

OBERLIN COLLEGE : Rhetoric and Composition 115

Entering Discourse Communities: Writing for College and Beyond

Spring, 2005

Mr. Podis

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How do I know what I think until I see what I say? —E.M. Forster

The word in language is half someone else's.—M. Bakhtin

Writing is rewriting.—Donald Murray

This course focuses on writing for college and for the world outside the academy, as well. You will write a variety of nonfiction pieces, including personal essays and academic papers. You will be encouraged to try other modes, such as journalistic reviews, editorial pieces, lab reports, letters, or stories. We will emphasize the writing *process* (how to function as a writer) as well as the *product* (the qualities of a good paper). We will dispel harmful myths and will approach writing as a rewarding activity that benefits the writer, who *learns* by composing, and the reader, who is informed, enlightened, or entertained. We will be both writers and readers: we will write for others, and we will read what others write for us.

When you enter the world of higher education, you get intensive exposure to what we call disciplines or fields. Each discipline or field can also be called a “discourse community.” Discourse communities are groups of people with special ways of communicating to each other about topics in which they share an interest. They employ specialized styles and formats, writing in conventionalized genres that members of the group have come to expect. For example, biologists, literary theorists, and cognitive psychologists have all developed specialized modes of writing that fall under the more general heading of academic discourse. Within academic discourse, however, there is a lot of variation: Biologists may write lab reports, literary theorists may write speculative essays, and cognitive psychologists may write experimental studies or reviews of the scholarly work that has been published on a topic. Beyond the boundaries of academia, we all participate in other discourse communities in which we may use forms such as letters, emails, personal essays, or memoirs. This course will help students to form a writer’s community to promote the exploration of the various discourses in which class members participate.

I would like us all to think of our writing, as much as possible, as real communication aimed at our classmates. We will treat writing as a tool for discovering and refining ideas, not merely a device for recording pre-existing knowledge. The course will include readings on the process of writing and essays on various topics, including discourse communities. There will be frequent writing assignments and conferences with the instructor to review written work. Most classes will be peer response workshops.

There are several major themes that will inform the course:

1. The value of writing as a tool for *discovery and learning*. (Writing is often generative, not just expressive.)
2. The need for *revision* to clarify the writer's ongoing discoveries. (Revision lets us re-envision our work.)
3. The view that writing is *social and interactive*, not just individual. (Our creations are influenced by others.)
4. The importance of *context and situation* in forming a piece of writing. (Adapting to circumstances is essential.)
5. The crucial role of *reading* in the shaping of a text. (Our writing becomes other people’s reading.)
6. The link between *personal* and *academic* writing. (Often they are separate, but they can also reinforce each other.)
7. The effects of a *diverse society* on writing and discourse. (People’s varied backgrounds yield diverse discourses.)

Writing Proficiency (WP) Credit. Students whose writing meets Oberlin’s proficiency standards by the end of the course can earn WP credit. However, WP credit is *not* automatically awarded for passing the course. (Except for those who have already passed RHET 100.) If you wish to earn WP credit, let me know so we can discuss your progress. At the end of the course, students interested in WP credit should submit a portfolio including their final research paper and three of their best revised essays.

Classes and Conferences. Classes meet T & Th. In lieu of a third class session, I will hold a half-hour conference with you every other week to review your written work in a one-on-one format. (Conferences will begin in Week 2.) Classes will allow you to write for—and get advice from—your peers, and conferences will provide an opportunity for you to work individually with me. **(OVER)**

Important: If you have more than three unexcused absences during the semester, you will be penalized at least one letter grade in the final course evaluation. I am enforcing a strict attendance policy, not to be authoritarian or punitive, but to emphasize that *your presence in class is crucial to our work*. This will be a hands-on, participatory course in which you are expected to take an active role. If you are absent when it is your turn to present a draft, it will be impossible to conduct the session. If you are absent when you are part of the audience for another's presentation, it will dilute our efforts to hold an effective workshop. So please make every effort to attend class.

If you must be absent, let me know. Also please be on time. Late arrivals are distracting and discourteous to your classmates, especially when they are presenting papers in workshops. Of course everyone has days when they are unavoidably delayed, but please try to take seriously your responsibility to be on time. All that said, I would prefer that you come late rather than not at all.

Writing Assignments. There will be one assignment in writing or rewriting weekly: either the draft of a new paper or a major revision of a previous one. Most papers should be 4–5 pages in length, except for the longer research paper (10–15pp) at the end of the course. I will hand out a new assignment sheet each week, but you should also try to do some *revisions* of previous papers. Major revisions may be done in place of new assignments. (You and I can discuss in our bi-weekly conference whether a particular revision is substantial enough to be counted as a new paper.)

Topics. Each week I will provide many topic options from which you can choose. You may also develop your own topics. If you want to work on a paper that is actually due in another course, I am happy for you to do so, and I will usually accept such assignments in place of the ones I give.

However, please be sure to get permission from the instructor of the other course. **Note:** If you believe that you are a person who responds poorly to freedom of topic choice, let me know, and I will then dictate a topic that you **must** write on. Also, if you believe you need practice with writing academic discourse, please pick one of the academic options. As a last resort, I can “force” you to write on an academic topic, but I’d rather you took the plunge of your own free will.

Submitting Work. Papers must be submitted on time. All drafts and revisions should be word-processed. Please use double spacing for your papers. Also please attach a Cover Sheet to each paper, whether for small group sessions, presentation workshops or submission to me. I will hand out blank Cover Sheets with each new assignment.

Grading. This is a graded course, but, as much as possible, I would like you to forget about the performance pressures that come with grading so that you can adopt a trial-and-error mentality and take risks that may be necessary to improve your writing. Rather than dwell on grading, I hope we can concentrate on the important tasks before us, so as to draw inspiration from the challenges and rewards of writing: discovering, expressing and communicating ideas, solving problems, and informing, enlightening, persuading, and entertaining each other. To facilitate this approach, I am using a form of contract grading. By this I mean that everyone who (1) attends regularly, (2) participates in course activities with strong commitment, and (3) does all the required writing assignments at an “acceptable level” will earn a grade in the B range. Don’t worry—I’ll tell you if a piece you have done is not acceptable, and we will talk in class about what we all think is acceptable or not, and why. People who do all of the above and who also go a step further to pursue their work with exceptional intensity and write excellent papers will get a grade in the A range. Those who don’t meet the contract will get a C, D, or F, depending on how much they depart from the contract (e.g., more than three unexcused absences will cost you one letter grade). Rather than put a grade on every paper, I will tell you every other week in our conference where I think you stand with regard to your grade and how you might maintain or improve your standing. Also, I will invite you to submit a final self-evaluation which I will consider as I determine final grades.

Textbooks: *Rethinking Writing* by Podis/Podis— Available on **ERes**; 1 copy also on Reserve

The Norton Reader, 11th Ed., by Peterson/Brereton— Available at the Bookstore

Working with Student Writers by Podis/Podis.— Available at the Bookstore

Online Resources for Writers: <http://www.oberlin.edu/rhetoric/students/online.html>

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Schedule for First Module—Sp. '05

WEEK 1

Tues., Feb. 8.....First Class Meeting: Check class registration and do introductions. Review the course syllabus. Assign. #1 will be handed out. For next class, read *Rethinking Writing*, pp. 1–17 (on **ERes**) and do Assign. #1 (This first assignment may be handwritten.)

Thurs., Feb. 10.....Bring your completed Assign. #1 for class discussion. I will ask you to sign up for a bi-weekly conference, and I will also hand out Assign. #2. For next class (Tues., 2/15), compose a draft of Assign. #2 and read *Rethinking Writing (RW)*, pp. 17–39 & 394–402. In *Working with Student Writers (WSW)*, read Chapter 3 (pp. 33–37).

WEEK 2

Tues., Feb. 15.....Bring a draft of Assign #2 to class. Today I will hand out the **Draft Presentation Schedule** for the first module (listing when people will present their papers to the whole class in a workshop format). In the first part of class today, we will go over the Guidelines for response in *Rethinking Writing*, pp. 25–28. During the second part of class, please exchange your draft of #2 with a partner. After you get advice on your draft, revise it to submit at our next class (2/17).

Note: Individual conferences begin this week for students scheduled in Sequence 1.

Thurs., Feb. 17.....Revised #2 due today. I will hand out Assign. # 3. A draft of #3 is due for peer response Tue. 2/22. Main activity for today: Our first Scheduled Draft Presentation to the class. For next week: *RW*, Ch. 2 & 200–208; *WSW*, Ch. 7 (73–83); *NR*: 1–9, 9–11 & 18–22.

WEEK 3

Tues., Feb. 22.....Bring a rough draft of Assign. #3 to class and exchange with a partner to read and respond to each other's work. Based on advice you receive, plan to revise #3 for submission at our next class.

Note: Individual conferences begin this week for students scheduled in Sequence 2.

Thurs., Feb. 24.....Revised Assign. #3 due. Assign. #4 handed out. Bring a draft of Assign. #4 to class on Tues., Mar. 1 for peer response. Main activity for today: Scheduled Draft Presentation. For next week: *RW*: 74–95 & 406–408; *WSW*: Ch. 10 (107–116); *NR*: 32–41 & 442–448.

WEEK 4

Tues., Mar. 1.....**Peer Response Sessions** for Assign. #4. Read and respond to each other's drafts. Then plan to revise Assign. #4 based on the advice you receive and submit it in class Thurs., Mar. 3.

Note: Individual conferences this week for students in Sequence 1.

Thurs., Mar. 3.....Submit revised Assign. #4. Assign. #5 handed out—draft of #5 due in class next Tues. (Mar. 8) for peer response. Main activity for today: Scheduled Draft Presentation. For next week: *RW*: 95–112 (**optional**: 493–506); *WSW*: Ch. 9 (95–100); *NR*: 74–79 & 82–87.

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WEEK 5

Tues., Mar. 8.....**Peer Response Sessions.** Bring a draft of Assign. #5 to class for peer response. Plan to revise the paper after you get feedback from your partner, and submit the paper in class Thurs., Mar. 10.

Note: Individual conferences this week for students in Sequence 2.

Thurs., Mar. 10.....Revision of Assign. #5 due. Assign. #6 handed out. A draft of Assign. #6 is due in class on Tues, Mar. 15 for peer response. Main activity for today: Scheduled Draft Presentation. For next week: *RW*, Ch. 4 and (optional) pp. 506–515; *WSW*, Ch. 16 (185–192); *NR*, 210–217 & 223–232.

WEEK 6

Tues., Mar. 15.....**Peer Response Sessions.** Bring your draft of Assign. #6 and plan to exchange with a partner. Then plan to revise to hand in at our next class, which will be one week from today, Tues., Mar. 22. Because there is no class on Thurs., Mar. 17, I will hand out Assign. #7 today and ask you bring a draft to class next Tuesday for peer response (along with the revision of #6 to submit). For next week: *RW*, Ch. 9 and (optional) pp. 516–528; *WSW*, Ch. 17 (193–198); *NR*, 889–902 & 1178–1180. Also read the handout: Jacob Weisberg’s “Thin Skins.”

Note: Individual conferences this week for students in Sequence 1 (except Thursday)

Thurs., Mar. 17.....**No Class!** Mrs. Podis and I will be presenting a paper at the Conference on College Composition in San Francisco.

WEEK 7

Tues., Mar. 22.....Submit your revision of Assign. #6 today and also bring a draft of Assign. #7 to class for peer response. Based on advice from your partner, plan to revise #7 for submission at our next class, Thur., 3/24

Note: Individual conferences this week for students in Sequence 2.

Thurs., Mar. 24.....Hand in Assign. #7. Assignment for over Spring Break will be made. Main activity for today: Scheduled Draft Presentation.

WEEK 8

Week of Tues., Mar. 29 & Thurs., Mar. 31:

Spring Break—Our next class meeting will be Tuesday, April 5. During break, in addition to working on your next assignment, I would like you to reflect on your work for the first half of the course and on the strengths and weaknesses of our writing course. We can discuss your thoughts and comments at the start of class on Tues., April 5.