Reading, Writing, Rhetoric, and the Public Sphere

English 15, Section 9
118 Sackett Building
Class Time: 10:10-11:00 AM
Website: cms.psu.edu

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Course Texts
Unspun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation by Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall
Jamieson ISBN: 9781400065660
Everyday Writer by Andrea Lunsford ISBN: 9780312433093
Penn Statements

About the course theme

"Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that, whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights."
Thomas Jefferson, January, 1789 Letter to Dr. Price

"Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right... and a desire to know; but besides this, they have a right, and indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean of the characters and conduct of their rulers." John Adams (1735-1826), from A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law (1765). Quoted in The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations, edited by Antony Jay (Oxford University Press: New York, 1996)

How predictable it is to find high-minded quotes by our erstwhile Founding Fathers at the beginning of a syllabus. Despite the tediousness of this opening salvo, let's assume that these guys are fundamentally right about liberty and democracy: they do depend on us, the citizens, to be informed, to be paying attention, to be involved in civic life. Indeed, a college education is not solely devoted to producing twenty-something accountants, nutritionists, and engineers. College is also about cultivating that well-informed citizenry, which, as Adams and Jefferson noted, is critical to our democracy and way of life. College should help you to become a person who can make well-considered decisions and can even lead others to see the wisdom of your opinions. Your voice is needed in the public sphere to make the whole thing tick. Yet, these days, it's not so easy to be "informed," even if we wanted to be, and it might be even harder for reasonable voices to be heard, as the public sphere is increasingly dominated by sound bites, talking heads and trumped-up, spun stories that are designed to deceive, for partisan gain or for net profits. As such, the state of public discourse is reduced to a pile of rubble through which we must sift to find truth.

Our course text, Unspun, will help us toward that end, teaching us what to look out for in our quest to be informed citizens with voices. Each writing assignment will help us practice to unspin hype, provide correctives, and articulate our own views in the public arena, drawing upon the principles of sound rhetorical practice. At first, we'll learn how to analyze rhetoric and recognize spin; in the second part, we'll enter into dialog with others; and finally, we will construct a website that urges others to care about—and even donate to—a cause.

Note that the title of the course is a riff on the good ol’ "three R's" of elementary school. We are adding Rhetoric to the list (and dropping Arithmetic, of course) because rhetoric, like reading and writing, can shape reality in any number of ways: by contorting reality, by defining the terms that we come to understand reality, and even, when it's powerful, to change the
course of history—to change our real lives. Throughout the course, we will always be attentive to the idea that words truly matter.

Writing in English 15
English 15 is designed to help you become a stronger and more confident thinker and writer. As you might expect, you will write some formal academic papers. Additionally, you will try your hand at more stylistic pieces as well as practice informal and more personal writing, such as quick in-class writing activities and an online class discussion. This emphasis on both formal and informal, graded and ungraded, writing activities is founded on the premise that improvement comes through writing—and revising—often in a number of forums.

This writing course will also emphasize critical thinking. Why? Well, provocative and convincing pieces of writing are almost invariably well conceived, so good thinking, as it were, is the seed of good writing. We’ll be spending some time challenging our assumptions and those of our peers. We’ll also practice researching and marshalling our arguments and evidence as we hone our rhetorical skills. We will work on developing these skills as if our very way of life depended on them—which, indeed, it does!

Peer Collaboration
A distinctive feature of this course will be its collaborative approach to learning. You will be working closely with a specific group of your classmates throughout the semester, sometimes even working jointly on projects. This classroom model will help you learn from your peers and will promote independent, student-centered learning and inquiry. Additionally, many of the writing samples we examine will come from you, your classmates, and former students of this course. Ideally, each student will offer his or her own work as a sample for critique at least once in the semester.

Portfolios and Evaluation
Though we will have many writing assignments in the class and you will receive copious feedback on your progress, your writing will be assessed for a grade just three times. At the end of each writing unit, students will be asked to turn in selected materials representative of their writing for that period in a “writer’s portfolio.” Most of the pieces will be reviewed and commerited upon at earlier dates by your peers and by your instructor, and you will be given ample opportunity to revise drafts to prepare for the portfolio assessment. Each portfolio will be accompanied by a narrative about the writing process for the included pieces and perhaps a rationale for inclusion (or, in some cases, exclusion). For example, in Portfolio 1, you may include an introductory letter, two papers, 3 discussion forum entries, and two post-reading question sets. You will be notified well in advance what pieces of writing the portfolio should include and how they should be presented.

Portfolio 1: 30%
Portfolio 2: 30%
Portfolio 3: 25%
Discussion Forum: 5%
Class Participation and Attendance: 10%

Grading Scale: 100-93% A; 92-90% A-; 89-88 B+; 87-83% B; 82-80% B-; 79-78% C+; 77-73% C; 72-70% C-; 69-68% D+; 67-60% D; 59% F

Class Participation and Attendance
Class participation is worth a substantial part of your final grade, so it’s in your interest, both in terms of your academic performance and the value you get out of the course, to participate as often and as meaningfully as possible. When calculating class participation, I take into consideration the quality of your in-class participation, contributions to group work, class presentations, preparedness, and homework.
I will be assigning an actual letter grade, worth 5% of your final grade, for your attendance. Here is the grade breakdown for attendance: 0-2 absences: A; 3-4 absences: B; 5-6 absences: C; 7-8 absences: D; 9-more absences: F. Missing 10 or more classes is grounds for course failure.

**On-line Discussion Forum**
This forum will be accessible from ANGEL (cms.psu.edu). Each week the class discussion leaders will post provocative questions to prompt lively debate and to discuss issues we did not get to in class or wish to discuss further. Each student is required to do 15 responses, about 250-300 words each, roughly one entry per week, in addition to posting discussion questions. Discussion leaders may be called upon in class during that week to synthesize the conversation in the on-line discussion forum. Forum entries should be at least a full paragraph and should be substantive. You are encouraged to read previous messages posted on a topic before you enter into the discussion. Also, be sure that you *really* have something to say rather than simply reiterating other class members’ points. You are free to post questions or comments relating to the course at any time.

The on-line discussion forum is *your* place. However, while your writing style can certainly be informal and your observations even less “academic” and more personal, you should always remain respectful and offer interesting and substantial insights. You will want to imagine your readers as your classmates, certainly, but also as members of an informed community seriously invested in your response.

The online discussion forum will be assessed in two ways: As the semester progresses, you will submit selected online discussion forum entries to be assessed with each unit portfolio. Then, at the end of the semester, the overall consistency of your participation (at least one entry per week, with two skipped weeks allowed), number of entries (15 minimum), and quality of your responses will be evaluated as 5% of your final grade. Earning extra credit is certainly possible here by posting extra questions to the forum, exceeding the minimum entry number, or offering excellent responses that have a significant impact on the forum discussion.

*A word to the wise:* Because there are many ways to lose a posting on ANGEL, it’s always a good idea to write your response in a word-processing program, save it on your hard drive, and then paste the response into the ANGEL discussion forum entry forms.

**Academic Integrity and Source Documentation**
In accordance with common sense and article 10 of PSU's Code of Conduct, cheating, including plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty, will not be tolerated in this course. A suspected case of academic dishonesty will be referred to the College Committee on Academic Integrity, which may recommend academic probation, suspension, or expulsion. We will review proper documentation in class; however, claiming ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism is not a legitimate excuse.

Students should use the MLA style of documentation in this class. Our class handbook, *Everyday Writer*, includes a substantial section on MLA documentation.

**Late Papers**
You are allowed one 48-hour, penalty-free extension for the semester. Please inform me before or on the portfolio or draft due date that you are taking an extension. Otherwise, portfolios are lowered one letter grade for every class day that they are late. Late drafts will also negatively affect the portfolio grade.

**Class Preparation**
Please come to class prepared with the reading or writing assigned for the day completed. We will often break into smaller groups for discussion and activities, and sometimes groups will be responsible for completing a task or reporting on their findings. It's unfair to your fellow group members and embarrassing for you when you are clueless during group work.

Contacting me
If my office hours do not work with your schedule, you may set up an appointment with me outside of those times. The best way to contact me is via email. If you go through ANGEL to email me, be sure to click on the optional box to send the message to my PSU email account.

Disability Support Services & Special Circumstances
The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you have a registered disability or any other special circumstance, please let me know about it within the first week of class. We can then devise a plan for how to approach the semester.

Resources

Class Webpage
Our class Website on ANGEL has a wealth of information. You need to access it anyway to get to the class discussion forum, but you'll also find an archive of class handouts. To access ANGEL, use the same ID and password as you use to access your campus e-mail.

The Writing Center
As a FREE tutorial service, The Writing Center assists members of the University community who seek help with their writing assignments (and with their writing in general). Students can schedule 50-minute sessions with Writing Center tutors for help with any aspect of the writing process or a particular assignment. Every student can benefit from utilizing The Writing Center's services—even students who get good grades on their papers. The Writing Center is located in 219 Boucke.

Conferences
Think of my office as an extension of the classroom. Use my office hours to discuss any aspect of your writing. We will be holding a few mandatory one-to-one and group conferences throughout the semester.

Class Schedule.
M 1/14 Introductions. Free-write exercise. Homework: Expand free-write, put it on ANGEL. Read Introduction to Unspun
W 1/16 Working groups formed. Discuss Unspun. Introduction to Paper 1: Rhetorical Analysis of an Advertisement. Homework: Look for Advertisement to analyze
F 1/18 Discuss Unspun. Brainstorm Paper 1 topics. Introduction to analytical sentences. Homework: Read Chapter 1 of Unspun. Find ad to analyze and work on developing thesis and evidence for Paper 1.
M 1/21 Martin Luther King Day—No Classes
W 1/23 Discuss Unspun. More work with analytical sentences. Workshop thesis claims. Homework:
F 1/25 Read sample rhetorical analysis papers. Discuss Unspun. Homework: Begin developing draft for Paper 1.
M 1/30 Read sample rhetorical analysis papers. Homework: Continue drafting Paper 1 for Wednesday's workshop.
F 2/4 Paper 1 due to me. Discuss Unspun. Introduction to Paper 2: Comparative Analysis of News Rhetoric.
M 2/4 Practice analysis of news rhetoric. Homework: Look for news rhetoric to compare and to bring
to class.

**W 2/6** Critique more examples of news rhetoric. Develop tentative thesis for Paper 2 in class. Talk out paper themes with group members. Homework: Start drafting Paper 2 for workshop next Wednesday.

**F 2/8** Critique sample drafts for Paper 2. Homework: Prepare drafts for Wednesday.

**M 2/11** Exercises on style and correctness. Homework: Prepare draft for Wednesday's workshop.


**F 2/15** Individual conferences; class cancelled. Paper 2 draft due to me at the time of meeting. Homework: Revise Papers 1 and 2 in preparation for Portfolio 1 submission. Read Chapter 3 of *Unspun*.


**W 2/20** Look at sample rebuttals in newspapers. Exercises on style and correctness. Homework: Prepare Portfolio 1 for submission. Look for article to rebut.


**M 2/25** Exercises with sample rebuttals. Develop ideas for Paper 3. Homework: Read Chapter 4 of *Unspun*. Begin developing draft for Paper 3.


**W 3/5** Paper 3 due to me. Grammar Smackdown! Homework: read Chapter 5 of *Unspun*. Answer questions on Angel.


**SPRING BREAK—NO CLASSES**

**M 3/17** Critique sample policy papers. Homework: Read Chapter 5 of *Unspun*.


**M 3/24** Library Day. Meet in library computer lab.

**W 3/26** Classes cancelled. Group conferences

**F 3/28** Classes cancelled. Group conferences

**M 3/31** Introduction for Paper 5: Create an Advocacy Website. Homework: Read Chapter 6 of *Unspun*.

**W 4/2** Discuss *Unspun*. Brainstorm ideas for Paper 5.

**F 4/4** Portfolio 2 Due. Look at sample advocacy pages. Homework: Reading on fundraising appeals.

**M 4/7** Discuss readings. Brainstorm ideas for Paper 5.

**W 4/9** Style exercises. Decide on content areas for Paper 5.

**F 4/11** Class cancelled: Round 1 of Group Meetings

**M 4/14** Class cancelled: Round 1 of Group Meetings. Homework: Read Chapter 7 through conclusion of *Unspun*.

**W 4/16** Discuss *Unspun*. Style exercises. Workshop outlines of Paper 5.

**F 4/18** Library Day—develop content of Paper 5.

**M 4/21** Discussion of design concepts and visual rhetoric. Work on Paper 5.

**W 4/23** Discuss *Unspun*.

**F 4/25** Class cancelled: Round 2 of Group Meetings

**M 4/28** Editing Paper 5; Activity TBA

**W 4/30** Editing Paper 5; Activity TBA

**F 5/2** Portfolio 3 Due. Course Wrap-up. Course Evaluations.

Discussion Forum ends Sunday, May 4 at noon.