Assignment #1: 
A personal essay 
3-4 pages

Your first assignment will involve writing about yourself. A personal essay will help me to get to know you and it will also allow you to begin by writing about something that’s very familiar to you. This first assignment will also allow you more latitude and creativity in the structure, style, and tone of the piece than you’ll have in the other pieces you’ll be writing during the semester. So, let’s get started!

Choose either of the following two options:

1. In his essay *Running the Table*, Frank Conroy describes how his discovery of billiards during his high school years brought a kind of focus, passion, challenge, and discipline to his life, which freed him from a sense of aimlessness, gloom, and self-absorption.

Consider the various aspects of Conroy’s experience that were meaningful to him. Does anything in his story “touch a chord” with you? Do you see any connection to an experience in your own life, in which you discovered a passion or fascination for something or found yourself absorbed by something? What was it you discovered? How did it happen? What drew you to that? Have your pursued that passion—and if so, how? If not, why? In what ways has that pursuit affected you or shaped you? You don’t need to explicitly refer to Conroy’s essay or draw explicit parallels. I’m interested in your expressing something meaningful in your own life.

2. In his essay *Can We Know the Universe?*, Carl Sagan reflects on science “as a way of thinking”—on the human capacity for curiosity and what it means to “know” or “understand” the world. He also explores the possible limitations of human knowledge and what it means to live in a world that isn’t entirely knowable.

What “aspect of the universe” are you especially curious about? *In particular, what scientific question or technological problem would you most like to answer or solve in your lifetime?* Why is this question or problem so compelling to you? What is its significance? What would be involved in answering or solving it? Do you think it’s achievable? If you have some doubts about that, do you still think it’s worth pursuing? Why?
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**Purpose/Theme**

Once you have chosen your topic, you’ll need to work out the *central purpose* and *theme* of the essay. What do you want to convey to your audience? Some people develop this through the act of writing; others prefer to spend time thinking about this aspect of the piece before they actually begin writing. What works best for you?

**Audience**

Who are you writing for? The answer to this may influence the purpose, scope, and style of the piece. For this essay, imagine that you are writing for a broad audience. Think of your audience as curious and intelligent, but not necessarily having a strong background in science or engineering. Your readers might be high school students, people with a college education in a range of fields, or even your peers here at MIT.

**Style**

The essay should be 1.5 or double spaced, and it should have an engaging and descriptive title. Indent the beginning of each paragraph, and don’t add extra spaces between paragraphs.