

Technoculture

SYLLABUS Expository Writing 20

Dr. Aden Evens

Spring 2004

Tu/Th 12-1 in Sever 104, and 1-2 in Sever 204

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Course Content

The computer and related technologies have invaded our daily lives, have changed the way we communicate, do business, gather information, entertain ourselves. Even technology once considered distinctly “modern” — photography, the telephone, movies, television — has been altered or replaced by faster and more dynamic media that allow more manipulation and control by the individual. Anyone can now create stunning photographic images without a processing lab; and film no longer earns its name, as the cinema often presents images that were never filmed to begin with, but created or doctored in the digital domain. What are the consequences of these changes for the media and arts they alter? How does digitizing affect the values, ethical and aesthetic, of images, texts, and sounds? How do these technologies change the way we spend our time and relate to other people? In the age of the digital, what becomes of property, of history, of identity? This course will consider such questions, paying special attention to visual media. Through a series of careful comparisons of images, texts, movies, games, and music — pre-digital versus post-digital — we will analyze the ways in which these media and our responses to them have changed in the digital era; and we will ask whether the change is for the better or the worse.

Readings

All readings for this course will be handed out in class. Students will pay a nominal fee to cover the cost of photocopies. The following list is not comprehensive, but provides some idea of what we will read together, write about, and discuss. The list is compiled in the order in which we will encounter these texts.

William Mitchell, excerpt from *The Reconfigured Eye*

Lev Manovich, “The Paradoxes of Digital Photography”

Mark Poster, “The Good, the Bad, and the Virtual: Ethics in the Age of Information”

Richard Spinello, a chapter from *CyberEthics*

Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music"
Anne Balsamo, on gender and the computer
Philip K. Dick, "Minority Report"
Steven Spielberg, *Minority Report* (film showing)

Course Requirements

In Expository Writing this semester you will write four essays. Each of the four essays will require a somewhat different approach from the others, but in every case, the goal is good academic writing. Such writing identifies a problem or a question that demands investigation, and then articulates that problem as clearly as possible, pursuing every reasonable route to its resolution. The best problems do not disappear in their solutions, but reach their point of greatest articulation. By completing assignments preliminary to the culminating essay in each phase of the course, you will examine and rehearse the writing process. These assignments will encourage you to ask questions, to consider the assumptions and definitions that underlie a conflict, to analyze and argue.

Class

Class is an important part of this process. Please come to class ready to contribute. Much of what you learn in the course will occur to you in class discussions as you listen to each other's ideas and enrich each other's thought. Class is a joint endeavor, and in everything we do this semester your participation is essential. You have a responsibility not only to yourself but also to your classmates to show up for class, to show up on time, and to show up prepared. Class starts punctually at ten minutes past the hour. If you're more than ten minutes late to class, you'll be counted absent. (See Expos policy on Attendance, below.)

Writing is extremely hard work, and you must be willing to put in the necessary hours in and out of class, and you must be committed to a persistent critical examination of your own work. Ultimately, you are uniquely positioned to be your own best critic. As such, both in relation to your fellow students and in relation to your own improvement, your role in this class is more crucial to its success than is mine.

We will frequently examine student writing in class. If you write something as part of an assignment, but do not want it to be shown to the rest of the class, please include this request in a note accompanying your submission.

Conferences

Each of you will have three or four conferences with me, of about twenty minutes each. Conferences are an extension of class, and in conference we will discuss your essays and work together to improve them. *You should come prepared to talk about the problems you're having as you work on a particular essay and to offer possible solutions.* I will listen and offer advice, but only if

you seem to need it. The point, after all, is to learn to write well on your own. Don't think of me as an editor or as someone who is going to "correct" your papers for you. Try to see me instead as someone who knows and understands the conventions you're trying to learn and who would like to help you develop your own ideas.

Deadlines

All deadlines in this course are firm. If you hand in a preliminary writing assignment after its due date and time, you will receive no feedback. If you hand in a draft after its due date and time, you will receive no feedback and forfeit your right to a conference. If you hand in a revision after its due date and time, you will be graded on the previous version of the essay, i.e., the draft version we discussed in conference. But make no mistake: even if you miss a deadline and suffer these penalties, you must still hand in your work or risk exclusion from the course. (See "Two Important Expos Policies: Attendance and Completion of Work," below.) Except in the case of medical or family emergency (in which case I need a notice from a doctor or a dean), I give no extensions. If, due to such an emergency, you cannot meet a deadline, please contact me as soon as possible so that we may work out an alternative schedule of due dates and times.

These policies, though seemingly severe, have two concrete benefits for everyone in the class:

(1) you may be less likely to fall behind if you know that your actions (and inactions) have real consequences, and (2) you can count on being treated the same as your classmates, which is another way of saying that no one will receive preferential treatment (by, for example, having immunity to overrun a deadline in order to work longer on a piece of writing).

Communication

Electronic communication, including the website and e-mail, will be used to reduce the amount of paper and photocopying for this course. I'll often use e-mail to relay administrative details and to hold in-class announcements to a minimum. Please check your e-mail daily. You are responsible for any information I pass along electronically. I might also ask you to e-mail me certain assignments. I, too, will check my e-mail frequently. As this course concerns itself with the digital, the course website will likely play a role in presenting materials for class. The website is available at <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~exposae/>.

Grades Goals, and Criteria

The goal of this course is for you to engage an original idea in each of your essays, and to interest both yourself and your readers. Your essays should enlighten your readers and let them know why your essay is important — why what you have to say *needs to be said*. The whole semester is designed to develop techniques for creating such essays. It is an expectation of the course that your essays will be free of grammatical, spelling, and formatting errors. If you are to grapple with the difficult process of thinking in writing, I cannot afford to spend time reminding you of formal rules. Essays with significant grammatical, spelling, or formatting errors will be penalized.

The bulk of your grade comes from the four essays you write. They are weighted equally, each constituting twenty-two percent of your final grade. The remaining twelve percentage points are assigned to class participation and the expert and careful completion of in-class and pre-draft assignments, including commentary on the work of your peers.

Good writing justifies itself: no general rule applies in every case, as thoughtful writing engenders its most appropriate form. As writers, therefore, we cannot rely on a checklist of rules to ensure that our writing is the best it can be. At most, we hope that the writing process itself, along with a constant commitment to excellence, will yield good writing. An author who takes up a problem that genuinely presses itself upon her and critically pursues it to the limits of her ability will likely produce excellent work. Nevertheless, there are a number of characteristics that the best writing tends to manifest, and these I will encourage in your work.

Typically, a good essay is a focused examination of a pressing problem. It provides appropriate and compelling evidence for its original conclusions. It includes no excess, making every word count and choosing the clearest exposition of its ideas and reasons. It considers every reasonable perspective, noting its own inadequacies. It takes account of its audience, offering explanations where requisite, and avoiding specialized jargon and unnecessary verbiage.

In spite of these guidelines, good writing is not formulaic, so that there can be no ultimately decisive criteria to determine the relationship between the essay and the grade. In general, an ‘A’ essay pursues an original problematic insight as thoroughly as possible, in compelling and beautiful prose. A ‘B’ essay may suffer from underdeveloped ideas, lack of focus, unnecessary excursions, awkward or inexact wording, or various other problems, but includes a strong sense of direction, the feeling of being “on to something.” A ‘C’ essay grasps at a problem but has not yet seized upon one, or is otherwise hampered by a glaring oversight, a lack of motivation, faulty logic, or a failure consistently to rise above the obvious. A ‘D’ or ‘E’ essay shows a profound lack of understanding or intellectual laziness. If you adhere to the requirements of the assignments, your grades will measure the strength of thought in your writing.

It is a minimum expectation that your essays will be free of grammatical, spelling, and formatting errors. Essays exhibiting such errors will be penalized. Mechanical perfection is not the goal of the course but, rather, its most basic expectation. The true goal is for you to express an original idea in an interesting, engaging way; your essays should both please and enlighten your readers and give them a sense of why your essay is important — why what you have to say needs to be said.

Manuscript Forms

Writing assignments other than essays will usually be submitted electronically. Unless otherwise specified, you should e-mail the assignment inline, as part of your e-mail text, and not as an attachment. The subject line should include the assignment number (“P1.2”) and your name. (Of course, your name will also appear in the address field of the e-mail, but for reasons of bookkeeping, it is very helpful for me if you include your name in the subject line, as well.)

Essay manuscripts should be typewritten, double-spaced, etc. Single-space your name, the course title, my name, and the number of the essay (or draft) in the upper right-hand corner of the first page. Center your title about a third of the way down your first page, and begin your opening paragraph two double spaces beneath your title. Please do not underline your title or place it in quotation marks (except in special cases, such as a title that is a quotation). Number your pages, beginning on page two. You should use a twelve-point font, and margins of about an inch all the way around.

All essay assignments will be submitted as hardcopies. The paper copy is generally the one that I will grade and put comments on. In addition, you are also expected to send an electronic copy to me, as an attachment, with the assignment number (“Draft 2” or “Revision 2”) and your name in the subject line.

All drafts and revisions must be word-processed and thoroughly proofread for typographical, grammatical, and punctuation errors. If you consistently make these kinds of errors, your grade will drop.

You are required to keep a copy, electronic or otherwise, of every assignment. You are strongly encouraged to save your document frequently, back-up regularly, and print your work-in-progress periodically. Computer errors are inevitable and do not excuse shoddy, incomplete, or late work.

Following the guidelines will ensure that I can focus on your ideas and your prose when I read your essays, rather than devoting time to issues of formatting, pagination, and so on.

Writing Center

If you'd like extra help on your essays in Expos or other classes, make an appointment at the Writing Center by logging onto its Web site: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr>. This superb service is located on the garden level of the Barker Center. Trained tutors will meet with you for about an hour. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours in Lamont, Hilles, and certain Houses; look for postings or call 495-1655 for information.

Expos Policy: Attendance

Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. If you are absent without medical excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade. On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your peril. This letter will also be sent to your Freshman Dean and to the Dean of the College, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within twenty-four hours; otherwise, you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Freshman Dean, as you will also be required to do in the case of protracted or repeated illness. Absences because of special events such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within twenty-four hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Freshman Dean and you must directly petition the Associate Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Expos Policy: Completion of Work

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course — not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and be copied to your Freshman Dean and the Dean of the College. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.