

# ESSAY TWO: PORTRAIT OF A WORD



painting by Wayne White

**In Essay Two, you will write a portrait of a word that is important to you, your community and the language of that particular community. This should be a word that many of your readers are somewhat unfamiliar with, not a word like “family” or “love,” but an *insider* word, one that includes some people and excludes others. This word might be in a different language, or it may be a slang word.**

We'll see some examples of this with Junot Diaz' “Fuku,” and Ta-Nehesi Coates' “In Defense of a Loaded Word.” These writers take different tactics to look at words that are important to them and try and express the importance of those words to potential outsiders. Coates writes in a formal, more academic way (for the New York Times,) Diaz writes in a foul-mouthed Dominican Spanglish slang (for his own novel.) **You are free to write in any way that feels natural to you and that you think best expresses the importance and meaning of the word you choose. You may write in what you consider your own slang, if you like. You may write in formal English, if you like. *Either way, (even if you wrote formally,) you should be able to explain why you've chosen the language you have.*** Why is this language the best tool for the job?

**You will also need to do research for this essay, which we will discuss as this unit goes along.** As you read, pay attention to the ways these writers use up their space with personal information as well as with research. I think the research will be fun for you. In the student example we'll look at, the writer does a lot of research, looking at the history of a curse word and its uses in different cultures. Coates looks at the NFL's attempt to ban a word and references news stories, while never losing sight of the ways the word functions in his own life. Diaz takes a word that many Americans won't know and talks about how it is important to them—and also does a LOT of research. He goes into a huge amount of historical detail about various fukus in history and makes us feel like there might be a fuku coming for us. This research isn't just a random way to prove to their teachers they spent an hour on Google, it's a way for them to draw the reader in and teach them something!

Important details:

- At least 1000 words.
- Must show evidence of research (we'll discuss this.)
- Must cite properly and have a **proper MLA** bibliography.
- You can write with whatever diction (style of language) you choose, but it must be the best language for the job. It also must be at least partially in English. That is, you may write in Spanglish if you want, but I am not able to read a whole paper in Urdu. (Some Urdu is great, though!) Take note of the way Diaz goes in between Spanish and English, though he is writing for an English-speaking audience.
- This is different from the papers we have done so far. I'm not asking you to quote from Diaz or Coates in your final essay—you are just using them as examples of ways you could go with this type of assignment. I do expect you to read both articles closely—as a writer. What are they doing in their writing that you want to do—or that you don't want to do?
- Papers **MUST BE TURNED IN ON TIME**. Papers will be marked down 1/3 a letter grade for each day they are late (an A- to a B+, for example) for the first three days. After that, they will be marked down a full letter grade each day they are late. This means that if I don't have the paper after 6 days, you will get an F on this paper and will not have the opportunity to revise it. **While I grade with portfolio grading, this does NOT include points taken away for lateness.** Each major take home paper is approx 20% of your grade, so if you get an F from not turning your paper in, you will lose 20% of your final grade in this class. That said, **all papers must STILL BE COMPLETED to pass the class.**
- One exception to the above late policy: you may talk to me **WELL BEFORE** the paper is due if you are having trouble and need an extension, and I will consider it. "Talk to me" means "come to office hours." It does NOT mean that you send me an email the night before the paper is due and give me some weird excuse. **If you have not heard back from me, you have not talked to me.**

*One final note: What do I mean by "community?" This can be any group of people that has a language (or slang, or jargon) or set of customs of their own. Any group of people with an inside group and people outside that inner circle. Your community might be Ecuadorians, people from a certain neighborhood in the Bronx, nursing students, football players, etc... "American Society" is not what I'm talking about here. That's just too big (and has too many languages and customs) to narrow it down.*