English 292: Contemporary Issues in Language, Writing, and Rhetoric

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 9:30 - 11, Thursdays 1- 2:30, and by appointment
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Overview

In this course we'll take a broad look at some of the foundational issues of the discipline of Rhetoric, beginning with the "language" and ending with "professional writing." In between we'll dabble in social theory, Marxism, critical pedagogy, and YouTube. This course is designed to strengthen your skills as a rhetorical "agent"; it's not designed to present you with a lot of facts that you must memorize. Rhetoric is a living, breathing, active art, one that you already engage in every waking moment. All the materials that we cover shed light on the same basic processes: accessing and deploying the common grounds of meaning. Thus, the course is meant to unshackle your already-abundant rhetorical intelligence so that you will become a more engaged, articulate, savvy, persuasive, critical, and civil student of humanities and human being.

Course Strategy and Objectives

Over a half century ago, an important American educator, Robert Hutchins, wrote, "The object of the educational system, taken as a whole, is not to produce hands for industry or to teach the young how to make a living. It is to produce responsible citizens." He also noted that "There is only one justification for universities, as distinguished from trade schools. They must be centers of criticism." In some respects, Hutchins sounds to our ear like an elitist and a snob. But in other ways, he was bang-on. The discipline of rhetoric is a good case in point: on the one hand, rhetoric has, since its inception, been disparaged as nothing more than a kind of trade-school knowledge—teaching people how to be better liars and propagandists. On the other hand, for the same length of time
rhetoric has also been understood as a critical method for arriving at or approximating “truth,” and as such has its feet firmly in philosophy and science. One of my major goals in this course is to teach you to look closely at the double-edged sword of rhetoric, to help you see its mercenary and visionary potentials, but to avoid, no matter what the case, a reversion to trade-school education.

The approach I take to teaching and learning is simple: introduce a concept; discuss the concept; apply the concept to a problem. Because I am not particularly concerned with “product” but more with “process” (i.e., is your brain working hard?) my assessments of your work (i.e., grades) will focus on effort, less so on result. I prefer an elegant line of thought that misses the mark than a clumsily expressed truism. Accordingly, I am a stickler for correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

By the end of this course you’ll have a firm grip on several cornerstone concepts of language, rhetoric, and writing; have completed a project that involves those concepts both in terms of self-practice and critical deployment; and have a better appreciation for the rhetorical nature of all communication. My intention is to ensure that you have a strong foundation for the advanced rhetorical knowledge and technique you will develop in subsequent courses.

The Progymnasmata 40% (32% + 8%)

The ancient Greek rhetoricians taught their art to novices by guiding them through a series of exercises called progymnasmata (literally, “fore-exercises”) that helped develop their understanding of the basic components of argument. Among the 14 progymnasmata were fables, anecdotes, narrations, and maxims. The exercises for this course don’t follow the ancient Greeks exactly; in fact, I’ve tailored them to reflect the particular needs of today’s students. You need less work on proverbs, for example, than you do in media analysis. So I’ve constructed nine exercises that take key notions from the critical practice under discussion and ask you to apply them to something close to our place and time.
You are responsible for **eight submissions**. Each progymnasma is worth 4%; you'll receive this grade regardless of the "quality" of your submission if it is of adequate length and submitted to our ACE forum by 7 AM before the Tuesday classes. Unfortunately, I can't accept late exercises. There are two reasons for these penalties: the first is that I want you to be prepared to talk about your work in class; the second is that I want to help you develop discipline in your reading and writing. You may also be wondering why there is no discrimination based on the quality of the progymnasma (with a small exception—see below). The answer is that these are meant to be low-risk exercises that will help you do better on the longer writing exercise. As in a sport, your performance in practice is less important than in games. Practice is a time for experimenting, strengthening, and honing.

Rhetorical Éclat: It's my sincere wish that by the end of the course everyone's progymnasmata will show evidence of increasing rhetorical judgment and reflection, not to mention written excellence. At the end of the term, I will review your progymnasmata and happily award a further 8% to those of you who have amassed a portfolio of very fine exercises and, to the rest, some proportion of the 8% commensurate with the quality of the portfolio.

The progymnasmata will be posted each week shortly after Thursday's class. That will give me a chance to allay any concerns you have before you go about preparing the progymnasma for the following Tuesday's class. You can find the progymnasmata assignment descriptions on our class website on UW ACE.

How to prepare the progymnasmata: each should be 500 words, give or take 50 words. Put your response in the Drop Box associated with that week’s progymnasma. I recommend that you keep a copy of your post in your own computer so that you will have a record of it in case of system failure.

**Test (30%)**

You’ll complete a test through UW ACE based on the material covered to that date.
Project (30%)

In groups of six, you'll create a "zine" that deals with a particular topic of contemporary relevance (e.g., the Canadian election, the American election, the war in Iraq) as filtered through a rhetorically-attuned sensibility. In other words, you'll find ways to better understand the topic by examining its rhetorical construction. Five of you will be contributing editors, and one of you will act as the editor-in-chief. The latter will be responsible for the overall look and integration of the zine and will write an editorial that serves as an introduction to the volume. You'll be able to sign up for a zine topic later in the course in ACE, on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Attendance and Participation

My assumption is that if you decide to stay in this course, you have obligated yourself to attend all its meetings and to come prepared to each one. You will have read the assigned texts and written your exercises. You will be ready to respond to and initiate discussion, listen to me and to your peers' remarks, and, in general, engage thoughtfully with the material we are studying. In turn, my obligation is to make these classes worth attending and the material interesting and useful.

Reading and Discussion Schedule

Week 1: September 9 & 11: Introduction

"What is the what?"

Week 2: September 16 & 18: What is Language?

Sapir and Pinker

Week 3: September 23 & 25: What is Rhetoric? Part 1
Greeks and Romans

Week 4: September 30 & October 2: What is Rhetoric?
Part 2

Metaphors

Week 5: October 7 & 9: What is Society? Part 1

Ideology and Hegemony

Week 6: October 14 & 16: What is Society? Part 2

Media

Week 7: October 21 & 23: Discourse and Institutions? Part 1

Discourse communities

Week 8: October 28 & 30: Discourse and Institutions Part 2

The University (Readings, Freire)

Week 9: November 4 & 6: Discourse and Institutions Part 3

Business

Week 10: November 11 & 13: Writing Part 1

Workplace

Week 11: November 18 & 20

Meetings of editorial collectives

Week 12: November 25 & 27 Ethics

Ethics

December 1: Zine due

Academic Integrity: in order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 - Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, http://www.admin.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/policies/policy71.htm

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, http://www.admin.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/policies/policy70.htm

Appeals: A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, http://www.admin.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/policies/policy72.htm

Avoiding Academic Offences: http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/grad/academic_responsibility.html