

Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: Modernist Essayisms

Short Name: Essayisms

Lecturer Name and Email Address: Prof Philip Coleman, philip.coleman@tcd.ie

ECTS Weighting: 10 ECTS

Semester Taught: MT

Year: Junior Sophister

Description:

The essay as a form has been the subject of renewed critical attention in recent years, from the publication of Brian Dillon's *Essayism* (2017), for example, which popularised the term "essayism," to *The Cambridge History of the British Essay* and *The Cambridge History of the American Essay*, both published in 2024. The word "essayism," however, and the idea of "the essay as form," have been around for some time. Austrian modernist Robert Musil meditates on the meaning of "essayism" in chapter 62 of *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-43), while German philosopher Theodor Adorno's essay "The Essay as Form," first published in 1958, is still an important critical text in the discourse of the essay. Musil and Adorno's ideas about the essay and "essayism" will be considered in this module, but the central aim will be to go back and look at the ways that a number of major anglophone Modernists used the form to explore and advance their aesthetic, cultural, and political ideas. Consideration will also be given to the ways certain writers treated the essay in itself as a distinctive form of literary expression.

Module Content:

- 1 Introduction: Modernist Essayisms
- 2 Virginia Woolf
- 3 W.B. Yeats
- 4 T.S. Eliot
- 5 Ezra Pound
- 6 Ernest Hemingway
- 7 Reading Week
- 8 Langston Hughes
- 9 Zora Neale Hurston
- 10 Gertrude Stein
- 11 F. Scott Fitzgerald
- 12 Conclusion

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module, a student should be able to:

- Demonstrate an awareness of the importance of the essay to our sense of Modernism, with regard to examples from a range of anglophone contexts;
- Employ a highly-developed range of interpretive strategies using appropriate critical vocabulary in discussing a number of major essayists and essays;
- Examine and explain some of the major critical and cultural contexts related to our sense of particular authors as significant Modernist essayists;
- Use high-level transferrable skills of analytical and writing techniques in relation to chosen topics studied in the module.

Learning Aims:

This module aims to provide students with the skills to:

- Critically evaluate a number of essays by major Modernist authors in order to obtain a clear sense of the form's importance to their work and in relation to a range of literary and cultural contexts;
- Demonstrate an understanding of different formal approaches taken to the essay by various Modernist authors;
- Show familiarity with key critical and theoretical approaches in both the study of the essay in general and in relation to the particular authors discussed on the module.

Assessment Details:

- *Number of Components:* 1
- *Name/Type of Components:* Essay
- *Word Count of Components:*
Essay: 5,000-6,000 words
- *Percentage Value of Component(s):*
Essay: 100%

Preliminary Reading List:

Primary Reading:

Classes will focus on particular essays (to be decided in due course), but in preparation for the module students are encouraged to dip into the essays included in the following:

- Joyce Carol Oates, ed. *The Best American Essays of the Century* (2000)
- Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*
- Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*
- W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*

Secondary Reading:

Recommendations for critical reading on individual authors will be made in class, but it would be useful to read the following before classes begin:

- Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," available online at:
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/488160?seq=1>
- Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (2017)

In addition to the above, students interested in taking this module should read a good general history of Modernism, such as the following:

- Tim Armstrong, *Modernism* (2005)
- Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (2015)