

Let's Talk About... Composition as Critical Inquiry

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In this course we'll take on as our subject *critical inquiry*. Both a method of composition and an indication of many genres of writing (academic or otherwise), critical inquiry prioritizes questioning and curiosity over argument and assertion. It is taking on the act of writing as an act of problem-solving, even if a clear solution isn't ever fully realized by the conclusion. As our primary case study, we'll read Carl Wilson's *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*, one music critic's experiment in his own distaste of the musical artist and pop phenomenon Celine Dion. Rather than reading just for what the book has to say, we'll read as much, if not more, for *how* Wilson goes about saying things—for how he's taking up his own point of inquiry—and you'll develop your own points of inquiry in response.

Although we'll primarily be working within the genre of the essay, we'll also talk about and compose in other genres such as the blog entry, and even in an audio genre, the podcast. Beginning with inquiry might change some of the conventions of the essays you've been used to writing in other contexts, so our forays into these other genres will offer some other options you might take advantage of in your essays for this course. The writing projects you'll work on this semester are intended to offer you flexible spaces for trying out writing-as-inquiry in a way that suits your particular goals as a writer, and may even intersect with your other academic interests or your future job aspirations. It intends to demonstrate how flexible the essay genre is, and to inspire you to make your own individually-driven decisions for what shapes your essays will take and what conventions you want to try out, bend or adapt, or even ignore.

It is my hope that by the end of this course you will feel a bit more confident about your ability to adapt to new writing situations, and to employ the writing strategies you'll pick up from our activities, our compositional projects, and from your classmates in this and future contexts. It's important for me to say that, as the teacher, I am merely the facilitator of this journey. Although I have many years of writing and writing instruction under my belt, I am still learning about what writing *does*—to the mind, to the body, and to the world—and I anticipate that I will have a lot to learn from you as well. In fact, I expect it.

Required Course Materials

- *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*, Carl Wilson. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- *A Pocket Style Manual, Sixth Edition*, Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2012.
- An audio recording program such as Audacity or Garage Band
- A selection of other readings, which are available via PDF on our class Courseweb site and may be added as the course progresses.

Course Goals

Seminar in Composition is the course that most undergraduates take to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive requirements in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. While the readings and assignments in different sections of the course may vary, this section, like all the others, consists of a sequence of assignments that will require you to:

1. Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry.

In this course, you'll be asked to use writing to generate ideas as well as explain them. You'll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you'll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

2. Compose thoughtfully crafted essays that position your ideas among other views.

In response to reading and discussing challenging texts, you'll write essays in which you develop informed positions that engage with the positions of others. You'll analyze as well as summarize the texts you read, and you'll compose essays that pay close attention both to the ideas voiced by other writers and to specific choices they make with language and form.

3. Write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions.

You'll work on crafting clear, precise prose that uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. You'll be required to learn the conventions for quoting and paraphrasing responsibly and adeptly, and you'll be assisted with editing and proofreading strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning. You'll also have opportunities to consider when and how to challenge conventions as well as follow them.

4. Revise your writing by rethinking the assumptions, aims, and effects of prior drafts.

This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts—not as a thesis-driven argument that adheres to a rigid structure. Much class time will be devoted to considering the purpose, logic, and design of your own writing, and you'll be given opportunities to revise your work in light of comments and class discussion, with the aim of making more attentive decisions as you write.

Requirements *All requirements must be met in order to successfully complete this course.*

Active Participation in Discussion: Each day in class we will have some level of full- or small-group discussion. I will offer some questions as a starting place, but my role is only as facilitator of the broader conversation. Rather than raise your hands and wait for me to call on you, you should learn each other's names and use them to respond to one another. In an ideal discussion my role will be minimal and you'll all take the conversation and run with it while I take notes. I expect everyone to contribute, though contribution can take many forms: responding to my initial

question/prompt, reacting to what another person says, synthesizing together what several people have offered, asking a new question you're wondering about, or listening attentively and taking notes to share with your peers on our course blog (see below), etc. If you do not contribute I will assume that you are unprepared for class that day.

Writing Workshops: Many days of our in-class work will involve putting writing from our class (anonymously) on the table for discussion and for use in compositional activities and exercises, as attuned to our recent discussions and toward our next compositional projects. Respectful and generous participation is expected and as stated above. It is important to conceive of this writing as in-progress that will evolve and change over future iterations.

Compositions: The subject of this course is your writing, as a method of reflection and critical inquiry. You'll compose essays and blogs, taking the reader beyond the bounds of the written text by way of digital annotation and hyperlink. Set aside a regular time to write, and be sure to carefully proofread and edit your essays and blogs before submitting. Writing marred by error will not receive comments until you have made the necessary corrections. Essays and blogs should be composed in 12-point font and follow MLA format as described in *A Pocket Style Manual*.

Commonplace Blog (CPB): I'm calling the blog a "commonplace blog" because I'd like us to imagine the blog as in line with what has historically been called a "commonplace book," a place for copying down interesting passages from reading, notes for future events, general ideas, and other materials and information. Posts may be writing-based, or links to what you perceive of as relevant material from other sources on the web. You should anticipate posting to the blog once per class period (three times per week) and commenting on another blog entry at least once per week. Further details can be found at our course blog: <http://materialsforthinkingSC2015@wordpress.com>

Essays: The word "essay" comes from the French "essai," which means to attempt, to try or test out. The essays you'll write in this course are in the spirit of this origin. The genre of essay we'll try out in this class starts from inquiry and enters into conversation with other writers, other ideas, and other texts as a way to work through the driving question(s). Inquiry-based writing has a great amount of flexibility with regard to tone, structure, and argument, and depend substantially on the situation and audience for the writing task as interpreted and identified by the writer. In this way, the compositions you'll take in and practice in this course will be quite different than those you might have been exposed to in the past, and may be quite different from those your peers are writing. Because of this flexibility, we'll discuss the compositional prompts as "works-in-progress" that we'll collaboratively polish together, so that the prompts accommodate the kind of inquiry you feel the urgency to try out.

Audio Projects: During the semester you'll put together two short audio pieces—an interview-oriented piece and a mini-podcast—composing not for the eye but for the ear. The interviews will help you learn audio editing, and the podcast (which may be completed collaboratively) will offer you the opportunity to enact the many ways we'll

discuss working with other sources in a new media, with different affordances and challenges for composition.

Logistics

Submitting Assignments to CourseWeb

Blog and essay assignments are due by class time to the blog or CourseWeb (depending on the project), which you can find online at the University's Blackboard website <http://courseweb.pitt.edu>. CourseWeb automatically uses your Pitt email account, so if you use another account as well (e.g., Yahoo, AOL, Gmail, etc.), be sure to check your Pitt account at least once a day for emails and announcements. Tutorials are available under "Help" in the menu. If you have trouble logging on, call the help desk at (412) 624-HELP.

Grades and the Digital Portfolio

Rather than receiving grades on individual assignments, your writing will be evaluated twice, once at mid-term and again at the end of the semester. At mid-term, you will submit a digital portfolio and receive a provisional grade, meeting with your teacher in conference to discuss your work and your progress in the course. At the end of the semester, you will again submit a digital portfolio of your best work, this time writing a brief introduction. Your final grade for Seminar in Composition will be determined both by the quality of your compositions and evidence of a serious and sustained effort to strengthen your work. *You must earn a "C-minus" in order to pass Seminar in Composition.*

You must complete all of the projects assigned in order to pass Seminar in Composition. Assignments are due by class time; late work will not receive comments and will result in a lowered final grade for the course. Your teacher may also adjust your final grade by one-third (e.g., B to B+ or B-) in order to reflect the quality of your participation in class discussion.

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

- A = superior attainment
- B = meritorious attainment
- C = adequate attainment
- D = minimal attainment
- F = failure

Note that "meritorious" means commendable or praiseworthy: a "B," in other words, is earned for work that is above average.

Attendance

Because this is a seminar, participation and attendance is expected. Come to class on time, prepared to take part in the conversation. While you should try to attend every class, *you are permitted three absences without penalty*. Assignments due on a day you miss class must be posted as scheduled—otherwise they will be considered late and will negatively impact your final grade for the course. Make sure to consult CourseWeb and talk with a classmate to find out what you missed. *Four absences are grounds for failure*: should you find yourself in this situation, your best option may be to withdraw from the course and take it again the following semester.

Classroom Etiquette

I expect you to be responsible, mature, and respectful. Among other things, this means putting away all cell phones, arriving on time, and addressing myself and your peers respectfully. While there will be moments for you to use your laptops, tablets, and phones in class for research and writing purposes, I expect you to use electronic resources conscientiously. Anything else will be distracting, and trust me, I'll notice! In general, I try to keep regular "business hours" and will not answer student emails after 5pm. Please make sure to check the syllabus, CourseWeb, and the blog for the answers you are seeking before writing with general questions. I will not answer emails about what happened in class if you were absent.

Plagiarism

It is important to acknowledge your sources, whether quoted or paraphrased in alphabetic texts, or integrated into digital compositions. Keep a record of your sources in a working bibliography, which you will need to consult both in revision and to prepare a Works Cited page for your essays. We'll talk about responsible work with sources, but you should consult your handbook for guidelines on proper paraphrase, quotation, and citation. You can get additional help at the Writing Center as well as hackerhandbooks.com/pocket. Depending on the severity of the offense, instances of plagiarism will result in a loss of credit for the assignment at the very least as well as a report to the dean, up to and including failure of Seminar in Composition.

The Writing Center

Located in 317-B Student Center, 4024 O'Hara St., the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to correct your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your writing. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, your teacher may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/

Composition Tutorial (an optional one-credit course)

After you've written your in-class essay, your teacher may recommend you enroll in Composition Tutorial, a one-credit course in which you meet weekly with a Writing Center consultant to get extra help with structure, grammar, and punctuation. Once enrolled in Composition Tutorial, you will need to attend all sessions; be sure to bring the course syllabus, assignments, and work-in-progress or with your teacher's comments.

Other Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your teacher and Disability Resources and Disability Services, 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890 / (412) 383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Adapted from: "Let's Talk About . . ." Seminar in Composition Common Syllabus 2014-15, Jennifer Lee and Brenda Whitney. University of Pittsburgh: Fall 2014.