthetics. It complements the essay because it contains accurate, interesting and specific information related to the topic that is better conveyed in visual terms. Its submission is distinct from the essay text.</td>
<td>The visual is adequately developed but its resonance with the topic could be stronger, or it simply repeats information already conveyed in the essay.</td>
<td>The visual is too undeveloped to be of value to readers, it contains major inaccuracies, or it fails to relate to the essay’s topic.</td>
<td>X3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS</strong> The writer’s in-class presentation thoughtfully analyzes choices he or she made and relationships among major elements of the rhetorical situation, including text, purpose, audience, context, and genre, citing examples for support. For extra credit, a written version of the analysis is included.</td>
<td>The analysis of the rhetorical situation provides enough information to evaluate the essay, though better explanations, examples, or care in the presentation is necessary.</td>
<td>The analysis does not contain enough information about the rhetorical situation to evaluate the essay’s effectiveness. The writer may have missed his or her final presentation.</td>
<td>X5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

800 / 350