What are you afraid of?

*Failure is not an option; it is a certainty . . . but it must always be overcome in order to achieve any lasting sense of success.*

An exercise in overcoming our fears and frustrations and figuring things out.

The Reading:

“Decidophobia” is a term coined by German-American philosopher Walter Kaufmann to help describe people’s fear of making important decisions affecting their lives. He argued that being truly autonomous brought with it the potential for lots of guilt and possibly suffering, so it engendered a good deal of fear. As with most human fears, we develop strategies (consciously or not) to avoid the conditions that cause them. The text you will be reading is the first chapter from Kaufmann’s book *Without Guilt or Justice* and it details ten specific strategies many humans use to avoid making big decisions in their lives. He is not suggesting that everyone uses these, nor that every example of such actions is evidence of decidophobia. He is simply beginning a discussion about why people are afraid of making choices and how they deal with those fears – presumably to help us all become a little more open-minded, clear-eyed, and autonomous.

This is a college-level text, which means that parts or all of it may be difficult to understand. There will be words you do not know (and not just the one Kaufmann made up) and examples with which you are unfamiliar. It is a work written by a philosopher for an audience that is intimately familiar with philosophy and history. You may feel a little bored or lost or frustrated as you read – this does not excuse you from figuring out what you are reading. In college you will be given texts to read and your ability to pass your classes and not waste a lot of money (as well as some of your future potential) will depend on your ability to comprehend them. Then, as now, you will have plenty of resources around you: the internet, dictionaries, people smarter than yourself, and people who aren’t as smart as you, but who know different things. Be patient, be persistent, avail yourself of these assets, and you will be fine. To help focus and guide you, I have written some key questions below; find the correct answers to these (according to Kaufmann) and you will have gotten essentially what you need from the reading.

- What is autonomy? Why are we afraid of it? What are its benefits?
- What is decidophobia? What are its pros and cons?
- What are the three basic strategies decidophobes use, alone or in concert with one another?
- What are the ten specific strategies described by Kauffman that decidophobes use to avoid making fateful decisions? Provide a specific example of each one, preferably from your own life.
The Assignment:

The first portion of your grade for this assignment will be based on your answers to the above questions – which you can type or hand write and turn in to me as soon as you have completed them (though I would recommend you discuss your answers with a few other people who have read the piece before you finalize them).

The second portion of your grade will be the quiz you take on the reading. It will basically cover much of the same information you used to answer the above questions and will simply be so I can check how well you understand the material versus how smart your friends are.

The third and largest portion of your grade will be the piece of writing you create. In this essay you will identify the big choices you fear making, the strategies you have used to avoid making these choices (so far), and then argue whether or not your use of these strategies is really such a bad thing (and whether or not you should be autonomous).

Steps for success:

1. Brainstorm: Identify all major decisions (can be subtle and seemingly subconscious – such as who you hang out with – or obvious and immediate – such as whether or not you should go to college) in your life you are afraid of making.
2. Narrow the field: Pick one (or two if they are closely related) decisions you struggle with particularly and feel you can write about intelligently.
3. Create an outline or other graphic organizer that helps you identify:
   a. why you want to avoid this decision
   b. the strategies you use to avoid it
   c. the potential costs and benefits of being a decidophobe/autonomous with this decision
4. Write your essay.
5. Edit/revise your essay to make sure what sounded good in your head actually sounds good when it is read aloud.
6. Get help revising and editing your essay – because even if your mechanics are good, we all miss some mistakes.
7. Hand in your essay (ideally before the due date).
8. Conference with the teacher (and listen to his suggestions – take notes even).
9. Revise your essay according to the suggestions of the person who is grading it and who has written and read a whole lot more essays (good and bad) than you . . . even if you think it is great just the way it is.
10. Hand it in again.
11. Repeat steps 7 through 10 as necessary . . . or until time runs out.
The Grading:

Your grades for this assignment will be based on the following:

- Demonstrates clear understanding of why people want to avoid big decisions
  - Uses specific examples to support arguments
  - Uses clear reasoning and logic to support arguments

- Demonstrates clear understanding of decidophbic strategies
  - Makes specific references to text to illustrate understanding
  - Offers your own specific examples to clarify understanding

- Demonstrates clear understanding of the pros and cons of being decidophbic
  - Uses specific examples to point out dangers and benefits
  - Uses clear reasoning and logic to support arguments

- Demonstrates clear understanding of the pros and cons of being autonomous
  - Uses specific examples to point out dangers and benefits
  - Uses clear reasoning and logic to support arguments

- Flow of writing is clear and logical
- Mechanics are perfect