

Essay

## Augustine and Autobiography: Confessions as a Roadmap for Self-Reflection

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**Abstract:** In this article, I explore a pedagogical strategy for teaching Augustine’s *Confessions* to undergraduate students, which involves a final essay assignment. In the assignment, students compose their own “confessions” at the end of the term that employs Augustine’s *Confessions* as a roadmap for rigorous self-reflection. Like Augustine, they must employ a creative literary frame, without duplicating his rhetorical technique of framing his autobiography as a prayer to God. Moreover, they must reflect on the salient questions, key people, pivotal moments that have shaped them, and analyze their shifts in worldviews. The assignment aims to demystify Augustine and to reinforce the evolving nature of the self as it moves through time and absorbs new ideas and experiences, as well as helping students begin to formulate a coherent and constructive life narrative.

**Keywords:** Augustine; *Confessions*; pedagogy; education; autobiography

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### 1. Introduction

As a former teacher of rhetoric and as a bishop, teaching was as instinctive as it was routine for Augustine. Given his pedagogical sophistication and stature in the history of Christianity, Augustine makes an ideal fulcrum for Samford’s inaugural conference on “teaching the Christian intellectual tradition”. Through his lectures, sermons, and writings, Augustine employs multiple pedagogical techniques to educate his audience in philosophy, theology, and scripture for the purpose of eliciting deeper apprehensions of truth. In his *Confessions*, for instance, Augustine shares his story of spiritual restlessness and wandering for clear pedagogical purposes, not for self-aggrandizement or

self-indulgence. They are meant to “arouse [or “stir up”] the human mind and affections toward him [God]” ([1], p. 36). In the ancient world, as Peter Brown notes, autobiographies function as conversion narratives, stories of dramatic transformations from one point of view and way of life to another, with the intent of sowing the seeds of conversion in the readers, and thereby motivating them to action: “Conversion had been the main theme of religious autobiography” ([2], p. 171). Since Augustine’s autobiography has deeper didactic designs beyond the surface narrative, we might try to mine them for insights into the reality of the self’s transformation throughout life, and the underlying factors that shape that transformation. If, in particular, the *Confessions* evince subtle strategies for self-reflection, then we might explore ways to utilize these strategies to facilitate sophisticated student self-reflection. In my paper, I will discuss an undergraduate essay assignment that invites students to write their own “confessions” using Augustine’s *Confessions* as the template for their self-reflection.

## 2. Context

Let me provide some context before I outline the essay assignment, its aims, and its results thus far. I am an Arthur J. Ennis Postdoctoral Fellow in the Augustine and Culture Seminar Program at Villanova University [3]. I teach three sections per semester of the Augustine and Culture Seminar, known as ACS, a two-semester humanities sequence that examines “great books” from the ancient and modern world. Each section consists of 16 freshmen students. As a seminar, ACS emphasizes critical dialogue on classic texts and their salient themes. As a great books course, it explores classic works of literature for insight into the course’s guiding question: *Who am I?* As a writing intensive course, it requires students to write approximately 30 pages per semester. Villanova, as an Augustinian institution, inscribes its Augustinian values of truth, unity, and love into its curriculum through the ACS seminar, where Augustine’s *Confessions* serves as the signature text in the fall semester and continues to exert influence in the spring semester as an interlocutor for the modern texts.

## 3. Assignment

Over the semester, I assign various types of essays, including short reflection papers, longer analytical essays, and creative essays. At the end of the fall semester, I give students two options. They can either write a short research essay (six to eight pages) on Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which they analyze a specific person, theme, or movement in its literary context and in the wider context of Augustine’s intellectual milieu, or they can write a longer autobiographical essay (8–10 pages) where they compose their own “confessions” in creative interaction with Augustine’s *Confessions*. If they choose the latter option, I give them detailed instructions, which I will now delineate before discussing the rationale and some interesting preliminary results.

First, I articulate the basic intent of the essay assignment: to tell their story in their own words using Augustine’s *Confessions* as a roadmap or blueprint. I caution against misinterpreting the title of the assignment. *Confessions*, I insist, does not mean share your “deepest, darkest secrets”. That is not the point of the assignment. Rather, I ask them to reflect deeply about their past, present, and future as a way of responding to the course’s guiding question: *Who am I?* Students generally respond positively to the assignment at first. Most freshmen welcome the opportunity to write about themselves. It comes naturally, especially since they had to write mini-autobiographical essays as part of their university

application. As I continue to flesh out the assignment, however, their initial euphoria dampens as they begin to see the complexity and intensity of the essay. Once they see that Option 2 is not an exercise in vanity and self-promotion but an opportunity for rigorous, sophisticated self-reflection, Option 1 seems to many an easier route, and many select it over writing their own confessions.

Second, I instruct the students who select Option 2 to couch their confessions in a distinctive literary frame. It cannot be a straightforward, pedestrian, informational autobiography. Students are tempted to write what amounts to breezy, desultory, date and data-driven journal entries on their life if they are not directed otherwise. I tell them that I am asking for a more reflective account of themselves than the standard journal format allows. Augustine, I remind them, frames his entire *Confessions* as a prayer to God, and reinforces that literary frame throughout. Recall his famous lines in the opening paragraph: “You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until its rests in you” [4]. Similarly, they must have a literary frame suitable to their narrative (prayer, as a bishop, was obviously well-suited to Augustine). My only restrictions are that it cannot be a prayer, since the assignment asks them to emulate Augustine without duplicating him, and that it has an authentic literary quality. For some students, the literary frame comes easily and fuels their enthusiasm for the essay. For others, it is a struggle that deflates their enthusiasm. I will give some examples below.

Third, I point to Augustine’s *Confessions* as a paradigm for their self-reflection [5]. What are the questions he asks? What are the topics he explores? What are the key moments he identifies? Again, the point is not to replicate Augustine—to simply reproduce his story in their autobiography—but for them to tell their own story under his expert guidance, which entails careful attention to multiple facets of the formation of the self, including: key figures (parents, friends, mentors, teachers), pivotal moments (crises, epiphanies, travels), major influences (intellectual, spiritual, literary), worldview (theological, philosophical, ethical), spiritual struggles and shifts, and aspirations for the future. Obviously they are not able to cover all of these topics exhaustively, but it gives them a sense of the intellectual caliber they should strive for and the kinds of questions they should be asking as they explore their interior life within their literary frame, following Augustine’s lead.

Finally, I preemptively address the perennial philosophical question asked by students from time immemorial: “How do I get an ‘A’ on the assignment?” Sometimes when I am asked “what are you looking for in the essay?” I reply Socratically “what are *you* looking for from it? What new existential registers do you hope discover through the process?” After a few moments of awkward silence and blank stares I outline the grading criteria. Thus, in addition to the standard criteria of grammar, style, and substance, I tell them that their grade will be based on the analytical and introspective depth of their self-reflections, the creativity of their literary framing device, the intellectual rigor of their discussion, and the range of topics covered. Many turn away from Option 2 when faced with the full scope of the assignment, although generally most opt to write the confessions assignment over the research essay, despite some trepidation.

#### **4. Pedagogical Objectives and Obstacles**

The purpose of the assignment is twofold. In the first place, it helps to overcome their resistance to Augustine and his *Confessions*. When students see his autobiography as a story that speaks to their story rather than as a pious rant, they begin to appreciate it more. Like other ancient texts, students

sometimes find it incomprehensible, irrelevant, and even off-putting (think: sinful babies, pears, and concubine), but if they begin to see it as a text that can still illuminate their experience, despite its antiquity (which decidedly counts against it for many students), then they are more willing to discard their chronological prejudices and enter into dialogue with him. When they write their confessions in the light of Augustine's, they sympathize with him more and view him more as a fellow quester after truth rather than as a moralizer telling them not to have any fun and trying to make them feel guilty.

Second, the confessions assignment facilitates the student's engagement with the course's guiding question: *Who am I?* Through their careful deliberations about the complex formation of their identity in interaction with their relationships, experiences, and worldviews, they gain a heightened sense of self-knowledge, first passes at the Delphic oracle, as it were, with which they are better able to evaluate and shape their intellectual and spiritual formation. Ideally, the exercise of charting their interior development over their first 18 years heightens their awareness of the ongoing nature of self-construction and stimulates the desire to revisit these questions throughout their lives. While fully actualized, existentially-aware freshmen are perhaps rare, given the opportunity, many find the assignment foundational to their educational formation.

There are three main pedagogical problems with the assignment. First, it requires sophisticated self-analysis and maturity and some freshmen simply do not have the experiential, emotional, and intellectual capacity to complete it well. Second, on a related point, it is difficult for many students to resist the urge to write a flat-footed, straightforward, virtually unreflective autobiography, especially at the end of the semester with other essays and exams bearing down on them. While some fall into this trap, others do produce dynamic, thoughtful, creative essays. Third, students sometimes share extremely personal and sensitive details in their confessions assignment, despite the persistent caveat that the assignment is not about unburdening their soul. It is imperative not to blur the boundaries between professor and priest or counselor. If students reveal information that indicates the need for specialized spiritual or psychological help, professors should direct them to the appropriate university office rather than venturing beyond their carefully demarcated professional roles.

## 5. Results

Finally, let me share two anecdotes that show the heuristic potential of the assignment. At first I was very reluctant to offer the essay assignment, primarily because of the three obstacles I enunciated above. I thought that the essay concept would work well in theory, but not in practice. I worried that most freshmen were not equipped to do it well, and that I was setting them up for failure. Additionally, I did not want to force facile self-reflection if they were not willing or able to undertake rigorous introspection. I made the assignment optional to avoid some of my own misgivings about it, so that those who were not comfortable with it or were not competent to engage in that level of introspection could take the more familiar, conventional route.

My first attempt at the assignment was in an upper-level Religious Studies course on Augustine at the University of Missouri. The course consisted of about 25 students, from freshmen to seniors, many of whom I had taught in previous courses. About half the class chose the confessions assignment, and nearly all my returnee students chose it, which signals the level of trust required to make the assignment work. By far, the best essay was written by a student who I had not taught before and,

more surprisingly still, was virtually silent for the majority of the course, despite many opportunities for discussion. In contrast to her reticence during the semester, her essay was expressive, extensive, engaging, and even engrossing. She wrote 25 pages for a 10 page assignment, which I would normally penalize, but she did not waste a word. I could not put it down, and that is a rare experience in the trenches of grading. She deftly detailed childhood struggles, relational and vocational crises, developments in her worldview, academic victories and defeats, theological and philosophical questions that she wrestled with, and the ways all these experiences informed her identity. She was clearly more comfortable with the written word than the spoken word. What I realized after putting the paper down was that I would have never encountered her amazing mind if I had not offered the assignment, and that she would not have had the opportunity to display her rich interior life to me and to benefit from the task of thoughtful self-analysis. She appreciated my remarks to her essay and she opened up more afterwards. It seemed to empower her.

Villanova's ACS course gave me the perfect opportunity to revisit the assignment and to refine and enrich it further, given its openness to explore questions of spiritual formation in addition to intellectual and broadly ethical formation. Many students have written insightful, penetrating essays that impressed me artistically and substantively. They write them at the end of the fall semester and it seems to give them confidence for the spring semester, both to solidify their sense of self and to explore the course question in dialogue with modern classics. In other words, it gives them an intellectual foundation from which to grow in the spring semester.

Students employ various framing devices, including the letter format (to parents, grandparents, future spouse, future child, future self, past self), fictional diary entries, song lyrics/titles, poems, seasons, imagery from sports, hobbies, quotations, *etc.* When I taught the course over the summer I had a student compose her entire essay as a poem. While she faltered in the medium of analytical essays, she flourished in the creative medium of poetry, which allowed her to express herself and engage the concepts of the essay assignment more naturally and freely. Because she was a part-time student who took courses at night, I did not expect to see her in the fall, so I wrote her a short e-mail expressing my delight over her essay, my desire for her to find outlets for her poetry, and my affirmation of her academic abilities, which she strongly doubted. I realized the assignment gave her the ability to overcome a lot of self-doubt and to allow her to express herself in the medium that maximized her intellectual potential. So the assignment often has a profound effect on students who appreciate the opportunity to reflect on these big questions in a structured, artistic format. Moreover, it deepens the intimacy in the classroom, since the students open a window into their inner life and since I have students share excerpts from their essays in class, if they are comfortable. It deepens the interpersonal dynamics in the classroom and gives them a memorable takeaway from the course. For institutions utilizing writing portfolios, it works well as literary "artifact" of their work.

## 6. Conclusions

There are many ways to rework and redeploy a confessions assignment in courses on Augustine, theology, Early Christianity, and various literature courses that read substantially from the *Confessions*. Professors would have to adapt it to their particular institutional sensibilities and course objectives. Some professors might be more open to spiritual reflection than others. Some might permit

personal reflections, some might not. Either way, I would recommend making it optional. I find the essay works best in smaller seminar settings where you are able help students tailor it to their distinctive personalities, histories, and academic objectives. Above all, for the assignment to achieve its full potential, you have to establish an atmosphere of trust, encouragement, and confidentiality. If your students know they can trust you with their stories, they will impress you with their ability to write ingenious confessions, many of which would make Augustine proud.

## Appendix

### Essay Prompt

#### *Confessions and Self-Discovery: Spiritual and Intellectual Autobiography*

Write your own *Confessions* (8–10 pages). Model your reflections on Augustine’s *Confessions*, but do not attempt to replicate his style, format, and substance. Instead, tell the story of your spiritual and intellectual journey in your own way, employing your own distinctive literary style. Like Augustine’s *Confessions*, tell your story by engaging some of the following themes:

- Key figures: family, friends, mentors, teachers.
- Key moments: crises, epiphanies, affiliations, journeys.
- Major influences: intellectual, spiritual, literary.
- Theological views: God, humanity, salvation.
- Philosophical views: knowledge, being, cosmology.
- Ethical views: the nature of the good life.
- Transitions: shifts in your worldview.
- Intellectual and personal struggles.
- Future trajectories: who do you want to become? What are the next steps?

In addition to the standard considerations of grammar, style, and substance, your paper grade will be based on these additional considerations:

- Analytical and introspective depth.
- Creativity: like Augustine, employ a literary framing device (e.g., diary entries, letter (to parent, grandparent, future spouse, child, self), Bible verses, play, dialogue/story, song lyrics/titles, poem, seasons, imagery from sports, hobbies, quotations, *etc.*).
- Level of sophistication/insight/self-reflection. Intellectual quality. Topics covered.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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4. Henry Chadwick, trans. *Confessions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
5. For a helpful introduction to Augustine's life and thought, see Henry Chadwick. *Augustine of Hippo: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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