The Personal Investigative Essay
Assignment #4

For this assignment, you will investigate an MIT-related topic that interests you, and write an essay that combines a personal story (your interest; your experience; your questions, thinking and insights) and an informative presentation of what you discover about the topic—therefore, the "personal investigative essay."

So, your first task is to find a topic that genuinely interests you and that you can present in an engaging way to a general audience—that is, people not necessarily well-acquainted with either MIT or the particular topic involved. It should provide you with good opportunities to find material and at the same time be focused enough to be manageable. The possibilities are close to endless—MIT's people (staff, students and faculty), historic projects and new initiatives, departments, labs, student activities and groups, buildings, institutes, or issues that concern you and fellow students. Something real, concrete, and particular should ground your essay: people, place, thing. For instance, questions like "Is MIT the greatest university in the world?" or "Why do people come to MIT?" are probably too vague and slippery to deal with successfully in such a relatively short time and space. On the other hand, you do want to go beyond the simply informational. As you approach your topic, you want to ask questions that lead towards your own insights and not just a recording of facts.

To get started, I encourage you to try freewriting—jotting down what you've already bumped into, found interesting, and might like to pursue. Ask yourself: "Is there something I really would like to find out more about here at MIT?" I also urge you to browse MIT's rich websites—following links to departments and labs, and the sites of institutes affiliated with MIT such as the Media Lab, Whitehead Institute, or McGovern Institute. You can talk to friends, TAs, house masters, and professors. You can poke your head into buildings. You can look up articles about MIT in the popular press like the *Tech,* the *Boston Globe,* and the *New York Times*. You can (and should for next time) scan through the model essays, and poke around among the suggested resources below to give you an idea of the range of what you can do. Once you've got an idea, it's often helpful to email or approach someone who can give advice on pursuing your investigation, answer questions, or direct you to useful material. You can consult with Mark Szarko at the library or Nora Murphy at the archives or someone else particularly involved and knowledgeable about the topic at hand.(I'm happy to assist in making a contact if you hit obstacles.)

Your own on-site observations can be an important part of your investigation. However, you'll also need to incorporate supporting material from interviews, books, articles, etc. into this essay. In a couple of weeks when you have a better idea of what you're interested in, we'll visit the Library Digital Instruction Resource Center, where Mark Szarko will help us navigate MIT's library resources as you look for information on your topic. Then we'll visit the MIT archives with Nora Murphy to take a look at what you might find there. This kind of research is like detective work. You follow leads and see where they take you. Some will be dead-ends, and the

route may be circuitous, but keep pursuing leads and you should find ample resources to write a well-informed essay about an intriguing aspect of MIT culture or history.

<div align="center">**Some Resources**</div>

Introduction to the essay:

Susan Orlean on the essay (from her introduction to "Best American Essays, 2005")

Model Essays

Timothy Curtis Shoyer: "The School Up the River and That Other Institute of Technology" (*Angles*, 2013)

Lindsay Sanneman: "Shifting Balance: The Elimination of MIT's Varsity Women's Gymnastics Program" (*Angles*, 2012)

Sterling Watson: "Brass Rat" (*Angles*, 2012)

Mina Healey: "Walker Memorial" (*Angles,* 2012)

Yvonne Wangare: "Away From Home" (*Angles*, 2012)

Shannon Moran: "Freshman Year on the Rocks" (*Angles*, 2011)

Model Profiles of MIT Personalities:

Ana Burgos: "A Professor of Puzzles" (*Angles,* 2012)

Jonathan Warneke: "Armed and Dangerous" (*Angles,* 2012)

A partial list of MIT-related books, periodicals, and websites:

- MIT's history library site: Perhaps the most valuable site to start with, this site offers a far-ranging introduction to the many elements of MIT history and culture and bibliographies of relevant published material: http://libraries.mit.edu/sites/mithistory/

- "Common Threads," http://mit150.mit.edu/multimedia/collection/36 explores the story of MIT's changing student population.

- *The Tech*, MIT's oldest newspaper; alumni reunion reports, and much more. http://tech.mit.edu/

- The MIT 150 website http://mit150.mit.edu/ provides a rich array of historical material, including the MIT Infinite History project (below).

- MIT150 Infinite History: Over the past few years, the MIT150 Infinite History project team has captured the first-person recollections of more than one hundred people who have shaped — or been shaped by — MIT. These individuals have made extraordinary contributions to their fields and to MIT and they include Institute leadership, faculty, alumni, staff, and friends. Interviews with MIT http://mit150.mit.edu/infinite-history. Especially useful for those of you interested in writing a profile, this site provides a good introduction to the interview process.

- The MIT archives: Offers a near complete collection of books about MIT: http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/

- The MIT museum displays a range of MIT-related artifacts that span the history of MIT. http://mit150.mit.edu/exhibition

- MIT's homepage: http://web.mit.edu/ presents a continuous feed of interesting activities, initiatives, people, etc.

- "Intuitively Obvious": http://diversity.mit.edu/videos is a series of videotapes in which students of different racial backgrounds discuss issues of race on the MIT campus.

- *The Tech* studies sleep habits at MIT and shares the results: http://tech.mit.edu/V132/N59/pressure/index.htm

- MIT's philosophy department gets rave reviews: Story + photographs at MIT SHASS News

- *Scope, The Student Publication of the Graduate Program in Science Writing at MIT:* http://scopeweb.mit.edu gives models of essays written by graduate students, many of which included source material from MIT.

- *The Boston Globe* : Just plug in "MIT" at the Globe's homepage and you'll come up with a whole array of articles with an MIT angle. (Go through the MIT Library which will give you access to all the articles.)

- MIT's news around campus sent out in a weekly email from the MIT News office provides lots: of interesting updates on MIT initiatives: MIT News Office [newsletter-bounces@MIT.EDU] .

- First-hand experience: Through your own experiences and conversations you may be alerted to MIT activities, lore, people, initiatives, and places that you find intriguing enough to investigate further.

These books offer good overviews of MIT History:

Kaiser, David, ed., *Becoming MIT: Moments of Decision.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
Prescott, Samuel C., *When MIT Was "Boston Tech," 1861-1916.* Cambridge: The Technology Press, 1954.
Alexander, Philip N., *A Widening Sphere: Evolving Cultures at MIT.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

The following articles on MIT-related topics might spark some interest:

MIT and MOOCs:

http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/05/06/got-a-computer-get-a-degree/?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120507

Reviews of the new Media Lab:

http://www.technologyreview.com/printer_friendly_article.aspx?id=25025

http://news.cnet.com/8301-17912_3-10464933-72.html

http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2009/12/06/mit_media_lab_elevates_transparency/?page=2

A National Public Radio program exploring why girls and women aren't better represented in STEM-related fields:
http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=212613885&m=212613876

A list of possible topics and places to look for information compiled by Nora Murphy for this assignment:

Early women students
Corporation Records (AC 272 & AC 278); 1892 issue of *Technique; Technique*; *Technology Review*; *The Tech* (on line) http://tech.mit.edu/ ; Womens Laboratory records (AC 298); Bever, Marilynn Arsey, *The women of M.I.T., 1871-1941: who they were, what they achieved* (Hum 1976 B.S.); follow link to thesis available on line in DSpace http://library.mit.edu/item/000043415; Ellen Swallow Richards; see sources in on line exhibit and finding aid at: http://libraries.mit.edu/sites/mithistory/community/notable-persons/ellen-swallow-richards/

Former student
Personal information
Existing dorms, faculty, courses, campus
Alumni directories, *Technique*, catalogs, Reports of the President (online)
http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931, *The Tech* (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, reunion books, Pathfinder file, Senior Portfolio

Former faculty
Personal information, professional information
Alumni directories, *Technique*, catalogs, Reports of the President (online)
http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931, *The Tech* (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, reunion books, Pathfinder file

Dorm
Number, 'personality,' location
When built and why; architect
Technique, *Technology Review*, Reports of the President (online)
http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931, *The Tech* (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, Pathfinder file, Department of Facilities web site http://web.mit.edu/facilities/ ; Planning Office records; online finding aid at http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/research/collections/collections-ac/ac205/index.html#I; Pathfinder files; *Tech Talk*; Office of the President records; on line finding aids at:
http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/research/collections/record-groups/president-chancellor.html

MIT Colors
Technology Review; Pathfinder File; Alumni Association of MIT records (AC 41, b. 19 & 20)

Student group
Name, purpose, membership, founded, ended?, location
Technique, *Technology Review*, Reports of the President (online)
http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931,, *The Tech* (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, Pathfinder file, MIT web site, check for collections in Archives

Athletics
Name, established, ended?, location
Technique, *Technology Review*, Reports of the President (online)
http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931, *The Tech* (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, *Tech Talk*,
Technique, Pathfinder file, MIT web site, Athletic Association records (AC 70), Pathfinder File

Department
Name (changes?), dates of establishment/end; focus of department; courses offered
Technology Review, Reports of the President (online) http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/58931,
The Tech (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, MIT web site, check for collections in Archives

Being a freshman in x year
 The Tech (online) http://tech.mit.edu/, *Technique*, handbooks, *How to GAMIT*, catalogs

21W.021 Writing and Experience: MIT: Inside, Live
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