"[T]he essay [is] a writing practice whose fundamental ground is a critical orientation toward the object of inquiry and toward the subject, that is, the self . . . . [I]n essaying, the writer and the object of inquiry (an experience, an institution, a text, a disciplinary practice, or even one's self as that self is rendered in language) define and transform themselves reciprocally, aspects of each becoming understood in relation to the other . . . . The sense of the essay that I am trying to approximate suggests that 'essay' is, at least implicitly, a subversive activity, for in its tentative and suspicious inscription of the self through an encounter with an object, the essay simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes both." --Thomas Recchio, "On the Critical Necessity of 'Essaying' "

If a writing class could be summed up in one word, then for me it would be inquiry. The purpose of the class is to initiate what might well be a life-long process of rigorous, but at the same time playful, questioning of the world at large. Beyond students just writing better essays, I take as my goal students becoming both better readers and thinkers as well because writing is always grounded in a particular practice of reading. When you write about a topic, it always operates within the larger context of what others have already written/said about the topic you are interested in. So what a class like this does is to help sharpen your ability to read a text and then know how to respond back. (Sometimes this “text” in not literally something written, but more like the “text” of your personal experiences.)

Course Description, Objectives, and Outcomes

Writing 121 emphasizes the development of essays appropriate for a college-level audience and critical thinking. The course focuses on fundamental features of essays including organization and development, diction and style, revision and editing, mechanics and standard usage required for college-level writing. Class operates by the model of active learning—exercising one's critical reading skills and asking independent questions. Class format is primarily group discussion and group workshops.

Upon successful completion of the class, students should be able to

1. Analyze the rhetorical needs implicit in a variety of academic and practical writing assignments (“rhetorical” is a fancy word that refers to the interaction of audience(s), author’s purpose/outcome, and the topic itself).
2. Apply appropriate levels of critical thinking strategies (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) in response to the rhetorical needs of an assignment.
3. Implement appropriate rhetorical elements and organization (introduction, thesis, development and support, rebuttal, visuals, narration, conclusion, etc.) in response to the rhetorical needs of an assignment.
4. Locate, evaluate, and integrate high-quality information and opinion in response to the rhetorical needs of an assignment.
5. Craft sentences and paragraphs that communicate their ideas clearly and effectively using words, sentence patterns, and writing conventions to make their writing clear, credible, and persuasive.
To meet these outcome goals, students will practice writing thoughtful expository prose, demonstrating competence in organization, mechanics, and the writing process. Such competence is reflected in the following skills: using a variety of writing strategies (narration, definition, comparison and contrast, classification, description, examples, and persuasion) to help focus and develop the main idea; presenting ideas logically; developing a writing style appropriate to the audience, purpose, and situation; reading and critically analyzing the writing of others using summary, paraphrase, and quotations; integrating source material into their own work using lead-in signal phrases and in-text citations (at least one essay must include outside research and MLA documentation conventions); using organizational and transitional strategies to give an essay shape and form; presenting material logically with an introduction which defines the subject and previews the content of the essay, a discussion section which is fully developed, and a conclusion which summarizes and interprets the thesis; using standard grammar, syntax, spelling, and punctuation; and revising and editing their writing effectively.

Requirements

Prerequisite: Placement in WR121 is determined by pre-enrollment testing or by passing WR115 with a grade of 'C' or better. Before entering WR121, students are assumed to have basic competence in grammar, mechanics, sentence structure and in developing related ideas in a unified, coherent paragraph and/or short essay.

*The Little Seagull Handbook, 2nd ed.*, Bullock, Brody and Weinberg
Also strongly recommended: portable dictionary

Major Assignments, Point Value and Percentage of Total Final Grade:

- 15% Essay #1 (3-4 pages) 75 points
- 15% Essay #2 (3-4 pages) 75 points
- 20% Essay #3 (a “Research” Essay, about 4-6 pages) 100 points
- 30% Final Exam (not graded on a point system, but equivalent to 150 points)
- 12% Homework / In-class Work 60 points
- 8% Participation / Attendance 40 points (4 points a week)

500 Total Points Possible (350 Points Before Final Exam)

Policies and Procedures

Attendance and Class Format: The format of the class is primarily discussion, rather than lecture; therefore, much of what goes on in class cannot be made up. Work that can be made up is available on the class’s Moodle website. You can get partial participation points for contacting me about an absence (up to five absences). More than five absences will likely cause you to fail the class because you will have missed in-class activities and essential material difficult to catch up with. Solid preparation work on your part by reading and being prepared to discuss assigned reading from the textbook will ensure livelier discussions and a more productive use of class time. The exception to this rule is illness. If you are seriously ill, especially with flu symptoms, please do not come to class.
Papers: Essays are due at the beginning of class on the assigned day. **Late papers will not be accepted if turned in more than a week after original due date.** In other words, I don’t accept paper “dumping” where students turn in more than half of their coursework in the last week of class. Papers should be typed, double-spaced, carefully proofread, and include your name, date, class name, essay number, and my name. **Save all** work you do for this class. Subsequent versions of essays submitted should include previous versions turned in along with my comments and peer reviews. Revisions are almost always appreciated and encouraged, but they should be completed no later than two weeks after being returned. Papers may be e-mailed to me as an attachment between classes. I can only download attachments in the following formats: *.doc, *.docx, *.rtf, or *.pdf (not *.wps format).

**Grading Criteria:** When I read student essays, I look for a number of qualities including unity of purpose, specificity of detail, and coherence of progression. Essays are given a holistic letter grade based on five criteria: argument, critical reading, organization, audience, sentence-level writing, and manuscript formatting. “Argument” includes how effectively the paper presents a thesis and supports it through relevant examples. Students can demonstrate their critical reading skills by how they use details from sources to offer a fresh perspective on the topic that goes beyond a bland summary. The paper’s organization into paragraphs should follow from the paper’s main purpose (form follows function). Good papers are often an implicit dialogue between an author and reader—good writers anticipate how a potential audience will relate to a paper. Students should write in complete sentences that avoid grammatical errors (especially comma splices!), awkward phrasings, and mistakes in punctuation, but beyond that students should cultivate a personal writing style with an interesting variety of sentence and phrase structures.

**College Resources:** Computer Lab in Albany (Forum 204) and Learning Resource Center (WH-222); Writing Center in Learning Resource Center in WH-200; **On-Line Writing Lab (OWL)** http://lbcc.writingcenteronline.net/WCenterWebTools/OWL/owl.php From initial ideas to final drafts, the LBCC Writing Center can help you take your writing to the next level. Please feel free to drop in during their regular hours to work one-on-one with one of their supportive Writing Assistants. In addition to your draft, please bring your assignment and any questions you have. You may also submit your writing online at lbcc.writingcenteronline.net where you will receive a personalized response within 1-2 business days. For more information, visit them online at http://www.linnbenton.edu/go/learning-center/writing-help. You will need to get registered through the Learning Resource Center.

**Accommodation:** Students who may need accommodations due to documented disabilities, who have medical information which the instructor should know, or who need special arrangements in an emergency, should speak with the instructor during the first week of class. If you have not accessed services and think you may need them, please contact Disability Services, (541) 917-4789.

**Etiquette and Nondiscrimination:** One of the goals of this course is to construct a "discourse community," a space in which students feel comfortable expressing their ideas openly. This means that during class discussions and small group work some basic rules of etiquette should be followed. No personal attacks will be tolerated. Also, avoid talking while someone else is speaking or frequent use of cell phones/pagers. The LBCC community is enriched by diversity. Everyone has the right to think, learn, and work together in an environment of respect, tolerance, and goodwill. We will work toward creating a community without prejudice, intimidation, or discrimination. (related to Board Policy #1015). LBCC prohibits unlawful discrimination based on race, color, religion, ethnicity, use of native language, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, veteran status, age, or any other status protected under applicable federal, state, or local laws.
**Plagiarism:** This college punishes incidents of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is subject to disciplinary action as described in Student Rights and Responsibilities. All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. Students may only seek assistance in writing their papers from authorized sources (me, members of class peer review group, or university-approved tutorial service). The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. See me if you have any questions about your use of sources.

**Four Basic Components of this Course**

When I design the class syllabus and plan out class activities, four main priorities help me organize the class:

- Writing Process ("How to write an essay")
- "Information Literacy"
- Argument
- Critical Thinking

Allow me to discuss each of these components in more detail to give you a sense of what I think this class is ultimately about.

**Writing Process**

Sometimes I have to laugh a little to myself that I’m teaching writing because writing was not my best subject in school and remains difficult work for me. Throughout high school and well into college, it was a subject that I really struggled with. I think it takes a long time (not just 10 short weeks) for someone to develop her or his own unique writing “voice,” which is not just a simple transcription of one’s speaking voice. I’m not convinced that anyone can teach you how to write.

Writing is a different kind of class because it involves more of a “know-how” type of knowledge, rather than a “know-that” type. In most classes, the course content is some definite set of information or way of solving problems that is reproduced on exams. In writing, on the other hand, although we will learn some about the “content” of writing, one demonstrates mastery of the material through one’s performance in writing essays. This means that one can be a good writer without actually knowing much about the subject—or knowing it in a more intuitive way. Also, unlike other school subjects, writing is unique in being more “recursive.” What I mean by that is that often, as one moves through an academic quarter, one builds on course material progressively: there is a definite set of steps to learn, and in order to get to step three one needs to have already mastered steps one and two. In my opinion writing is **not** like that, though, because with writing one rarely starts at the beginning and moves steadily to the end; rather, it is often more of a chaotic, zigzagging process.

I do try to give constructive feedback on how to improve your writing in my responses to your writing, but in the long run it will help you to become your own best editor rather than relying on someone else “catching mistakes.” (Do you know the saying “Give a man a fish and he eats for the day; teach the man to fish and he eats a lifetime”?) As a teacher, I have to say upfront that I don’t see education in a strictly hierarchical, top-down way. I have as much to learn from you as you do from me. Yes, I will be assigning you a grade and have chosen the reading and writing assignments for the class, but I’m primarily interested in setting up a dialogue with students. Hence, many of my comments on your papers will be marginal comments and questions that occur to me as I’m reading them. These marginal comments are meant to model a habit of reading or a style of inquiry that I think best stimulates critical thinking.

Your essays will improve if you pay attention to the process by which you compose them. The basic steps all writers use (albeit with major differences in how they go through these steps) are Pre-Writing (brainstorming,
clustering/mapping, outlining, etc.), Drafting, Revising, and Editing. Note that revision and editing are different activities. Revision is more attuned to the “global” features of the essay: paragraph structure, relevance of examples to support thesis, enhancing level of development of ideas, etc. Editing is more about “fixing” mistakes or enhancing the readability of the essay in terms of sentence phrasing.

**Resources for further help:** See document “Basic Conventions and Tips for Writing Essays” in the course packet and *Little Seagull* Chapters W3-W4 and R3-R4. The templates in *They Say / I Say* (765-79) are meant to help you master the basic “moves” often made in academic discourse. For sentence-level issues (which are actually not a major determinant of one’s grade in most cases) that often pop up in writing, see “Basic Mechanics Guide” in packet and *Little Seagull* pages 252-354.

**“Information Literacy”**

The way in which one accesses, evaluates, and incorporates information into one’s writing has become a state-mandated feature of this course. For your third essay in particular, you will need to consult and incorporate outside research into your essays. In learning to work with sources, students should become more adept at using direct quotations, paraphrasing, summarizing, and synthesizing information. In addition to the technical challenges information literacy involves (learning the mechanics of how to incorporate other’s work into one’s own according to academic conventions), a conceptual barrier must be overcome, too—subordinating the research one does to the process of inquiry. In the handbook *LB Brief*, Jane Aaron explains, “Research writing is much more than finding sources and reporting their contents. The challenge and interest come from interacting with and synthesizing sources: reading them critically to discover their meanings, judge their relevance and reliability, and create relationships among them; and using them to extend and support your own ideas so that you make your subject your own” (399). Here, Aaron is explaining that doing research in an academic context goes beyond reporting about a topic in a completely neutral and bland way.

Whenever you consult an outside source, you will need to document this source. Multiple conventions for how to do this make the process somewhat confusing. The default system we will use is the MLA (which stands for Modern Language Association—essentially an organization of the nation’s college English teachers), but if you are more familiar with another system (APA for example) you may use that one as well. Please stay consistent with whichever system you use. Don’t create a quirky hybrid system of your own.

The main features of MLA include brief in-text citations of, at a minimum, the author’s last name (or title if no author is listed) and a page number (if one exists). Your writing will be more effective if you do more than just mention the author’s name. Try to use a “signal phrase” that tells your reader something about the author. Why is this person a credible source for you to consult? Full bibliographic information is on a separate page at the end of the essay (“Works Cited”). Some key features to remember about the Works Cited page: uses a “hanging” paragraph indent format, organized alphabetically (not in order of appearance in the essay), does not include URLs (http…) for web-based sources, includes “medium of publication,” for web-based sources include your date of access. The MLA changed some of these formatting features in April 2009, so if you’re using an older handbook or learned all this stuff a while ago be aware some of it may have changed. For a sample Works Cited page, see *Little Seagull* pp. 156-57.

**Resources for further help:** *Little Seagull* pp. 80-157. The “They Say” section of *They Say / I Say* (pp. 19-51) is primarily about how to interact with your sources more effectively. Reference librarians are a great resource. They
won’t do the work for you, but they’ll point you in the right direction. When it comes to formatting a Works Cited entry, I’ve found Purdue’s OWL site to be helpful over the years (Google Purdue OWL).

Argument

The editors of They Say / I Say claim that “academic writing is argumentative writing” (3; emphasis added). In western society, generally, “argument” encompasses a major way that people communicate with one another. Argument in this sense is not necessarily a verbal fight—more about making assertions and backing up those assertions with evidence. Because of the importance that this concept has for our communication both generally and in terms of writing essays, we will look briefly at Toulmin’s understanding of argument.

In this regard, there are three types of writing to avoid in this class: pure chronology, encyclopedia order, and “data dump” writing. In Pure Chronology (also called “and then” writing), a writer tells what happens (remember that “showing” through analysis over “telling” is a better route all the way around) between point A and point B without focus, selection, pacing, or tension. Such an essay might be tempted to begin “since the dawn of time . . . ” and then try to encompass a historical totality of the problem. It’s very difficult to do this in any depth in just a few pages. Instead, focus on just one piece of the overall problem. (Of course, then the struggle is how to say one thing without saying everything.) Such an approach is likely to fall into the pattern of a descriptive summary, rather than an analysis or argument. Because of the profound impact of stories on people’s sense of self, chronological thinking may seem a “natural” way of retrieving ideas and even details from long-term memory. But what you need to do in your writing is develop reasons to support your view. You can make use of narrative in your writing, but this story needs to be subordinated to the overall issue/problem.

In your writing, you will often be communicating information about a topic. But information transference alone is inadequate to effective writing. Encyclopedic Order (“All About” Writing) tries to say a little bit of everything about a topic. When skillfully done, it breaks a problem down into a meaningful series of categories or sub-topics. But these categories do not function as reasons to support the claim. Like the headings in an encyclopedia article, the categories are merely a way to arrange information that does not add up to an argument. Remember that your purpose is not primarily to impart information—it is to construct an argument. It might help to focus on certain kinds of questions: rather than asking factual questions (“what is it?”), it would help to ask “how” and “why” type questions instead. I also call this type of writing “report mode” in that it’s offering a reader a neutral report on the topic rather than an engaged inquiry into a problem/issue.

Random Order (“Data Dump” Writing): Unlike the previous two types, this type of writing has no discernible structure. This approach patches together quotes, statistics, and other raw information without a coherent organization plan and without “doing something” with the information. No more than 20% of your essay should be quotations. The majority of the essay should be your processing of the information by interpreting and analyzing it. (This is why it’s usually a bad idea to end a paragraph with a quote. Instead, remember that “fat-bottomed” pearls make the writing world go ‘round—paragraphs are like “pearls” strung together on a necklace. The “heavy lifting” of any paragraph comes after the quote—what you do with it.) This type of writing reveals a student overwhelmed with information and uncertain what to do with it.

Here’s a quick checklist to make sure you have the makings of a “good” argument:

1. Potential for Disagreement. A thesis can be thought of as the response to a question at issue. For a question to be at issue, it has to be “open” and currently unresolved. Reasonable people can disagree about the answer to the question. If your topic is a matter of verifiable fact, then there is no potential for disagreement.
2. Interest/Relevance. For a question to be at issue, there has to be something at stake about it to make it worthwhile to discuss. Personal interest can help supply this sense of relevance, but you also have to take into account what your readers might be interested in.
3. Not Overly Risky or Personal. People tend to care deeply about their own personal political and/or religious points of view. But these interests often don’t translate well into an academic context. As a
genre, an essay is not a religious testimonial. (It’s for this reason, that I’ve “banned” abortion and death penalty as possible topics.)

4. Evidence-Based. As much as I personally like to think about Bigfoot, extraterrestrial aliens, and ghosts, these and other “extra-sensory” topics don’t work well as the basis for an argument. You will need to base your argument on credible and empirical evidence.

5. Balance of Narrow/Broad. Think realistically of what you can take on in a few pages. You may not be able to tackle an entire “big” subject (why welfare is the greatest evil since Satan himself, for example). You can focus on pieces of larger issues.

Resources for further help: Documents on Argument section of course packet, class Moodle site, and Chapter W7 in *Little Seagull*. I have also provided a helpful chapter on Argument from *LB Brief* as a .pdf on Moodle.

Critical Thinking

According to Stephen Brookfield, as expressed in his book *Teaching for Critical Thinking*, critical thinking “entails (1) identifying the assumptions that frame our thinking and determine our actions, (2) checking out the degree to which these assumptions are accurate and valid, (3) looking at our ideas and decisions (intellectual, organizational, and personal) from several different perspectives, and (4) on the basis of all this, taking informed actions” (1). According to Brookfield, there are three types of assumptions that underlie our thinking process: causal, prescriptive, and paradigmatic. A causal assumption uses a linkage of cause and effect to explain why something has happened and to predict the potential outcomes of decisions. Prescriptive assumptions are held about what are desirable ways of thinking or acting (often uses the word *should*). Paradigmatic assumptions are the deeply held assumptions that frame the whole way we look at the world (sometimes called “ideology”). It’s important to learn to recognize how these assumptions affect how we think and act. Brookfield argues, “if you can’t think critically, your survival is in peril because you risk living a life that—without your being aware of it—hurts you and serves the interests of those who wish you harm. If you can’t think critically you have no chance of recognizing, let alone pushing back on, those times you are being manipulated. . . . So critical thinking is not just an academic process that leads to . . . elegantly argued essays . . . . It is a way of living that helps you stay intact when any number of organizations (corporate, political, educational, and cultural) are trying to get you to think and act in ways that serve their purposes” (1-2). I couldn’t say it any better myself. The primary means we have for developing this skill, I think, is through active reading. Whenever we read an essay, we should be thinking about the author’s underlying assumptions. Learning to recognize the assumptions that other authors use will help us identify our own underlying assumptions and reflect on them in a more self-critical way (that’s the theory anyways).

In beginning to think about basic assumptions, it might help to consider the basic assumptions at work in academic writing. In their textbook *From Inquiry to Academic Writing*, Stuart Greene and April Lidinsky identify four key habits of mind involved in academic work: inquiring, seeking and valuing complexity, understanding writing as a conversation, and understanding writing as a process. On their second habit, allow me to offer a bit more explanation. Many times when students come into class, they complain, “Oh, that reading was so complex!” My response: “You say that like it’s a bad thing.” The best questions lead to rich, complex insights that others can learn from and build on. Consider a beer analogy: I once heard a Sam Adams commercial that touted its complex flavor. Exactly! Not everything in life is Coors Lite. But if your taste buds are attuned to Coors Lite, you probably won’t like more “sophisticated” types of brew. Think of the reading we’ll be doing as a giant taste test of other types of “beer” which may taste a little bitter at first. Not all writing is necessarily better if it can be boiled down into a bullet point list. Sometimes students need to resist a rush to judgment and instead “complexify” their thinking through a

"[T]o stand in the midst of this . . . rich ambiguity of existence without questioning, without trembling with the craving and the rapture of such questioning, without at least hating the person who questions, perhaps even finding him faintly amusing--that is what I feel to be contemptible, and this is the feeling for which I look first in everybody."

--Friedrich Nietzsche
process of developing ideas in a fuller way than one may be used to. If you find a particular reading too “dry,” I’d be really curious to know what wet or juicy reading looks like from your perspective.

**Resources for further help:** Looking through both *They Say / I Say* and *Little Seagull*, this would appear to be a major blind spot of both books. Chapters 8-9 of *LB Brief* is helpful; this book is on reserve in the library. I will try to work on these skills during class as well.

**Stuff We Will Do in This Class**

**Reading**

A warning up-front: I do assign quite a lot of reading. This could be thought of as my attempt at "casting a wide net": if I assigned less reading, I would run the risk of students not connecting to any of the essays I happened to choose during the course of the quarter. In assigning more reading, I am hoping that at least some of the reading we do will be of interest to an individual student to explore in greater depth. So I would recommend that students at least try to read the essays on at least a superficial level to prepare for class discussions and reading quizzes but hopefully find 1-2 of the readings of enough interest to explore in greater detail. Also, if I were to assign fewer essays to read, then we would have to devote more class time to discussing the essays in excruciating detail.

In recent years, I’ve noticed a steady decline in either the willingness or ability of students to perform assigned reading. (How many of you are actually still even reading this piece, for example?) Much of this decline can probably be ascribed to more and more intense schedules students need to try to maintain (I can’t imagine going to school and working and having major family responsibilities). I should remind you, though, that the basic assumption for a college-level course is that the work you do outside of class should be double the amount of contact time. If you’re taking a 3 credit class that means you should be doing at least 6 hours of homework a week. Another barrier to students doing the reading, perhaps, is that since you’re not being tested on this material, there’s no direct utilitarian purpose in doing it. To try to provide a more direct incentive for doing the reading, we will be doing some reading quizzes throughout the quarter that factor into the Participation portion of your grade. The exact format and point values of these quizzes has not yet been determined.

OK, I have to admit that when I was a student, I didn’t do all the assigned reading either. But in my darker moods, I’m beginning to wonder if our society is entering into a state of “post-literacy.” I sometimes wonder how our society will function if people refuse to read basic directions, for example. Beyond basic “functional” literacy, I see my job as a writing teacher to also promote a sense of “critical” literacy—knowing what it means to engage fully with a text. So we’ll be doing quite a bit of reading to try to counter this trend.

One habit that students need to get over is a simplistic evaluation of a reading based on one’s initial preferences. “I didn’t like that reading because it was boring.” One’s liking or disliking of a reading is almost irrelevant. Any reading is just one more example of a source that presents an example of the kinds of rhetorical patterns we are learning about in *They Say / I Say*. I find it interesting that English class readings, in particular, are subjected to the standard of a student’s random preference. When handed a set of problems to solve in a math class, one doesn’t normally say, “Ehhh, I didn’t feel like doing those problems because they just didn’t speak to me. They were too boring.” Yes, it’s boring—that’s why it’s college. Or, perhaps you can fool yourself into adopting the mindset of a scholar where anything is potentially open to a process of inquiry. Think of the essays we read as a set of homework problems to work on.

The most effective tool a student can use to develop his/her critical reading skills is the “dialectical” or double-entry notebook journal. (“Dialectical” refers to the method Socrates used in his search for truth.) The purpose of this journal is to become actively engaged in the struggle to obtain meaning from an unfamiliar and challenging work. The journal takes the form of a written conversation with one’s self about the reading that encourages the habit of reflective questioning. First, divide notebook pages into two columns. In the column labeled "Text," students record important elements taken directly from the text, in the order in which this information appears. Thus, when they finish, students have a summary of the material they have read. Include both summaries
and quotations. Clearly indicate which is which to prevent inadvertent plagiarism. The second column of the notebook is labeled "Response." Here students record their questions, comments, and ideas next to that part of the text that has prompted their reactions. Students use these responses in class to help analyze the text and to express any thoughts or reflections they may have had as they read. In essence, the Response section becomes an intellectual history of their reading experience. One of the important outcomes is that this section allows readers to see how they have changed during the process of interacting with the text. In essence, they are able to say, “This is what I knew and how I felt at this point in my reading, and this is what I know and how I feel now.” Furthermore, this material drives classroom discussions (see below), and it offers students a wealth of material for their writing.

There are two main types of reading we will be doing: “textbook-y” reading and “real” reading. The “textbook-y” reading (all the stuff in Little Seagull and the first four sections of They Say / I Say) is helpful, especially if it’s been a while since you’ve taken a writing class. But the long-term use-value of this type of reading is limited. Much more important, I think, are the actual essays we will be reading. Even if these essays are on subjects you’re not interested in, they do present models for what academic writing looks like that you might be able to emulate in your own work. Some of the reading we encounter may be difficult—but that’s sort of the point, isn’t it? If you’re content in reading stuff at the Dick and Jane level, you’ll have no chance in reading the difficult and demanding material you may encounter in other courses.

Discussing

Most of our class time together will be spent talking in one form or another. This will include discussing assigned reading (see above—if few students do the assigned reading, what is there to talk about, really?), developing ideas for essays, and some instruction on writing essays generally. Ideally, class discussions can be another avenue for developing one’s critical thinking and communication skills. But they are just one avenue to developing these skills. Merely talking doesn’t guarantee that critical thinking is happening. For critical thinking to happen, some responsibility must be assumed by both instructor AND students for discussions to remain relevant. A class is what both the students and the teachers make of it. One way of thinking about a class is that a class “happens” when we all meet face-to-face, and students sit back passively waiting to absorb what the instructor or class has to offer. But to my way of thinking, the class meeting time only supplements the real action of the class: an individual student sitting down to write an essay or actively engage in reading someone else’s.

It’s best if no 1-2 students monopolize the conversation. It’s not necessary to comment on every other student's comments. The more people’s perspectives we can integrate into the overall discussion, the better off we are. It helps to keep as a major focus of our discussions an identification of assumptions—one’s own, other students’, the teacher’s, and the text’s. Sometimes assumptions can be explicit, but other times they are more implicit and difficult to discern. It will also help to keep focused on the essays we read as essays—that is, think about how the authors are communicating as much as what they are communicating. What are the authors “doing” in their essays in addition to what they are saying? Remember that writing is not just a neutral packaging of ideas. Writing is itself a mode of thinking. How do the authors use their essays as a way of developing their ideas?

Ultimately, if you don’t like tangent-filled, irrelevant discussions, then don’t have them. I admit I bear some responsibility for trying to keep the discussion moving and focused, but ultimately I believe in free speech. But with freedom comes responsibility. I tend to allow students to pursue their own lines of inquiry--meaning, I usually don’t cut students off. (One person's irrelevant tangent is another's essential "line of flight" that is adapting ideas from the essays into one's own personal context.) Take personal responsibility for the relevance of your own comments and work on listening carefully to others and try to build off what others are doing with the reading in their comments during class time. We will be working in both small group and whole class discussion formats. I tend not to call on students directly, but I may do this to try to stimulate a fuller discussion not dominated by the same students each time.

In class discussions of an essay, try to stay focused on the essay itself rather than getting diverted on a wide-ranging discussion of the issues raised by the reading. In a math class, for example, in a word problem involving apples, one doesn’t normally then engage in a discussion of the relative merits of different kinds of apples. The apples are just a neutral means to pose a mathematical problem. In similar fashion, get into the habit of seeing the essays we read as posing various rhetorical or argumentative problems or patterns we can learn to incorporate into our own writing. This is a class on writing, not sociology or whatever other random topic that might be at issue in a particular reading. Try to stay focused on the essay AS an essay.

One discussion game we may play to foster engaged inquiry is called “Sparks.” Students come to class with 2-3 points they want to make or quotes from the essays they found especially thought-provoking or interesting. First, each student briefly shares one of his/her points. On this first round, other students should first listen to the student talking with only minimal interruptions, but pay attention to and take notes on points for future discussion.
On the next round of the game, students comment on one item from the previous round—the item that most “sparked” his/her interest. On student’s job should be to keep track of everything communicated.

Writing Assignments

- Reading Quizzes: brief discussions of assigned reading.
- Three Reading Notes. Perform a rhetorical analysis of either the assigned reading or a text of your choice that relates to research you are doing for an essay. Alternative: Toulmin analysis. See fuller discussion of this assignment in course packet.
- Six Peer Review responses. During each of the three essay cycles, I will ask you to read and respond to two other students’ essays. Write a brief letter or a paragraph to the student highlighting the major strengths and weaknesses of the essay. See course packet for fuller instructions.
- Three essays: See course packet for suggested paper topics.

A brief note on the essay as a genre: Does anyone know who wrote the first essay? (It wasn’t the 11ᵗʰ Commandment—Thou shalt write essays.) The essay, as a genre, has a specific historical origin that is helpful to consider because it helps constrain how an essay works. (Or, you could contemplate going back in time and killing the person who wrote the first one, and then the essay would never have existed in the first place to torture the lives of students everywhere.) Michel Montaigne is the culprit responsible for this literary form. In French, to “essay” means to “try” something, and Montaigne’s essays are sort of quirky little thought and epistemological experiments he was conducting (trying to discern what he could really know). Montaigne lived in a very turbulent time in French history (early 1500s), when the country was trying to decide whether to be Catholic or Protestant. (The Catholics won.) Montaigne was Catholic, but a very skeptical and free-thinking one. In his essays he considers a wide variety of subjects (proper education of children, cultural relativism, etc.) so as to try to understand both his world and himself better. Because of this history, I think, there are some qualities to keep in mind when writing an essay—how it is tied up with a modern sensibility: fragmentary, provisional, open-minded, skeptical, focused on the individual, experimental, pragmatic, secular, evidence-based, etc. In this regard, an essay is different from other discourse forms: scientific treatise, religious sermon or testimonial, diary, letter, a shopping list, etc. The success of the genre is its inherent flexibility which allows it to consider a wide range of topics in an open-minded way.

For more information on the mechanics of how the class works, consult the syllabus and the rest of this course packet. Two important pieces of information to know: you can get partial participation points (up to 5 classes) if you aren’t in class and I accept late work (no questions, no deductions) up to a week late—but then after that I don’t read it. The syllabus contains a tentative reading and writing assignment schedule which should give you a good idea of what we might be doing any given day in class. I keep a Discussion Forum on the Moodle page devoted to a running list of homework assignments. You can subscribe to this “Course Preparation Assignment” forum to keep track of assignments or just check in when you miss a class or forget what the next day’s homework is.