

ENGLISH 250: ADVANCED COMPOSITION (Winter 09)

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A writer is a reader who is moved to emulation.

-Saul Bellow

Every story teaches you how to write that story but not the next story.

-Eudora Welty

Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.

-Anton Chekhov

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is an introduction to techniques of writing nonfiction: expository writing which combines characteristics of literature and journalism with the personal narrative. The familiar fundamentals of effective persuasive writing - providing a clear context and warranted reasons and evidence in support of a claim - are necessary underpinnings for an exploratory and reflective writing style. As such this course assumes students have a certain maturity in their prose and self-awareness as writers. Focus in this class is on development of the writer's literary voice and style to explore experience (family, culture, community, travel, health, and historical or personal history, for example) with emphasis on the creative use of setting, character, narrative action and arc, motif, symbol, and possible archetypal themes. Film (?) and text readings will be used as prompts, models, or jumping-off points for students to produce writing to be shared in a workshop setting. The course will involve intensive reading and writing. This course offers practice in writing a variety of prose forms. Stress is placed on developing the student's ability to order and structure material into its most effective form. Individual assignments will be written weekly over the semester and range from 500 to 2,000 words (course total of 5,000-5,500 words).

REQUIRED TEXTS

Robert L. Root Jr. & Michael Steinberg, *The Fourth Genre*

EVALUATION SCHEME

A+ = 90-100% A = 85-89 A- = 80-84
B+ = 77-79 B = 73-76 B- = 70-72%
C+ = 65-69 C = 60-64 D = 50-59%
F = Below 50% IN = Incomplete

A word about grading standards: Merely fulfilling the terms of an assignment, and doing so in a competent, reasonable manner is generally only enough for a grade in the B- range. 'A' grades will only be awarded when work demonstrates notable creativity, insight and excellence. All papers will be given a numerical grade to reflect the value in the term's work. The mark will be based on organization, quality of ideas and support, style and grammar, according to the following criteria:

A Range (85 - 100%) Superior level of achievement - worth consulting.

- exceptional insight into material or topic
- detailed, significant discussion
- effective organization for paper's purpose
- fluent, error-free expression

B Range (70 - 84%) High level of achievement - worth keeping.

- competent treatment of material or topic but less originality or perception than for A
- full but not so detailed discussion as for A
- organization contributing to sense but remaining workmanlike
- expression free of errors

C+ (65 - 69%) More than satisfactory level of achievement - worth doing.

- sound content, reasonably well organized
- clear but somewhat mechanical organization
- expression generally free of errors that confuse sense. May display content at the B or even A level but with more than one or two serious mechanical errors

C (60 - 64%) Sufficient level of achievement to proceed with next level – readable.

- acceptable but commonplace content adequately supported
- mechanical but generally coherent organization
- adequate but sometimes confusing expression

D (50 - 59%) Minimum level of achievement for which credit is granted - worth reworking.

- limited or misleading content with inadequate or inappropriate support
- incomplete or confusing organization
- frequent errors in expression that confuse sense

F (Below 50%) Minimum level not achieved - worth discarding.

- inadequate or inaccurate content
- incoherent organization
- many errors in expression
- basically, no apparent effort made in the paper at all

EVALUATION & ASSIGNMENTS

Your grade this semester will be based primarily on three main writing assignments (personal essay/memoir, critical review, reflective essay) and a group presentation.

ALL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE UPLOADED ON THE D2L SERVER:

<http://online.camosun.ca/>

Please be forewarned - make sure you have access to the Dropboxes for the assignments. Excuses involving issues around Dropbox access will not be accepted and will automatically result in a grade of zero for the assignment in question.

25%: Personal Essay - This essay is autobiographical but keep in mind you are not writing about yourself because your story is inherently interesting to your audience. Rather, you are shaping and interpreting some incident or encounter so that your readers may recognize some connection between your experience(s) and their own. Your primary source will be individual experience – no formal research is required for this essay (2-3 pages).

Suggestions

1. We have all had experiences that have changed the directions of our lives. Such experiences may be momentous, such as moving from one part of the country to another or losing a family member or close friend. On the other hand, they may be experiences that did not appear particularly significant at the time but have since proved to be important. Recall such a turning point in your life, and present it so as to give the reader a sense of what your life was like before the event and how it changed afterwards.
2. Without getting too sentimental, recreate your childhood perspective of a particular family. Your purpose might be to highlight the division between the child's perspective and the adult's; or it might be to illustrate the child's movement or attitude toward an adult perspective. You might want to draw instead from an account of a memorable person other than a family member and the effect - physical, emotional or psychological - that experience has constituted in your life.
3. Sometimes a significant relationship with someone can help us to mature, easily or painfully. Recount the story of such a relationship in your own life or in the life of someone you know well. If this relationship marked a turning point in your life or if it provided you with an important change of self-image, present enough information so that readers can understand the causes and effects of the change and can recognize the before-and-after portraits.
4. Write a reminiscence of a place that has had considerable significance for you (either during your childhood or more recently)--positive, negative, or both. For readers who are unfamiliar with the place, demonstrate its meaning through description, a series of vignettes, and/or an account of one or two quintessential people or events you associate with that place.

5. Write an account of some deep disclosure. Writing about a difficult, even traumatic, episode that either you or someone you know has experienced is always at risk of becoming a confessional so keep in mind you need to achieve some distance and 'objectivity' in tone. This is a personal essay in the sense that the information it contains is drawn from your own experience or at least filtered through your own observations. It is not, however, a private essay in the sense of therapeutic writing.

25%: Review - This essay will be an extended review of some item or event: live or recorded music, film, dance performance, book, lecture, protest rally, restaurant, car, bicycle, play, computer, sporting event, etc. Your goal will be to describe and evaluate the item under review. Your primary source will be "textual" in the broadest sense (3-4 pages).

Suggestions

Prepare for this assignment by reading some good informative articles in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, online forums like Slate or Salon, or other ones that are related to your specific interests. The purpose of a review is to provide an informed and succinct analysis of an item such (as a book, article, video, etc). The review should describe the item's content and discuss its strengths and weaknesses. A person who has not read (or seen) the item should be able to decide from what you have written whether or not he/she wants to read (or see) the item.

As always, give a lot of thought to your choice of a topic - something that you're interested in, something that you already know something about, and that you'll enjoy writing on.

As you explore your topic and then draft your article, consider the *needs* and *interests* of your potential readers: target an audience and give some consideration to what they *need* to know about this topic, and what they *want* to know about it. Remember, you need to move beyond your 'gut reaction' to an item in writing the review.

As you move from draft to revision, two of your main concerns will be making the article both informative *and* interesting.

25%: Feature Article - This essay should inform readers about a particular issue and provide commentary on that issue. However, we may choose from a variety of ways to approach our subject: as a conventional argument, as a simple exposition of opposing views, as a proposal, or as satire. In any case, this essay should highlight observation, research and factual investigation. Some minor element of the personal might factor in, as long as our primary focus is on the issue and not on ourselves. What we do not want to write for this assignment is any sort of tiresome rant or opinion piece or empty exercise in sarcasm. Your primary sources will be individual experience and textual evidence. Your essay should take on the guise of a feature article. This essay should be approached as if you were writing to submit to a magazine. Your primary sources will come from research (4-5 pages).

Suggestions

Read around issues that interest you – and you might well draw on your own academic interests here. Consider topics that you have already studied in depth – and keep in mind that as this is a research paper, you should settle on a topic that you have adequate source material for. Topic ideas may also come to you as you consider the different approaches available to you in this assignment.

Conventional Argument. The conventional argument can generally be thought of as a "pro" or "con" affair: Camosun should (or should not) sponsor a child-care facility on campus; college athletes should (or should not) be paid a salary and exempted from academic requirements; affirmative action programs do (or do not) perpetuate cultural myths of racial inferiority; laws against drinking alcohol until the age of 18 do (or do not) encourage teenagers to abuse alcohol; free condoms should (or should not) be distributed to high school students. If you take a "pro" or "con" approach, make sure that you build your arguments on facts - not on feelings or personal experience.

A Simple Exposition of Opposing Views. You might think of this approach as a conventional argument without the attitude: in other words, rather than actively trying to *persuade* your readers one way or another about a controversial issue, you set out to *inform* your readers about the complexities of an issue so that they have a basis for making up their own minds. Are there any issues that you have changed your mind about after much research and thought? Or are you now genuinely uncertain about some issues that you used to hold firm beliefs about?

A Proposal. You might want to propose a new required course for your program of study or a law requiring that all adolescents be exiled to Prince George until their eighteenth birthday. The basic parts of a proposal are a detailed explanation of the project or plan that you are proposing and a thorough justification for the implementation of the proposal. Many proposals, in the spirit of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* take the form of *satire*. Writing an effective satire isn't easy - particularly in our age of cheap sarcasm and the easy insult but the strategy is potentially powerful. Think about some of the ironies you may have perceived in our day-to-day lives: the elevation of self-esteem over intelligence in our educational system, perhaps, or the presumption that technology is saving us time (for what?) or the fantastical worlds projected by infomercials.

25%: Presentation - This exercise requires students (in their respective groups) build an essay presentation from a single word. First, each group will choose one word - any word - to which they are particularly drawn, a word that resonates for them. Then the task is to build an essay collaboratively revolving around this single concept. The direction of the presentation is open, but groups might wish to present the chronology of the project, work with personal memories triggered by the word, or provide some analytical, intellectual, philosophical study of the word. The goal of this exercise is to weave the word's broader application into a cogent, complex and meaningful presentation. The essay is not handed in – only the oral presentation is graded. Each group member must have equal speaking roles (20 minutes max.)

Note: I suggest students keep a reading portfolio. Collect articles that are examples of the types of things you will write, keep a reading log/journal of notes on those readings as well as the readings that will be assigned in class. This will help you work through the assignments in the course.

COURSE POLICY

Participation:

-This course requires participation by class members, so it is important that you attend in order to peer edit and contribute to class discussions. Regular and prompt attendance is required. You are responsible for material you miss if you are absent. I do not respond to "what did I miss" queries via email.

Assignments:

-Assignments are mandatory and due according to the dates & times specified. Late work will not be accepted (except under extraordinary circumstances) and will receive a grade of 0 (zero).

-Do not e-mail assignments – use the Dropbox.

-Please keep a copy of all work - including material you hand in - until final marks have been posted.

Email Policy:

While I make every effort to check email regularly, I would appreciate at least 24 hours to respond to questions/problems.

Student Disabilities:

-I would like to hear from students who have a disability that may require some modification in my teaching so that arrangements may be made to make them feel more at ease in class. .

Academic Honesty:

-I develop a sense for the style and syntax of your writing, and it is relatively clear when a written submission is not representative of your work. I also routinely use www.plagiarism.org to upload essays and check any suspected instances of plagiarism against sources on the Internet. Plagiarism is a serious offence. All offences will be reported and will result in a failing grade for the course. If you have any questions about source materials you are using, talk with me *before* turning in the assignment in question. **Students are assumed to be familiar with the "Academic Policies and Procedures" in the Camosun 2008-09 Calendar.**