Self Analysis in the Midst of the Millennium

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Section: 73
144 Fenske  T, H 8-9:30

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Contents:

Course Theme: 1
Course Objectives: 2
Course Requirements: 3
Course Policies: 3
Grades: 5
Assignment Description: 6
Argument Proposals: 8
Draft Workshops: 9
Research Group Assignment: 10
Revision Unit: 12
Grading Standards: 13
On Plagiarism: 15
English 15

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Texts: Self-copied packet of course texts
Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*

Optional: A strong college dictionary
Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*

Course Theme:
The beginning of the New Year brings us closer to the much touted "Millennium", an event many thinkers have described as crucial historically, due to its potentially profound implications for humankind. The notion that the year 2000 marks simultaneously an end to things as we know them and the beginning of a new era, forces us to consider our own identity in the vast scheme of things. Who are we? How are we different from our predecessors? Where are we going in the future?

In this course, we will explore a wide range of materials in an effort to provide some answers to these questions. Dissecting works ranging from the Bible to *The X Files*, and considering various media including film, music and literature, we will attempt to contextualize ourselves in relation to past, current and future historical events, especially as they relate to the approaching Millennium. Topics we will explore include the following:

Metaphysical
Apocalypse now?
Even prior to the advent of Christianity, prophets have described the end of the world in the violent, disastrous terminology of Apocalypse. Beginning with an analysis of the most influential of Apocalyptic writings--*The Book of Revelation*--we will define the more ominous aspects of the coming Millennium, and discuss their relation to recent historical events such as the Waco, Texas disaster.

Social Paranoia
As the popularity of recent TV shows such as *The X Files* demonstrates, a widespread paranoia has begun to pervade our social/cultural landscape. Issues such as crime, racism and education have been linked directly to the decline of societal order. At
least one artist has described a new generation as *Natural Born Killers*, and everyone seems to be asking, "What is wrong with our society?" Through analysis of tracts on educational crises, and art depicting racial and criminological chaos, we will investigate our own apocalyptic paranoia and ask whether or not it is justified.

**Science Fiction**

Fiction has long posited the potentially disastrous effects of science on humankind. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, nearly 150 years ago, asked, "What does it mean to play God?" Recent developments in technology that make possible cloning, force us to ask this same question once again. In this section of the course, we will look at such developments and the problems they promise at the fin de siècle.

**Party Time**

In a rather famous tune, the singer formerly known as Prince, describes one likely reaction to the Millennium: "Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1999!" As historical examples illustrate, not all people see the end of the world as a wholly negative phenomenon. In fact, many see it as a chance to live life to its fullest. Looking at examples including excerpts from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, we will explore this interesting reaction to potential apocalypse, as well as its relation to current obsessions over "Extreme" sports and the historical persistence of the *carpe diem* philosophy.

Of course, all of these topics are inter-related and will be discussed in relation to one another as well as by themselves.

**Course Objectives:**

Our exploration of the topics listed above serves primarily as a cohesive means by which we may improve our writing skills. Based on the logical premise that written and rhetorical skills will be a crucial aspect of any field a student may choose, this course seeks to cultivate your strengths and improve your weaknesses as a writer/rhetorician. Rhetoric can be defined as the effective use of language, the art of persuasion. When Bob argues that Penn State is a superior football team, when Cristina attempts to explain to her boss why she deserves a promotion, or when you try to convince your parents they should give you money, the skill of rhetoric is being employed. In any major or field on which we choose to focus, the ability to argue in an articulate manner is essential to success.

Learning to read critically is the first and most important step toward acquiring this skill. Being able to understand and critique the expressions of others is not only personally satisfying—it is crucial to our survival. How can we protect ourselves from manipulation if we do not understand the art and tools of rhetoric? How do we prevent others from taking unfair advantage of us if we do not possess the means to counteract? Finally, how do we advance or bring about change if we cannot persuade others of our worthiness and authority? Hopefully, by the end of this course, you will be able to argue your own position in a clear, persuasive and even eloquent manner.

Undoubtedly, you have all heard the traditional nightmarish warnings about English 15. The course is certainly more demanding than many others, but hard work and
discipline always pay off and typically result in a more stimulating college experience. The course not only depends upon your own individual effort, but on effective group interaction as well. The best way to prevent an instructor from standing before you and lecturing for an hour is to situate yourself within the classroom discussions. I envision a classroom where student conversation dominates and lectures are rare.

Requirements:

In order to pass this course (with a grade of "C"), you must satisfactorily fulfill the following requirements:

• Write 5 major papers; see Course Schedule. Each paper must be submitted in a folder, along with rough drafts, signed peer-review comments from draft workshops, argument proposals, and other materials and notes that represent the various stages of the paper's development. Papers must be handed in on time; late papers will be docked on full letter grade per day, unless you receive my approval for an extension at least 48 hours prior to the due date.
• Complete a substantial revision of one of your papers; see Revision Unit. This revised paper also must be submitted on time, and in a folder with the aforementioned materials.
• Complete the Group Research/Library Report assignment; see The Research Group. This assignment absolutely must be completed and submitted on the due date specified on the schedule.
• Complete all homework assignments (reading and writing). Maintain regular attendance and active participation as both reader and writer in draft workshops, argument workshops, in-class discussions and exercises.
• Complete daily in-class journal; see below.

Policies

Attendance and Preparation: I expect you to attend class every day and to have your packet of supplementary materials with you. If you have unexcused absences, your class grade may be docked up to one full grade (excessive absences will result in a failure of the course). Excused absences must be arranged in advance and all work missed must be made up (you must contact a classmate to find out what you have missed). In an emergency, please call me.

It is particularly important for you to attend and be prepared to participate in class. I teach under the assumption that discussion is the most valuable method of learning and retention. The success of the class, therefore, depends upon how active you choose to be. As mentioned above, active participation also prevents me from lecturing to you the entire class, something we all should wish to avoid.
**Conferences:** I *strongly* encourage you to see me when you have questions or comments about an assignment or any aspect of the course--mini-lectures, discussions, invention, brainstorming, grammar, logic, etc. I am available at least 3 hours a week for you. Make it a habit to know your instructors and to make use of them as resources.

**Assignments:** In this course, I will try to hold you to the professional standards that prevail in the working world. For example, of the requirements listed below, your employer will take some completely for granted, such as promptness, neat appearance, and correct mechanics.

**Promptness:** In this course, as in the working world, you must turn in your work on time. All projects are due at the beginning of class on the dates indicated on the syllabus. Assignments turned in late will normally be penalized one letter grade per day unless you have made other arrangements with me in advance.

**Appearance:** All work should be neatly typed, using standard margins and spacing. Regardless of the document in question, your communication should exhibit appropriate format (see *MLA*). Rough drafts and take-home assignments must be typed; final drafts should be prepared on a computer or word processor. You are responsible for separating pages and observing appropriate margins. I recommend Joseph Gibaldi’s *MLA Handbook* as the best resource available to answer questions regarding mechanics and appearance.

**Grammar, Spelling, Proofreading:** At work, even a single error in spelling, grammar, or proofreading can jeopardize the effectiveness of some communications depending on the rhetorical situation. My grading will reflect the great seriousness with which these matters are often viewed in the working world. See me with any questions you may have regarding these matters. A good, readable and cheap beginning grammar is Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* (available in any bookstore).

**Back-up Copies:** Always prepare two legible copies of each major assignment. I will grade one copy and hand it back, the other copy will be for your own safe keeping and permanent records. Sometimes I will request a clean copy of one of your papers so that I can use it as a sample, in packets such as this, to illustrate effective and problematic responses to assignments. I won’t use your work without obtaining your permission.

All assignments should be saved on at least 2 floppy disks (and a hard drive if possible). I know first hand the perils of the computer process--save yourself from a real nightmare!

**Folders:** All assignments must be turned in inside of a folder including signed peer-review forms, drafts and outlines. Final paper should be bound or stapled separately from other documents.

**Plagiarism:** You will find in the *Course Packet* a departmental statement on what plagiarism is and why it is bad. If you still have questions about plagiarism after reading over the document, please see me. Plagiarism demonstrates contempt for your instructor,
Description of Document Types

**Portfolio:** The portfolio is a record of your semester's formal work. It should contain the paper trail for 5 major papers, including drafts with comments, peer review forms, and optional revisions. Be prepared to hand in your portfolio at any point in the semester.

**Journals:** You should be prepared to write a short journal entry each class period. A notebook will do. Music will usually accompany your writing. Feel free to write whatever you want—the purpose of the assignment is to get you writing every day, and to allow you time at the beginning of each class to vent frustrations, feelings, etc. After, we will all be more focused, more prepared for discussion.

**Interviews:** Each of you will be responsible for conducting an interview with someone in your prospective field—an employer or employee of a company, a professor or dean. The question you will focus on: "Why do I need to take a class in English 15?" Each interview package must include the following materials: a signed document proving that you have conducted the interview, significant information about the person you have interviewed, and a 2-page, double-spaced summary of your interview and what it has taught you.

**Rhetorical Analysis:** In this first paper—considered by many students to be the most difficult—you will isolate a particular argument we have already investigated in our readings/discussions, and argue why or why not the argument is persuasive. In doing so, you will employ a rhetorical terminology (ethos, pathos, logos, etc.). The paradigm for this opening paper consists of the following steps:

1. What is the argument?
2. Is the argument persuasive?
3. Why or why not?

**Evaluation:** In the second paper, instead of analyzing someone else's argument about a given issue, you will offer your own evaluation of a chosen topic. You may wish to argue that X is ethical because Y, that X is beautiful because Y, or that X is practical because Y (et cetera). The paradigm is a simple alteration of that governing the rhetorical analysis:

1. What problem are you exploring?
2. What type of claim are you making about the problem (ethical, pragmatic, or aesthetic)?
3. What is the basis for your claim?

**Proposal:** Now you must simply answer an additional question as the focus of your third paper:

4. What can we do about it?
The proposal asks you to establish a logical solution to the problem you have established. Proposals can be extensions of paper three or can introduce new topics.

**Cultural Analysis:** Your final original paper and the most philosophical. Considering a given problem you have chosen to investigate, what does this problem tell us about our culture? The paper simply asks you to refigure the final question of the proposal paper.

1. What is the problem?
2. What claim are you making about the problem?
3. What is the basis for this claim?
4. What does your conclusion tell us about the society in which we live?

**Revision:** See Revision Paper.
What Is An "Argument Proposal"?

What we're calling an "Argument Proposal" is one of the basic assignments in almost every unit of this course. It is, in essence, an exercise meant to help you to:

- Begin to formulate and clarify what you plan to argue, as well as how you plan to argue it and to whom, as a prelude to the actual drafting of your essay.
- Develop a conscious rhetorical framework that will be useful for planning and designing any written work that you may undertake, not only the work that you will do for this particular course.

We will think of an "argument" as consisting of a claim and the reasoning/evidence that functions as the basis for the claim -- the audience's reason for believing it.

In your Argument Proposal, you should address the following concerns:

- What is your claim? What do you wish your audience to believe, or feel, or do, as a result of reading your essay? Try to state your claim as precisely as possible, as a single sentence.

- What is the basis for your claim? What reasoning, what evidence, will help to make your claim as persuasive as possible? Again, try to state your reasoning/evidence precisely, as a single sentence.

  Also consider, and be prepared to discuss in class: What key assumption(s) does this reasoning/evidence depend on? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

- What's the issue that the argument responds to? What question or controversy? Also consider, and be prepared to discuss in class:

  Is the issue arguable? Is it a question about which reasonable people can (or do) disagree? Can (or does) this question have competing answers?

  Why does it matter? This is sometimes called the "So What" question. Why do you feel this issue is important, worth discussing? Why should (or do) other people think so too? Does the argument offer a significant answer to the issue?

- Who's the audience? Who do you wish, need to persuade? Also consider, and be prepared to discuss in class: What is your audience's knowledge of the issue likely to be? Its general attitudes and opinions? In what ways may this audience be responsive or resistant to your argument (and the assumptions it depends on)?

Length of the proposal: The whole proposal should not be more than a page.

Note that the key part of this proposal can be handled in two sentences that precisely formulate the argument that you propose to make -- or even a single complex sentence, such as, "[Claim ......] because [reason(s)/evidence]." For example: "Gender stereotyping impedes the progress of women in engineering schools, because images of women as 'illogical' or 'unscientific' make it difficult for female engineering students to be taken seriously by male professors and fellow students." The rest should be handled as briefly and concisely as possible.

The Argument Proposal will be due at each "argument workshop" in the syllabus; it must also be handed in with the finished paper (along with notes, rough drafts, etc.)
What Is A Draft Workshop?

For each of the units of the course, you will participate with other students in the class in a draft workshop. These workshops will typically take place on the class meeting before your final paper is due.

The draft workshop will yield several benefits for you, including:
• a chance to work with and get to know your classmates
• the opportunity to see how other writers have approached various assignments
• specific, written feedback on your draft from one or more other students

Your responsibilities for the draft workshop include:
• bringing a complete, readable draft to class on the day of the workshop
• being open to suggestions and honest responses from other readers
• participating in the workshop with enthusiasm and a willingness to help other writers

It is important that the comments that you offer to your classmates reflect your specific responses as a reader. For instance, vague positive comments like "this is cool," "good point," and "I like it" do not provide specific guidance in helping the writer revise. Of course, when you like specific things that a writer has done, you should say so--all writers appreciate positive responses. However, you should also comment in a specific way on how and why various parts of the writer's essay work (or don't work) for you as a reader. Some examples of specific, useful comments are "This example doesn't seem to work for me as a reader because...," "I wonder if changing the order of these points might be more effective because...," and "I really had to slow down and reread through this paragraph because the sentences are..."

The workshops will be conducted in a variety of ways. Early in the semester you will be furnished with "response sheets" to help guide your feedback. Later in the semester, as you have gained skill as a reader of your classmates' writing, your responses may not be quite as structured. However, in all cases, you will furnish your classmates with written, signed responses to their writing.

Remember: When you turn in your folder for each assignment, it should include one or more written and signed responses from other students.
The Research Group / Library Report Assignment

Purpose: This assignment has four basic purposes:

- For you to find and provide some useful information concerning a particular topic, or issue, that this class will be discussing and writing papers about.
- For you to become familiar with the various resources of the Penn State Library, including Electronic databases and search engines.
- For you to become more experienced at using library resources, as part of the process of investigating an issue and inventing an argument about it.
- For you to develop your ability to work effectively as part of a task group.

The Assignment: You will be part of a task group of four (possibly 5) persons. There will be approximately one group per every week we are in session. This is what you and your group are asked and expected to do:

- Familiarize yourself with the assigned text. Know what the author's main arguments appear to be. Before approaching any other texts, prepare a short abstract (five - seven minutes) of the text. This section of your report will serve to open your presentation and will help your classmates understand the angle you are coming from.
- Now ask yourself, "How can I situate this text within a larger discourse?" That is, what type of general (or specific) philosophical / sociological / etc. questions is the author interested in? How can I measure his/her contribution to this area of discussion? What other texts, materials offer similar or contrasting points of view?
- Using the library's resources, find at least 5 sources of information relevant to the area of interest. You will need to examine many more than the minimum required number of sources, in order to find 5 that are truly, usefully relevant.
- IMPORTANT! Make sure that the 5 sources come from at least 3 different databases (i.e., LIAS and 2 additional databases; See library information materials in the back of this packet). The sources should include at least one book, and no more than one of the sources should be from mass-media publications or popular magazines. Scholarly journals, professional/trade journals, public-information documents and statistics, and the like, are preferable and should be included. The conversation you create out of these materials should constitute the bulk of your presentation.
- Spend the last few minutes of your presentation explaining your own opinion on the subject. Group members do not need to agree, and debate is encouraged. The important point is that you make a concise, well articulated argument that expresses your opinion clearly.
- You are expected to hand in the following materials:
1. A typed annotated bibliography. This should include a complete bibliographical listing (see MLA), plus library call # for each of the sources in your group's report, with a very brief description (4-5 sentences) of the key points, or key information provided in each source. FURTHERMORE, this annotated bibliography should be photocopied and distributed to each member of the class before you begin your report.

2. A concise oral presentation lasting about 20 minutes. You are responsible for dividing speaking responsibilities as you wish. Be prepared to answer questions after your report is finished.

3. A folder, to be handed in to me, containing the annotated bibliography and documentation (i.e., library computer printouts) of all the materials your group consulted in its investigation.

Your grade for this assignment will depend on the overall quality of your research group's work. The grade will be given to the group as a whole; that is, each person will receive the same grade. Thus, it is essential for each member to take responsibility for the group's overall success.

The "overall quality" of your group's work includes:

- The quality (thoroughness and focus) of the group's effort in searching through Library resources, as demonstrated by your folder.
- The quality (relevance and usefulness) of the annotated bibliography the group provides.
- The quality (clarity and effectiveness) of the group's oral presentation of the bibliography and its significance.

I strongly encourage all groups to be in contact with me prior to their report.
Revision Unit: What Is A Significant Revision?

For this unit, you can revise any of your first four papers. (Paper #5 is not available, since it won't be returned in time for you to work with it.) It's probably better to work with one of your stronger papers, one that you feel interested in working with.

The grade you earn for this revision will not "replace" the previous grade; it will be graded separately, as your sixth paper in this course.

In order for this revision to fulfill the assignment and receive a grade, it must be a significant revision.

This means that you must do at least one of these two things:

• The argument should be significantly expanded and developed: new evidence, new examples and illustrations, inclusion of (and response to) counter-arguments, fuller development of introduction and conclusion, etc.
  A significantly expanded/developed version of your argument would probably be roughly 30% longer than the original.

AND/OR

• The argument should be significantly different than the original: a modified or changed thesis (you could even argue the opposite of the original), different lines of reasoning, inclusion of (and response to) counter-arguments, etc.

In addition to the above, you may also:

• Write to a different audience (this will probably require some changes in the argument as well).

• Change your ethos—you could even adopt a fictive ethos.

• Restructure the argument.

• Change your style and tone of voice.

Note: It goes without saying, of course, that your revision will take into account the comments you received on the original.