

TECHNOLOGIES OF WRITING: FROM PLATO TO THE DIGITAL AGE

First Year Seminar 174-01

Anne Trubek

Fall, 2003

TTh 11:00-12:15

King 235

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Course Description

“Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word.”

-Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

Are computers changing the way we read, write and think? If so, are they also altering our “interior consciousness,” our sense of self? In order to approach these questions about reading and writing in (what some have called) a post-print age, this course will explore the history of writing, including past revolutions in writing technology, such as the invention of writing and the printing press. We will do so in order to better understand writing today as a set of individual, cultural and historical practices, and to reflect on the relationship between the tools we use to write—whether tablet, pen, keyboard or screen—and what we write.

We will meet in the new laptop seminar room, Many class sessions will consist of us all writing together, looking at each others’ writing on screen or surfing the web. We will also spend some time in Special Collections looking at pre-print manuscripts, early printed books and other interesting books and writings. Thus this will be a writing course in all senses of the term, as we will read and write about reading and writing.

Materials

The following can be purchased at Mindfair Books on College Street in the Ben Franklin building

Evelyn Tribble and Anne Trubek. Writing Material: Readings from Plato to the Digital Age 1/e Longman, 2003.

Joseph Williams, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace. Seventh Edition. Longman, 2003.

Course Requirements

Course Goals: To receive credit in this course you must demonstrate the following by the end of the term: 1.) significant improvement in your writing over the course of the semester, 2.) constant, thoughtful, involved participation in all aspects of the class: discussion, workshops, readings and Blackboard posts; and 3.) an introductory understanding of writing practices old and new, academic and general, expository and creative.

Writing: *Weekly Projects:* You will complete a writing assignment, or project, every week. Projects will be due on Thursdays. Assignments will range greatly—you will be asked to keep a literacy log for one assignment; another will ask you to analyze a recent technological trend; a third will ask you to handwrite a response to a reading. Some projects be only a paragraph long; others will be 4-5 pages long. Twice during the semester you will turn in all completed projects for one holistic grade. Grading will emphasize progress over the course of the semester; early projects will weigh less than later ones.

Final Essay: At the end of the semester you will submit a revised, expanded version of one of your weekly assignments (or an essay on another topic developed in consultation with me). This essay will be 6-8 pages long and will require independent research.

Grading: Class Participation: 20%
Projects 1-5: 20%
Projects 6-10 30%
Final Essay: 30%

Course Procedures

Blackboard: You will post to Blackboard every week by 11:00 am Thursday. You will post either that week's writing project (if it is completed in an uploadable form) or reflections upon the writing project (for example, thoughts about the experience of handwriting a response). Some of the projects posted to Blackboard may be discussed or revised during our Thursday workshops.

Writing Workshops: Most Thursday class sessions are set aside for writing workshops. During these sessions, you may be using laptop computers to work individually on your writing, working in a small group to review each other's work, experimenting with new ways of writing, participating in a workshop on a specific writing issue, etc.

Conferences: I will meet with each of you individually, for about thirty minutes, three times during the semester. During these conferences we will discuss your projects thus far and/or upcoming assignments. Some class meetings will be cancelled to allow time for individual conferences.

Attendance: This course is designed to be extremely interactive, because I think the best way to learn how to write well is to be able to read what other people like you are

writing, to talk with them about your writing, and to write together. Unfortunately, such a class can only work if we're all always prepared and we're all in class at the same time. In my experience, students who miss more than four classes are not able to complete the work required to receive credit for the class. Thus, students missing more than four classes will receive a No Entry for the course. Students missing more than three classes will have their letter grades reduced. Of course, exceptions will be made for emergencies. If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what was done during the class and complete all necessary work before the next class meeting

Late Assignments: Because this course emphasizes frequent writing, all assignments must be turned in on time unless you talk with me in advance of the due date.

Writing Requirement: Students whose writing meets Oberlin's "Criteria for Proficiency" by the end of the course can earn a writing certification credit. However, such certification is *not* automatically awarded for passing the course. Please talk with me individually about any concerns you may have about writing proficiency.

SYLLABUS

All readings are from Writing Material (last name of author listed below) or Williams, Style

Longer descriptions of weekly project requirements will be distributed in advance of due date.

Readings are subject to change.

Week 1 *Your Writing History: Introduction*

Sept. 2 Introduction
Sept. 4 Project #1 due: how do you write?

Week 2 *The History of Writing, Overview*

Sept. 9 Plato, Baron, Ong
Sept. 11 Project 2: handwrite a response; post reflection upon the experience to Blackboard

Week 3 *Orality and Memory*

Sept. 16 Elbow, Sundiata, Homer
Sept. 18 Project #3: Fairy Tales

Week 4 *Orality and Memory in the Digital Age*

Sept. 23 Parker, Bolter
Sept. 25 Project #4: Memorize and perform a narrative in class; post reflection to Blackboard

Individual conferences held week 4

Week 5 *The Digital Age?*

Sept. 30 Gopnik, Lesser, Johnson, Sosnoski, Birkerts
Oct. 2 Project #5: New ways of writing, an analysis. ***Hand in projects 1-5 for grading***

Week 6 *Style, part one*

Oct. 7 No Class
Oct. 9 Style, Lessons 1-3

Individual conferences held week 6

Week 7 *Style and the Digital Age, continued*

Oct. 14 Style, Lessons 4-6
Oct. 16 Project #6 Revise one previous assignment for clarity and grace, following Williams. Post reflection to Blackboard

FALL BREAK

Week 8 *The History of Writing Continued: Print Culture*

Oct. 28 Eisenstein, Trithemius, Twain, Gissing
Oct. 30 Project #7: to be announced

Week 9 *Special Collections*

Nov. 4 Visit to Special Collections—Greatest Hits in the History of Writing
Nov. 6 Project #8: Judging a Book by its Cover

Week 10 *Researching the Past*

Nov. 11 Hirsch, Pang, Roberts
Nov. 13 Project #9: looking up terms

Week 11 *Commenting in/on The Information Age*

Nov. 18 Duguid and Brown

Nov. 20 Project #10: annotation ***Hand in projects 6-10 for grading***

Week 12

Nov. 25 No Class

Nov. 27 **THANKSGIVING**

Individual conferences held week 12

Week 13 *Reading the Web*

Dec. 2 Sosnoski, Johnson

Dec. 4 Research Workshop

Week 14 *We're History*

Dec. 9 Workshop on final essays

Dec. 11 Conclusion

Final Essays due 4:30, Friday December 12

