

Seminar in Composition

Sample Syllabus

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Course Description:

The goal of this course is to help you improve your writing. We'll do this by paying close attention to life, language, and the connection between the two. The course will encourage you to pay especially close attention to your own language, and because language is inseparable from thought, your own thought processes. In short, you'll be expected to talk and write, but also listen and think.

The theme we will explore is as follows. How do I (you) see the world? Why? How do other people see the world? Why? How can we navigate between these perspectives? In my opinion, this line of questioning goes to the heart of our existence as social beings. To communicate, to connect in any meaningful way, we must consider these questions.

Reading-wise, we'll examine a number of important philosophical works, some popular essays, and a lot of random stuff from the internet. First up are pieces by two philosophers: Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German, and William James (1842-1910), an American. For these essays, and the rest of the course materials, I encourage you to read carefully, paying close attention not just to what the writer says, but how they say it.

Assignment-wise, you'll do eight blog posts, five blog responses, four textual essays, one podcast or audio essay, and one multimedia project. All of your essays will focus on a single *ethical conflict*, a situation, of your choosing, in which there is no easy answer. You can pick any topic you wish. The only requirement is that it be of import to your life.

Learning Goals:

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry;
- Compose thoughtfully-crafted essays that position your ideas among other views;
- Write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions;
- Cultivate new perspectives by exploring your ideas through a variety of modes;
- Revise your compositions by rethinking the assumptions, aims, and effects of prior drafts.

Readings / Course Materials:

Copies of all the readings are available on the course website. They are, in order of appearance:

- Martin Heidegger – Memorial Address
- William James – On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings
- Audre Lorde – Uses of the Erotic
- Annie Dillard – The Deer at Providencia
- Joan Didion – On Morality
- David Foster Wallace – Consider the Lobster
- Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner – *Think Like a Freak* (Chapters 1 & 3)

You will also need a **notebook** for in-class writing, and regular access to Microsoft Word, Microsoft PowerPoint and Audacity (or other audio recording/editing software).

Essays:

The essays you write in this class may differ from those you wrote in high school. Though it's always good to "have a point," trying to make a forceful argument can sometimes cause you to overlook new and better ways of thinking. We want to avoid this sort of stubbornness. As such, it's perhaps best to think of each essay as a conversation. Rather than trying to shut down competing voices or ideas, you want to invite them in, chat with them, and see how they can help you understand the world a little better.

Blog Posts:

In this course, the blog will serve as a forum for working out our ideas. Most every week you'll write one blog post and comment on a classmate's post. Engaging with your classmates' posts is essential: if they have a good idea (or a bad one) you need to let them know. Posts and comments should be substantive (and proofread), though they need not be technically perfect; rather, they should serve as catalysts for future thinking and writing.

Public Writing:

To get better at writing, you must get feedback. As such, in this class, be prepared to share everything you write. When we workshop an essay or blog post, I will make an effort to conceal the author's name. Be aware, though, that anonymity is often not possible.

Deadlines & Extensions:

Unless otherwise stated, assignments are due by classtime. If something comes up and you can't make a deadline, let me know and I will likely give you extra time. As a general rule, it's better to be a little late than to rush and submit an inferior product.

Assessment:

As this is a writing class, participation is essential. To get a passing grade, you must complete every assignment. You should also be prepared to speak (and write) in every class meeting.

Your final grade will be based on the degree to which you: 1) complete every assignment as directed; 2) present evidence of sustained effort to “get better” at writing and thinking; and 3) present evidence of actually “getting better.” In other words, your grade will be based on how hard you try, and how much your writing improves.

The relative weight of each task is as follows:

- Class Participation 20%
- Blog Posts & Responses 20%
- Textual Essays 40%
- Podcast / Audio Essay 10%
- Multimedia Project 10%

Schedule (15 week course):

	Introduction + In-Class Essay
Discuss In-Class Essay	Discuss Heidegger
	Due: Blog Post #1
Due: Blog Post #2	Discuss James
Due: Essay #1	Discuss Essay #1
Discuss Lorde Due: Blog Post #3	
Discuss Dillard & Didion Due: Blog Post #4	
Due: Essay #2	Discuss Essay #2
Discuss <i>Think Like a Freak</i> Due: Blog Post #5	No Class / Conferences --
Due: Essay #3	Discuss Essay #3
Edit Podcast	Due: Blog Post #6
Due: Podcast	Due: Blog Post #7
--	Due: Blog Post #8
--	Due: Multimedia Project
Due: Essay #4 (Draft)	Workshop Essay #4

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