

English 263
Writing as Activism
M/W, 2:35-3:45
Fall 2012

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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 and short stories).

Goals and Structure

Writing 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)—and also the larger theoretical question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. 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--in connection with this year’s In Focus topic of Sustainability.

These explorations will come from our reading of a range of historical and contemporary works, attention to guest speakers, and viewing of relevant films, 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: a manifesto or personal essay, a poem, and a longer work (e.g., an expanded manifesto or personal essay, short story, mixed-genre, or multi-media piece).

Besides 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. 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

Wendell Berry, *Given: Poems* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

David Gessner, *My Green Manifesto: Down the Charles River in Pursuit of a New Environmentalism* (Milkweed Editions, 2011).

Helon Habila, *Oil on Water: A Novel* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

Grace Paley, *Fidelity: Poems* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008).

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 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.

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.

*****Note to English Majors:** In preparation for creating an English Major Portfolio in your senior capstone seminar, please save both digital and hard copies of your work for

this class, including drafts with peer and instructor comments.

Moravian encourages persons with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation or have questions about the physical access provided, please contact the event sponsor at least one week prior to the event. Students who wish to request accommodations in this class for a disability should contact Elaine Mara, assistant director of learning services for academic and disability support at 1307 Main Street, or by calling 610-861-1510. Accommodations cannot be provided until authorization is received from the Academic Support Center.

Pre-Class Posts and Journal Entries

Pre-class posts are to be brief (probably a few sentences at most) thoughts or questions in response to a given day's assigned reading; we will determine as a class the best forum for sharing these posts (be it a shared email distribution list, Blackboard Discussion Forum, or some other means of communicating as a group). These will be due at an agreed-upon time 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.

I will record whether or not you submitted the required pre-class posts, as well as marks for post-class and post-workshop journals, converting these to an overall letter grade for this component of your evaluation (see below).

Evaluation

Pre-class postings (Min. 4 required; see schedule for dates) and post-class and post-workshop journal entries (Min. 8 required; see schedule for dates)	25%
Manifesto or personal essay plus workshop participation	15%
Poem plus workshop participation	15%
Longer work (min. 8 pages) plus workshop participation	20%
Midterm in-class writing (Addressing assigned question or questions on p. 2 and drawing on a minimum of one	

writer and one philosophical discussion of ethics and aesthetics addressed in class) 10%

Final in-class writing

(Addressing assigned question(s) on p. 2, a minimum of three writers, and one or more discussions of ethics and aesthetics) 15%

Schedule

Week 1

Mon. 8/27

Introduction to course; in-class reading and writing.

Wed. 8/29

Reading (handouts and online material) as assigned; in-class writing.

Week 2

*****Watch *Gasland* by Wed., 9/5.**

Mon. 9/3

Labor Day (no class).

Wed. 9/5

Pre-class post on reading (handouts, online material) as assigned; journal on *Gasland* due.

Week 3

*****This week: Required attendance at Cohen Lecture by Winona LaDuke on Thursday, Sept. 13, 10 AM.**

Mon. 9/10

Gessner, *My Green Manifesto*, Part 1; journal due.

Wed. 9/12

In-class writing and sharing in small groups.

Week 4

Mon. 9/17

Journal on LaDuke lecture due. Manifesto/personal essay workshop.

Wed. 9/19

Workshop, cont'd. Post-workshop journal due by 5 PM Friday, 9/21.

Week 5

Mon. 9/24

Excerpts from Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There* plus poem packet (handout); journal due.

Wed. 9/26

Final manifesto or personal essay due; in-class writing (poetry exercises).

Week 6

Mon. 10/1

Pre-class post on assigned reading: Holly Metz, "Remembering an Executed Man" (handout); excerpts from Plato and Murdoch (handout); preparation for midterm in-class writing.

Wed. 10/3

Possible guest speaker: Holly Metz (view work at hollymetz.net in preparation).

Week 7

Mon. 10/8 Fall Break (no class).
Wed. 10/10 Midterm in-class writing.

*****Watch for information re. Dodge Poetry Festival this week.**

Week 8

Mon. 10/15 Pre-class post on Berry, *Given: Poems*, Part 1; poem workshop.
Wed. 10/17 Workshop, cont'd. Post-workshop journal by 5 PM Friday, 10/19.

Week 9

Mon. 10/22 Paley, *Fidelity: Poems*; journal due.
Wed. 10/24 Paley documentary. Final poem due.

Week 10

Mon. 10/29 Berry, *Given: Poems*, Part 2 and "It All Turns on Affection" (2012 NEH Jefferson Lecture (online)).
Wed. 10/31 Gessner, *My Green Manifesto*, Part 2; journal due.

Week 11

Mon. 11/5 Pre-class post on LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (handout) and Simpson, "Diary of an Interesting Year" (online).
Wed. 11/7 In-class writing.

Week 12

Mon. 11/12 Final longer piece workshop.
Wed. 11/14 Workshop, cont'd. Post-workshop journal by 5 PM Friday, 11/16.
*****Film: *Journey of the Universe* on Friday, 11/16.**

Week 13

Mon. 11/19 Workshop cont'd. Habila, *Oil on Water*, Part 1.
Wed. 11/21 Thanksgiving Break (no class).

Week 14

Mon. 11/26 Lecture on Noel Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research" and Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*.
Habla, *Oil on Water*, Part 2; journal due.

Wed. 11/28 Class visit by Helon Habila.

*****Required attendance at Helon Habila's reading, Wed. 11/28, ? PM.**

Week 15

Mon. 12/3 Final longer piece due; course evaluations; review for final in-class writing.
Wed. 12/5 Final in-class writing.

