

**English 395**  
**Writing and/as Activism**  
**M/W, 1:10-2:20**  
**Spring 2010**

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**Office Hours: Mon., 10:30-11:30; Tues., 1-2:30;**  
**Wed., 2:30-4; 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, view, discuss, and emulate both factual/documentary and imaginative works (ranging from op-ed pieces and documentaries to poems, short stories, graphic novels, and beyond).

### **Goals and Structure**

Writing and/as Activism 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, we 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). We will use these frameworks and this large theoretical question to explore two contemporary issues: (a) poverty and economic justice and (b) environmental damage and ecological responsibility. These explorations will come from our 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.

In addition, for the writing component of the course, students will complete several “non-academic” (in the traditional sense) assignments: an opinion piece or personal essay, a poem, and a longer work (critical review, expanded personal essay, short story, mixed-genre or multi-media piece, etc.). 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 three 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 Noel Carroll—in order to consider larger philosophical questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. 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?**

**Which literary genres or modes (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, film, songs, graphic novels) connect most clearly, deeply, or meaningfully with the effort to understand, and to live, a moral life?**

### **Required Texts and Materials**

James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001; originally published 1941).

Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun* (McSweeney's Books, 2009).

John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (Yale UP, 2009).

Derrick Jensen and Stephanie McMillan, *As the World Burns: 50 Simple Things You Can Do to Stay in Denial* (Seven Stories Press, 2007).

Plus online works, 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 fourteen 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.

All phones *turned off* during class time, please.

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 8 AM on the day the reading is to be discussed in class, 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 5 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%
Opinion piece or personal essay plus workshop participation	15%
Poem plus workshop participation	10%
Felstiner/selected poet class presentation	5%
Longer work (min. 8 pages) plus workshop participation	20%

\*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 (Addressing assigned question or questions on p. 2 and drawing on a minimum of one writer and one philosophical discussion on ethics and aesthetics discussed in class)	10%
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Final in-class writing (Addressing assigned question(s) on p. 2, one or more discussion of ethics and aesthetics, and a minimum of three writers)	10%
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Participation 5%

## Schedule

### Week 1

Mon. 1/18 Introduction to course; brief overview of Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; handouts: Rilke and Wright, Martin, Haymaker

Wed. 1/20 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 5 PM Fri. 1/22.

**Week 2\* This week: Required attendance at talk by Veronica Eady ("MLK's Vision of the 'Beloved Community': Moving Toward Environmental Justice"), Tuesday, Jan. 26, 7:30 PM, Prosser.**

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 8 AM Mon., 1/25 (Here please include a listing of op/ed pieces read, and then a note or question on assigned reading for 1/25.).

Mon. 1/25 Handouts on op/ed writing, Bauchner, Biss; essays online (links provided) by Strand ("The Crying Indian," "Keyword: Evil").

Wed. 1/27 Discussion of Tuesday's talk; in-class writing (writing prompts for op-ed piece or personal essay).

### Week 3

Mon. 2/1 and Wed. 2/3 Workshop: Op-ed piece or personal essay  
Post-workshop journal entry required by 5 PM Fri. 1/29.

**Week 4\* This week: Film *Coal Country* (Thurs., Feb. 11, 7:30, Prosser)**

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 12 AM Mon. 2/8.

Mon. 2/8 Handouts: Plato and Murdoch; Nussbaum.

Wed. 2/10 Final op-ed piece or personal essay due.  
Felstiner, Preface and Introduction; model chapter/poet presentation; scheduling of presentations for weeks 5 & 6.

**Week 5 \*This week: Kathy Mattea's "My Coal Journey," Wed., Feb. 17, 7:30, Foy Hall.**

Mon.2/15 No class.

Wed. 2/17 Handouts (Adrienne Rich, from *What Is Found There: Notes on Poetry and Politics*)

Presentations on poets in Felstiner

**Week 6\* This week: Film *Woven Ways*, Feb. 23, 7:30, UBC Room**

Mon. 2/22 Handouts (Hoagland, Ostriker, etc.)  
Presentations on poets in Felstiner.

Wed. 2/24 Presentations on poets in Felstiner; midterm review.  
Post-class journal entry required by 5 PM Fri., 2/26.

**Week 7**

Mon. 3/1 Midterm in-class writing; poem pre-writing.

Wed. 3/3 No class.

**SPRING BREAK (Note that everyone is to have watched all four hours of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* [under External Links on class Blackboard site] by class time on Wed., March 24.)**

**Week 8\* This week: Film *Crude*, Thurs., Mar. 18, 7:30, Prosser.**

Pre-class Blackboard posting (on *As the World Burns*) required by 8 AM on Mon., 3/15.

Mon. 3/15 *As the World Burns*; workshop: poem.  
and Wed. 3/17  
Post-workshop journal entry required by 5 PM Fri. 3/19.

**Week 9**

Pre-class Blackboard posting required by 8 AM on Mon. 3/22.

Mon. 3/22 *Zeitoun*.

Wed. 3/24 Final poem due; *When the Levees Broke*.

Post-class journal entry, on both *Zeitoun* and *When the Levees Broke*, required by 5 PM on Fri. 3/26.

**Week 10**

Mon. 3/29 Agee & Evans, pp. 43-98 and 195-224; brainstorming, in-class writing, scheduling for final projects.

Wed. 3/31 Agee & Evans, pp. 255-278, 309-313, 381-394; brainstorming, in-class writing, scheduling for final projects.

Post-class journal entry required by 5 PM Fri., 4/2.

**Week 11\* This week: Film *Green*, April 8, 8 PM, UBC Room.**

Mon. 4/5                      No class.

Wed. 4/7                      Leguin (handout), Simpson, “Diary of an Interesting Year” (online; link provided), Strand, “Beautiful Ruination” (online; link provided).

Post-class journal entry required by 5 PM Fri. 4/9.

**Week 12 \*This week: Required attendance at reading/talk by Ginger Strand on Tuesday, April 13**

Mon. 4/12                      Noel Carroll, “Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research” (online; link provided); review of Plato, Murdoch, Nussbaum.

Wed. 4/14                      Class visit by writer Ginger Strand.  
Post-class journal entry required by 5 PM Fri. 4/16.

**Week 13**

Mon. 4/19 and Wed. 4/21      Workshop: Final project.  
Post-workshop journal entry required by 5 PM Fri. 4/21.

**Week 14**

Mon. 4/26                      Presentations of final projects.

Wed. 4/28                      Presentations of final projects.

**Finals Week**

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