

# A Manifesto for the Unessay

The *Unessay*, originally [conceived by Danial Paul O'Donnell](#), is a project designed to connect students with a vision of the essay as "a wonderful and flexible tool for engaging with a topic intellectually" in a way that is "often...provisional...and almost always...personal." For O'Donnell, and others who have adopted and adapted it, a primary goal of the unessay is to help mitigate the damage done to the essay form for justifying grades and other gatekeeping processes in the context of both secondary and higher education. While O'Donnell and pedagogical practitioners of the *unessay* have not specifically framed it as having potential in the context of anti-racist pedagogical practice, the spirit of the unessay shares some core principles with inclusive, anti-racist pedagogy. For example, at the core of an *unessays* project -- students are empowered to choose their own topics, they can use any genre and medium that is meaningful to them, and they are evaluated on the qualities and characteristics of their work rather than standardized, inflexible, and often arbitrary rules or criteria. That said, using an open and flexible form like the *unessay* in your curriculum can be a challenge. So here are a few things to keep in mind.

## Competencies, not skills

The *unessay* has the capacity to emphasize and foreground competencies rather than skills. In a writing class, an *unessay* asks students to practice rhetorical competencies like developing a purpose for their work in relation to questions of audience, context and genre. O'Donnell's *unessay* is premised on the idea that "the compositions you usually are asked to do in class are actually far less 'real' examples of the genre as it is used professionally." (See [Sample](#) for more on this.). For example, compositions we have historically assigned in our classes tend to at best foreground (sometimes unintentionally, often very intentionally) to students that writing is about "skills" or "rules" like formatting a works cited page in a particular way, a task that software can now do for us. What our software and MLA Handbooks can't do for us and our students is to help us develop the competency and capacity to [cite like a bad-ass tech feminist scholar of color](#). The *unessay* as an assignment framework might have the potential for making a space to develop these kind of competencies.

## Embody the Power of the "Un"

The potential of the *unessay* as a project framework to have anti-racist capacities resides in how much we remix it to resonate with Carmen Kynard's definition of anti-racist pedagogy: "A stance and praxis that deliberately and actively rejects a white supremacist status quo...for teaching

and being in schools and institutions, using this rejection [and using] this rejection as energy to reach and move toward insurgent and creative alternatives." Recognize that the "un" in *unessay* is calling us to question what we think essays are (or are not) and who they are for (or not), and arguably -- who can write them (or not). It invites us to consider, ideally with our students, that essays, like all genres, have a history (and a present and a future) and are recognizable responses to rhetorical situations. More radically it calls us to *reject* white-supremacist iterations of the essay (and language more broadly) that actively malign its potential as a flexible genre of personally engaging with a topic.

(What is the rhetorical situation of the school essay and the *worship of a narrow, standardized vision of the written word*?)

### **Embrace the decolonizing and reimaginings of genre.**

How many of us know about the history of the essay? (see [Montaigne](#) or perhaps [Paul Lynch](#)) Or the history of the pedagogical use of the essay? The *unessay* is an invitation to -- as Paul Lynch might say -- "re-vision" the essay. Even more important -- Carmen Kynard teaches us, it is critical that we give our Black and Brown students the space ["to put some stank on it."](#) Use the *unessay* as an invitation to start doing this vital and hard work. Try this: Hack the students' and your own impulse to default to the "school paper" as the only viable genre of expression and intellectual work in the context of academia. Build your course around two projects. One project helps students see what's possible. Have the entire class explore and compose in a genre beyond beyond the school paper -- zines, or manifestos, for example. As a collective, the class studies zines (or manifestos) as a genre and makes their own. Then make the second project an *unessay* where students are invited to choose the genre they work in.

### **Start small.**

Approach the *unessay* in small ways. The *unessay* can be used as a single assignment (or project) if you teach a course that asks students to create multiple projects/assignments of varying scale. For example, starting a course with a manageable assignment that explicitly opens up possibilities -- "present your thinking on a topic in any form, format or medium you please" -- invites the opportunity to have students make choices about their work and not simply follow all of the choices that instructors have already made for them. Together -- the teacher and students -- can then intentionally discuss and reflect on these choices. Chances are many students will by default bring in something that looks a lot like a school "paper" -- name and instructor's name in the upper left-hand corner, made with MSWORD, 3 - 5 paragraphs, etc. All of these elements represent rhetorical choices made by the writer, even if the choice was to use the "default setting" we've been trained to have as writers in school. Some of the students' choices will also go counter to many of the "default" expectations we as teachers (and our institutions and our

disciplines) have for writing/assignments. For example, many of us expect (or appreciate!) creative titles to be attached to a piece of writing. There will be students who don't use a title or use the most generic kind "Paper #1." Embrace this! This is fertile ground for starting discussions about the **what's** and **why's** of the things we and the systems/institutions of schooling value, and why, in terms of writing. These initial conversations can help shape and frame ongoing discussions of future projects in the course.

### **Also go big.**

Don't be afraid to open your "big" course projects to the flexibility at the core of the *unessay*. One of the fears we have in using open and flexible assignments is that we fear being awash in a bunch of strange artifacts like [podcasts](#), [videos](#), [interactive timelines], [websites](#), [Instagram accounts](#), [paintings](#), [interpretive dances](#)...and we won't know how to grade them. Embrace this! Approach the *unessay* as a way to start *ungrading*, or at least working more in collaboration with students on the processes of assignment design, grading and evaluation. The *unessay* doesn't presume that you say to students -- "do what you want" -- and then wait around until the end of the quarter for all the weird artifacts to show-up for you to grade. Try this: Have students pitch you an idea for their *unessay* project early in the term. In their pitch have them do some rhetorical awareness work/practice -- What do you hope to accomplish with this project (purpose)? Who are you making it for (audience)? Why are you making this particular thing/form (genre)? What are the qualities of this thing/form (i.e. what makes work/writing in this genre successful?) -- and have them discuss this with you and their peers.

### **Expect the "school essay" to persist**

You'll be surprised, or maybe disappointed or maybe jazzed, who knows...that often students themselves make what they perceive as the comfortable and only *authorized* choice -- writing a school paper. Many of our students, probably most, have not been given the chance to be supported in the design of their own writing projects. Teachers are very good at making *all* the decisions writers make about a project in advance *for* the student.

But, embrace this! And push back! It gives you and students an opportunity to think about the genre of the *essay* - the "real" ones out in the world and the "unreal" ones sitting in the Canvas assignment submission area. You all can read [Hanif Abdurraqib](#) and [Joy Preist](#) and [The Essays of Michel Montaigne]([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essays\\_\(Montaigne\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essays_(Montaigne))) and [Essay Daily](#) and [The Feral Atlas](#) and [Black Futures](#) and [Carmen Kynard](#) together while asking along the way -- What are essays? Who writes them? Who reads them? Where do they circulate? How do readers come in contact with them? Why do teachers care so much about particular genres of essays? Why aren't Hanif Abdurraqib, Joy Preist, et. al. using MLA format? (I mean my you're making such a big deal about it?? I keep losing points. And this whole [cheesburger thing](#)...what

is that?)

### **Embody the Power of the "Un"**

The potential of the *unessay* as a project framework to have anti-racist capacities resides in how much we remix it to resonate with Carmen Kynard's definition of anti-racist pedagogy: "A stance and praxis that deliberately and actively rejects a white supremacist status quo...for teaching and being in schools and institutions, using this rejection [and using] this rejection as energy to reach and move toward insurgent and creative alternatives." Recognize that the "un" in *unessay* is calling us to question what we think essays are (or are not) and who they are for (or not), and arguably -- who can write them (or not). It invites us to consider, ideally with our students, that essays, like all genres, have a history (and a present and a future) and are recognizable responses to rhetorical situations. More radically it calls us to *reject* white-supremacist iterations of the essay (and language more broadly) that actively malign its potential as a flexible genre of personally engaging with a topic.

(What is the rhetorical situation of the school essay and the *worship of a narrow, standardized vision of the written word*?)

### **Leverage the power of remix**

Approach the *unessay* as a chance to practice and explore rhetorical action. Ask students to write something that they (and you) would consider a pretty traditional school essay. (But don't forget to explore that "school essay" as a genre! Maybe there's a "[Cheeseburger Essay](#)" poster in a supply closet (or classroom wall) on your campus.) Then ask students to remix what they initially wrote for a different audience in a different form. Maybe they're a gamer and want to share their ideas with other gamers on Itch.io by making a [Bitly game](#) or prototyping a table top gaming experience? Model this by remixing your own syllabus (or something else you've written professionally or for fun) as a game or zine or a comic book. Converse and commiserate on what it feels like to work in and try to do something with these genres.

### **Don't be afraid of a "low-tech" approach.**

Often, we assume that if we're not asking students to write traditional school essays, then the alternative must be some whiz-bang, hip digital text -- podcasts, videos, websites, etc. -- that require access to expensive or hard-to-use proprietary software. Rightfully, we have concern for the accessibility and equity in requiring (or even simply inviting) students to use these tools. The seeming explosion of AI into the living room of writing pedagogy has also, again rightfully, prompted many teachers to be even more skeptical and wary of "high tech." An *unessay* requires no more "high tech" than when we assign traditional "papers" that, ultimately for most students, require they use proprietary software behemoths like Google Docs and Microsoft Word

(and Canvas). Behemoths our institutions pay out the nose for in site licences, etc. Zines are a good example of a "low tech" *unessay*, and while there are examples of digital zines, they are [a genre that is often taken up to resist tendencies to valorize the digital](#). (see [Sayers](#) and [Shipka](#) for more on "low tech" approaches.) Remember, the *unessay* seeks to develop *rhetorical competencies* -- working with a sense of purpose, audience, context, and genre. The goal is not to develop word processing or other skills required by particular software and their adjacent industries.

**But also don't be a afraid of "high-tech."**

Remember that the *unessay* doesn't require a "high tech" approach, but inviting and supporting students' use and experimentation with "high tech" should be in the mix. Follow Carmen Kynard, and lead your students in pursuit of a ["technological creativity"](#), a "digication" that resists viewing students of color, working class students, and diversely-abled students as "simplistically...being on the wrong side of the digital divide." What does technological creativity look like as a component of black and brown excellence? Part of our pedagogical work here might be to seek out and point students to open-source and freeware tools like [Audacity](#) or [Electric Zine Maker](#) or [TimelineJS](#), and demand that these tools get installed and updated on computers in campus labs alongside the proprietary stuff. Part of our pedagogical work might be to Become a technological tinkerer (not necessarily expert) ourselves! Develop your own *technological creativity*. Make something "high tech" alongside your students. Converse and commiserate on what it feels like to work in and try to do something with these genres.

**Assess with students, and make room for *reflection* and \*speculation.\***

Loop back. Look back. Imagine forward.