

SEMINAR IN COMPOSITION

Spring 2013, Thursdays 6-8:30
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The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration---how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?

--- Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*

I could easily give you a list of writers whose work I enjoy and strive to emulate. [...] But the real list is entirely eclectic and peculiar and is of no use to anyone but myself, and it includes Pac-Man and Caddysback and bottle-cap collecting and every girlfriend who ever dumped me, and the Commodore 64 and Charles Schulz and the angry dog in the alley behind my elementary school, and model rocketry and photography and DIY guitar stomp boxes, and my mother's sense of order, and my father's social graces, and my friend's dad's Playboys, and my other friend being home sick from school the day the space shuttle blew up. Honestly, I don't think I'd give up a single ex-girlfriend for one of my favorite writers. The world is lousy with writers. There will never be time for me to read all the good books. But the things I have seen and heard and felt are unique, and they are what make me the writer I am.

--- JR Lennon (novelist, short-short story writer, reviewer, teacher of writing, etc.)
on why he is sick of the "Influences Question" that interviewers so often ask writers

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We'll work with and on three sets of materials in this course: published writings, writings produced by students in the class (including me), and the set of things that we---collectively and individually---have seen, heard, smelled, touched, felt, and thought. We'll approach each of these sets with the same seriousness, and we'll trouble the idea that they even are distinct sets. Our main goal will be the development of flexible writing processes that help you show off the ways in which you are active, agile, and reflective learners. I try not to predict the future, but I can say with a fair amount of certainty that success in this course will be made of one part persistence (putting in the time and effort) and one part risk taking (willingness to fail spectacularly and then really think about those failures instead of pretending they never happened).

So what does it mean to say that we'll *work with and on* these particular materials? Because this is a composition class, one thing it means is that we'll spend a lot of time trying out different methods that might---if all goes well---help us make some "new" stuff (including new ideas, new pieces of writing, new kinds of writing) out of the existing stuffs (including ideas and writings) of this world that we inhabit. In other words, this course will ask you to think of yourself as a writer. But, more than that, it will ask you to think of yourself as a *writer-in-the-world*. We'll talk about what this means as a class, but ultimately you will be responsible for defining what it means for and to you.

You'll compose in class and outside of class, in ways that may seem familiar and in ways that will surely seem strange. You'll compose formally and informally, alone and with the help of others. Workshops and discussions will take up a significant portion of our time, and one-on-one conferences will be required. Individual writing assignments will ask you to engage the relationship between experience, experimentation, and essay writing in particular ways. However, you will have the freedom to pursue the elements of each assignment that interest you the most. If you are ever having trouble aligning your interests with a particular assignment, I encourage you to make time to discuss it with me.

PROGRAM-WIDE COURSE GOALS FOR SEMINAR IN COMPOSITION

Seminar in Composition is the course that most undergraduates take to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive requirements in the School of Arts and Science. While the readings and assignments in different sections of the course may vary, your section, like all the others, consists of a sequence of assignments that will require you to:

1. ENGAGE IN WRITING AS A CREATIVE, DISCIPLINED FORM OF CRITICAL INQUIRY.

In this course, you'll be asked to use writing to generate ideas as well as explain them. You'll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you'll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

2. COMPOSE THOUGHTFULLY CRAFTED ESSAYS THAT POSITION YOUR IDEAS AMONG OTHER VIEWS.

In response to reading and discussing challenging texts, you'll write essays in which you develop informed positions that engage with the positions of others. You'll analyze as well as summarize the texts you read, and you'll compose essays that pay close attention both to the ideas voiced by other writers and to specific choices they make with language and form.

3. WRITE WITH PRECISION, NUANCE, AND AWARENESS OF TEXTUAL CONVENTIONS.

You'll work on crafting clear, precise prose that uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. You'll be required to learn the conventions for quoting and paraphrasing responsibly and adeptly, and you'll be assisted with editing and proofreading strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning. You'll also have opportunities to consider when and how to challenge conventions as well as follow them.

4. REVISE YOUR WRITING BY RETHINKING THE ASSUMPTIONS, AIMS, AND EFFECTS OF PRIOR DRAFTS.

This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts—not as a thesis-driven argument that adheres to a rigid structure. Much class time will be devoted to considering the purpose, logic, and design of your own writing, and you'll be given opportunities to revise your work in light of response from your teacher and peers, with the aim of making more attentive decisions as you write.

* You must earn a “C-minus” in order to pass Seminar in Composition, and those who earn a “C” or above will have substantially progressed toward fulfilling the goals described above. Subsequent writing-intensive courses you take in any discipline should help you further develop your abilities as a writer and reader.

COMPOSING SPACES

ESSAYS. Students sometimes assume that the essays they write for Seminar in Composition should be similar to those they've written in high school—with an Intro/Body/Conclusion format, a thesis statement supported by three examples, and a voice that sounds like that of a detached journalist or scholar. But you will be expected **not** to adhere to such a formula in this course. While some enjoyment may come from being free of that formula, you're also likely to find the lack of restrictions challenging.

It can be difficult to have your choices for composing expanded, with no clear-cut answer as to which path will work best. Attempting various approaches, seeing what happens as a result, then making a fresh attempt—this is the way you'll be encouraged to work on essays in this course. Each essay that we attempt will be distinct, but you can expect most of them to require at least 1200 words (roughly four typed pages of 12-pt font). At the end of the term, you will spend a significant amount of time reimagining and revising at least two of the essays that you have written.

INFORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (IWs). In addition to more formal essays, you'll produce initial responses to our shared readings (and to experiences you have during the semester) that are informal and inventive. Despite the word “informal” in the title of these assignments, I do expect them to be thoughtfully composed and typed. These will take several different forms throughout the semester, but it is generally appropriate for them to be at least 500 words (one page single-spaced or two pages double-spaced).

Again, sometimes alternate directions will be given, but informal writings will generally be due in my email inbox at 9:00 am on the Wednesday before the class in which they'll be discussed. You should also bring a hardcopy to the class immediately following that due date. The care you take when working on these homework writings will have a direct, noticeable impact on your participation grade. It is also likely that you will choose to include some of these writings in your two major portfolios.

READINGS AND REQUIRED TEXTS. In this course, we'll read as writers rather than critics. One thing this means is that reading will be approached as an active, generative activity; you'll be expected to write (annotate and take notes) as you read. Reading will provide us with opportunities to discuss a variety of ways in which other writers explore and document; it will prompt us to explore what it means to “do” creative-critical inquiry in relation our own writing and thinking.

I will distribute many required readings in class; these will include “professional” and student writings. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get copies of these before the next class period. We will also use selections from the following book, available in the University Book Center (unfortunately, you do need the most recent edition; earlier editions are missing some of the content that we'll be focusing on):

Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers (9th ed.) by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky.
Boston: Bedford Books, 2011.

POLICIES / GRADES / OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

GRADING GUIDELINES. This course will definitely set different (potentially higher) standards for writing than you've experienced before. Both risk taking and technical proficiency will be taken into account. It's not uncommon for work that might have earned an "A" in high school to be considered "C" work in college. Here's how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade level:

A = SUPERIOR ATTAINMENT
 B = MERITORIOUS ATTAINMENT
 C = ADEQUATE ATTAINMENT
 D = MINIMAL ATTAINMENT
 F = FAILURE

These aren't the words I'd choose, and we'll talk more about grades in class, but it is worth noting now that "meritorious" means *deserving of reward or praise*. In other words, a "B" is a good grade, not an average grade. Your grade will roughly reflect the following breakdown:

PARTICIPATION – 30%
 MIDTERM PROCESS PORTFOLIOS – 20%
 FINAL PORTFOLIOS – 50%

PARTICIPATION. In short, participation means sharing your knowledge and insights in whatever form is appropriate. Those of you who are quieter will be glad to note that listening and reading are just as important as speaking and writing in relation to this portion of your grade. Everyone should note that--in the context of this course--participation includes coming to class and conferences prepared and on time, taking part in class discussions, draft workshops, and other activities. It includes asking questions. It also includes doing the required reading and writing for each class and doing it well. Beyond simply accounting for your participation, I may choose to raise your overall grade by one-third (i.e. B to B+) in order to recognize truly exemplary participation in workshops and class discussion.

PORTFOLIO GRADING. Rather than grading every paper individually, after you turn in each essay I'll write you a set of comments intended to help you revise these essays, which you will do (for at least some of them) before I grade collections of your work at midterm and at the end of the term. We'll talk more about portfolios and grading as due dates for these assignments approach. It's critical for you to save hard copies of your invention work and early drafts, as well as teacher and peer comments; you will be required to select representative artifacts from this collected process material to include in both of your portfolios.

LATE/MISSING WORK. There will be some form of writing every week, and **all writing assignments must be completed satisfactorily in order for you to pass this course.** Late work is unacceptable. If you submit an essay late (without a documented excuse), your final grade for the semester will drop by one third (B- to C+, for example), and you will be required to visit my office hours in order to receive feedback. More than two late submissions of any other kind of assignment (invention writing, exercises, drafts for workshop, etc.) lowers your final grade by one-third, and with every late submission thereafter your grade will drop another third. If you expect to have

trouble meeting a deadline, talk to me before the assignment is due. **Deadlines are not negotiable after you have missed them.**

ATTENDANCE. Attendance is mandatory. This policy is not all about you. Because this is a small, discussion- and workshop-based class your classmates' experience is directly impacted by whether or not you show up prepared. Come to class on time, ready to ask questions and take part in conversation. Because this class only meets once a week, **you are allowed just one absence** during the term (for whatever reason). If you arrive significantly after class has begun or if you arrive without drafting materials on a workshop day, you will be counted as absent that day.

If you do miss a class, you must arrange for the day's assignments to be submitted on time, either via email or by placing them in my mailbox in CL-501. **Two absences without a documented excuse (such as a doctor's note) will result in your final grade dropping a full letter grade; more than two absences can be grounds for failure.** If you find yourself in that situation, you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. That said, I understand that we're all human beings with lives that go on outside the classroom, and I'm a pretty reasonable person--if you expect to get into trouble with this policy, once again, please talk to me **before** there's an issue, not after.

COMMUNICATION: OFFICE HOURS/EMAIL/COURSEWEB. Office hours provide us with an opportunity to talk one on one. Mine are Mondays and Thursdays 4-5pm; my office---1532CL---is located inside 1530CL, the door to which is located inside stairwell A on the 15th floor of the cathedral. You may drop in during this time at any point in the semester to ask any questions you have or to talk about your progress in the course. I weirdly enjoy talking about what you think of readings, assignments, and the way class is running, and I am always happy to offer individualized advice on writing projects. However, initiating these types of conversations is your responsibility---not mine.

I am also available by appointment, if office hours aren't compatible with your schedule, and I am happy to answer questions via university email. You can assume that I will check my email at least once a day on most weekdays, but you should not assume that I will always be able to reply instantly (especially if your message reaches my inbox at 2AM the night before an assignment is due). As the need arises, I may send important announcements or updates about assignments to your Pitt email account. Even if you use another account for most email (something like gmail), get in the habit of checking your Pitt account at least once a day. I will also occasionally make readings, resources, and announcements available using the University's Blackboard website, <http://courseweb.pitt.edu> --- you can log in using your university computer account username and password.

CELL PHONES/LAPTOPS. On occasion, we'll want to use the internet in class and/or we'll do workshop activities that you may want to have your computer for; I'll try to be good about letting you know in advance if this might be the case. However, I expect that you'll shut off your phone's ringer and that you won't text during class---this is part of you having respect for your classmates (which is a thing I care about a lot). If for some reason you absolutely need to have your phone out in class (think Fire/EMS job: unavoidable circumstances tied to being a responsible adult), it's your job to let me know in advance why I shouldn't penalize you. Similarly, I expect to see laptops out only if we are doing an activity that necessitates them. In my experience, your active, conversational engagement in class is worth a lot more than taking down the perfect set of notes.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY. Showing that you are drawing on the ideas of others as you develop your own thoughts is an important part of this course, and in all of your writing it is important that you cite your sources, even when you are paraphrasing. The Council of Writing Program Administrators describes plagiarism as follows: “plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source.” We’ll talk a lot about how to handle other people’s ideas responsibly, but it is important to note now that just changing a few words or lines in a quotation does not constitute avoiding plagiarism. All instances of plagiarism will result in an automatic “F” on the assignment and a report to the Dean.

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE/RESOURCES

THE WRITING CENTER. Located in 317-B Student Center, 4024 O’Hara St., the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to “correct” your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help with a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/

COMPOSITION TUTORIAL (AN OPTIONAL ONE-CREDIT COURSE). After you’ve produced some in-class writing, I may recommend that you enroll (or you may already be enrolled) in a one-credit course called Composition Tutorial, which gives you the opportunity to meet once a week with a Writing Center consultant to examine your writing more closely and address problems with structure, grammar, and punctuation. If you are enrolled in Composition Tutorial, you’ll need to attend all sessions and bring with you the material from this seminar (syllabus, assignments, drafts of papers, my comments, etc.).

OTHER SERVICES. Pitt offers a number of services to help students who are struggling either academically or personally. If you are a student with a disability, you may wish to contact Disability Resources and Services in 216 William Pitt Union or at 412-648-7890. I’m committed to accommodating any qualified students with disabilities in appropriate ways. Please speak with me after class or in office hours and be prepared to provide information from DRS, so I can know how to help.

Pitt also offers free counseling at the Counseling Center, located in 334 William Pitt Union (412-648-7930), for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE / MAJOR DUE DATES
(subject to change)

WEEK 1 – THURSDAY JAN. 10

Introductions; excerpts from JR Lennon and Erin Moure

HW: Reading – From Rebecca Solnit’s *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (pages 1-41).

Writing – Informal writing #1, in two parts. Due in class next Thursday. Bring two copies.

(Part 1) As you are reading, make some notes on what “getting lost” seems to mean to Solnit and what it means to you. Aim for at least eight sentences/observations/proposals. *(Part 2)* Take some time to get lost---in a book, an activity, or a place (familiar or unfamiliar). During and after, take down a set of “field notes.” These can take paragraph form, or they can take list form. They might include photographs or sketches. Being detailed is important. Try to track how all your sensory apparatuses are working. Don’t trust your memory. Make notes about both the nature of the thing/activity/place you have gotten lost in and notes about your particular experience. If you’re having trouble thinking of a place to get lost, you might consider visiting the Phipps Conservatory, the Carnegie Museum of Art (or Natural History), or a campus building you’ve never been inside before---all free for Pitt students. You might take a long bus ride around the city or plant yourself in a coffeeshop to people watch for awhile or go to a grocery store and walk up and down every aisle. You might go see a movie.

WEEK 2 – THURSDAY JAN. 17

Maps, field guides, wandering, and the essay as a genre.

HW: Reading – Revisit “The Blue of Distance.” Select one paragraph to become an expert on. Annotate it closely. Come ready to share something unique about your way of reading.

Writing – Bring three copies of a working draft (2+pgs.) of essay #1 to next class; email me one representative paragraph from your draft and one question that you have by 9:00 am on Wednesday Jan. 23. Please also bring your “field notes” with you to next week’s class.

WEEK 3 – THURSDAY JAN. 24

Draft Workshop

HW: Writing – Essay #1 (A Solnit-like essay map) Due in class on Jan. 31.

WEEK 4 – THURSDAY JAN. 31

Debrief essay #1. Discuss relationships between content and structure/form. Introduction to Biss.

HW: Reading – Eula Biss “The Pain Scale” (*Ways of Reading*, pages 170-182).

Writing – Informal writing #2 (TBA)

Additional – please bring one nonfiction “research” book with you to class. This can be a dictionary, an atlas, a chemistry book, a biography of someone famous or not so famous---whatever you’d like. Do try to bring something you think your classmates won’t necessarily bring. (My hope is that we’ll end up with 18 or 20 different books, not 15 copies of the same Biology textbook).

WEEK 5 – THURSDAY FEB. 7

Facts, research, curating, and subjective knowledge.

HW: Reading – Revisit Biss. Select one page. Become an expert on how each brief paragraph on that page either connects or jumps to the one after it. How does disjuncture do good work for Biss as a writer? If a paragraph doesn’t connect to those before and after it, does it connect to other paragraphs in the essay in an interesting way?

Writing – Bring three copies of a working draft (2+pgs.) of essay #2 to next class; email me one representative paragraph from your draft and one question that you have by 9:00 am on Wednesday Feb. 13. Please also bring research notes on at least three distinct topics with you to next week's class.

WEEK 6 – THURSDAY FEB. 14

Draft Workshop

HW: Writing – Essay #2 (A Biss-like essay featuring linked fragments) Due in class on Feb. 21.

WEEK 7 – THURSDAY FEB. 21

Debrief essay #2. Introduction to Anne Carson. Look at *NOX*.

HW: Reading – Carson “Short Talks” (*Ways of Reading*, pages 264-69), supplement from *Plainwater*.

Writing – Informal writing #3 (TBA)

**NOTE. Next week, in addition to class (which will be shortened), you'll be required to attend individual conferences; your midterm process portfolios will be turned in during these conferences.*

WEEK 8 – THURSDAY FEB. 28

Continue with Carson: collections and titles. Look at Calvino's *Memos for the Next Millennium*.

HW: TBA

WEEK 9 – THURSDAY MAR. 7

Draft Workshop; Introduction to Essay #4.

HW: Reading – Antonio Porchia “Voices” (*Ways of Reading*, pages 475-79). Look at *Desert Songs*.

Writing – Essay #3 (Short Talks with Introductions/Memos) Due in class on Mar. 21.

WEEK 10 – NO CLASS

Spring Break, March 10-17

WEEK 11 – THURSDAY MAR. 21

Design, multimedia forms, and aphorisms. Look at infographics and ruins.

HW: TBA

WEEK 12 – THURSDAY MAR. 28

Design Workshop

HW: Writing – Essay #4 (Essay-object projects) Due in class on Apr. 4.

WEEK 13 – THURSDAY APR. 4

Revision Workshop

HW: Be working on revisions; specifics TBA

WEEK 14 – THURSDAY APR. 11

Revision Workshop / Conferences

HW: Be working on revisions; specifics TBA

WEEK 15 – THURSDAY APR. 18

Any last questions. Revision/portfolio presentations.

WEEK 16 – NO CLASS – FINAL PORTFOLIOS DUE (DATE/TIME TBA)