

WRITING FOR THE GENERAL READER

Topics in American Studies /Topics in American History
Spring 2018, 20181:050:521 and 510:533
Prof. Robert Snyder
Conklin 233 Mondays, 5:30 pm-8:10 pm

My office is in 324 Bradley. I can best be reached by email at
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Office hours: Monday 2-3:30 pm, Wednesday 1-2:20 pm, and by appointment.

We live in a time when urgent questions call out for an informed response and scholars strive to communicate with a public beyond the academy. This course meets both challenges. In “Writing for the General Reader,” students will turn their graduate research into clear, compelling, and authoritative prose that can be read, enjoyed and understood by readers outside the academy.

Our goal is for each student to submit their work for publication. Those who successfully place their pieces will receive extra credit. To improve the odds of success, students will:

- Study the challenges of turning scholarly research into prose with public appeal;
- Explore what readers expect from writers;
- Weigh the demands of writing in different genres;
- Develop literary tactics and strategies;
- Survey the landscape of possible outlets;
- Undertake reading and writing exercises; and
- Write two pieces grounded in your research: first an op-ed, and second a longer writing assignment of your own design that can serve as a book proposal, a public presentation, a documentary proposal, a review essay, or another kind of piece that serves your interests.

Students in the course are expected to enter the course with either a body of research that they want to convey to a broad public or a willingness to become very knowledgeable about something very quickly. I anticipate that students in our course will have a wide array of research interests, sufficiently wide that I can't lay out a research plan that will serve everyone. Each student will be responsible for drawing up their own research plan that builds on their existing work.

The course will be run as a workshop in which we all learn from each other. To achieve that goal, in certain sessions students will supply readings and draft essays that we will discuss in class.

On days noted in the syllabus (February 12, 19 and 26 and March 5 and 19), specific students (who will sign up in advance) will bring to class short readings that amplify and extend the lessons in assigned course readings. We'll read and discuss these texts in class. Bring one copy for each member of the class and one for me.

On days when we workshop draft op-eds and final projects, students whose work is the subject of the upcoming workshop are required to submit a copy of their piece to the entire class no later than 10 pm on the Thursday before Monday's class.

In response, each student will print the essay and suggest edits using proofreaders' marks. (Examples are at <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/help-tools/proofreading-marks.html>.) Each student will then write a letter addressed to the author, at least one page long single-spaced, evaluating the piece. Each letter should address, in this order, the pieces's strengths, its problems, and how it might be revised. Bring to the workshop your marked-up copy of the piece, stapled to your letter, to present to the author. Also bring a copy of your letter to submit to me.

Our course owes a great debt to the example of the Little Red Schoolhouse, a distinguished series of courses offered by the Writing Program at the University of Chicago. My planning for this course has been enriched by conversations with Kathy Cochran, deputy director of the Writing Program at the University of Chicago; Mira Sucharov, associate professor of political science at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada; and Jack Lynch and Mark Krasovic at Rutgers University-Newark.

Because we meet at an hour when many people would rather have supper, you are welcome to bring a sandwich or a light meal to class. We will eat at the beginning of our session, 5:30 pm, and afterward move on to more intensive work. Please don't bring crunchy, noisy food that will disrupt our conversations or reading during our brief dinner period.

Readings

The core text in our course is Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago, ISBN 0-226-89915-2.) Although the book is out of print, it is available online at a modest price. Our campus bookstore stocks a more recent edition, Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup, *Style Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Pearson, ISBN 0-13-408041-6.) Both books are useful. The older edition is the less expensive of the two and offers a detailed analysis of the principles of clear reading. It inspires and rewards close reading and study. If you buy only one edition, I suggest that you buy the older one.

The newer edition contains exercises that I will use in class (for which you do not need to buy the book) and useful material on ethics, punctuation and research. It is more expensive than the older edition, but if you don't mind the cost and dislike buying books online, the newer edition will serve you fine. I have organized our syllabus so you can use either book in the course.

Short readings on our Blackboard site:

John McPhee, "Structure"

Melani McAlister on captivity narratives

Shelley Fisher Fishkin on Huckleberry Finn

David Blight on Civil War memory

Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* excerpt

John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* excerpt

Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue* excerpt

George Orwell, "Why I Write"

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

Requirements and Grade Calculation

Class participation: 20% of final grade

Short writing and editing assignments, inside and outside class: 20% of final grade

Op-ed piece of 750 words: 20% of final grade. Placement of the op-ed in an off-campus publication will be rewarded with extra credit. Source citations in the essay should be produced as endnotes in the Chicago note and bibliography style; you can easily remove them for publication.

Final piece of 2,500 words: 40% of final grade. Source citations in the essay should be produced as endnotes in the Chicago note and bibliography style; you can easily remove them for publication if necessary.

Class Sessions

Week 1, 1/22

How does writing for the general reader present challenges of form and content?

Before class, read John McPhee, "Structure" and op-eds by Melanie McAllister on captivity narratives; Shelley Fisher Fishkin on Huckleberry Finn; and David Blight on remembering the Civil War. Bring printed copies of the McAlister, Fishkin and Blight pieces to class for review and marking up.

Week 2, 1/29

What do you work on and why? And who do you write for?

Readings on the public and scholars' public engagements: excerpts from Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*; John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*; George Orwell, "Why I Write" and Eddie Glaude, *Shade of Blue* on course Blackboard site.

Submit short essays of 500 words and presentations on research and interests. Each student should bring to class one copy of their short essay for each member of the class plus the instructor.

Week 3, 2/5

What happens when we approach research as problem solving?

Problem: where can you publish your work? Each student will submit and discuss at the start of class an annotated list of at least five possible outlets for your op-ed that explains why each outlet is appropriate for your work.

After our discussion of outlets, students will share suggestions on research strategies and then devote the remainder of the class to searching, online or in Dana Library, for sources that will be useful for your op-ed or final project. We will gather in the last half hour of our class to discuss results. Everyone should find at least one useful source in the form of a book or peer-reviewed journal article.

Week 4, 2/12

Why is there so much bad writing and what can we do about it?

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language"

Williams, Chapters 1 and 2 OR

Williams and Bizup, Lessons 1 and 2

Discuss student submissions

Week 5, 2/19

How can we make words work together effectively?

Williams, Chapters 3 and 4 OR

Williams and Bizup, Lessons 3, 4, 5 and 6

Discuss student submissions

Week 6, 2/26

How does the form of writing shape clarity?

Williams, Chapters 5 and 6 OR

Williams and Bizup, 6, 7 and 8

Discuss student submissions

Week 7, 3/5

In writing, what is the relationship between clarity and elegance?

Williams, Chapters 7,8, and 10
Williams and Bizup, 9, 10 and 11
Discuss student submissions

Spring Break, Week of March 12

Week 8, 3/19

What goes into a good op-ed piece?

Discuss course readings on how to write effective op-eds:
Discuss student submissions of op-eds worth emulating

Week 9, 3/26

Op-ed workshop I

Submit your draft to classmates electronically on the Thursday before our class.

Week 10, 4/2

Op-ed Workshop II

Submit your draft to classmates electronically on the Thursday before our class.

Week 11, 4/9

Individual meetings

Individual meetings with professor on op-eds and final projects

Week 12, 4/16

Submit op-eds; discuss proposals for final projects

Submit final versions of op-eds. Attach first draft to final version. Also submit a copy to Turn It In on our Blackboard page.

Bring to class for discussion a proposal at least one page long summing up and justifying your final project. Bring one copy for every class member and one for the instructor. Why are you doing it? Why is it interesting and important? What will be its value?

Week 13, 4/23

Final Project Workshop I

Submit your draft to classmates electronically on the Thursday before our class. Students whose work has been reviewed in this workshop should meet with me at least once before submitting final essays.

Week 14, 5/30

Final Project Workshop II

Submit your draft to classmates electronically on the Thursday before our class. This will be our last session as a group. Students whose work is reviewed in this workshop should meet with me individually before submitting final essays.

Week 15, 5/7

Individually submit final essays for grading

Submit final version for grading, either in our regular classroom at class time or by slipping hard copies under my office door, 324 Bradley. Attach first draft to final draft. Also submit a copy via Turn It In on our Blackboard page..

Course policies

Regular attendance. You are permitted two absences for any reason without a penalty. After that, you will lose one full course grade for each day of absence over the limit. Example: if your course average is B+ and you have three absences, your course grade will become a B. Medical absences for which you present a doctor's note are excused. However, once you get beyond three absences of any kind, it will be difficult for you to pass the course.

Class participation. Our readings, editorial exercises and written assignments are the foundation of every class. Do them in advance, take notes, then review your notes before class. Contribute when we discuss readings in small groups and as a class. If you are absent on the day of an in-class writing assignment, there will not be a makeup opportunity.

Submit work on time. Written work is due in class, printed and stapled, on the day marked on our syllabus. For every day that it is late, a full grade will be deducted from the essay. Major assignments (our op-ed piece and longer essay) should also be submitted on Turnitin. Please do not send me your essays as email attachments with a request to print them. If you submit an essay on time but do not do as well as you hoped, you may revise the essay for a higher grade. Please see me if you want to exercise this option.

Respect our work. Share your ideas with the class so that we all learn from each other.

Focus on our class. Turn off all cell phones during class. You are welcome to use a laptop to take notes or look at readings online.

Work with integrity. Plagiarism (passing someone's work off as your own), fabrication (inventing sources) and cheating are forbidden. They are offense against your classmates and the entire university. They will be reported to the dean and punished.

You are welcome to drink the beverage of your choice in class. I will try to keep class sufficiently interesting that you do not need coffee to stay awake.

See me if you are having problems of any kind. I want to see you do your best work.

Resources

The Writing Program at Penn State University applies the principles of "Little Red Schoolhouse" in its courses. For a useful summary of ideas, exercises and courses, visit: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/c/a/caw43/behrendwriting/lrs.html>

For a good mix of op-eds, articles and essays from many sources, updated regularly, check out “Arts and Letters Daily” at: <https://www.aldaily.com/>

Jack Lynch’s “Guide to Grammar and Style,” filled with good ideas and useful suggestions, is at: <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/>