SYLLABUS
1st Semester, 2012-2013

In this first year seminar, from various perspectives on writing, through various case studies of political leaders, and through writing and rewriting many essays over the semester, you will learn to write better, by recognizing and eliminating bad writing; you will learn to think more insightfully, by abandoning the mindless repetition of hackneyed phrases; you will gain the intellectual power to see through and reject the unclarifiable blather of politicians and political commentators; and you will learn to think politically, by understanding how leaders attempt to cope with the demands of the American public and the constraints of the American political system.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of all first year seminars, as I understand it, is to improve your ability to think, write, and converse, so that you can be more successful in future academic work and, for that matter, in life.

ADDITIONAL OBJECTIVES

In addition to the above concerns, this seminar is intended to help you learn to:

1. Read thoughtfully, with superb comprehension and recall;
2. Think critically, deeply, and incisively;
3. Formulate and present compelling arguments that are well-supported by logic and evidence;
4. Reflect on the meaning of what you write so that you can draw inferences about its significance;
5. Think before you write, as opposed to just pushing words around in the hope that they might add up to something;
6. Improve your writing;¹

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¹ You may not know you write badly; perhaps no one ever told you. There are many reasons why high school teachers, for example, might not have told you. These reasons include …
Other reasons you write badly include …
- Bad writing habits include, for example:
  - Not thinking before, during, or after you write;
7. Recognize the difference between writing for the sake of discovery and writing (actually re-writing) for the sake of presentation;
8. Communicate what you think, in prose that is clear and engaging;
9. Be critical of your own writing, so you recognize and avoid mistakes that limit your power of persuasion²;
10. Listen to what others are saying and interact with them in a manner that helps them, others, and you understand their meaning, and explore its implications;
11. Speak in a manner that engages³ others in your thoughts and enriches the conversation in the room;
12. React to what you hear, by thinking “on your feet”, in a manner that is insightful, quick, and bold;
13. Not take criticism personally;⁴ and
14. Do all this in a particular context, one that leads to an understanding of the nature of political leadership and that introduces you to a new way of thinking about the American political system.

WAYS OF REACHING OBJECTIVES

We will reach the above objectives, through reading, discussion, writing, and in class critiques of each other’s writing.

SUPPORTS

In addition to support you are able to obtain from friends, family, and other members of this class, I have arranged for a Peer Writing Tutor to help you: Jade La Croix (jlacroix@oberlin.edu). You are encouraged to consult often with Jade.⁵

Seek out Jade:

- … as a sounding board for ideas about your next essay;
- … as a “first critiquer”; i.e., someone who can read and critique your essay before you turn it in;
- … to discuss required reading⁶ before we do so in class, thereby mastering the text before we explore its ideas and implications; and

- Relying on the use of “lazy” or “weasel” words (such as so, therefore, thus, obviously, inherently) to cover thinly the absence of an argument that has been carefully built, step by step; and
- Presuming the reader cares about what you are writing, as opposed to taking an active responsibility for making the reader care.

² The flip side of this imperative: do not become defensive and refuse to improve your writing.
³ To be engaging you have to avoid giving needless offense by, for example, delivering a monologue or by acting disrespectfully in some other manner.
⁴ You, of course, are all wonderful and meaningful; your prose may not be. If you are not open to criticism and willing to benefit from it, you simply remain frozen at your current level of development.
⁵ See her welcoming comments at the end of this syllabus.
⁶ You also are encouraged to form study groups among yourselves to discuss required reading before class.
• … to help you understand what you’re doing wrong and how to do better.

In addition, after discussions with Jade, you are encouraged to seek me out to discuss your written work, the quality of your class participation, and ways of improving both.

You are required to attend at least one joint meeting with Jade and the Instructor.

REQUIRED READING

3. George Orwell, “Politics and the English language” @ http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit (and elsewhere) [Bb]

* Paperback

RECOMMENDED READING

• Occasional news stories
• “This Embarrasses You and I: Grammar Gaffes Invade the Office in an Age of Informal Email, Texting and Twitter,” WSJ, June 19, 2012.

Additional reading assignments may be distributed in class or made available on the seminar’s Blackboard site [Bb].

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

All the following are course requirements (that means, to pass the course, all must be complete satisfactorily):

1. Regular attendance and participation;
2. All written assignments; and
3. All other assignments.
   (There is no midterm or final exam.)

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7 These are required readings you should have; other required readings may be made available online.
8 It is easier to avoid writing badly than it is to write well. Strunk and White will help you avoid writing badly; for a few chances to develop, beyond the semester’s calendar, insight on writing well, see William Zinsser, On Writing Well and Stanley Fish, How to Write a Sentence.
Grading: I grade on progress; those who refuse to improve will receive, at best, the grade of “C”. Those who fail to learn how to join the discussion in an effective (and respectful) manner will, at best, receive the grade of “C”.

SCHEDULE/TOPIC/ASSIGNMENTS

WEEK 1  Personal Views of Political Leadership

- In class the first day, Tuesday, Sept 4, write an Initial Essay (Essay #1) on political leadership. (20 minutes)
  NOTE: This and all subsequent written work is public; that is, it may be shared with other members of the seminar and critiqued in class.
- TEN MINUTE BREAK (Read over the Syllabus)
- In class critique of selected essay(s)
- Syllabus highlights
- Assignment for the next class (Thursday, Sept. 6):
  - Take away your Initial Essay and word process it, verbatim. (“Verbatim” means type it as you wrote it; don’t change a thing.)
  - Read Strunk and White (hereafter S&W).
  - The Initial Essay with S&W Corrections Essay (Essay #2). Use the advice of S&W to critique and correct your essay (Note: This is “The S&W Procedure”):
    - Use the “Track Changes” option (in Word) to critique your essay.
    - Use the strike though option to eliminate words and phrases.
    - In a different font or color, add corrections.
    - Do not re-think or in any substantial way re-write the essay.
    - Print out 2 copies of this, The Initial Essay with S&W Corrections Essay, bring both copies to the next class session on Thursday, Sept. 6, and hand in one, at the beginning of class.
      - Also bring the S&W text to class.
  - In class, walk us through your essay:
    - Describe what you did wrong: Yes, each mistake.
    - Explain why each was wrong, according to S&W (be specific: refer us to the relevant page in S&W)
    - Speculate about why you made each mistake
    - Describe what you should have written.
    - Speculate about what you might have had to do to have been able to write that.
  - In class, write down what you have learned, from your first essay and from the essays of others. Cast these lessons as imperatives; i.e. your own list of Dos and Don’ts.

9 When the syllabus, under Week 1, says “Read Strunk and White”, this means the text must be read before the meeting for which it is assigned. This is true for all reading assignments.
After class, and on the same day, word process this, The Dos and Don’ts List and email a copy to me\(^\text{10}\) (and Jade).

- Attach this list to every subsequent essay.
- NOTEs:
  - This list you should continuously revise and update. (Your grade depends on this listing getting longer and better.)
  - If you fail to apply the lessons on this list to any essay, that essay will be downgraded.

**WEEK 2 The New Essay**

**Assignments:** NOTE: Although the assignments are listed under the heading “Week x”, they, unless indicated otherwise, are to be completed before the class(es) of that week.

Step 1: Throw away The Initial Essay.
Step 2: Write a new, original essay on political leadership. (Note: This is a think piece; it requires original thinking. Do not pad this essay with a bunch of junk that bores me.)
Step 3: Print out two copies of the new essay, The New Essay, and turn in one to me, in the box outside Rice 230, by 8 am on Tuesday, Sept. 11. (Include name, date, and securely fasten, dark ink, one-sided.)

**Assignment:** In class on Sept. 11, discuss The New Essay.

**EXTRA CREDIT**

Sept. 13: An Evening with Obie Journalists Covering the 2012 Election
Th, September 13 2012 07:30 PM - 08:30 PM Finney Chapel
http://new.oberlin.edu/calendar/index.dot?id=4262338

Extra Credit: If, at the end of their presentations this evening, you manage to ask a “good” question of (one of) the journalists, and, the next day, report to the class on your assessment of their answer(s), you will receive extra (double) participation credit for that day.\(^\text{11}\)

**WEEK 3 The Bullshit Assignment**

**Read:** Frankfurt (entire) and Cohen (entire)[Note: When something is assigned for a particular class, it is to be read (and mastered) before that class session.]

**Discussion:** Frankfurt and Cohen:
- What’s bullshit?
- Why does it exist?
- What should you do about it?

\(^{10}\) This, The Does and Don’ts List, is due before midnight on Thursday, Sept. 6. NOTE: Everything you email me you must also email Jade.

\(^{11}\) Note: A “good” question is one that appears to make the respondent think; it is not a rambling speech, designed to impress.
Assignment: To be announced in advance of this class.

WEEK 4 The Orwell Assignment

1. Read: Orwell
2. Class discussion: In class, on Tuesday, Sept. 25, reconstruct, orally, Orwell’s argument.
   a. Guidelines for a meaningful discussion
      i. The first step in a meaningful discussion of a text: Demonstrate mastery of this text; i.e., faithfully reconstruct the arguments and reproduce the supporting evidence and examples.
      ii. The second step: Present your assessment, both positive and negative, of the text.
      iii. Then … In what ways has Orwell changed your view of language? (Think about this question ahead of time and come prepared to be specific.)
3. Find a substantial printed news story that includes many of the things Orwell is complaining about.
4. Photocopy the news story.
5. On the photocopy, circle and number the offending words/phrases.
6. For each numbered offending word/phrases, and on the same document, write down your understanding of why Orwell would find it offensive. If you wish, add your own critique.
7. Reproduce 2 copies of this annotated news story, The Orwell Assignment, and, on Monday, Sept. 24, turn in one copy by putting it in the box outside my office.

HEADS UP
- Start reading Machiavelli.
- Always look ahead to see what you should be preparing.

WEEK 5 The New Original Essay

Assignment: Write a new, original essay on political leadership. Caveat: This essay must be original, interesting, clear, compelling, and powerful. It also must not include S&W mistakes, bullshit, or what Orwell would deem slovenly language.
Turn in: 1 hard copy: Tuesday, 8 am, Oct. 2.
Also, bring one hard copy of this, The New Original Essay, to class on Oct. 2.
Discussion and Critique: In class, Oct. 2 & 4 (selected essays)

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12 In a newspaper of your choice
13 Or scan, if it’s easier and/or cheaper.
14 Or a syllabus, from any OC course.
15 Or, on the scanned copy, somehow highlight the offending words/phrases.
WEEK 6   **Even the best of us …**

Step 1. Before class on Tuesday, Oct. 9, find examples of slovenly language and foolish thoughts in the written work of any currently on-campus Oberlin College faculty member.16

  o  Ask them: “Why do you write this way?” NOTE: YOU MUST ASK THEM IN PERSON: NO EMAIL INTERVIEWS.

  ▪  Please DO NOT say any of the following:

    *  DO NOT say: “Professor Dawson wants me to ask you why you write so badly.”
    *  DO NOT say: “Professor Dawson wants me to ask you why you use such slovenly language.”
    *  DO NOT say: “Why do you use such slovenly language?”

  o  Simply share with them a copy of the excerpt from their written work and ASK, POLITELY: “Would you please tell me why you chose to express your thoughts in this way?” (Write down their answer so that can share it with the class.)

Step 2. In class on Oct. 9 and 11, share …

  o  The examples: Have a copy of the excerpt and read it aloud.
  o  Read your verbatim account of the responses of the Oberlin author you interviewed.
  o  Class discussion of the examples and the authors’ responses

2.  What do you conclude from this exercise?

**Week 7  Machiavelli**

**Heads up: Start reading Caro, The Master of the Senate**

For class on Oct. 16:

*  Have read *Machiavelli*.
  o  In class discussion … According to Machiavelli:
    1.  What must a prince do?
    2.  Why?
    3.  Do you agree or disagree with Machiavelli? Why? (Be specific.)
    4.  Can political leaders lead without being Machiavellian? If so, how? Examples (real or hypothetical)?
    5.  For a leader to lead in a non-Machiavellian manner, what would have to be true? About human nature? About the political system?
    6.  If Machiavelli is correct, what must leaders (and those who aspire to be leaders) do? And not do?
    7.  What does it take to be a Machiavellian leader?
    8.  If political leaders are Machiavellian, what kind of politics will we have? What kind of public policy?

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16 Books by Oberlin faculty are shelved in Azariah’s.
Write a new essay on political leadership, The Machiavelli Essay, incorporating, where useful, ideas from The Prince, and, by 8 am on Thursday, Oct. 16, turn in a copy of this new essay.

Class on Oct. 16 and 18: In class discussion and critique of The Machiavelli Essay.

FALL BREAK: Oct. 20-28

Week 8 LBJ’s Style of Political Leadership

For class on Tuesday Oct. 30 and Thursday, Nov. 1:
- Read Caro (1st fourth of the book)
- In class discussion of the assigned portion of the text
  - Follow the above “Guidelines for a meaningful discussion”
- Begin writing an essay that conveys your view of Johnson as a political leader.

NOVEMBER 6: Election Party, 284 Forest Street BYOAAB, 7-11pm. (Note: The Election Party is in lieu of class on Tuesday, Nov. 6 and Tuesday, Nov. 20.)

Week 9 LBJ (cont.)

For class on Thursday, Nov. 8:
- Reading Assignment: Caro (2nd third of the book)
- In class discussion of the first two-thirds of the text
- Meet with the Peer Writing Tutor and the Instructor to discuss your evolving Johnson Essay.

Week 10 LBJ (cont.)

For class on Tuesday, Nov. 13, and Thursday, Nov. 15:
- Reading Assignment: Caro (3rd fourth of the book)
- In class discussion of the text (continued)
- Finish your Johnson Essay: Due 8 am, the Tuesday (Nov. 27) after Thanksgiving -- Turn into the box outside Dawson’s office (Rice 230).

No class on Tuesday, Nov. 20.

THANKSGIVING: NOV. 22

Week 11 LBJ (cont.)

For class on Tuesday, Nov. 27, and Thursday, Nov. 29:
- Reading Assignment: Have finished Caro
- In class critique and discussion of Johnson essays.
- Begin writing your Final Essay in which you present your current view of political leadership, drawing, where appropriate, on course reading and discussion.
Weeks 12 and 13  Personal Views of Political Leadership Revisited

Final Essay: Due, by 8 am on Tuesday, Dec. 4, in the box outside my office.
Discussion: In class discussion and critique of final essays: Dec. 4, 6, 11, and 13
## LIST OF ESSAYS/WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS\textsuperscript{17} (AND DUE DATES)

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<th>Assignment</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Initial Essay</td>
<td>Tu: Sept. 4</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Initial Essay with S&amp;W corrections</td>
<td>Th: Sept. 6</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>The Dos and Don’ts\textsuperscript{18}</td>
<td>Th: Sept. 12</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>The New Essay (8 am)</td>
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<td>5</td>
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\textsuperscript{17} This listing understates the number of essays, since you may be required or invited to revise particular essays.

\textsuperscript{18} Recall: This list is to be revised and updated continuously; attach the current version to any essay you turn in.
Memo from the Peer Writing Tutor

1st Semester, 2012-2013

Jade La Croix [Call me Jade; the last name is tricky to pronounce]
Peer Writing Tutor
Email: jlacroix@oberlin.edu

Office Hours for the first week of class: Tuesday 7:30-9pm in the Science Center Atrium
Regular Office hours: Thursday 8-9:30pm and Sunday 7-8pm in the Science Center Atrium

Please Note: I am available to meet outside of these designated times; please contact me via email to do so.

Hi!
I’m a senior Politics major and Rhetoric & Composition Minor. My interests lie deeply within the American political system, fashion/shopping, tutoring and writing. I’m also a survivor of EVERY Dawson course ever offered!
This semester I’m going to be your peer writing tutor. I am an aide to the course, helping you improve your writing skills, achieve course objectives, and overcome course related academic challenges.
Throughout the semester I am available for meetings during all stages of the writing process. I’m here for you to brainstorm and to help you express your ideas clearly. I will also help you spot trouble areas in your writing and work with you to find solutions that will become second nature. I’m also available to talk with you about assignments, class expectations and just about life at Oberlin.
Both Professor Dawson and I believe that improving writing is an ongoing process. Whether you think you’re an awesome writer or an average writer there is always room for improvement: that’s why I’m here!
I look forward to getting to know all of you and your goals for the course.

(August, 2012)