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

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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 theories of 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, whether you realize it or not. 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 engages those concepts both in terms of project design and criticism; 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.

Textbook

The Essential Guide to Rhetoric by William Keith and Christian Lunberg

Other readings will be available via the UW ACE website for this course.

The Progymnasmata 25% (21% + 4%)

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 seven submissions. Each progymnasma is worth 3%; 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 9 AM before the Tuesday classes. Unfortunately, I can’t accept late exercises. Please do not ask for extensions, send submissions via email, or come forward with technical excuses after the fact. There are three reasons for my insistence on the deadline: 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; the third is that our class website is set up to receive your submissions only before the deadline. 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 4% to those of you who have amassed a portfolio of very fine exercises and, to the rest, some proportion of the 4% commensurate with the quality of the portfolio.

The progymnasmata will be posted each week before 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 will find the progymnasmata assignment descriptions on our class website on UW ACE.

How to prepare the progymnasmata: generally, each will be 500 words, give or take 50 words (about one single-spaced page). I’ll give you specific length requirements if the
progymnasma deviates from this standard. 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.

Midterm Test (20%) 

You’ll complete a test administered on UW ACE based on the material covered to that date.

Final Exam (25%) 

Project (25%) 

In groups of five, 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. Four 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 (5%) 

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.

Schedule 

Note: A detailed schedule will be available on ACE

Week 1: September 15 & 17: Introduction 
    “What is the what?”
Week 2: September 22 & 24: What is Language? 
    Sapir and Pinker
Week 3: September 29 & October 1: What is Rhetoric? Part 1 
    Greeks and Romans
Week 4: October 6 & October 8: What is Rhetoric? Part 2 
    Metaphors
Week 5: October 13 & 15: What is Society? Part 1 
    Ideology and Hegemony
Media

Week 7: October 27 & 29: Discourse Communities
Test

Week 8: November 3 & 5: Discourse Communities
Week 9: November 10 & 12: Discourse Communities
Week 10: November 17 & 19: Writing
Week 11: November 24 & 26
Meetings of editorial collectives

Week 12: December 1 & 3
Catchup and review

December 4: Zine due

Academic Integrity etc.

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo 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 offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (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.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm](http://www.adm.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.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm](http://www.adm.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.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm)

Academic Integrity website (Arts): [http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html](http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html)

Academic Integrity Office (UW): [http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/](http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/)

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities: Note for students with disabilities: The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD at the beginning of each academic term.