

English 395
Writing and/as Activism
W/F, 2:20-3:30
Fall 2008

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Office Hours: Tues., 1-2:30; Wed., 11-12:30;
Thurs., 10:30-12:30; and by appointment.

Course Description

To what extent can, or should, writing (and also reading) function as a kind of activism? Can written work change minds and hearts? Should it be designed to do so? Can writing be more than a hobby--but also more than a vocation? That is, can the acts of writing and reading be seen as moral acts, as part of living a fully engaged life? In this course we will examine these and other questions as we read, discuss, and emulate both factual/documentary and imaginative works (ranging from op-ed pieces and documentaries to poems and short stories).

Goals and Structure

Writing and/as Activism, a special-topics course, will be an interesting hybrid: both a Learning in Common Moral Life (U2) course and a writing course. For the Moral Life component of the course, students will consider two “theoretical frameworks” for reflection upon a moral life (in this case, the frameworks of (a) factual/documentary works and (b) imaginative works of poetry and fiction); they will use these frameworks to explore two contemporary issues: (a) poverty and economic justice and (b) environmental damage and ecological responsibility. These explorations will come from students’ reading of a range of historical and contemporary works, attention to guest speakers, and viewing of relevant documentaries, and from assignments including journal responses and midterm and final written analysis and discussion.

For the writing component of the course, students will also write several “non-academic” (in the traditional sense) assignments: an opinion piece or personal essay, a poem, and a longer work (short story, mixed-genre, or multi-media piece). English Track 3 (Writing) majors who are taking the course as a major requirement will be expected to go further with revision and refinement of these works, and to submit all of them in a portfolio at the course’s end.

In addition to works of literary and journalistic nonfiction, poetry, and fiction, we will read and discuss several writers and philosophers who deal with ethics and its relationship to art (more specifically, in this case, to writing), including Plato, Iris Murdoch, Martha Nussbaum, and others. Through the entire semester, and in completing *all* the assignments referred to above, our work as a class will return to this list of fundamental questions:

What is a moral life?
Should we try to be moral? Why or why not?

**What is activism?
Can or should activism be linked with morality?**

**Does reading matter? If so, in what ways?
Who should read?
What should they/we read?**

**Does writing matter? If so, in what ways?
Who should write?
What should they/we write?**

**Can reading and writing be moral acts?
Can reading and writing be forms of activism?**

As we delve more deeply into questions of ethics and aesthetics and as we consider the wide-ranging works of a number of poets and writers, our answers to these questions will, I hope, grow deeper. And also perhaps clearer.

Required Texts and Materials

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001; originally published 1941).
 Tony Hoagland, *Hard Rain* (Hollyridge Press, 2005).
 Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notes on Poetry and Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2003; originally published 1993).
 Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio, *Hungry Planet: What the World Eats* (Material World Books and Ten Speed Press, 2005, 2007).
 Derrick Jensen and Stephanie McMillan, *As the World Burns: 50 Simple Things You Can Do to Stay in Denial* (Seven Stories Press, 2007).

Plus handouts and other materials provided by instructor and materials placed on reserve in Reeves Library.

Attendance Policy, and a Note on Plagiarism

We will meet twice a week (sometimes only once a week) for fifteen weeks; that isn't much time together when you consider all we have to do. If you are serious about writing and about this course, you will show up on time, every time. More than two absences (excused or unexcused) will automatically lower your final grade.

I would hope that it goes without saying that any work you submit for this course must be your own; to plagiarize in an upper-level writing course is to convey a shocking disrespect for writers and their work. Refer to the College's policy on academic honesty (available in the Student Handbook) for any needed clarification.

Blackboard Postings and Journal Entries

Pre-class Blackboard postings are to be brief (probably a few sentences at most) thoughts or questions in response to a given day's assigned reading, posted at that week's forum on our course Discussion Board. These are due by 12 AM on the day the reading is to be discussed in class (that is, by midnight the night before), and they will be used to guide our class discussions that day and beyond.

Post-class or post-workshop journal entries (minimum one page, or 300 words) should be responses to the reading, film or speaker, discussion, and/or workshop session we've read/viewed/heard/ participated in that week. These should be thoughtful critical responses (no rants, please), and they may be e-mailed to me or delivered as hard copies, by 2 PM on the day they're due. I will read these and assign them a plus, check, or minus.

Evaluation

Pre-class Blackboard postings (Min. 5 required by 9/3, 9/17, 10/24, 11/5, 11/12) and post-class and post-workshop journal entries (Min. 10 required by 9/1, 9/15, 9/29, 10/6, 10/13, 10/20, 11/3, 11/17, 11/24, 12/8)	25%
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Opinion piece or personal essay plus workshop participation	15%
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Poem plus workshop participation	15%
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Longer work (min. 8 pages) plus workshop participation	25%
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*Note that English Track 3 (Writing) majors will be required to submit more fully refined versions of the above, in portfolio form, including one work selected for submission to *The Comenian*, *The Manuscript*, or another publication, at the course's end. Also included in the portfolio should be an introduction describing the revision process and choices. Failure to meet this requirement will result in a lowering of the final grade by a minimum of one letter grade.

Midterm in-class writing plus discussion (Addressing questions on p. 2 and drawing on a minimum of one writer and one philosophical discussion on ethics and aesthetics discussed in class)	5%
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Final in-class writing plus discussion (Addressing questions on p. 2, distinctions between factual/documentary and imaginative work, and a minimum of three writers)	10%
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Participation	5%
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Schedule

Week 1

Wed. 8/27 Introduction to course; brief overview of Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; handouts: Rilke, Wright

Fri. 8/29 Agee & Evans, Preface plus pp. 1-42
 For following week: reading of op/ed pages of *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Morning Call*, *Express Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* (on three different days; at least one reading of *NY Times*).
 Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 9/1.

Week 2

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Wed., 9/3.

Wed. 9/3 Handouts: Bauchner, Shipler, Skutches, Reynolds, Martin, Saunders.

Fri. 9/5 In-class writing (writing prompts for op-ed piece or personal essay).

Week 3

Wed. 9/10 and Fri. 9/12 Workshop: Op-ed piece or personal essay
 Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 9/15.

Week 4

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Wed. 9/17.

Wed. 9/17 Handouts: Plato and Murdoch; Nussbaum.
 Lecture: Background on ethics and aesthetics (drawing largely on Noel Carroll's "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" in the Jan. 2000 issue of *Ethics*, available at www.jstor.org).

Fri. 9/19 No class.

Week 5 *This week: Required attendance at talk by Colette Palamar on Thurs., Sept. 25.

Wed. 9/24 Final op-ed piece or personal essay due.
 Rich: VI (As if your life depended on it), X (The hermit's scream), XII (Someone is writing a poem), XXV (To invent what we desire); Ostriker (handout).

Fri. 9/26 No class.
 Post-class (and talk) journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 9/29.

Note: Attendance at the Dodge Poetry Festival, held in Waterloo Village, NJ Sept. 25-28, is recommended (though not required); bus transportation will be provided by the English Dept. and Zinzendorf Society on Friday, Sept. 26. See www.dodgepoetryfestival.org for more details.

Week 6

Wed. 10/1 Hoagland, *Hard Rain*; discussion of Colette Palamar's talk and work; in-class writing (poem exercises).

Fri. 10/3 No class.
Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 10/6.

Week 7 *This week: Required attendance at "Shakespeare Behind Bars" (film screening and talk), Wed., Oct. 8 at 7 PM in Prosser Auditorium and the Snyder Room.

Wed. 10/8 and Fri. 10/10 Midterm in-class writing plus discussion; guest speaker (days to be determined).

Post-class and film/talk journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 10/13.

Week 8

Wed. 10/15 and Fri. 10/17 Workshop: Poem
Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 10/20.

Week 9 *This week: Required attendance at talk by Scott Weidensaul on Thurs., Oct. 23 and required viewing of *An Inconvenient Truth* by Fri., Oct. 24.

Wed. 10/22 Weidensaul (handout).

Pre-class Blackboard posting (on *An Inconvenient Truth*) required by 12 AM Fri., 10/24.
Fri. 10/24 Discussion of Weidensaul talk and *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Week 10

Wed. 10/29 Final poem due; Jensen and McMillan, *As the World Burns*.

Fri. 10/31 Carson and Kolbert (handouts).

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Mon., 11/3.

Week 11

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Wed. 11/5.

Wed. 11/5 Agee & Evans, pp. 43-98 and 195-224; in-class writing (longer work exercises).

Fri. 11/7 Agee & Evans, pp. 255-278, 309-313, 381-394; in-class writing (longer work exercises).

Week 12 *This week: Required attendance at reading/talk by Akiko Busch, Wed. Nov. 12 at 4 PM.

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Wed. 11/12.

Wed. 11/12 Busch (handout).

Fri. 11/14 Leguin (handout); Menzel and D'Aluisio, *Hungry Planet*, Introduction.

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Mon., 11/17.

Week 13

Wed. 11/19 and Fri. 11/21 Workshop: Longer work.

Post-workshop journal entry required by 2 PM Mon. 11/24.

Week 14 (Thanksgiving—no classes.)

Week 15

Wed. 12/3 Menzel and D'Aluisio, *Hungry Planet* (selections to be determined).

Fri. 12/5 No class.

Post-class journal entry required by 2 PM Mon., 12/8.

Week 16

Wed. 12/10 Final longer works posted on Blackboard by 12 AM Wed., 12/10 and due to JH by today's class; discussion of these works, plus course evaluations.

Finals Week

Final in-class writing plus discussion.
English Track 3 (Writing) portfolios due.