

WRC-268-01

Writing (and Arguing) Inequality

Wesleyan University

Spring 2014

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Instructor:

Tracie McMillan

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Class time: 1 pm–4 pm

Class location: Zilkha 106

Office: Downey House, Rm 103

Office hours:

Tuesdays

In person

11:15-12:45; 4:15 – 4:45

Weekdays

(Skype or Phone)

9-10 a.m.

Other hours available by appointment, *with explanation*.

(GCal Link on Moodle)

Course Description/Objectives:

“I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.”

-George Orwell

“The reader [is] in serious trouble most of the time, floundering in a swamp, and it [is] the duty of anyone attempting to write in English to drain this swamp quickly and get the reader up on dry ground, or at least to throw a rope.”

-E.B. White

Most writing occurs because the writer wishes to persuade someone of something: that a particular person or place is interesting; that the reader is loved or hated; that an object is worth buying; that a political goal deserves support. Whether it is commerce or journalism, the purpose of the written word is to make a case. Our job this semester will be to write with clarity and purpose so that we can be persuasive.

As a writing course, we will be refining your skills as a writer, stripping away unnecessary phrasing and eddies of thought so that your point can be heard. We will also explore a few ways of conducting research to inform your writing, most notably in first-person reporting and interviews. You should think of these as intentional, guided conversations from which you will take concrete examples of an issue you want to explore.

More broadly, we will be advancing your critical thinking and media literacy such that you can more quickly and more easily identify the crux of an argument and respond to it.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Edit your own work, and others, for clarity and accuracy as well as basic grammar
- Analyze and write clearly, critically, and accurately
- Deconstruct persuasive arguments, whether they are made directly or not
- Initiate, coordinate, and successfully conduct interviews with people
- Prepare for interviews by doing research (aka “doing your homework”)
- Synthesize library and internet research from a variety of disciplines with empirical observations from your own reporting

Teaching methodologies:

This course combines a demanding load of readings from a variety of disciplines with writing assignments and lectures.

We will be using primarily journalistic techniques for gathering information. Although few of you will become journalists, the skill of condensing research into coherent prose will serve you well in any trade.

You will be expected to identify the topics you will be writing about and to supply specific circumstances that illustrate a general trend. The professor will be available during office hours, and during limited hours via Skype or Google Hangout, to help with this process.

Course Requirements:

1. PARTICIPATION

Because we only meet once a week, attendance and class participation are essential. To do well in this course, you must keep up with the readings and participate regularly in the class discussions.

We will average around 100 pages of reading each week; roughly half of what I ask you to read will be suitable for skimming, other pieces I’ll want you to read closely. (The week before, I will tell you which is which.) In weeks when papers are due, I will reduce the writing requirement. I suggest you arrange your schedule to complete all reading on time, rather than cramming it in the day before.

2. READING RESPONSES

On weeks when a formal assignment is *not* due, each student will be required to read out a brief response, with a hed and dek, to that day's readings to help direct our discussion. Some weeks I will advise on the direction I'd like your response to take; others it is your choice. It should be no less than two full paragraphs, and more is fine (but don't get crazy).

Your responses cannot simply be a summary of the readings; you must engage with the text, and provide analysis or inquiry about either the content or the technique in the piece. These should be written casually but clearly, with attention to style and grammar; we will use them to practice editing skills on each others' responses.

3. IN-CLASS WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

There will be occasional in-class writing assignments. They will not be graded, but will count toward participation.

4. WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Room For Debate

Each student will be responsible for three short opinion pieces that take a specific stance and argue a point. I am not expecting original reporting as much as I expect you to develop your rhetorical skills; emphasis will be placed on students adopting techniques we learn in class—or in going beyond them. As reference, we will be reading the *New York Times* Room For Debate column series.

Length: 500-750 words (2-3 pages, TNR, double-spaced)

Papers

Each student will research and write two papers, but the second will be divided into a first draft and a revised, and additionally reported, final draft. I will count length by words rather than pages, and you will lose points off your grade if you submit papers that are significantly under or over word count.

Each paper must deal with different subjects.

- Paper 1: A written argument in favor of an approach, or analysis, to solving a social inequality, drawing primarily on library and internet research, although you may add first-person reporting if you like.
 - **Length: 750 -1,000 words (3-4 pages, Times New Roman, double-spaced)**
- Paper 3: A long reported essay making an argument about a social inequality, combining both first-person reporting and traditional research. This may draw on one of the earlier paper topics, but direct cut-and-paste of content is strongly discouraged.
 - **Length: 2,500-3,000 words (10-12 pages, TNR, double-spaced)**
 - Please note that the final paper is *double* the length of the previous papers, and combines first-person reporting with research. Do **not** leave this until the last minute, as you will need to conduct in person interviews etc.

Ground Rules In Class

ATTENDANCE

Students who miss two or more classes without a valid excuse will face a reduction in their final grade. The only acceptable excuses for missing a class are severe illness (with a doctor's note, submitted before or upon, **but not after**, your return to class); a death in the family (obituary or other proof required); or a religious observance.

NO-TECH RULE

Cell phones, tablets and laptops are **not permitted** in this class. There will be **zero exceptions** to this rule. Bring a notebook to take notes, and if you take notes on your readings digitally, you will need to print them out before coming to class.

If you make use of an electronic device in the classroom, I will ask you to leave and you will be marked as having an unexcused absence. Multiple infractions will affect your grade.

DEADLINES

This is a course based on journalistic practice; in journalism, you must meet your deadline. All assignments for this class **must** be turned in on time. Late assignments will be subject to grade reductions, and any missed assignment will receive an F. As with tech, there will be **no exceptions** to this rule.

Writing assignments submitted digitally must be in by 1:00 p.m. on the day of class. Papers submitted as printouts are due when you walk in the door; if you are late for class, the paper will be considered late.

WRITING

Every week, you will be expected to bring **two printed** copies of your Room for Debate or written response to the week's readings. Please be advised that we will read and edit each other *every week*; I, as well as a classmate or two, will see your work. Although reading responses will not be graded, the thought put into both the responses and edits will count toward your participation grade.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism, fabricating quotes, or inventing sources will not be tolerated. This includes close paraphrasing of another's work without attribution; if you have any doubts or questions about this, contact me. Anyone caught doing so will fail the course and the department chair will be notified. There will be **no exceptions**.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BRING TO CLASS

- Course packet
- Two paper copies of that week's writing assignment (unless it is one of the three long papers)
- Two pens or pencils
- Notebook or notepad
- An open mind and a tolerant ear
 - In this course we will be discussing sensitive topics around race, gender, class and other forms of division; these are not easy topics, and discussing them is not always pleasant. These conversations must always be held with respect for everyone involved, however much you may disagree with them. If you disagree with someone, or find something they have said offensive or misplaced, the best response is to articulate in concrete terms what is offensive, rather than to dismiss it out of hand or to ridicule it. This is at the heart of what we are learning to do in the class.

GRADING

Your final grade will be based on your assignments—both inside and outside class—and your participation in class discussions and activities.

Your grade will be calculated using this formula, updated as of Feb. 17, 2014:

- Attendance and observance of no-digital rule: 5 percent
- Class participation and basic reading responses: 15 percent
- Room-For-Debate-style responses: 15 percent
- Mini-Profiles: 10 percent
- First paper: 10 percent
- Final paper, first draft: 10 percent
- Final assignment: 30 percent

COURSE PLAN

January 28- February 25

(Plan for later dates is forthcoming)

REQUIRED READING:

- *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk and E.B. White (2005 edition)
- *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide*, ed. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (2007)
- *Course Packets*
 - Packet 1 available starting Jan. 19, 2014
 - Packet 2 available starting March 3, 2014
 - Course readings will also be available on the course's Moodle no later than one week prior to class

Section 1: Writing Boot Camp

JAN 28 - WEEK 1

USING THE WRITTEN WORD TO MAKE YOUR CASE

Topics: Ground Rules; Why Inequality

In-class readings:

- “On the English Language,” George Orwell (8 p.)
- Obama speech on inequality (11 p.)
- **Examples for First Two Papers**
 - “Welfare Nation” Bill O’Reilly, 10.31.2013 (2 p.)
 - “A Feckless Attack on Income Inequality,” Michael Barone, *National Review*, 1.10.2014 (3 p.)
 - “Under My Thumb,” Timothy Egan, *New York Times* (3 p.)
 - “Crack-Cocaine Limbo,” Linda Greenhouse, *New York Times* (3 p.)

In-class discussion:

- Orwell and Obama
- Sign-up for consultation next week

FEB. 4 - WEEK 2

HOW TO FLIP THE SCRIPT

Topics - READING

Using rhetoric to change the course of debate; inequality in the news.

* Please note that *next* week is a very heavy reading week. If you have time, start reading ahead.

Topics – WRITING

Basic opinion structure/Room for Debate; the utility of heds and deks; how to find a subject; general vs. specific topics

Read for class (103 p. required):

READ CLOSELY:

ON WRITING (58 p. required; 5 optional)

- McMillan’s Rules on Writing handout (2 p.)
- *The Elements of Style*: While I will hold you responsible for the entire book, if you have already read it, please revisit:
 - Part 2 (Principles of Elementary Composition; 24 p.)
 - Part 3 (A Few Matters of Form; 7 p.)
 - Part 5 (An Approach to Style; 25 p.)
 - *Optional*: “Happy Birthday, Strunk and White” (5 p.)

HOW TO ARGUE A POINT (21 p.)

- Room-For-Debate: Rising Wealth Inequality: Should We Care? (21 p.)

SKIM: HOW RHETORIC WORKS (24 p. required; 10 optional)

- Introduction to *The American Way of Eating* (13 p.)
- Introduction to *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (11 p.)
- *Optional*: Chapter 1, *Comfort Me With Apples* (10 p.)

Write for class:

- **2 copies – Reading Response:** Identify one suggestion or rule from *Elements of Style* you liked, and one you disliked or did not understand. Explain why you like and dislike them. Try to compare each to the rules offered by Orwell in “Politics and the English Language;” is there common ground?
- Two examples of newspaper or magazine stories dealing with a social inequality, written after November 1, 2013. At the top of each, indicate the **general** problem covered in the story and at least one **specific** example contained within the text.

- A list of **five** specific ideas you would be interested in exploring in your writing this semester; indicate one of them as your preferred topic for your first writing assignment.
 - If you haven't already, sign up for a consult with me about your ideas. During that conversation, we will determine which idea is the best fit for your first paper.
 - We will decide by Friday on your topic for Paper 1.

Section 2: Inequality Basics

FEB 18 - WEEK 4

WHY INEQUALITY MATTERS + INTERVIEWING WORKSHOP 1

Topics – WRITING

Revisiting the importance of heds and deks;
identifying the writer's perspective
Interviews: The Beginning of a Profile
Sourcing

Topics – READING

inequality in the American story; inequality in contemporary American politics; equality of opportunity vs. equality of outcome;

READ FOR CLASS:

ABOUT INEQUALITY

NEW readings highlighted in **yellow**

In American political discourse (25 p)

The Declaration of Independence (3 p.)

The Gettysburg Address (1 p.)

Kennedy on civil Rights (4 p.)

“Thomas Jefferson, Equality and the Creation of a Civil Society” *Fordham Law Review* (17 p.)

Current events (35 pages)

About DeBlasio:

- “The 99% Mayor,” Chris Smith, *New York* (13 p.)

DeBlasio Inauguration - NEWS

- de Blasio inauguration speech (5 p.)
- Mayor Bill de Blasio Takes Oath of Office *New York Post* (6 p.)
- Taking Office, de Blasio vows to fix inequality *New York Times* (4 p.)

DeBlasio Inauguration - OPINION

- “Will de Blasio Meet Bloomberg Standards?” *New York Post* (3 p.)
- “De Blasio’s crusade against inequality gives short shrift to personal responsibility” *New York Post* (2 p.)
- “Mayor de Blasio looks forward” *New York Times* (2 p.)

FOR REFERENCE – skim, but mostly it’s so you can refer to it in later work for context and statistics.

- “Thinking Clearly About Inequality” – Cato Institute (28 p)
- Introduction and Ch. 10, “Why It Matters;” *The Great Divergence*, Timothy Noah (25 p.)

ABOUT WRITING: Telling True Stories (appx. 10 p.)

- Review “Accelerated Intimacy,” Isabel Wilkerson, *Telling True Stories* (p. 30), and add:
- “Profiles,” Jackie Banaszynski (p. 66)
- “The Ladder of Abstraction,” Roy Peter Clark (p.70)
- “Every Profile is an Epic Story,” Tomas Alex Tizon (p. 71)
- “The Limits of Profiles,” Malcolm Gladwell (p. 73)

Write for class:

- **2 copies:** RFD-Style response to INEQUALITY readings, 500-700 words (2-3 pages)
 - *If you want more to respond to, I suggest reading the reference/optional pieces.*
- **Hed, Dek, and Outline** for Paper 1
 - Hed and Dek, responding to any edits in revision process, for Paper 1. If you had to clarify your idea, it’s likely you’ll need to revisit the display copy. (Hed and Dek)
 - List of 5 sources you plan to use for Paper 1

FEB 25 - WEEK 5

INCOME INEQUALITY + INTERVIEW WORKSHOP 1

Topics – WRITING: big picture

- deconstructing rhetoric;
- identifying audience;
- how format affects message and vice versa

Topics – READING

rhetoric underpinning arguments about inequality in U.S.;
roots of those arguments;
pros and cons of call and response

READ FOR CLASS (~100 p.)

Inequality: General

1. “Wall Street Isn’t Winning—It’s Cheating;” (6 p.)
2. “Mike Bloomberg’s Marie Antoinette Moment;” (5 p.)
3. “How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the OWS Protests;” (3 p.)
 - a. Matt Taibbi, *Rolling Stone*
4. “Inequality Anyone?” Samuel Gregg, *National Review* (2 p.)
5. “Income Inequality is Bull;” Bill O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor* (6 p.)
6. “Leftists Denounce the NYC They Created;” Rush Limbaugh transcript (5 p.)

Inequality: Call and Response

SET ONE

7. “Of the 1%, By the 1%, and For the 1%”, Joseph Stiglitz, *Vanity Fair*, (3 p.)
8. “The Inequality Fetish;” Patrick Brennan, *National Review*, (4 p.)

SET TWO

9. “The Costs of Rising Inequality;” Stephen Pearlstein, *Washington Post* (2 p.)
10. “Addressing Inequality, the Non-PC Way;” J.D. Foster *National Review* (3 p.)
11. “How Much Has Income Inequality Really Increased?” Reihan Salam, *National Review* (3 p.)

SET THREE: Room for Debate

12. “Disrespect to Bloomberg, or Truth to Power?” (11 p.)

Paper 1

13. Metrics sheet

Interviewing

14. [“The Art of the Interview,”](#) *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 30, 2013, Ann Friedman (3 p.)
15. [“Interviewing Principles,”](#) *News Reporting and Writing*, Melvin Mencher (16 p)
16. “Appendix, *Sidewalk*, Mitchell Duneier, (25 pages)
17. [Tips on Taking Notes](#), Bernard L. Stein (6 p.)

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWING RESOURCES – Not required, here for informational purposes/reference

- a. [How Journalists Can Become Better Interviewers](#), Poynter Institute
 - b. [How to Conduct an Interview Like a Journalist](#), The Write Practice
 - i. Note: This is written by a blogger doing more lifestyle-type work. IT’s a little loose and self-promotional, but is pretty easy to read
- [“NBC Pushes Too Far in Bringing Bode Miller to Tears,”](#) *New York Times* (2 p.)
 - i. For a quicker take, [“NBC Reporter Accused of Badgering Bode Miller Until He Cried,”](#) Jezebel

BRING to class:

- Questions about Paper 1 Metrics
- Five questions about how to interview – **submit via Moodle, and bring1 hard copy in class**
 - Submit this no later than 8 am on MONDAY, as I will use to shape the lecture
- Write up a 5-step interview process for yourself, starting with when you walk up to your subject.
 - Presume that your subject has not met you before, and does not know who you are. What is the first thing you need to do? What is the second? Walk me through the process.
 - **submit via Moodle and bring to class**
- Reading response. **2 copies** – Submit Via Moodle and Bring to ClassReading
 - This should be 500-600 words long (give or take 10 percent). It will count toward class participation.
 - Please comment on:
 - The most compelling conservative position on inequality, and why

- The most compelling liberal position on income inequality, and why
- What ideas from American rhetoric each side draws upon

MARCH 4 / WEEK 6

WORKSHOP DAY: INTERVIEWING

PAPER #1 DUE

Readings: Download and Print Via Moodle

Please print out the readings available and bring them to class, as we will be discussing them at length.

1. Urban Legend (5 p.)
 - a. For each Urban Legend, give me a summary, no more than 15 words, of the “general idea” or bigger issue that the profile is about.
 - b. Pick one profile from “First Hand” and write out **five questions** that the interviewer would have needed to ask in order to write the piece.
2. First Hand (5 p.)
 - a. For each First Hand, give me a summary, no more than 15 words, of the “general idea” or bigger issue that the profile is about. The name of the subject does not count.
 - b. Pick one profile from First Hand and write out **five questions** that the interviewer would have needed to ask in order to write the piece. The name of the subject does not count.
3. Action Heroes (12 p.)
 - a. Pick one of the full-page profiles from First Hand and write out **ten questions** that the interviewer would have needed to ask in order to write the piece. The name of the subject does not count.

Do for class:

1. Paper #1 - submit via Moodle
2. Idea for Paper #2: Hed, Dek, Description – submit via Moodle
3. Reading responses as outlined above – **2 copies, 1 via Moodle, 1 hard copy to class**
4. Five questions about interviewing – **2 copies**, 1 via Moodle, 1 hard copy in class

SPRING BREAK

MARCH 25 / WEEK 7

Topics: Racial Inequality

Papers: where we’re still struggling

Readings will be available on Moodle

Graded papers will also be returned via Email (if I can’t figure out Moodle). Go over these before class so that you can approach me to talk if you have questions/concerns

BRING to class:

- **General questions about**
- **2 copies** - Readings response

Section 3: Nuanced Inequality

APRIL 1 / WEEK 8

Topics: Gender Inequality

MINI-Profile Due

APRIL 8 / WEEK 9

Topics: Redefining equality

RFD #2 DUE

APRIL 15 / WEEK 10

Paper 2: First Draft DUE

Topics: LGBT inequality

BRING to class:

- **2 copies** - Readings response

APRIL 22 / WEEK 11

Mini-Profile 2 Due

Topics: Food or Citizenship inequality

BRING to class:

- **2 copies** - Readings response

APRIL 29 / WEEK 12

Topics: Humor as Persuasion

RFD #3 DUE

MAY 6 / WEEK 13

FINAL CLASS

Final Paper Due no later than our scheduled exam period: **Thursday - May 13**