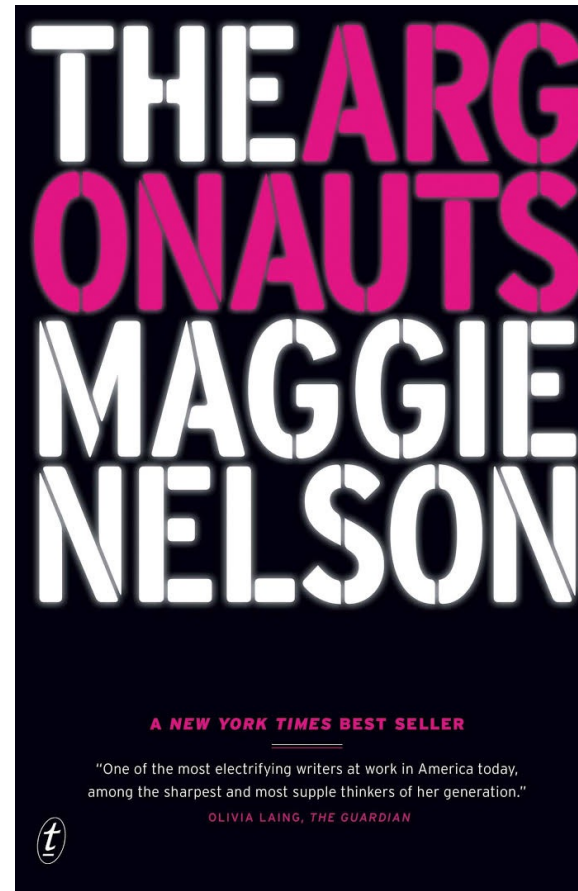


# Autotheory, Essay & Writer's Voice



# Autotheory, Essay & Writer's Voice

Writing Task

Write a type of an essay you want. You can use theory and lateral citations in text. You can make a hybrid essay. You can combine academic style with with a more poetic or personal one. This is an opportunity to experiment with academic writing in a way that suits your needs.

Deadline May, 9 (Sunday)

Lenght 3–10 pages

[riikka.alahakula@gmail.com](mailto:riikka.alahakula@gmail.com)

You can write in Finnish, English or French.

Next meeting

Autotheory & Essayistic Voice in Writing May, 11 (Tuesday,10-16)

# Questions for Reflection

Would you like to share your ideas about the specific work(s) of research or work(s) of art you are working on?

Which media, techniques, and work processes did you use, and why did you make those choices?

How do you describe your theoretic or artistic style and perspective?

What is your inspiration for creating this research or artwork? What were your inspirations for creating research or art?

What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when viewing your work?

# Writing Task

Using 10 words, describe yourself as a researcher and an artist.

# Anne Boyer, Questions for Poets, 2013

Must the artists enter first that womb of fire? Is it the practice of the fun, the authentic, the intimate, the affective, the cooperative, the collaborative, the granted? Is it the practice of the quantified smile?<sup>30</sup> Is it the practice of a managed intimacy? Is it the practice of the scripted hello? Is it the practice of the controlled burn? Does it grow in the ruins of authorship? Does it grow in the ruins of ruins? Is it that the right relation of an artist to a city is for a city to fiddle while the artist burns? And what is the trial of today if art has lived on after its failed self-abolition, aerosolized, manic and ambulatory, freed from the constraints of medium and modality, living on as a form of management, living on a form of flexi-feeling, living on in an already granted self-dissolution, living on as resilience in all the resilient horror? Would it find a compromise in silence?<sup>31</sup> Might it make a clandestine opening of a thousand leaves?

# Questions for Reflection

Am I employing a healthy perspective on art?

Am I using my time wisely?

Am I true to myself?

What worries me most about the future?

Have I done anything lately that's worth remembering?

What small act of kindness was I once shown that I will never forget?

Who has had the greatest impact on my life?

Would I steal to feed a starving child?

# Writing Task

Write about a moment experienced through your body. Making art, meditating on a theoretical topic, touching a friend (a human, animal or non-human organism; a person, place or thing), making breakfast, going to a party, having a fight, an experience you've had or you imagine for your character. Leave out thought and emotion, and let all information be conveyed through the body and senses.

# Writing Task

Make a list of everything you'd like to say no to.

Make a list of everything you'd like to say yes to.



# Anne Boyer, *Toward A Provisional Avant-Garde*, 2009

1. It won't be called the avant-garde. It will be referred to by various names, all of them precise, like "the society for touching lightly the forearms of another" or "a tendency toward making chains of half-rhymes in a circle with one's friends."
2. It will share with the historic avant-garde that art will often be made in groups, but it will seek or find the artistic and literary expressions that mimic something other than war or machines or violent manly death, something like "human touch" and "animal touch" and "comforting noises made when another is ill" and "maternal protection" and "friendly ritual" and "a little daub of secretion" or "just like playing cards with my aunts and uncles" or "the soft feeling of an arm" or "game for which the rules are never directly stated but which everyone knows how to play."

# Anne Boyer, *Toward A Provisional Avant-Garde*, 2009

3. It will be fascistic in that it will be devoted to play. In this, it will mimic my dining room. Like the avant-garde in history, the best thing about it will be its games, which will proliferate and in this proliferation be in a constant state of alteration.
  
4. It will share with the historic avant-garde that art will often be made in groups, but it will seek or find the artistic and literary expressions that mimic something other than war or machines or violent manly death, something like “human touch” and “animal touch” and “comforting noises made when another is ill” and “maternal protection” and “friendly ritual” and “a little daub of secretion” or “just like playing cards with my aunts and uncles” or “the soft feeling of an arm” or “game for which the rules are never directly stated but which everyone knows how to play.”

# Anne Boyer, Toward A Provisional Avant-Garde, 2009

7. No one will use art to hurt anyone. They will not use art to hurt themselves. In this it will be a new thing: a defamiliarization not about infliction.
8. Boredom will have its uses, as it always does, but it will not become a value.
9. All ideas will be tested by writing them in dry erase marker on a white board and leaving them outside in the elements “to weather.” Those that survive will be implemented.
11. It will include both robots and animals, sometimes robot-animal chimeras. There will be other chimeras, too. I recently read that the great question of our time is “Am I machine?” and though I do not know if this really is the great question, no one will mistake herself for a machine who also has a tail.
12. Ezra Pound said “make it new” and Gertrude Stein said “make it ugly” but I say “make it okay.”
13. There will be children, though often not in the ways we expect them.

# Anne Boyer, Toward A Provisional Avant-Garde, 2009

14. It will make no fetish of form, or rather, it will seek such a multiplicity of forms, which results in such a formlessness that its forms cannot be dumped out and reused as sacks to hold the stuffy or banal or slightly/greatly evil.

19. Because it is committed to something like comforting, it will build for those who hate it a papier mache giant with a familiar sort of face. Artists and poets will be on megaphone rotation saying such things as “art is war” and “we love money and/or death” because it is this sort of statement, alone, which the enemies (having been, early in life, deprived of 90% of something) can hear. The enemies will squat and defecate, then sling their feces at the giant. They will be amused enough, imagining themselves in a battle with something real, “look at us proud warriors” or “I’m getting my individuation on.” The feces will be composted and used to fertilize fields in which the enemy’s food is cultivated.

24. It will be utopian, in the sense that it wants furniture enough for every home and home enough for everyone. No one will ever confuse home for the enemy of art, or a woman with a home.

# The Five Major Types of Essays

## 1. Narrative Essays: Telling a Story

In a narrative essay, the writer tells a story about a real-life experience. While telling a story may sound easy to do, the narrative essay challenges writers to think and write about themselves. When writing a narrative essay, writers should try to involve the reader by making the story as vivid as possible. The fact that narrative essays are usually written in the first person helps engage the reader. “I” sentences give readers a feeling of being part of the story. A well-crafted narrative essay will also build towards drawing a conclusion or making a personal statement.

## 2. Descriptive Essays: Painting a Picture

A cousin of the narrative essay, a descriptive essay paints a picture with words. A writer might describe a person, place, object, or even memory of special significance. However, this type of essay is not description for description's sake. The descriptive essay strives to communicate a deeper meaning through the description. In a descriptive essay, the writer should show, not tell, through the use of colorful words and sensory details. The best descriptive essays appeal to the reader's emotions, with a result that is highly evocative.

### 3. Expository Essays: Just the Facts

The expository essay is an informative piece of writing that presents a balanced analysis of a topic. In an expository essay, the writer explains or defines a topic, using facts, statistics, and examples. Expository writing encompasses a wide range of essay variations, such as the comparison and contrast essay, the cause and effect essay, and the “how to” or process essay. Because expository essays are based on facts and not personal feelings, writers don’t reveal their emotions or write in the first person.



## 4. Persuasive Essays: Convince Me

While like an expository essay in its presentation of facts, the goal of the persuasive essay is to convince the reader to accept the writer's point of view or recommendation. The writer must build a case using facts and logic, as well as examples, expert opinion, and sound reasoning. The writer should present all sides of the argument, but must be able to communicate clearly and without equivocation why a certain position is correct.

## 5. Lyric Essays: Hybrid Texts

The lyric essay combines the autobiographical information of a personal essay with the figurative language and form of poetry – – [or a form of photography, film, theory, architecture, performance, design etc]. In the lyric essay, the rules of both poetry and prose become suggestions, because the form of the essay is constantly changing.

An influential definition of the form, by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall, was published in the *Seneca Review* in 1997: The lyric essay partakes of the poem [or an another form of art] in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality [or visuality] of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.

Just like the braided essay, lyric essays can certainly braid different story lines together. If anything, the freedom to play with form makes braiding much easier and more exciting to investigate. How can you use poetic forms to braid different ideas together? Can you braid an extended metaphor with the main story? Can you separate the threads into a contrapuntal, then reunite them in prose?

## 5. Lyric Essays: Hybrid Texts

Loyal to that original sense of essay as a test or a quest, an attempt at making sense, the lyric essay sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance, and language - a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning.

While it is ruminative, it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader's participatory interpretation. Its voice, spoken from a privacy that we overhear and enter, has the intimacy we have come to expect in the personal essay. Yet in the lyric essay the voice is often more reticent, almost coy, aware of the compliment it pays the reader by dint of understatement.

What has pushed the essay so close to poetry [or other forms of art]? Perhaps we're drawn to the lyric [visual, material and medial] now because it seems less possible (and rewarding) to approach the world through the front door, through the myth of objectivity. The life span of a fact is shrinking; similitude often seems more revealing than verisimilitude. We turn to the artist to reconcoct meaning from the bombardments of experience, to shock, thrill, still the racket, and tether our attention.

# Amy Bonnaffons

## Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay, 2016

### 1. THE WHITE SPACES

Suppose you want to write, in prose, about a slippery subject that refuses definition. Something like water, or the color blue. Like the word “lyric,” or the word “essay.”

Beginning, you balk at the question of form. One long block of prose seems to suggest a linear accretion of meaning, building to a thesis—but the more you poke at your subject, the more it seems to spread in all directions, to touch everything you’ve ever touched.

Often, “lyric essayists” like Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, and Eula Biss solve this problem, or represent it, by using white space. Each paragraph (Nelson prefers “proposition”), like a stanza of poetry, becomes a little island of text, lapped by whiteness—set against blankness, and in relation to the others. Like music, lyric paragraphs make use of silence. They draw attention to their own density. In navigating them, the reader (perhaps confused, perhaps delighted) becomes a stakeholder in their meaning.

What do the white spaces signify? What does their silence say?

#### 4. THE WHITE SPACES (RECONSIDERED)

I've typed the phrase "white spaces" so many times now that I can't help but focus on the word "white." Blank pages are usually white. But that doesn't mean they are innocent.

Claudia Rankine's recent book *Citizen* has been called a lyric essay. Though most reviews labeled it as poetry, its formal indeterminacy and plurality have invited a variety of classifications. Either way, the subtitle, "An American Lyric," seems to invite the reader to treat the book's speaker with the generative indeterminacy, the choral plurality, of a "Lyric I"; Rankine has said that this speaker, who explores the lived experience of Black subjectivity in America, conveys experiences that are her own as well as those of people she knows. The book mostly eschews the "I" itself in favor of a second-person "you"; this "you" could represent the speaker's plurality, or her dissociation from herself. Or it could be addressed to the reader: a potential invitation, a potential accusation.

Many associate whiteness with blankness, innocence. But Rankine's book reminds us that whiteness is more like willful ignorance, disavowed knowledge. It's a highly complex set of codes and privileges, disguised as normative neutrality. To equate whiteness with blankness is a refusal of knowledge—or of acknowledgment. *Citizen's* spare blocks of prose on blinding-white paper serve to underline this notion: to force the reader to confront whiteness as part of the text, to confront whatever she projects onto it in response to its difficult (and notably black) "propositions."

Autotheory

Citation as Relation:  
Intertextual Intimacies  
and Identifications

# Theory

- theory (n.)
- 1590s, "conception, mental scheme," from Late Latin *theoria* (Jerome), from Greek *theōria* "contemplation, speculation; a looking at, viewing; a sight, show, spectacle, things looked at," from *theōrein* "to consider, speculate, look at," from *theōros* "spectator," from *thea* "a view" (see theater) + *horan* "to see," which is possibly from PIE root *\*wer-* (3) "to perceive."
- Earlier in this sense was *theoretical* (n.), late 15c. Sense of "principles or methods of a science or art" (rather than its practice) is first recorded 1610s (as in music theory, which is the science of musical composition, apart from practice or performance). Sense of "an intelligible explanation based on observation and reasoning" is from 1630s.



# Autotheory

- While the term “autotheory” foregrounds the “auto” (or autos, self), many works approach this self in relationship to others, theorizing relationships through autotheoretical modes.
- Alex Brostoff makes the apt point that “autotheory” is, in fact, “a misnomer.” The autobiographical relation to theory – – is highly mediated through and dependent on the intersubjective, marked by the insistence of communication and intimacy, both with the figures in – – [writer’s] life and with – – [writer’s] theoretical forebears.
- Through formal play, – – [the author] underscores the ways that the writing self—the narrator and the character—operates and writes in undeniable proximity to others. It doesn’t matter whether these are others with whom she is intimately involved – – [as a colleague, as a friend or as a partner] or whom the writer “knows” through texts as a reader. Such transtextual relationships take place within, across, and beside other human beings, stories, and texts, and the writer cites each in turn.

# Citation as Relation:

## Intertextual Intimacies and Identifications

- Many writers who are involved in the autotheoretical turn, use lateral citation. To cite laterally means to cite one's peers, friends, cohort, or colleagues instead of citing only upward—established philosophers, scholars with tenure, and so on.
- The self-consciously citational structure of the text, which formalizes the autotheoretical move quite literally and visually on the mise-en-page, **gives space both the self, and the other, that has been quoted in the text.**
- The rise of autotheory is wrapped up in ethical questions around writing and art: Whose story is yours to tell? What are the parameters of your “I,” and are you speaking within those bounds? If your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth, then whose truth is truth? But what stories is an “I” able, or permitted, to tell?

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# Writing Task

Write about your first love or obsession—whether it's a person\*, place or thing.

How does your first love or obsession affect your perspective on research?

**person** a friend a writer a member of a family a crush a theorist a pet a lover a stranger

**place** a seashore a mountain range a film theater a forest a house a library

**thing** a color a concept a word a smell a material a plant an animal a theory

Use citations when you describe your experience. You can use citations you know through texts as a reader and citations you know through discussions you have had with people you are intimately involved, for example, as a colleague, friend or partner.

# CONTACTS

RIIKKA ALA-HAKULA

DISSERTATION RESEARCHER & WRITER

[RIIKKA.ALAHAKULA@GMAIL.COM](mailto:RIIKKA.ALAHAKULA@GMAIL.COM)

+358445375489

INSTAGRAM @RIIKKA.LINDA.AURORA

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC, ART AND CULTURE STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

# SOURCES

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