Retrospectives
I. Structure

I selected three autobiographical pieces and one analytical for the portfolio. The order is: "Multi-Threaded Thing™," an autobiographical paper which took inspiration from the form of Susan Griffin's "Our Secrets," and represented my life by pseudocode written in different computer programming languages; "Autobiographical Comparison," which was a partially successful attempt to compare and contrast my beliefs with those of James Baldwin; "Virginia Woolf: Assertive or Introspective," an analytical assessment of Virginia Woolf's motives while writing her memoir *A Sketch of the Past*; and "The ideal Life," an autobiographical response to the fantasy life portrayed in Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers." I chose this layout because it sorts the papers by an increasing amount of time spent on each paper, which coincides with an increasing order of my satisfaction with it, as well as for some other reasons.

The first paper consists of alternating sections of computer code describing the period of the last four years of my life. It was an interesting experiment to write a paper in this structure. It was at once both easier and more difficult to write than a standard prose structure. I found it easier because I am used to and more comfortable writing with computer code. The structure of code is stricter than that of English in that fewer constructions can be used. I found it more difficult because I did not have a set vision of the content of the paper in mind, but rather only one of its form. I actually accomplished matching the form to my vision, something that is never done when the vision is of the

content, but had no coherent picture of the piece while writing. It was an interesting experiment to express myself in this style, however I was unsatisfied with the result. Although the form and the style suggest things about different periods in my life, they make nothing explicit, and leave a careful reader to garner any information concerning my thoughts or feelings during these periods. This unconventional form and style have some merit; I believe they can be used to convey more information than standard prose, but I was unable to use them to my satisfaction.

The second story developed from a grand structure in my mind to a mediocre paper with few recognizable resemblances to my goal. I had intended to be both self revealing and thought-provoking, debating the origin of my beliefs in relation to the origins of James Baldwin's. However, immediately upon starting the paper I discovered an immense difficulty in determining the origins of his beliefs, as well as a difficulty in self-analysis. It was relatively easy to explain my own beliefs and speculate upon tracing their origin to a specific event, but I found it impossible to objectively state whether a viewpoint was a result of being a minority. Since the only life I can remember living has been as a Hispanic, I have no way of knowing what external actions are due to myself as an individual, and which are due to myself as a member of a group. There appear to be clear cases where race is the driving cause for action: Baldwin's rejection from restaurants where black clientele are prohibited; instances when I have been called names based upon my race. Thinking of these instances, I had intended this paper to delve into the effects of such moments, but found myself unable to state anything definitively.

The third paper examines Virginia Woolf's reason for writing her memoir, determining that she writes it for herself. I like this paper because it has a controversial

thesis that I believe I supported well. I tried developing the paper in a logical structure, supporting each step. It also begins with weaker points, then moves on to discuss an opposing theory and explain why that theory has flaws, and finally uses the best supporting evidence I could find. This thesis also allows Woolf's memoir to fit in with my notion of a good autobiography: It claims that Woolf completely removes herself from any concept of the reader and that rather than writing to create an impression on the reader, her work instead gains a deeper, truer, more pure autobiography. It might be an interesting question whether my enjoyment in reading her memoir led me to categorize her memoir as selfless so that I could enjoy it without hypocrisy. However, I would suggest that this is an incorrect statement, since I don't think I have any particular fear of hypocrisy. I've spent countless hours on this paper: writing it, revising its content on a global level, reading it through, and revising it on the sentence level. In the end I believe that I state my case clearly and prove it well, and it has come the closest to attaining the goal I had in mind when I started writing.

The fourth paper attempted to explain autobiographically my concept of the ideal life. I was very unsatisfied with the outcome of the first draft, because it suffered from one of the main difficulties I have while writing: I tend to write just enough and in such a way that I might understand it while reading it, but not enough to explain or give support to the reader. I believe this stems from my disdain for writing that bludgeons the reader with a single monotonous point, instead of using cleverness and ingenuity to present material that supports the thesis while still allowing the reader to make the connections himself. After determining where I would like to lead the reader and spending hours thinking about a problem and a certain solution I become bored with the argument and try

not to subject my reader to this boredom as well. However, this leads me to leave out necessary connections, assuming the reader has not only spent as much time as I have thinking about the problem, but also thought in the exact same fashion, needing only a small clue to find his way to my argument. In revising this paper, however, I believe that I found innovative ways to present the information and mood that I wanted to express without being overly blunt. In re-revising the paper, I also added some more concrete examples and descriptions based upon external suggestions.

In addition to the structure of the portfolio as mentioned above, there are a few other reasons for choosing the ordering. The first paper is well suited for being an introduction to an MIT student's portfolio, provided the general stereotype of Engineers and graduates from this fine institution. It is somewhat expected that even in an autobiography, an MIT student will write without emotion, in a dry, explicitly factual manner. However, putting such a paper first shows how unbased the stereotype is. Choosing myself to place it first shows an awareness of such a stereotype, and both caters to and denounces it at the same time. In addition, the second and fourth papers are autobiographical with a standard prose format, while the first and third are not. This varies the tone of the portfolio, so that things are spaced out well, instead of clumped together in groups. It forms a nice transition from reading computer code to an autobiographical essay to an analytical one, and returning to an autobiographical one. For these reasons, this format best suits both the papers individually and the portfolio as a whole.

This class has helped me to develop my writing style and content. Although this class has made it somewhat harder to write papers (I now catch myself starting sentences

with "It was" or "It is" or "There were," and even before I can finish the thought or get it down on paper I stop and try to search for a better verb to use. Since this is the way I think ("this is"), I continue to start with these sentences and verbs, but then try to revise it immediately and bring the creative process to a halt while trying to think of better verbs), I believe that it has helped me to develop my writing. It has reacquainted me with the whole process of writing, and while it's not any easier to produce the papers, at least I have the experience of producing, and the knowledge that I can probably do it again if forced.

"In conclusion, I would like to thank you, gentle reader. What's that you say? Me thank you? No, it's not a misprint, for you see I have enjoyed writing this paper as much as you have enjoyed reading it." – Charles Montgomery Burns ("Bart's Blood" - Simpsons) Courtesy of an Anonymous Student. Used with permission.