

Why You Can't Write

Online

T/Th 11:10 - 12:30

Zoom Office Hours: Thursday 2-4 and by appointment

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Course Description

Institutions of higher education have required first-year students to take writing courses for well over a century. In doing so, they have made it clear that educational and professional success are deeply tied to writing skills. But why is this? This class asks what it means to teach students how to write by probing seemingly stable concepts and practices like language and communication. We will discuss the history of writing studies in higher education before taking up debates over literacy, language standardization, theories of writing instruction, assignment design, and assessment practices. In addition to introducing students to the field of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies, so, too, will this course center the practice of writing with a specific focus on academic writing. As such, students can expect to write, revise, and comment on classmates' writing regularly. Assignments will include a personal literacy narrative, short essays, weekly journals, and a final project.

Learning Objectives

- Gain an introductory knowledge of issues, methods, and approaches in composition and rhetorical studies
- Develop your literacies, writing skills, and writing process through consistent and experimentative writing
- Read critically and ethically, generate thoughtful questions, and construct well-supported arguments
- Reflect regularly to consider how this course will inform your future learning experiences

Required Texts

All required readings are available on Moodle. Though you are not required to purchase texts for this course, I encourage you to donate money (what you might have spent on books) to individual and grassroots coalitions that deliver books into underserved communities. For example: a local little library, [Donate to prison libraries](#), [NYC Books Through Bars](#), or [The Distribution to Underserved Communities Library Program](#).

Classroom Environment

Why you Can't Write will run fully online. We will meet twice a week via Zoom and engage in discussions on Moodle a/synchronously. Though this is different from meeting regularly in person only, our online classroom environment allows us to practice writing more often, learning to differentiate between high-stakes writing (like a final essay) and low-stakes writing (weekly moodle posts).

This course is discussion based, which means for our online classrooms to be both educational *and* engaging we must rely on each other. Our online space will only be exciting if we regularly check in and respond to one another with curiosity and gusto. So, too, will our discussions depend on treating each other with respect and dignity. Each and every student should: address each other using our names and pronouns; respond to each other's ideas with respect and attention to detail; ground your comments in the text(s) assigned for that week to keep discussions pertinent and to engage your classmates about a shared cultural artifact.

When sharing your opinions about a topic that is not directly from the readings, cite as often as possible so we can learn about where your ideas are coming from; when sharing personal opinions be clear about how they are specific to you – your knowledge, experience, belief systems etc. and be prepared to hear about other belief systems, knowledges, and experiences that might come into conflict with your ideas. There is a zero tolerance policy for harmful behavior or speech. For complete details see *Guidelines for Classroom Civility and Conduct*.

Zoom

We will rely on Zoom to bring us together throughout the semester, though, of course, it is an imperfect software with its own privacy issues. In this course, we will *not* record Zoom meetings since our discussions are free-form and places to experiment with our thinking and interpretations of texts. We are in this course to learn and grow, not to already know and create static documentation of our knowledge. That being said, if someone is unable to attend class because of Covid-19, we will talk as a class about recording the course so they can 'attend' at a later time.

Feel free to use a zoom background. Zoom works quite well if we use "gallery view" rather than "speaker view." I encourage you to use the hand raise function and the chat function to introduce questions. I have disabled personal chatting, which means that all chats will be visible to all participants.

Office Hours and Email

Office hours are a time and place for you to meet with me directly to discuss course materials, assignments, and your ideas more generally. I'll be holding office hours on zoom. Please do drop in or set up a phone call. If you cannot meet with me during my scheduled office hours on Thursdays from 2-4pm est, please contact me to schedule a time to meet. I especially encourage you to meet with me if you have any reservations about participating in class, or if there is anything happening inside or outside of class that is impacting your learning experience.

Please allow up to 24 hours for me to read and respond to emails during the week and at least 48 hours during weekends and holidays.

Academic Honesty

This course is about developing yourselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. You will be expected to read materials and integrate others' writing into your own by being clear about attribution through citational practices. In short, the work produced in this course should be from you and for this course specifically. Wesleyan takes its honor code quite seriously. Any form of academic misconduct,

including but not limited to cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, or facilitating others' academic dishonesty will be reported to the Honor Board. If you have any questions about the Honor code, please see me and/or consult the discussion in the [student handbook](#).

Technical Support

Working entirely online means that we will likely run into some technical difficulties. If you have difficulty accessing the internet where you live let me know ASAP. Similarly, if you are experiencing technical difficulties contact me as soon as possible to keep me up to date on your issues. Though I am not an expert, I can direct you to some resources including the ITS Desk at Wesleyan.

A reminder: save and back up your materials regularly. Sometimes computers and software, including our Moodle site, will fail to work. I expect that you backup everything, either on remote disk space (such as google drive or Dropbox) or on a thumb drive. You should also save course materials you download, such as this syllabus and assignment sheets, in case you find yourself working on readings or written assignments when you can't access the internet.

Additional Resources

Disability accommodations often require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively. Please contact [Accessibility Services](#) in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. The [Writing Workshop at Wesleyan](#) provides resources to help you develop as writers, in this course and in others. The [peer advising program](#) works individually with students to provide peer advice regarding topics such as time management, organization, study strategies, and many other academic skills. [Peer tutors](#) provide supplementary course-content instruction for students who request them. Peer tutoring is provided free of charge; students can receive up to two hours of tutoring each week per course.

ASSIGNMENTS (More details provided on assignment sheets in the "Assignment" Folder on Moodle)

Regular attendance. Attendance is required in this course. You may miss three classes and still pass. Please save these absences for illness, travel, and religious holidays. Notify me in advance by email if you need to miss a class. Absences beyond the three allowed will lead to a full letter grade deduction from the *final grade*. Three late arrivals will equal one absence. If necessary, you should contact university administration such as an advisor or a Dean to assist you if faced with exceptional circumstances.

Participation (20%) This course is student centered. As such, the majority of your grade will be derived from engaging with readings, lectures, and each other's ideas. Active and timely participation are crucial components of the class – you are expected to check into Moodle regularly, complete reading and discussion assignments on time, and produce written responses that excite your

classmates, making online discussion forums interactive spaces where we will all look forward to learning and being inspired by each other. Because the course runs online, student participation will be assessed in three ways:

- **In Class Engagement (10%):** During our Zoom meetings, we will discuss materials, watch videos, and listen to short lectures. So, too, will we engage with each other over video/audio, Moodle discussions, and breakout groups. Students should plan to always have Moodle open and available during class meetings.
- **“Thinking Abouts...” (10%):** Each week you will reflect on what you are still thinking about after our Tuesday and Thursday class meetings in brief posts, private Moodle journals. Posts should take roughly 15 minutes to produce and are P/F based on completion.

Writing Assignments (30%) Students will work on three writing projects throughout the semester. Each project will be discussed during a writing workshop and will be submitted with a (1) revision reflection and a (2) self assessment.

Workshop Attendance Letters (15%) Students will be placed into small groups that will meet regularly throughout the semester to discuss each other’s writing in detail. To prepare for those meetings, students will read each other’s work and write each other short, detailed letters that reference specifics in each other’s work.

Micro-Mini-Research Project (5%) After students are introduced to the library’s resources (in-class), they will complete a short research project where they find and briefly annotate (re: summarize) three texts related to a topic of their choosing. The topic should relate to class discussions or course readings.

Final Project (20%) For your final project, you must answer the following: How should we teach writing? The details of the project are up to you. You can answer this question in any number of ways, but you *must* answer this question as a writer. This means thinking about the form you want your answer to take, who the audience will be, what genre expectations are at play, and what the larger rhetorical situation is. Whether you produce a syllabus, podcast, letter to administration, a design of high school writing curriculum design, an assignment sheet, or an article on assessment practices, you should incorporate course materials and personal experiences to make an argument for your approach.

Final Reflection (10%). At the end of the semester, students will compose a 2-4 page final reflection that incorporates our course materials and discussions.

Weekly Reading Schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Check your email and Moodle regularly for updates.

Why Do We Write?

Week 1

Tuesday, 9/1: Introductions

Thursday, 9/3: Excerpt from *Why They Can't Write*

Week 2

Tuesday, 9/8: Fulkerson's "Four Philosophies"

Thursday, 9/10: Fulkerson's "Composition at the End of the Twenty-First Century"

Complete draft of essay #1 and post on Moodle by **Sunday, 9/13 at 11:59pm est

Read workshop groups essays and complete letter by **workshop meeting time

Week 3

Tuesday, 9/15: Workshop Group A (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group B (11:50-12:30)

Thursday, 9/17: Workshop Group C (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group D (11:50-12:30)

Essay #1 Due **Sunday, 9/20 by 11:59pm est

Language and Power

Week 4

Tuesday, 9/22: Toni Morrison's Nobel Speech

Thursday, 9/24: Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and "Inventing Writing" with Ellen Cushman

Week 5

Tuesday, 9/29: "Translingual Practice, Ethnic Identities, and Voice In Writing" and Jamila Lyiscott's "3 Ways to Speak English"

Thursday, 10/1: James Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," Gail Shuck's "Racializing the Nonnative English Speaker" and Asao Inoue's "Is Grammar Racist? A Response"

Complete draft of essay #2 and post on Moodle by **Sunday, 10/4 by 11:59pm est

Read workshop groups essays and complete letter by **workshop meeting time

Week 6

Tuesday, 10/6: Workshop Group A (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group B (11:50-12:30)

Thursday, 10/8: Workshop Group C (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group D (11:50-12:30)

Essay #2 Due **Sunday, 10/10 by 11:59pm est

Literacy, Education, and Writing

Week 7

Tuesday, 10/13: UNESCO's definition of literacy, "Literacy" from Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy

Thursday, 10/15: Rebecca Lorimer-Leonard's "Multilingual Writing as Rhetorical Attunement"

Week 8

Tuesday, 10/20: excerpt from Trevor Noah's memoir and Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue"

Thursday, 10/22: Fan Shen's "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition" and David Dzaka's "Resisting Writing: Reflections on the Postcolonial Factor in the Writing Class"

Complete draft of essay #3 and post on Moodle by **Sunday, 10/25 by 11:59pm est

Read workshop groups essays and complete letter by workshop **meeting time

Week 9

Tuesday, 10/27: Workshop Group A (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group B (11:50-12:30)

Thursday, 10/29: Workshop Group C (11:10-11:50); Workshop Group D (11:50-12:30)

**Essay #3 Due Sunday, 11/1 by 11:59pm est

So How Should We Teach? Writing in Higher Education

Week 10

Tuesday, 11/3: Election Day *No Class*

Thursday, 11/5: Peter Elbow's "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals"

Week 11

Tuesday, 11/10: Stanley Fish's "What Should Colleges Teach?" Part I and III, New York Times (2009); Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use Their Own English"

Thursday, 11/12: Joseph Harris's "Revision as Critical Practice"

Week 12

Tuesday, 11/17: Asao Inoue's "Classroom Writing Assessment as an Antiracist Practice Confronting White Supremacy in the Judgments of Language" and Mastuda and Cox's "Reading an ESL writer's text"

Thursday, 11/19: Cox, Tirabassi, and Ortmeier-Hooper's "Teaching Writing for the 'Real World'" and Rachel Marie-Crane Williams "Can you Picture This? Activism, Art, and Public Scholarship"

Week 13

Tuesday, 11/24: Library Day, Complete "Micro-Mini-Research Project," and watch video on final project

Thursday, 11/26: THANKSGIVING

Week 14

11/30: Fall Break no classes

Tuesday, 12/1: Peer Review on final projects and working day

Thursday, 12/3: Class reflections, course evals, sharing writing you are proud of, go over final reflection

Final Project AND Final Reflection Due 12/10 by 11:59pm est