Discovered at MIT: The Personal Investigative Essay
Main (Revised) Essay Assignment #2:

For this essay I’m asking you to investigate a topic related to MIT which intrigues you. As you write, your aim will be to blend the story of your own engagement with the topic and what you find out along the way. That is, this essay will combine a personal story (your interest, your experience investigating, your questions and insights) and an informative presentation of what you find out about the topic you are investigating—therefore, the “personal investigative essay.”

You will want to pick a topic which gives you good opportunities to find material but which is also specific enough to let you do your own exploring and discover something fresh.

The possible topics are close to endless—MIT’s people (staff, students and faculty), ongoing or historic projects, labs, departments, student activities and groups, community initiatives, buildings, controversial moments (MIT student response to the Vietnam war, or the controversy around gender equity at MIT during the 1990’s, for instance).

We will visit the Library Digital Instruction Resource Center, 14N-132, where we will investigate ways to access MIT library resources with MIT librarian Mark Szarko; the MIT archives where we will do some hands-on investigation of primary resources with archivist Nora Murphy; and the MIT museum where we’ll tour the MIT150 exhibit with curator Deborah Douglas.

You may include your own on-site observations, interviews and surveys as part of your investigation. However, you also need to incorporate material from other sources—books, articles, etc.—into this essay. 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 you should find ample resources to write a well-informed essay about an intriguing aspect of MIT culture or history.

Readings

Rivka Galchen’s “Disaster Aversion” from The Best American Science Writing, 2010.

JunXie’s Li’s “1927” (Angles 2011)

Mihai Duta’s “Frank Gehry, Starchitect or Master of Spin?”

Kenrick Vezina’s “Oh, That Watson”: http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=1004 . (This essay is briefer than yours should be, but gives you a sense of lively writing about a relatively little-known MIT figure.)

Julee Hong’s “WMBR: We Might Be Radio” (Stellar readings).

“MIT: Divided We Fall” (Stellar readings).

You can check out additional articles from Scope, The Student Publication of the Graduate Program in Science Writing at MIT:

http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=209
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=217
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=1043
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=996
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=216
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=214
http://scopeweb.mit.edu/?p=471

You can find topic ideas and resources for your essays in many places including:

- 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
- The MIT museum: In particular the MIT150 Exhibit displays a range of MIT-related artifacts that span the history of MIT. We will be visiting. http://mit150.mit.edu/exhibition
- MIT’s homepage: http://web.mit.edu/ Presents a continuous feed of interesting activities, initiatives, people, etc.
- The MIT archives: Offers a near complete collection of books about MIT: http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/
- The Boston Globe http://www.boston.com/: Just plug in “MIT” at the Globe’s homepage and you’ll come up with a whole array of articles with an MIT angle.
- 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.
- MIT’s news around campus sent out in a weekly email from the MIT News office: MIT News Office [newsletter-bounces@MIT.EDU]
These books give a good overview of MIT History: