

# WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC

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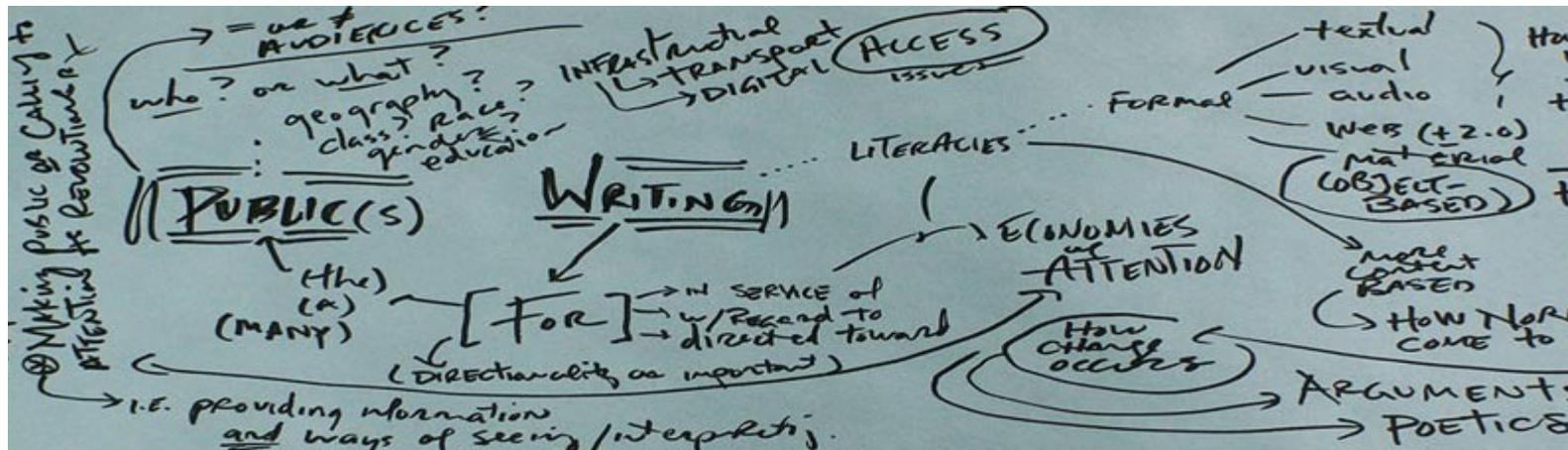
ENGCMP0420 || Spring 2014

TuTh 11-12:15, 135 CL

<http://writingforpublics2014.wordpress.com>

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION.

This course is designed to help you explore *theories* and *practices* relevant to writing that serves the public interest. In this section, we'll pay keen attention to ways in which digital communication has become critical to activists, artists, non-profits, and government officials/agencies. In addition, we'll touch on ways in which the proliferation of social media platforms and digital multimedia forms influences our theoretical understanding of the nature and import of analog forms of public writing.

One way to think of writing that serves the public interest is to think of it as writing that is done in order to effect some sort of change in the world. As a member of this class, you will select a topic that you're personally invested in---one that you believe also has relevance for others---to work with for the duration of the semester. This topic might be something linked to conversations about safety and public health, civil rights, the environment, community development, education, the arts, &c.

You will be asked to approach your topic from several angles, to write about it in several genres, including design-based genres that force you to ask: what counts as writing? You will produce projects that bring together visual and verbal components; you'll craft infographics and capture/curate a series of interviews. Because professional writing is often conducted in collaborative, team-based settings, this course will also require a significant amount of teamwork and 'good citizenship.' Mid-semester, you'll be assigned to an affinity group. Your group's work will begin with an analysis of how your topics are/may be intertwined; before semester's end, your group will design some kind of complex web space that presents the best of your semester's work all in one place. The diversity of this work will (hopefully) aid us in the semester-long project of developing capacious, generous, personalized definitions of our course's key terms: *writing* and *public*.

As a writing intensive class meant to help you work on the mechanics of your writing, this class also entails public engagement with the processes of creation and revision. You'll post to a class blog and comment on others' posts. You'll often have a say in what types of reading we focus on. Workshops and discussions will take up a significant portion of our in-class time. I hope there will be a lot of respectful disagreements and a lot of thoughtful observations about how others have chosen to put things together. We'll have to see how it goes.

## PROGRAM GOALS FOR THE WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC COURSE.

Writing for the Public is a writing-intensive course that focuses on helping students learn about and use specific forms of reading and writing that are common in the nonprofit and government sectors of American life. It is a core course in Pitt's Public and Professional Writing (PPW) Certificate Program. The course enables students to do the following:

**Learn how persuasive writing functions in both nonprofit and government contexts.** Students will learn about standards for writing and the range of genres that constitute writing in the public interest, and they will learn how to identify and research public issues.

**Learn how to engage with the contexts and goals of writing in the public interest,** including ways of satisfying the needs of their readers and what is at stake in writing a document that is published by an agency or nonprofit.

**Compose sustained arguments supported by research (including interviewing) to persuade a particular audience to take a particular action.** Students will choose a social issue or problem to research and write about and will narrow their focus to create a project that can be completed during the course.

**Address the rhetorical and technical challenges of using images, captions, tables, charts, and other design elements** to advance an argument and persuade an audience.

**Craft language with attention to both style and precision.** The course will allow students to better edit their own writing and to provide useful feedback on their colleagues' writing.

Students who earn a C or above in Writing for the Public have substantially progressed toward fulfilling the goals listed above.

## GRADING BREAKDOWN AND MAJOR PROJECT DEADLINES (SUBJECT TO CHANGE).

*Participation, including in-class and informal writing – 10 points*

*Blog posts, comments, and tutorials – 20 points*

*Project Proposals – 2 Parts: personal and historical/contextual – 10 points – Jan. 21*

*Infographics – 10 points – Feb. 6*

*Midterm research logs/website launch – 5 points – Feb. 25*

*Multimedia Interviews – 20 points – Mar. 18*

*The Where, The Why, & The How Projects – 10 points – Apr. 3*

*Final Website: design, organization, revisions (plus reflection letters) – 15 points – Apr. 24, 12:59pm*

*Total available points: 100*

These are the dates on which points will be assigned. Rough drafts will be due earlier. **Both risk taking and technical proficiency will be taken into account.** As long as the original drafts were turned in on time, you may revise and resubmit either your proposal or your infographics for re-grading. (Due before spring break).

While individual assignments ask you to engage with particular genres of public writing in particular ways, 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 topic and/or your interests with a particular assignment's structure, I encourage you to make time to discuss it with me.**

Final grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

*A = 92 – 100 points*

*A- = 90 – 92 points*

*B+ = 88 – 89 points*

*B = 83 – 87 points*

*B- = 80 – 82 points*

*C+ = 78 – 79 points*

*C = 73 – 77 points*

*C- = 70 – 72 points*

*D = 60 – 69 points*

*F = below 60 points*

**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; part of this means going beyond the minimum requirements for blog/social media participation and engaging digitally with your classmates.

**CLASS BLOG.** In addition to more formal projects, you'll produce blog posts in response to our shared readings and your own experiences. Toward the end of the semester, you'll transition to drafting blog posts for your affinity group's website, posts that imagine a wider audience than our class. Each week, I'll offer a series of guiding questions to get you started. Your post should contain at least one question of your own, and I encourage you to respond directly to one another rather than responding only or primarily to me. It is generally appropriate for blog posts to be at least 400 words (you may offer multiple shorter replies to classmates rather than posting a single long post, however these must still be thoughtful, substantive comments---not just 'I agree' or 'I disagree' or 'I like this').

**COURSE READINGS.** In the interest of keeping our work together relevant to both current events and our collective interests, many readings will be selected as the semester progresses. When relevant, I will distribute required readings via Courseweb (as files or links) and in class.

There is one required text for this course:

*The Best American Infographics: 2013*  
edited by Gareth Cook (Mariner Books, 2013).

There is also one recommended text for this course (you and friends might want to share a copy):

*The Where, The Why and the How: 75 Artists Illustrate Wondrous Mysteries of Science*  
edited by Jenny Volvovski, Julia Rothman, and Matt Lamothe (Chronicle Books, 2012).

**LATE/MISSING WORK.** The highest grade you are eligible to receive on any given assignment drops a full letter grade for each day the assignment is late. 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. **You are allowed two absences** 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 or if you're clearly texting/socializing online during class, you will be counted as absent.**

If you do miss a class, you must arrange for the day's assignments to be submitted on time, either via email or a classmate. **Three absences without a documented excuse (such as a doctor's note) will result in your final grade dropping a full letter grade; four absences will result in your final grade dropping two full letter grades; having more than four absences is grounds for automatic failure.** 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.** Office hours provide us with an opportunity to talk one on one. Mine are Tuesdays/Wednesdays 1-2pm; my office---1532CL---is located inside 1530CL, the door to which is located inside stairwell A on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the cathedral. You may drop in during this time at any point in the semester to ask questions 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 tech support or advice on writing projects. However, initiating these types of conversations is your responsibility---not mine.

I am also available by appointment, in case my office hours aren't compatible with your schedule, and I am happy to answer questions via 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 (i.e. gmail) for most email, get in the habit of checking your Pitt account once a day.

**CELL PHONES/LAPTOPS/ETC.** 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.** 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 about things like fair use and how to handle other people’s creations responsibly, but it is important to note now that changing a few words or lines in a quotation does not constitute avoiding plagiarism. All instances of plagiarism will result in an automatic 0 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 resource that allows you to work on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to “correct” your work for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. They can also provide fresh eyes and invention help. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at [www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/](http://www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/)

**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 – please check Courseweb regularly for updated schedule)**

\* Because this is a digitally rich class and we have been assigned a nationality room, we will periodically meet in a computer lab. Be on the lookout for emails announcing location changes.

**WEEK 1 – INTRODUCTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS**

TUESDAY JAN. 7 – Designing introductions.

THURSDAY JAN. 9 – Samples and definitions

**(Re)read** – Brief excerpt on “thinking” and ways of knowing from John Dunnigan

**Register** – for the class blog by responding to email invitation.

**Find** – A piece of writing that “serves the public interest” in some way, one that you admire for both its subject and style – this can be anything: a letter to an editor, an article in a newspaper or magazine, a blog post, a series of tweets, a press release, an organization’s mission statement, an interview transcript, an artist’s statement, an activist manifesto, promotional material for an event, etc. Bring a copy to class. Be ready to say something about *what* your sample is doing (or trying to do), something about *how* it does what it does, and something about *why you* picked this example. (I.e. what does the example you picked say about you?)

Blog Post #1 due Sunday Jan. 12 at 9pm (prompt posted by EOD Friday).

**WEEK 2 — BLOGS, COMMENTS, AND PERSONAL INVESTMENTS**

TUESDAY JAN. 14 – Exigence, personal/cultural memories; introduction to proposal part 1.

**Read** – Your classmates’ blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

**Read** – Selections from *Evocative Objects*.

THURSDAY JAN. 16 – Invention workshop

**Read** – Selections on invention from Bowdon and Scott, Chapter 3, "A Rhetorical Toolbox for Technical and Professional Communication."

**Read** – Selections from *Experimental Geography*

**Bring** – A list of 3-5 potential issues/topics that you can actually imagine research/writing about/caring about for an entire semester.

Blog Post #2 due Sunday Jan. 19 at 9pm. (1 object-oriented paragraph for proposal part 1)

**WEEK 3 – PROPOSAL WORKSHOPS / DOING EXPLORATORY RESEARCH**

TUESDAY JAN. 14 – Evocative objects workshop / introduction to proposal part 2.

**Bring** – 3 hard copies of a full draft of proposal part 1 to class.

**Read** – Your classmates’ blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

**Read** – Selections from Williams & Colomb (on clarity, concision).

THURSDAY JAN. 16 – Research plan workshop / final proposal questions?

**Bring** – 3 hard copies of a draft of proposal part 2 to class.

**Be revising** – Proposal part 1. Bring a copy of this to class too.

**WEEK 4 – INFOGRAPHICS AND VISUAL ARGUMENTS****!! Proposals due for grading before the start of Tuesday's class (via Courseweb)**

TUESDAY JAN. 21 – Debriefs, begin talking about confluence of research and design.

**Bring** – Cook's *Best American Infographics: 2013* to class.

THURSDAY JAN. 23 – Presentation +/- persuasion.

**(Re)read** – Cook's forward and Byrne's introduction.

**Select** – Two favorite infographics to study more closely. Look up some additional information related to one of them that helps provide context. Bring good notes to class.

Blog Post #3 due Sunday Jan. 26 at 9pm (prompt posted by EOD Friday).

**WEEK 5 – MORE ON THE CONFLUENCE OF RESEARCH AND DESIGN**

TUESDAY JAN. 28 – A few photoshop basics. Redesign. Word and image / word to image.

**Read** – Selections on design from Faigley

**Find** – Additional examples from a variety of designers/sources – before blogging, *explore*.

<http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/>

<http://flowingdata.com/>

<http://523informationdesign.blogspot.com/2013/01/final-poster-30x40-from-fall-2012-class.html>

<http://pinterest.com/CorinaGheonea/infographics/>

<http://dashburst.com/infographic/viral-infographics-rules/>

**Read** – Your classmates' blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

THURSDAY JAN. 30 – Visual Workshop # 1

**Bring** – Draft of one infographic/visualization: may be digital or a hand-drawn mockup

**Skim** – Selection on Redesign from Park.

**Come** – Ready to discuss some risks/hazards to look out for when crafting and/or analyzing visual arguments.

**WEEK 6 – WORKSHOPS / CIRCULATION / RE-COMPOSING**

TUESDAY FEB. 4 – Visual Workshop # 2

**Bring** – Draft of a second visual-rich object (or a substantially re-envisioned draft of the object you workshopped on Wednesday). Be prepared to talk about how your two texts/objects work differently and/or how they fit together as part of a set.

**!! Infographics due for grading before the start of Thursday's class (via Courseweb)**

THURSDAY FEB. 6 – In-class media release/rhetorical velocity experiment.

**WEEK 7 – COMPOSING FOR THE WEB / PREPPING FOR INTERVIEW PROJECTS**

TUESDAY FEB. 11 – Forming affinity groups. Initial conversations/mappings.

**Add** – A new section to your resource log for active social media users whose updates bear upon your issue in some way. Consider (if you haven't already done this) creating a Twitter account, a Pinterest account/board, and/or a Facebook fan page for your issue to help you keep this list organized and to begin making connections outside class.

**Bring** – 3-5 questions related to your issue that peers might find interesting to discuss.

THURSDAY FEB. 13 – Wordpress demo, talk about Content Management systems.

**Explore** – Sample themes, examples built using Wordpress, Tumblr, Wix (details TBA).

**Work on Setting Up** – An interview with an expert relevant to your issue.

Blog Post #4 due Sunday Feb. 16 at 9pm (prompt posted by EOD Friday).

### **WEEK 8 – BUILDING NETWORKS / COMPOSING INTERVIEW PRACTICES**

TUESDAY FEB. 18 – Question workshop. Listening to sample audio essays.

**Read** – Your classmates’ blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

**Read** – Tips for Interviewing: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~sponder/j641/Interview.htm>

Selections from Padgett Powell’s *The Interrogative Mood*

**Bring** – As many potential interview questions as possible

**Check out** – Maker’s Project. Be looking for / thinking about: Other ways in which you might use interview materials.

THURSDAY FEB. 20 – Tinkering Workshop (time to do web work in your groups)

**Bring** – Digital copies of completed projects, anything your group might want to use.

**Read** – Lia Purpura on being of “Two Minds.”

**Have For-Sure, For-Real, Absolutely Confirmed** – An interview with an expert.

### **WEEK 9 – MIDTERM CONFERENCES, CHECKING IN RE: INTERVIEW PROJECTS/GROUP WORK**

**!! Points assigned for individual research logs and group website launch.**

Link (with first issue-centric blog posts live) due on the course blog by 9am on Tuesday.

**TUESDAY FEB. 25 – Class cancelled for required individual conferences.**

THURSDAY FEB. 27 – Audio editing workshop

**Have Completed and Recorded** – An interview with an expert relevant to your issue

**Bring** – All your interview audio/collected research materials to class with you.

Blog Post #5 due Sunday Mar. 2 at 9pm (prompt posted by EOD Friday).

### **WEEK 10 – ALIGNING INFO FROM EXPERIENTIAL AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH**

TUESDAY MAR. 4 – Interview project workshop #1. Details TBA.

**Read** – Your classmates’ blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

**Consider – Setting up a second (less intensive?) interview.**

**If working in Audio, find** – An existing audio file that includes conversation relevant to the interview materials you collected, a piece of music, at least three sound effects.

**If working with images, find** – At least five visual objects relevant to your work. These should be drawn from three distinct genres (e.g. a photo, a map, and a computer-generated visualization; or: a still shot drawn from a movie, an image of an old newspaper article, a piece of art.)

THURSDAY MAR. 6 – Interview project workshop #2. Details TBA.

**{ SPRING BREAK – March 9-16 }**

Blog Post #6 due Sunday Mar. 16 at 9pm (a teaser from your interview project).

### **WEEK 11 – WRITING ABOUT TECHNICAL SUBJECTS FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES**

**!! Interview projects due for grading before the start of Tuesday’s class (via Courseweb)**

TUESDAY MAR. 18 – Debriefs, affinity group meetings, intro to *The Where, The Why, and The How*.

**Bring** – *The Where, The Why, and The How* (if you purchased a copy).

THURSDAY MAR. 20 – Invention/question formation workshop.

Blog Post #7 due Sunday Mar. 23 at 9pm (prompt posted by EOD Friday).

**WEEK 12 – POETICS, COMMUNITY, AND THE ARTISTIC SIDE OF WHERE/WHY/HOW PROJECTS**

TUESDAY MAR. 25 – WWH textual component draft workshop.

**Read** – Your classmates’ blog posts. **Comment** - On at least two posts before class begins.

**Read** – Amy Leach excerpt from “Things That Are.”

THURSDAY MAR. 27 – Art *as* and *as-other-than* illustration. Affinity group work time, talk about potential final features. Details TBA.

**WEEK 13 – FINAL WHERE, WHY, HOW WORKSHOPS / FINAL PROJECT PLANNING**

TUESDAY APR. 1 – WWH visual component workshop.

**!! Where, Why, How projects due before the start of Thursday’s class (via Courseweb)**

THURSDAY APR. 3 – Debriefs and progress check-ins.

**WEEK 14 – PROGRESS CHECK / REVISION WORKSHOPS**

TUESDAY APR. 8 & THURSDAY APR. 10 – Affinity group meetings and workshops. Details TBA

**WEEK 15 – LAST QUESTIONS & FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.**

TUESDAY APR. 15 & THURSDAY APR. 17

**WEEK 16 – NO CLASS**

**!! Final Projects Due on Thursday April 24 by 11:59pm (via Courseweb)**

*\* A smart, cohesive webspace produced by each affinity group that includes at least one new, substantial feature produced by each group member; two reflective letters (one addressed to your class/group mates, one addressed to me).*