In this class you will read essays from the anthology *The Best American Essays of the Century* as well as from the book entitled, *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* by Lewis Thomas. I choose readings for Composition because of how they can create shifts in our ways of thinking and alter our sense of what we experience, or how we think about the world, and for how they can provoke new ways of thinking. The editor of our anthology, *The Best American Essays of the Century*, argues, “all essays are an expression of the human voice addressing an imagined audience, seeking to shift opinion, to influence judgment, to appeal to another in his or her common humanity” (xvii). This is true of the essays in that collection and in the Lewis Thomas book, and we will think of the essays that you write this semester as expression[s] of your voice, as you come into contact with the writers’ expressions of their responses to aspects of life in America in the twentieth century. Some of these readings may be a little challenging, but the skills needed to unravel a difficult reading are part of what you will learn in this class. Most of the emphasis will be on writing, but in order to write you will read, talk, re-read, and write journal entries that allow you to express early thoughts in free-writing, revise after more talking and reading, and work together to improve that writing. The kind of writing that this class encourages is that where the writer works out his/her ideas on paper so you will do well if you are willing to think! This process helps you to gradually discover your own views on the issues, and as a result to find your voice.

The readings will provoke ideas that you will want to explore and understand, and writing is the best way to decide what you think about a complex issue. You will not be writing the kinds of papers in which you begin having already decided what you think. Those tend to make new thinking almost impossible. Sometimes students who have been taught to do that kind of controlled writing find it nerve-wracking to let go of a tight structure that can keep thoughtful exploration out of the paper, but letting go of that structural control can allow your thoughts to go where they need to go, and you can always regain structural control at later stages of revision.

The required texts are: anthology *The Best American Essays of the Century*, edited by Joyce Carol Oates, *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* by Lewis Thomas, and *A Writer’s Reference* by Diana Hacker. **Please also buy a cheap dictionary and bring it to each class.** Make sure that you buy all of the books as we will use the grammar handbook and the dictionary in class. I will record a grade under the column “class participation” when I see that you have bought a dictionary and brought it to class. Recently "Big Lots" had them really cheaply.

This class requires your active participation in a way in which your other classes may not. This is not a lecture class, but one where you will engage with ideas and
conversation and express your own thoughts. First-year students often like this if their other classes are big: we get to know one another in this class.

You must prepare for class by reading the assigned essays thoughtfully and by coming to class prepared to be involved in active discussion. This can be lots of fun, and we can often have a laugh, but for it to function we need everyone to make the effort to be reflective about his or her part in it. If you tend to want to talk a lot you might need to check that you do not dominate the discussion. If you are shy and tend to leave the talking to others you might need to push yourself to speak. It is extremely important that we behave respectfully towards others in the discussions.

Class participation will form part of your grade.

Policies and Rules: Please ensure that your cell phone is turned OFF before class. That means that you will not check for “text” messages. I can see texting through chairs and am not fooled by the old phone-on-the-lap or the phone-behind-the-book bag!

Attendance is required. More than three absences and you risk having your grade lowered. Missing class will affect your grade anyway, but if I have to lower it too you could really be in trouble. If you need to schedule appointments make sure that they do not take place during class time. Be punctual at the beginning of class, and do not make plans to leave before class ends: to do otherwise will result in an absence being recorded.

Plagiarism is an extremely serious offence and will not be excused. Be sure that you see the distinction between peer revision in which you help each other to revise your work, and the kind of help with writing which involves someone else doing work for you. This includes writing that other people have done and posted on the internet. To present the language or ideas of others as if they are your own is plagiarism. I know that Dr. Paul Newman will have talked about academic integrity at your orientation and by now I'm sure you know what it is.

Grades
Each paper will receive a letter grade. The grade you earn for Paper One may not be what you would hope for as I find that the writing skills students have when they come to my class at first are not quite what they need to be for college, but as you work and improve your skills your grades will improve too, and I award improvement in my grading so it is often the case that students will receive lower grades for early papers and then show a marked improvement later. The grade recorded for the course will be the average of the last two grades. If this means that I need to decide between two letter grades I will consider the quality of your class participation throughout the semester as well as the amount of work you have put in to improve. This does not mean that you can do less than your best work in the early weeks of the semester, as it will be clear if you are doing this! The process of development needs time and you need to begin this development in week one by working hard right from the start. Students who have taken my classes before often advise students who are new to my classes that it really helps to do all the short assignments I give for home work or in-class. I never assign "busy-work,"
but the short journal assignments will build into a later paper and can give you a chance to work out your ideas.

The course work will consist of **four 4-5 page papers**. These will be written in increments, beginning first with journal assignments, then drafts, and then a final draft, which you can still revise if you wish when you have seen my comments and suggestions, but only if you are willing to make a radical revision. When I grade I write lots of responses to the content of your papers, engaging in a conversation with you about your topic, and this often lets students see how they could re-write substantially. I will announce the deadline by which you will need to submit revisions of each paper. The Final Examination will consist of an in-class essay on a pre-assigned reading. You must pass this examination to pass the course.

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Health and Counseling Services, G-10 Student Union, 814-269-7119 as early as possible in the term. The Office of Health and Counseling Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

**Thursday, 8th January**
Introduction

**Tuesday, 12th January**
Please read Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” from *The Best American Essays of the Century*

**Journal assignment on Wright**

**Thursday, 14th January**
Finish journal assignment on Wright

**Tuesday, 19th January**
Read Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” from *The Best American Essays of the Century*

Why would Wright choose to write in note form and King to write a letter? Are these writers describing the same world?

What purpose does writing serve for King and Wright?

**Thursday, 21st January**
Give out assignment for Paper One.

**Tuesday, 26th January**
**Rough draft of Paper One due in class.**

Peer revision groups

**Thursday, 28th January**
Back to the readings to discuss and explore what work we need to do.
Close work on specific sections of the readings. More work on the points of overlap between the readings.

**Tuesday, 2nd February**
**Paper One due in class.**
Please also read Adrienne Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying.”

**Thursday, 4th February**
Journal assignment about “lies of silence.”

**Tuesday, 9th February**
Read Michael Herr, “Illumination Rounds.”

**Thursday, 11th February**
Discuss idea of “notes” and “illumination rounds” as ways of expressing experience. What do we need to do to interpret Rich and Herr? Why would their experience make these “notes” or “illumination rounds” seem the best form of expression?

**Tuesday, 16th February**
Give out assignment for Paper Two
In-class work on beginning a draft that examines Herr and Rich and experiences that resist easy interpretation,

**Thursday, 18th February**
Return to the readings to work on the use of quotation.

**Tuesday, 23rd February**
**Rough draft of Paper Two due in class**
Peer Revision groups. Focus on good use of quotation,

**Thursday, 25th February**
Back to readings to work on sequencing quotations. How can we quote effectively and understand quotations? How can quoting help us to work towards better understanding of a writer? What difference does it make if the writer leaves some of the interpretation to the reader?

**Tuesday, 1st March**
**Paper Two due in class**
Read Lewis Thomas, “Thoughts for a Countdown,” On Societies as Organisms,” and “Some Biomythology.”

**Thursday, 3rd March**
Read Lewis Thomas, “On Various Words,” “Living Language,” “Information” and “Social Talk.”

**Tuesday, 8th March and Thursday, 10th March - SPRING BREAK**
Tuesday, 15th March  

Thursday, 17th March  
Give out assignment for Paper Three about Thomas, Gould, and social myths.

Tuesday, 22nd March  
In-class work on overlaps between Gould and Thomas.

Thursday, 24th March  
Rough draft of Paper Three due in class. Peer revision groups

Tuesday, 29th March  
Return to the readings  
Work on difficult parts of the paper: constructing a coherent argument out of complex ideas.

Thursday, 31st March  
PAPER THREE DUE IN CLASS.  
Read Joyce Carol Oates, “They All Just Went Away.”

Tuesday, 5th April  
Read Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman.”  
Explore overlaps between Kingston and Oates.

Thursday, 7th April  
DIG OUT PAPER ONE, ELECTRONIC VERSION AND THE ONE I COMMENTED ON.  
Journal assignment on Oates and Kingston.  
Give out assignment for Paper Four

Tuesday, 12th April  
ROUGH DRAFT OF PAPER FOUR DUE IN CLASS.  
Focus on how revision of drafts can better express the argument in the conclusion, introduction, and transition sentences.  
How can you clearly express a good argument?

Thursday, 14th April  
Work on drafts: transition sentences, conclusions, introductions  
Last work to make Paper Four the best one yet.

Tuesday 19th April  
Work on revisions of earlier paper. How can we apply what you have learned to improve this earlier paper?

Thursday, 21st April  
PAPER FOUR DUE IN CLASS. FINAL EXAMINATION IN CLASS