While free-writing to prepare for this autobiography, I realized that my attitude towards writing has changed in the last few years. Where my writing was once a form of personal self-expression, it is now supposed to be rather impersonal and selfless. And where writing was once an escape for me, a way to release tension, it now causes a degree of tension in me. It is easy to locate the main reasons for these changes. When I moved from writing fiction to working as a theoretical linguist, I traded personal self-expression for more objective, precise results. In deciding to become a linguistics professor, I forfeited my carefree amateur status and made writing integral to my professional success. These are not complaints. I am just acknowledging that writing this autobiography now feels strangely nostalgic and somewhat self-indulgent, because it is just the sort of writing that I have not done for years. If someone asked me to describe myself as a writer, I would begin by acknowledging these emotions. It seems the crux of it.

My life as a thinking person began when I conceived of myself as a writer, at the start of high school. Before that, I led an active mental life, but the thinking was inward-looking. A minutely examined, though disengaged, life. The first serious writing I did of my own accord was fiction. It proved an excellent way to articulate and externalize my thoughts. I wrote enough to fill a large file drawer, mostly with short stories. I have not looked at this work in years. I hesitate to confirm my suspicions that it’s not particularly good stuff.

I no longer write fiction; it was always an unnatural fit. My brain is designed for writing nonfiction. Even while churning out a short story a week, I found writing essays to be more absorbing, the results more satisfying. I seemed also to be making more progress with this form. My nonfiction improved steadily, and my passion for it increased. What’s more, the old stuff, while of lesser quality, sometimes still pleased me, at the level of phrasing and the level of content. I sensed that my fiction was wallowing at an amateur level, unlikely to move upwards.

The next few years had me casting about for just the right sort of writing. I considered becoming a journalist. But there were too many reminders, in the instruction, that writing is merely a tool for

I haven’t found a good title yet. I want it to suggest the two main changes I discuss.
This paragraph begins my search for linguistics. It implicitly asks, “What combines a love of language with analytic thinking?”

A new element: writing is most satisfying for me when it is done in the service of a larger goal. I should try to make this more explicit later, perhaps.

Here is the big “but” that you could probably feel building up in the previous paragraph.

The mix of emotions that I have about where I ended up and what it has done for me as a writer and thinker. I think it is fine to leave this unresolved in the paper. It is unresolved in my mind!
New York to become a graduate student, I have read fewer and fewer novels. My reading time is instead devoted to technical articles and monographs. Similarly, as I said, this is the first personal writing I have done in quite some time.

Some habits survive from my days as a fiction writer. I do most of my thinking at my keyboard, for instance, in the form of loosely composed essays. I am incapable of sustained thinking outside the form of the essay. This slows me up considerably, since even terrible ideas must be articulated in my most polished prose just so I can see that they are terrible. I found this nerve-wracking when I began working in earnest on my dissertation. I would set to work improving a paragraph, or a few lines, only to be struck by a creeping anxiety: “This thing needs to be like 300 pages! There isn’t time for individual sentences. Move!” I had found a job for the next fall. But it was (and is) contingent upon my getting the dissertation defended and filed this year.

Here, in my dissertation’s composition, we have a prime example of how writing is now a source of tension, rather than a relief from it, as it was in high school. It’s not the only such example, nor is it the first. The change happened in my second year of graduate school, when I first felt pressure to publish my research. I wrote some serious linguistics as an undergraduate. However, at that point in my career, the mere fact that I was doing such work sufficed. It did not much matter whether it was top-notch. My responsibility was simply to get out of college in fine form. That changed in the middle of my time as a graduate student. The UCSC graduate program is research-oriented; one’s progress in the department is measured in large part by how many major research papers one has produced and then published or presented at a conference.

As a result, my thoughts and feelings as I sit at my keyboard differ from those of my high school and college days. When I write now, I often have an audience of my peers in mind. I hear their potential challenges. I hear their work, especially when it is in conflict with what I am proposing. I worry that this chorus could freeze me up, prevent me from continuing to think and write freely. At the same time, I know that freezing up would be bad for my career. Could that knowledge freeze me up? I have a strategy for preventing this. So far it has been successful. I do my best to write my first draft without worrying what others would think about it. Then I revise with my audience in mind. I find revising easier than composition, in large part because the draft exists at that point. I feel freed to linger over small points, to look at the ideas from new perspectives. In a pinch, I could read it for typos, print it, and be done with it.

So, at present, and probably for the whole of my future, I am...
a writer of impersonal linguistics rather than personal essays. Both modes depend entirely on the author’s creativity. Linguistics engages me analytically in a way that my personal writing never did. I am looking forward to this course because it will provide me with a way to combine these two modes of expression. My essays can contain some linguistics, but they can also contain a visible and important element of me and my style.

This paragraph returns us to Writing I, as in the last part of the opening. It suggests that the class might help relieve some of the tensions that run through this essay. An optimistic outlook.