SYLLABUS
1st Semester, 2014-15

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 though 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.

MAIN 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;

1 Contrary to popular opinion, there is no requirement that First Years take a First Year Seminar.
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;²
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 persuasion³;
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 engages⁴ 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;⁵ 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.

Additional comments from Shosh, the seminar’s Writing Associate

Whether you are a basic or an advanced writer, I can help you with any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to proofreading. Rather than write your papers for you or re-teach class material, I'm here to help you

² 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:
  o Not thinking before, during, or after you write;
  o 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
  o Presuming the reader cares about what you are writing, as opposed to taking an active responsibility for making the reader care.
- The “curse of being articulate”; that is, presuming you write well because you speak well.
³ The flip side of this imperative: do not become defensive and refuse to improve your writing.
⁴ To be engaging you have to avoid giving needless offense by, for example, delivering a monologue or by acting disrespectfully in some other manner.
⁵ 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.
become a stronger writer. I'm happy to meet with each of you throughout the semester to work on your ideas or drafts. If you can't make my office hours and would like to meet, please email me and we can find a mutually convenient time to meet. Have a great first semester!

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 Writing Associate to help you: Shosh Gordon (sbgordon@oberlin.edu). You are encouraged to consult often with Shosh. Seek out Shosh:

• … 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 reading\(^6\) before we do so in class, thereby mastering the text before we explore its ideas and implications; and
• … to help you understand what you’re doing wrong and how to do better.

In addition, after discussions with Shosh, 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 Shosh and the Instructor.

REQUIRED READING\(^7\)


\(^6\) You also are encouraged to form study groups among yourselves to discuss required readings before class.

\(^7\) These are required readings you should have, or have access to; other required readings may be made available online.
5. 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. [Bb]

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.)

NOTES:

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.
• Written work: All written work must be word processed in dark ink, single-sided, and securely fasten, with your name and the date it is due.
• 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
NOTE about “Assignments”: Although the assignments are listed under the heading “Week x”, assignments, unless indicated otherwise, are to be completed before the first class meeting that week.

WEEK 1  Personal Views of Political Leadership

• In class the first day, Tuesday, Sept 2, 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. 4):
  o Word process, verbatim, your Initial Essay. (“Verbatim” means type it as you wrote it; don’t change a thing.)
  o Read Strunk and White (hereafter S&W). 9
  o 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.

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.
• Print out 2 copies of this, **The Initial Essay with S&W Corrections**, bring both copies to the class session on Tuesday, Sept. 9, and hand in one, at the beginning of class. (To the copy you hand in, securely attach the original, hand written, one.)
• Also bring the S&W text to class.
  o In class on Tuesday, Sept. 9, 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.
  o In this Tuesday’s 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**.
    ▪ After class, and on the same day, word process this, **The Dos and Don’ts List** and email a copy to me\(^{10}\) (and Shosh).
      • Attach this list to every subsequent essay.
      • NOTES:
        o This list you should continuously revise and update. (Your grade depends on this listing getting longer and better.)
        o If you fail to apply the lessons on this list to any essay, that essay will be downgraded.
  o Rewrite this, your Initial Essay, without making any S&W mistakes. Bring two copies of this to the next class (Sept. 11); turn in one copy of the rewrite at the beginning of the next class.

### WEEK 2  Rewrites due & bullshit

Rewrite due (Thursday, Sept. 11): In class, turn in one copy of the above rewrite; keep one copy in front of you.

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\(^{10}\) This, **The Does and Don’ts List**, is due before midnight on Tuesday, Sept. 9. NOTE: Everything you email me you must also email Shoshanna.
Reading Assignment: G. A. Cohen, “Deeper into bullshit.” Bb

- NOTE: This, and all assigned readings are to be read – and mastered – before the class for which they are assigned.
- The Cohen assignment is to be read before class on Thursday, Sept. 11.

(In class) Discussion Questions:
1. Compare and contrast Frankfurt’s and Cohen’s definitions of “bullshit”.
2. Revisit your rewrite. Using Frankfurt’s and Cohen’s definitions, circle the bullshit.
   a. Describe what you have circled.
   b. Think out loud:
      i. Why do you write bullshit?
      ii. How might you avoid/reduce it?

Additional assignment: For the next session of class (Tuesday, Sept. 16), go find, and be prepared to share, other examples of (written) bullshit. Also for class on Sept. 16, see below.

WEEK 3 (Sept. 16+) A New Essay (To be based on Martha Johnson, On My Watch: Leadership, innovation, and personal resilience.)

Assignments:
Step 1: Before the Sept. 16 seminar meeting, read:
- The Johnson text
Step 2: Tuesday, Sept. 16 seminar discussion questions:
- Was Ms. Johnson a political leader? A good/bad one? Why?
Step 3: For class on Thursday, Sept. 18, word process an essay in which you explore what the Johnson text suggests to you about political leadership.
- Drop off one copy in the box outside Dawson’s office by 1 pm on Thursday, Sept. 18.
- In class on Thursday, Sept. 18, be prepared to read aloud your essay and to lead a discussion of it.
  - After the discussion, be prepared to defend what you have written.
  - After the discussion, rewrite this essay. (Recall: You are graded on improvement; repetition of the same mistakes will result in failure.)
WEEK 4 (Sept. 23+)  Revisiting the Johnson essays

For class on Tuesday, Sept. 23, drop off one copy of your revised Johnson essay in the box outside Dawson’s office by 10 am (on Tuesday, Sept. 23).

In class this week, we will compare, critically, the initial and the revised versions of your Johnson essay. While participating in this discussion, take notes. After the discussions, word-process a memo to yourself on what you have learned. Email that memo to Dawson and Shosh by midnight on Sunday, Sept. 28.

WEEK 5 (Sept 29+)  The Orwell Assignment

1. *Read:* Orwell
2. *Class discussion:* In class, on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 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 … Discussion question: In what ways has Orwell changed your view of language? (Think about this question ahead of time and come prepared to be reflective and specific.)
3. *Find* a substantial printed news story\(^{11}\) that includes many of the things Orwell is complaining about.
4. *Photocopy\(^{12}\) the news story\(^{13}\).
5. On the photocopy, *circle* and *number* the offending words/phrases.\(^{14}\)
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.

\(^{11}\) In a newspaper of your choice
\(^{12}\) Or scan, if it’s easier and/or cheaper.
\(^{13}\) Or a syllabus, from any OC course
\(^{14}\) Or, on the scanned copy, somehow highlight the offending words/phrases.
7. *Reproduce* 2 copies of this annotated news story, **The Orwell Assignment**, and, on Thursday, Sept. 25, *turn* in one copy by putting it – by 1 pm -- in the box outside my office.

8. In class on Thursday, Oct. 2, be prepared to lead this discussion: “What would Orwell have to say about your article?”

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

**WEEK 6 (Oct. 7+) 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, 10 am, Oct. 7, in the box outside Dawson’s office.

*Also, bring* one hard copy of this, **The New Original Essay**, to class on Tuesday, Oct 7.

*Discussion and Critique:* In class, Oct. 7 & 9 (selected essays)

**Weeks 7 & 8 (OCT. 14+) Machiavelli**

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

For class on Oct. 7:
- Have read **Machiavelli**.
  - 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?

- Write a new essay on political leadership, The Machiavelli Essay, incorporating, where useful, ideas from The Prince, and, by 10 am on Tuesday, Oct. 28 (after the Fall Recess), turn in a copy of this new essay.

**FALL BREAK: Oct. 18-26**

**WEEK 8: OCT. 28+  Machiavelli (continued)**

- Hard copy of your Machiavelli Essay due, in the box outside my office, by 10 am on Tuesday, Oct. 28.
- Class on Oct. 28 & 30: In class discussion and critique of The Machiavelli essays.
- Heads up: Start reading the Caro text.

**WEEK 9: Nov. 4+  LBJ’s Style of Political Leadership**

For class this week …
- Read Caro (1st fourth of the book)
- In class discussion of the assigned portion of the text
- Begin writing an essay that conveys your view of Johnson as a political leader.

**WEEK 10: Nov. 11+  LBJ (cont.)**

For class this week …
- Reading Assignment: Caro (2nd fourth of the book)
- In class discussion of the first two-thirds of the text
- Have a joint meeting with Shosh and Dawson to discuss your evolving LBJ essay.

**WEEK 11+: Nov. 18, 20, 25  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)
If you have not already done so, start your LBJ essay. (It’s due on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving (Dec. 2). after Thanksgiving -- Turn into the box outside Dawson’s office (Rice 230).

THANKSGIVING: NOV. 27

WEEK 12: DEC. 2+ LBJ (cont.)

For class this week …
• Turn in your LBJ essay; place one copy in the box outside Dawson’s office by 10 am on Tuesday, Dec. 2.
• Reading Assignment: Have finished Caro
• In class critique and discussion of LBJ essays.
• Begin writing your Final Essay in which you present your current view of political leadership, drawing, where appropriate, on course reading and discussion.

WEEK 13: Dec. 9+ Personal views of political leadership revisited

Final Essay: Due, by 10 am on Tuesday, Dec. 9, in the box outside my office.
• Discussion: In class this week … discussion and critique of final essays.

Extra Credit Assignment: What have you learned about writing? (Due no later than 10 am on Thursday, Dec. 11.)

(August, 2014)