
Writing for the Public | EngCmp 0420-1080 | Spring 2016

University of Pittsburgh | T/Th 231 David Lawrence 11-12:15pm

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Drop-in “office” hours: Thurs 12:20-2:30 at Hillman Cup & Chaucer
Other meetings by appointment in my office at the Cathedral of Learning 617F

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the theory and practice of writing that serves the public interest. This kind of writing is becoming more crucial in just about every sector, though is especially key for individuals working in careers with some aspect of public service (e.g. social justice law, non-profits, journalism, public health, etc.), for those invested in being active citizens as advocates and/or activists, and for those whose creative work is aimed toward a public agenda (e.g. artists, performers, other creative content professionals). Whatever your purpose for learning more about writing for the public, this course will offer you ample opportunities to increase your understanding of the complexities of issues that have some level of public importance and to practice writing in the public sphere.

As a writing-intensive class, the bulk of your time will be dedicated to practical experience in composing textual and multi-media genres from the position of an issue of public interest you have a genuine investment in. Through these projects you will come to understand the impact of rhetorical situations on the choices you have with respect to a composition’s genre, style, and tone as well as target audience. In your final projects, you will shape the material you’ve produced into a website/blog of your own design. It is my greatest hope that you will want to continue to work on these websites even after the semester ends. You will practice and prepare for your individual projects by collaborating in the design and execution of a class blog, by reading theoretical approaches to rhetorical citizenship, by looking in depth at relevant case examples, and by sharing and discussing your work with your classmates.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES FOR WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC

Writing for the Public is a writing-intensive course that focuses on helping students learn about and use specific forms of reading and writing that are common in nonprofit and government sectors. It is a core course in Pitt’s Public and Professional Writing (PPW) Certificate Program. The course enables students to do the following:

- **Learn how persuasive writing functions in both nonprofit and government contexts.** Students will learn about standards for writing and the range of genres that constitute writing in the public interest, and they will learn how to identify and research public issues.
- **Learn how to engage with the contexts and goals of writing in the public interest,** including ways of satisfying the needs of their readers and what is at stake in writing a document that is published by an agency or nonprofit.
- **Compose sustained arguments supported by research (including interviewing) to persuade a particular audience to take a particular action.** Students will choose a social issue or problem to research and write about and will narrow their focus to create a project that can be completed during the course.

- **Address the rhetorical and technical challenges of using images, captions, tables, charts, and other design elements to advance an argument and persuade an audience.**
- **Craft language with attention to both style and precision.** The course will allow students to better edit their own writing and to provide useful feedback on their colleagues' writing.

COURSE MATERIALS, TECHNOLOGIES & LINKS

Our course materials will primarily be made up of readings about rhetorical citizenship and case examples of works enacting the genres you'll be trying out in this course. These will be provided via PDF or hyperlink, so there's no required books for this course. Our course materials also include the technologies we'll use; in this class you'll learn to use several different web-based platforms for public/semi-public writing and collaboration that you may encounter in some future context.

Wordpress Site:

Both your collaborative course blog (see below) and your individual final websites will be authored through the free version of the blogging platform Wordpress. The course documents I'll author (the syllabus, schedule, and assignments) are also posted on a blog I've set up called "Instructor's Digest," which, as the name suggests, is a place for me to summarize and talk back to you about the work you're doing, as well as make schedule adjustment and general announcements.

Your blog: <https://writingforthepublicspring2016.wordpress.com>

Course Blog: <https://instructorsdigest.wordpress.com>

Courseweb: <http://courseweb.pitt.edu>

You'll be turning your assignments and receiving evaluative feedback via Courseweb. We'll also store readings in PDF there* and will use the Discussion Forum feature for blog planning and for the commonplace log (see below). ** By providing PDF documents I am operating under educational fair use guidelines for copyrighted material. Please do not distribute.*

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THIS COURSE

Participation/Active Engagement (10% of the final grade)

This is a discussion-oriented seminar and engagement in our daily conversations is mandatory. While certainly I have expertise to offer, so do all of you, and I look forward to relying on your experience and knowledge to round out and invigorate our learning in this course. Individuals who are actively engaged arrive on time, take notes, ask questions, and interact with their peers as helpful interlocutors who are curious about and respectful toward the ideas of others. Engagement is evidenced in the body (making eye contact, sitting up straight, etc.) as much as through verbal contributions. *If you do not appear engaged I will assume you are unprepared for class.*

Commonplace Log (CPL) Participation (10% of your final grade)

As a part of your preparation for class I'll often ask you to contribute something to the commonplace log. What we do there is roughly modeled after a genre of reading log called the "commonplace book," a place to gather scraps of texts, examples, and reflections. We'll build ours

collaboratively through the discussion forum feature on Courseweb. It will be a repository for points of engagement from the reading, examples and resources from outside of the class you want to bring to the table, micro-drafts of upcoming projects, and various other resources that will help you prepare for class discussion and your composition projects.

Blog Participation (15% of your final grade)

As a class you will design and author a publicly accessible blog so that you can get some practice in addressing a public audience and in collaborating with others, as many public-oriented projects necessitate. The blog is your publication—my purpose is to look on, give advice, and supervise, but I will not participate as an author. You'll plan via a discussion board on Courseweb, and I'll provide regular feedback on the Instructor's Digest blog, and will provide individual feedback at the mid-term.

Composition Projects (65% of your final grade)

You will work on several composition projects that are conventional genres for public writing toward the eventual end of a final website that will release your investments to the public. Ideally, this final project will be something you will be interested in continuing beyond this course. For each project you'll hand in a draft in advance of in-class workshops and then, several days later, a more polished version for evaluation. *It is imperative that you dedicate daily or near-daily writing time for working on the compositions for this course.* Here is a rough sense of the projects you'll compose (detailed instructions will be provided as needed on the Instructor's Digest site).

- The "My Story" Project/Topic Proposal (5%)
- Project Rationale/Memo (10%)
- White Paper (10%)
- Profile Piece (10%)
- Visual Arguments (10%)
- Final Website (20%)

MY RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THIS COURSE

Fostering a Safe and Fun Collaborative Learning Environment

You will encounter many genres, theories, and technologies that will be unfamiliar to you in this course. Learning new things is always challenging, but I'll do everything I can to make sure that the initial situation of not-knowing is a productive motivator rather than an obstacle. As a discussion-based seminar, my role in this course is to design activities that have you engaging in applied learning through *collaborative problem-solving* (working together to figure something out), *critical analysis* (analysis by inquiry and interpretation) and *critical making* (aiming to understand a thing by making that thing).

Facilitating Workshops

During writing workshops I'll bring examples from the student writing being generated in this class for discussion. The purpose of these workshops is not to have you critique the examples; rather, the idea is that you'll learn something by looking at works-in-progress about the challenges (and excitement!) of learning to write for a public. Each student can expect to have their work brought in front of the class at least once (if not twice) over the course of the semester.

Making Myself Available for One-on-One Conversation Outside of Class

On Thursday afternoons (from the end of class until 2:30pm) I will head to the Hillman library café (the Cup & Chaucer) to make myself available for drop-in conversations/“office” hours (with caffeine!). If you cannot meet during office hours, we can meet by appointment in my office in the Cathedral of Learning (617F). I am also available over email, though I try to keep regular “business hours” and do not typically respond to emails past 6pm unless the matter is urgent.

Evaluating Your Work

Your participation and course projects will be evaluated through letter grades and the following numerical equivalents: **A/95 = Superior Attainment, B/85 = Meritorious Attainment, C/75 = Adequate Attainment, D/65 = Minimal Attainment, F/55 = Failure.** I may offer pluses or minuses to reflect movement toward the next level of attainment up or down (+/- 3, so a B+ is an 88, a C- is a 72, etc.). Final grades will be determined by the following scale: A = 93-100, A- = 90-92, B+ = 88-89, B = 83-87, B- = 80-82, C+ = 78-79, C = 73-77, C- = 70-72, D = 60-69, F = below 60

Compositions will be evaluated as follows:

- **Compositions at the “A” level** exceed expectations. The composer has fulfilled the requirements of the project with nuance (subtlety and attention to gradations of meaning) and complexity (attention to the intricacies of the topic, genre, and audience). With only minor adjustments, A-level compositions could be considered publication-ready, as they address the audience genuinely and without any signals that the piece was an “assignment.” ***I do not offer “A” grades liberally.***
- **Compositions at the “B” level** handle requirements with great promise, moving toward attending to complexity and nuance. It is likely, though, that the writer still has some things to figure out, likely in the thinking/ideas, addressing a public audience, and/or in understanding/using the conventions of the genre. ***I do offer “B” grades liberally.***
- **Compositions at the “C” level** are either 1) those that show effort by its author but are missing or deficient in at least one major requirement, showing a lack of understanding of some portion of the task at hand and/or the intended audience; or 2) an adequate or surface-level understanding of the requirements without depth or breadth.
- **Compositions at the “D” level** are missing multiple requirements entirely, are completed with minimal effort, or represent a complete misunderstanding of the task at hand.
- **Compositions at the “F” level** are assignments that have been turned in late (see “Due Dates” below).

*** Note: Compositions at the “C” level or below may be revised for reevaluation. Missing compositions receive a zero.*

Participation will be evaluated as follows:

- **Participation at the “A” level** is reserved for students who are actively engaged in in class-discussion and our digital environments and who contribute with the aim of fostering productive dialogue with their peers (they are talkers *and* listeners). “A” students arrive on time, are prepared, and have turned in all drafts and digital contributions in advance of class.
- **Participation at the “B” level** will be given to students who are actively engaged in class discussion and our digital environments, but who may still be learning to contribute toward the broader conversation (e.g. talkers but not listeners). “B” students arrive on time, are prepared, and have turned in all drafts and digital contributions in advance of class.

- **Participation at the “C” level** will be given to students who are generally present but rarely contribute unless prompted directly to contribute do so and for whom it is difficult to read their level of engagement. Digital contributions are present but may lack depth or breadth.
- **Participation at the “D” level** is reserved for students who, while present, appear disinterested or bored and who are difficult to work with in group discussions, either in-class or in our digital environments. Such students are frequently late and/or unprepared for class.
- **Participation at the “F” level** is reserved for students who are consistently absent or unprepared, and/or who disrespect his or her peers and thus negatively contribute to our in-class and digital environments.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance

Attendance in this class is mandatory. Each class builds on the last and previews the next, and your peers depend on your presence to test out their own ideas and engage in productive dialogue and collaboration with you. In short, there is no way to “make up” a missed class and there are no “excused” absences. If there is some unavoidable circumstance that prevents you from attending class please be in communication with me as soon as possible. Students who miss three or four who have not communicated extenuating circumstances will have their final grade lowered by 10% per absence. Students who miss five or more classes should not expect to pass this course.

Due Dates

Most drafts and final versions will be submitted digitally via Courseweb by following the link called “Assignment Dropbox.” Please title documents with your last name and the task so they are easy for me to find. I expect turned-in work to be completed to the best of your ability, which includes giving yourself enough time to complete the work and proofread and polish the version you turn in.

Assignments must be turned in by the due date unless you have arranged for an extension (see below).

Assignments turned in late (past the initial due date or past the extension date arranged) will automatically receive an “F/55” for that project. Projects not turned in will receive a zero. *Students missing assignments should not expect to pass the class.*

Late Policy for CPL and Blogs

Commonplace and blog contributions (including in the planning stages) late within reason (e.g. within one day of the due date) will reduce the final grade eligibility by .25%, and extremely late or missing entries will reduce final grade eligibility by .5%. For example, the CPL is worth 10%, but if you miss four entries you will only be eligible for 8%, even if your entries fulfill all of the requirements.

Extensions

I understand that occasionally life circumstances may prevent you from achieving your best work by the due date assigned. Because of this I will generally grant extensions for composition projects (not blogs) if the request is reasonable (e.g. if you realize you need to change the direction of your project, a family emergency interrupted your composition schedule, etc.). *Extensions will only be granted once per semester (except in dire circumstances), and should be requested by 5pm the Friday before an assignment is due.* New due dates will be scheduled on a case-by-case basis.

Revisions

Work evaluated in the C range or lower may be revised and resubmitted for re-evaluation. *If you would like to do so, you must submit a request to me directly and arrange to meet with me to discuss your plans for revision.* Requests must be made within a week after projects have been returned with feedback. Revisions should clarify and complicate the ideas of the composition to merit an improved grade (the new grade will replace the old). Revision due dates will be scheduled on a case-by-case basis.

Technology

I prefer to work digitally as much as possible. In-class this means that you will have to either print the readings/your projects or bring a laptop or e-reader/tablet with you to class for discussion and note-taking. I will not provide paper copies. Please use all technology responsibly and know when your tech will be a distraction to you. Irresponsible use of technology (checking your email, social media, or anything outside of the course) will result in a lowered participation grade.

RESOURCES

Writing Center

I highly recommend planning for multiple Writing Center sessions, as the tutors in the Center will serve as wonderful early audiences for your work. The Center has provided the following language for instructors to include on syllabi for the University of Pittsburgh:

Located on the third floor of the O'Hara Student Center, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for undergraduate students. Although consultants do not correct, edit, or proofread papers, they can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a consultant once or regularly over the course of the semester. 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. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting www.writingcenter.pitt.edu.

PittServes

It might be that your individual projects created for this course could benefit civic engagement opportunities already in place at Pitt. Pitt's Student Affairs office offers plenty through PittServes, (see <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/PittServes>), which describes itself as follows:

PittServes strives to empower members of the Pitt community to be engaged citizens on campus, off-campus, and globally. PittServes bridges the academic and civic missions of the University by: developing and modeling genuine partnerships with local communities and community organizations with a specific emphasis on reciprocity, transparency, and sustainability; providing training and capacity-building programs for the campus community in areas of civic engagement, community-building, and reflection and sponsoring and supporting a wide variety of civic engagement opportunities for students, including volunteering, internships, and community-based learning.

Library

As there will be plenty of independent research for this course please do make use of the library, interlibrary loan, and our liaison librarian for the English Department, Robin Kear, rlk25@pitt.edu, 207G Hillman Library. Although a lot of what you'll do is google-able a lot of the historical and theoretical implications of the work you'll do for this class is not, so please do take advantage!

CAMPUS POLICIES

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to adhere to the standards of academic honesty. Any student engaged in cheating, plagiarism, or other acts of academic dishonesty would be subject to disciplinary action. Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating the University Policy.

Disability Services

If you have a disability, contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 216 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.

Statement on Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

ROUGH SCHEDULE

Weeks 1-5: Getting Started & Rhetorical Citizenship

The first weeks of this course will introduce you to the collaborative blog project and will get you started thinking about your independent projects. We'll also take on several difficult and challenging theoretical arguments about what I refer to as "rhetorical citizenship," that is, what it means to write in order to make an impact in our world.

Weeks 6-12: Project Proposals, Research, and Public Genres

The middle of the course you will spend engaged with practical genres of public address, learning to attend to different audiences who you can appeal to/call to action in relation to your chosen issue of interest through various conventional genres individuals and groups use to deliver ideas and arguments to the/a public.

Weeks 14 & 15: Website Presentations/Workshops

During the last two weeks of class you will informally present your projects as they are starting to take shape. These presentations will offer you the opportunity to share the hard work you've done up to this point in the term, and will offer you the opportunity to solicit your peers' advice and recommendations for finalizing your project.

Important Dates to Note:

- Last day to add/drop: January 19
- Spring Break: March 6-13
- Withdrawal requests due to the Deans office: March 16
- Finals Week: April 25-30