



So You Want to Be an Intellectual?

A Roadmap to the U.S. Republic of Letters



FYSP 152 | Fall 2018

MWF 2:30-3:20pm | 302 Peters

Sebastian Faber | sfaber@oberlin.edu

x58189 | Office: 404 Peters

Office Hours: Tues 1:30a-2:30p, Wed 11a-12p, Fri 10-11a

Writing Associate: Sydney Allen (sallen@oberlin.edu)

Library Reference Liaison: Elizabeth Sullivan (esulliva@oberlin.edu)

Course Description

Speaking truth to power: It is perhaps the most commonly agreed-on mission of the public intellectual, from Julien Benda and Susan Sontag to George Orwell, Noam Chomsky, Molly Ivins, and Edward Said. But when, where, and how does this speaking to power occur? What are the tools, skills, and venues necessary to do so effectively? This course has three main goals: to think about the role of the public intellectual today in light of its historical evolution; to become thoroughly familiar with the “republic of letters”—the segment of the U.S. and international public sphere in which intellectuals communicate with each other and reach a general audience—and to begin thinking of ourselves as prospective citizens of that republic, while also critically considering the limitations of this public sphere and the ways in which the internet and social media have changed its role and function.

What are the minimal conditions for a productive public debate? Who has the right to speak out publicly and why? To what extent do experience and expertise legitimate public interventions? What is the most appropriate or productive venue for public exchanges of viewpoints and arguments? What is the role of civility, commitment, militancy, activism, identity, style, or language? What is the place of facts and how does ideology operate? What is the role of academics, journalists, activists, and citizens?

Course Structure

The three central activities of this course are reading, writing, and discussing. We’ll start with some initial introductory texts to help us understand a handful of key terms—such as *ideology*, *public sphere*, or *intellectual*—theoretically and historically. We’ll also draw a rough map of the U.S. (and, partially, U.K.) public sphere trying to pinpoint, as it were, the political GPS of a handful of major newspapers, magazines and other venues. (Each student is expected to “follow” one publications in particular.) During the rest of the semester we will revisit, follow, and join in debates about half a dozen controversial issues that affect the general interest, but about which thinkers and experts have profound disagreements. Some of these debates have been going on for years; others have emerged more recently. We’ll leave room to include debates that may pop up during the semester.

The course meets three times a week. Roughly speaking, we’ll dedicate Mondays to a discussing a selection of readings about a complicated issue that has sparked intellectual debate. Drafts for major writing assignments are generally due on Wednesdays, when we’ll devote class time to peer editing activities and talking about the writing process. Fridays, finally, will be regularly reserved for discussion

about recent texts on any topic of interest (two of these will be suggested by students on a turn-taking basis and one by the instructor).

On Reading

While this course carries a significant reading load, the large majority of the texts are directed toward a non-specialized audience, well written and edited, and highly engaging. That does not mean they are easy. Nor does it mean we should not read them carefully or critically; to the contrary. This course will also encourage you to begin reading—if you don't already—*as writers*, in the same way that a musician may listen differently to a concert than a non-musician. I want you to pay attention to style, openings and closings, structures: tricks of the trade. What kind of writerly voice resembles the voice *you* would like to develop as an author?

On Writing

We'll be writing a lot, pretty much something for every class. In addition to some sixteen short response papers, you will complete four formal writing assignments of different genres and lengths, with several drafts for each assignment. You are expected to bring a hard copy of your response papers to class; they'll serve as a starting point for discussions and other exercises. The response papers are handed in at the end of class and will be graded globally (v+, v, or v-). The writing assignments (handed in electronically in Word format) will be graded on a rubric, resulting in a letter grade. Only the grade on the final draft of each assignment will count toward the final course in the grade.

On Sharing

Between the 16 or so of us, we will be closely following ongoing public debates. Everyone is encouraged to share suggestions for interesting readings with the rest of the group at any time, but each student will be assigned with "following" a specific publication through the semester, in addition to the *New York Review of Books*. Some days, two students will be asked to share specific readings they found particularly good or interesting.

On Collaboration

Writing—like creative thinking generally—is a collective process. Ideas and texts are born in conversation with others. Both writing and editing are processes that heavily depend on others' eyes and brains. It is advisable to seek help. It is also good ethical and intellectual practice to acknowledge the help received. As a class, we will use each other—but not only each other—to improve and fine-tune our thinking and writing. But this does not mean that the author of a text is not the person ultimately responsible for that text. Our trained Writing Associate, Sydney Allen, will be of invaluable help in all stages of the writing process.

On Class Discussion and Peer Feedback

This course purposely combines theory and practice. While we read and think about reasoned public debate on issues that matter to many people, we will also engage in it ourselves. In fact, would like our

classroom to be something of a model public sphere unto its own: a space where ideas can be freely developed, exchanged, argued, and questioned. As your teacher, I will work hard to create an environment in which people feel it's okay to take risks. To achieve this, "safety" is less of a goal than mutual trust, good faith, and generosity of interpretation. I hope we can work together to build an atmosphere in which everyone trusts each other enough on a personal level to leave their comfort zone on an intellectual level. The goal of the class is to generate understanding, meaning, sense—not necessarily in order to formulate answers, but certainly the sharpest possible questions about issues that matter. I strongly believe that this process is creative and collective. Ideas are to share—and to challenge. All positions are tentative. Mistakes are allowed; in fact, they are inevitable and necessary. This is why it's helpful to assume good faith and be generous with granting the benefit of the doubt. Reading, too, can be an exercise in critique *and* generosity. It is good to ask questions before assuming an interpretation that may prompt a visceral reaction. We can only learn if we are not afraid to be wrong. Jumping to conclusions, on the other hand, tends to block the learning process.

On the Honor Code

Every student is expected to adhere to the honor code. This means in very general terms that you only submit work that is yours. More specifically, it means that you will not plagiarize (that is, you will not appropriate the work or ideas of someone else—whether written or not—without acknowledgement, using the conventionally agreed-on practices for quoting and citation), and that you will not cheat, fabricate, collaborate on a project that is meant to be done individually, or submit the same work for multiple classes or assignments without the prior approval of all instructors involved. Everyone in the campus community is required to report all suspected violations of the honor code. Following college-wide policy, you will include a signed statement on every assignment to certify that you adhered to the honor code. For more information, see the Dean of Students website (<https://www.oberlin.edu/dean-of-students/student-conduct/academic-integrity>).

Other Expectations

- Active class participation and group work based on readings and assignments.
- Attendance to all class sessions. (Any absence over 3 will lower the final class grade with 1%.)
- Students are expected to be on time and to remain for the entire class. Unexcused tardiness, early departure, or unexplained long breaks will be regarded as an absence. The student who misses a class, or any part of a class, is responsible for acquiring the information missed from a classmate.
- Email and Blackboard will be the preferred media for announcements, questions, and assignments; students are expected to check their mail and Blackboard page at least once a day.
- Every student will receive a one-semester print subscription to the *New York Review of Books*. (Please pay the \$10.50 subscription fee to Blanche Villar in 301 Peters **before the end of add/drop**.) You can also access the entire *NYRB* archive through the OC library ([link](#)).

Ongoing Assignments

1. Ongoing free reading. In addition to the readings assigned, everyone is expected to read at least **two substantial articles each week** on their own from at least **two different venues** (these may include the *NYRB*, to which everyone will receive a print subscription), either related to the debate under discussion or on another topic. (The goal is to create a habit; I'm trying to get you hooked.) These articles may occasionally be texts assigned in other classes you're taking.
2. **Reading log.** Using the template provided, log the articles you've read, along with some brief notes. The reading log will be shared with the instructor, for credit, three times in the course of the semester.
3. **Sharing** reading experiences. Once during the semester, every student will be asked to share a particularly interesting piece and lead a brief discussion on that reading during class.
4. **Response papers.** You will write a response paper (RP) for almost all classes that don't already carry another major assignment. These texts are around one page, double-spaced (but quality is more important than precise quantity) and will be graded globally (v+, v, or v-). These RPs are a great way to try out ideas and arguments.

Major Writing Assignments

1. First assignment: Profile of a fellow student, modeled on a *New Yorker* profile (750 w)
2. Second assignment: A newspaper op-ed piece (400-500 w)
3. Third assignment: An interview (750-1000 w)
4. Final assignment: An extended review article (2,000-2,500 w) on at least two books on related topics. You will also prepare a 7-minute in-class presentation on the books.

Final Grade Breakdown

Response Papers	10%
Writing Associate Sessions	5%
Reading Log	5%
In-Class Participation	5%
Writing Assignment 1	15%
Writing Assignment 2	15%
Writing Assignment 3	15%
Final Presentation	10%
Final Writing Assignment	20%

Tentative Course Program

Week 1 (Sep)

- Wed 9/5 Introduction(s)
- Fri 7 Profiling the Public Intellectual; explanation of profile assignment; profile pair-ups
Reading: 3 of the 5 *New Yorker* profiles (Morrison, Hitchens, Chomsky, Nussbaum, Stevenson), as assigned. [~45 pp total]
Due: brief note about yourself for the instructor; Response Paper (RP) 1

Week 2

[Sat/Sun Meet with two classmates to prepare your and their profile]

Mon 10 Mudd library session

Reading: On the concept of the public sphere (first set of texts).

Due: pre-assignment from Elizabeth Sullivan, Reference Librarian

[Tues/Wed weekly meeting with WA]

Wed 12 The Profile: Peer editing

Due: First draft of classmate profile for peer editing; due to Prof. by midnight

Fri 14 Discussion: the concept of the public sphere; the US public sphere today

Reading: On the concept of the public sphere (Calhoun)

Due: reading log (1)

Week 3

Mon 17 Debate 1: What is Clarity? The Tricks and Traps of Style

Reading: selection of texts on Bb

Due: RP 2

[Returned: The Profile, Draft 1]

Wed 19 No class (Yom Kippur)

Fri 21 Discussion: On the concepts of ideology and the intellectual

Reading: selection of texts on Bb (Williams, Said, Gramsci, Faber)

Due: RP 3

Week 4

Mon 24 [Syd Allen:] Prepare the Op-Ed (brainstorm; arguments; outline; research to be done)

Due: Final draft Profile

Wed 26 Debate 2: On Clarity continued: Language and Ideology

Reading: selection of texts on Bb

Due: RP 4

Fri 28 The Op-Ed, Draft 1 (peer editing)

Due in class: Op-Ed, Draft for peer edit

Due Saturday: Op-Ed, Draft 1 (400-500 words)

Week 5 (Oct)

Mon 10/1 Debate 3: Free Speech on Campus

Reading: selection of texts on Bb

Due: RP 5

Wed 3 [Syd Allen:] How to set up, conduct, and edit a journalistic interview

[Returned: Op-Ed, Draft 1]

Fri 5 What Have We Been Reading? (Reading reports 1)

Reading: TBA

Due: The Op-Ed, Final Draft

[Sat/Sun Conduct interview for Assignment 3]

Week 6

- Mon 8 Debate 4: Journalism and the Free Press: Challenges and Opportunities. Discussion with Dan Kaufman, journalist and author of *The Fall of Wisconsin*.
Reading: selection of texts on Bb
Due: reading log check-in (2), RP 6
[4:30pm: attend Dan Kaufman's talk]
- Wed 10 The interview (peer edit)
Writing Assignment 3 (Interview), Draft 1 (peer editing)
Due: Writing Assignment 3, Draft 1
By midnight: hand in Draft 1
- Fri 12 Career Center Presentation

Week 7

- Mon 15 Debate 5: Education in the United States
Reading: selection of texts on Bb
Due: RP 7
- Wed 17 What Have We Been Reading? (Reading reports 2)
[*Returned:* Writing Assignment 3, draft 1]
- Fri 19 screening: *The Fifty-Year Argument* (Martin Scorsese)
Due: Writing Assignment 3, Draft 2

*****FALL BREAK*******Week 8 (Oct/Nov)**

- Mon 29 Debate 5: The Midterm Elections & the State of U.S. Democracy
Due: RP 8
[*Returned:* Assignment 3, draft 2]
- Wed 31 Final Writing Assignment Brainstorm / What makes a good review essay
Reading: selection of reviews from *New York Review*, *London Review*, etc.
- Fri 11/2 What Have We Been Reading? (Reading reports 3)
Reading: TBA
Due: RP 9

Week 9

- Mon 5 Debate 6: Race in the United States
Reading: selection of texts on Bb; *Due:* RP 12
Due: RP 10
- Wed 7 Debate 6: continued.
- Fri 9 Discussion book selection for final assignment
Due: Prepare for Final Writing Assignment: explore and identify at least two books from the past 5 years on related topics

Week 10 (Nov)

- Mon 12 Debate 7: US Foreign Policy
Reading: selection of texts on Bb
Due: RP 11
- Wed 14 Books for final assignment: discussion
Due: titles and brief description of books for final assignment
- Fri 16 [Syd Allen]
What Have We Been Reading? (Reading Reports 4)
Reading: TBA

Week 11

- Mon 19 Debate 8: Universal Basic Income
Reading: TBA
Due: RP 12
- Wed 21 Final assignment: progress reports
Due: Ideas and Outline for final review essay
- Fri 23 THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 12

- Mon 26 Final writing assignment opening graphs (peer editing)
Due: Draft of first paragraphs final assignment
- Wed 28 Final writing assignment full draft 1
Due: Final writing assignment, **full draft 1**
- Fri 30 How to give a stellar presentation: Session with associates from Speaking Center
Reading: TBA

Week 13 (Dec)

- Mon 12/3 What Have We Been Reading? (Reading reports 5)
Reading: TBA
Reading log check-in (3 & final)
- Wed 5 final assignment presentations (5@7 minutes each)
- Fri 7 final assignment presentations

Week 14

- Mon 10 final assignment presentations,
- Wed 12 Wrap-up, semester debriefing, evaluations
Due: Final writing assignment, **draft 2** [will be returned during reading period]

➔ **FINAL DRAFT OF FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Thursday December 20, 4:00 p.m.**