How to Write a Great Essay: A Writing Bootcamp for Undergraduates

English 195B  Professor Terry Castle  Fall Quarter 2013
MW 2:15-3:45  castle@stanford.edu  Office hours: MW 10:30-12 pm and by apptmt.

Course Description:

The course will be a practical workshop for undergraduates on how to improve essay-writing skills. Just like any other complex and demanding human activity--scuba diving, working out a mathematical proof, learning to pole vault, cooking the perfect soufflé, arguing a court case--the ability to write clear and compelling prose requires practice, alertness, psychological intensity, and a certain amount of imaginative and emotional daring. A good writing teacher is in turn like a good coach: not just someone who inspires you to 'do your best' in the abstract, but someone who can actually help you with the nitty-gritty, the practical details. In this course we will focus on the finer points of vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, logic, timing, intellectual precision; how to connect with (and delight) an audience; how to magnify a theme; how to deflect counter-arguments; how to develop your own sophisticated authorial 'style'; how to write sentences (and papers!) your reader will care about and admire and maybe even remember.

The course has been designed with humanities students and especially English majors in mind, but any student who hopes to improve his or her writing should be able to benefit from the practical instruction on offer. The course enrollment will be limited to 12 students and the class run as a workshop. The reading component will be comparatively light. Over the course of the quarter we will read two books--J.M. Coetzee's novel Disgrace and Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita--modern fictional masterpieces both, and students will be writing blog notes and short papers for each book. (We will no doubt also read a few short critical essays and reviews as examples of style.)

But the primary focus will not be on literary-critical analysis per se, but on how one goes about developing a coherent, impressive response to a work of beauty and imagination. The two central problems we will address: how you figure out what to say, then how best to say it. You will be reading and revising your own work and that of your classmates 'up close' and repeatedly; indeed, we will undertake first drafts and second drafts and possibly even third drafts for some assignments. Each class session will be devoted to critique and comment--kind, insightful, but also direct--along with a
certain amount of light-hearted (!) SWAT-team group 'copyediting.' During this last activity, class members will practice identifying technical problems in the essays in front of them and suggest immediate emergency remedies.

Though I can't obviate it completely, I hope to minimize the 'grade anxiety' that so often afflicts students in writing classes. When it comes to practicing and refining a skill—and again athletic skills make for a good analogy—grades are often utterly beside the point. I want students to take risks and be open to new challenges. Thus I will not be grading our weekly assignments. Nor, when it comes time indeed to give final grades, at the end of the quarter, will I be using some mysterious standard or class 'curve'—i.e., 'this is an A paper, that is a B paper'—to make my judgments. Students will be evaluated on two things: intensity of effort and overall improvement, i.e., the distance I consider you to have traveled in your own writing over the course of the quarter. You will not be competing with your classmates, in other words—only your once and future self.

Books:

J.M. Coetzee, Disgrace
Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita
Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb,
Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace
Virginia Tufte, Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style

Requirements:

1) Attendance, Reading, and Class Participation:

Students will complete all readings for the course according to the schedule below. 100% attendance is required; casual absences are not acceptable. (Students absent for any reason are expected to notify the instructor in advance.) More than one absence will affect your grade adversely! All students should be prepared to participate fully in every class discussion. Classroom participation will account for 20% of your final grade. (**Note: no incompletes will be given in this course except in authentic cases of illness or emergency**)

As a courtesy to me and to your fellow students: may I also ask 1) that you not arrive late; and 2) that you turn off all laptops and cellphones, etc. at the beginning of class?

2) Written Assignments:

Students will write two critical essays, one 6-7 pp., the other 9-10 pp. Each essay will go through a formal revision process. Students will submit a first draft for each essay; a revised and polished version will be due the following week. (Only revised versions will be graded.) The two papers taken together will constitute 50% of the student’s final grade. Students will be evaluated specifically on how thoughtfully and thoroughly the process of revision and rethinking has been carried out.
[N.B. My policy on late papers: for every day your draft or revised essay is late, the final grade will be reduced by a half-step (i.e., B to B-). Policy kicks in immediately, so papers will be due IN CLASS. If essays come in later that same day, the grade will automatically be reduced a half-step.]

In addition, we will have a Course Blog, to which each student will be asked to contribute 5 short 'glosses' or blog entries--i.e., one well-honed paragraph of writing on the reading assigned for the day. The format for each entry will be this: the student will select and reproduce a paragraph or short section from the assigned reading that he or she finds particularly striking or puzzling or potentially illuminating. He or she will then 'gloss' it: that is, describe as succinctly and compellingly as possible what it's doing in the fictional context, why we should find it interesting or important, what kinds of critical questions and challenges it poses, and indeed, how one might generate from it some more extended critical statement or essay topic. Issues highlighted can be thematic, stylistic, linguistic, formal, reception-oriented, or indeed anything else one might find intriguing. All blog entries will be shared with one's classmates, and students will be asked to keep up with and comment on one another's entries. In class we will use these glosses as our discussion 'prompts.' Not only will they help us identify key themes and topics in the works under discussion, we'll consider each gloss itself as a piece of concise critical rhetoric to be analyzed. How well has the author conveyed the passage's significance? What's the author's point and how successfully does he or she get it across?

The 5 course blog entries will make up the remaining 30% of one's final grade.

gloss^2 (glôs, gls)
n. 1. a. A brief explanatory note or translation of a difficult or technical expression usually inserted in the margin or between lines of a text or manuscript.
    b. A collection of such notes; a glossary.
   2. An extensive commentary, often accompanying a text or publication.
   3. A purposefully misleading interpretation or explanation.          !!!!!

tr.v. glossed, gloss-ing, gloss-es
1. To provide (an expression or a text) with a gloss or glosses.
2. To give a false interpretation to.

[Middle English glôse, from Old French, from Medieval Latin glôssa, from Latin glôssa, foreign word requiring explanation, from Greek, tongue, language.]
## Reading Schedule (precise page numbers to follow):

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<td>1</td>
<td>Sept 23</td>
<td>Introduction—Style and the Essay</td>
<td>Sept 25</td>
<td>(First blog note due today!)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Sept 30</td>
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<td>Oct 2</td>
<td>(2nd blog note)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Oct 7</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Oct 14</td>
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<td>Oct 16</td>
<td>1st PAPER DRAFT DUE TODAY! (7-8 pp.)</td>
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<td>Oct 21</td>
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<td>Oct 23</td>
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<td>NO CLASS! PROF. CASTLE AWAY</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Oct 28</td>
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<td>Oct 30</td>
<td>2nd DRAFT OF FIRST ESSAY DUE!</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Nov 4</td>
<td>Coetzee, <em>Disgrace</em>, pp.</td>
<td>Nov 6</td>
<td>(4th blog note due)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Nov 11</td>
<td>Coetzee, <em>Disgrace</em>, pp.</td>
<td>Nov 13</td>
<td>(5th blog note due)</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Nov 18</td>
<td>Coetzee, <em>Disgrace</em></td>
<td>Nov 20</td>
<td>1st DRAFT OF 2nd ESSAY DUE (9-10 pp.)</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Nov 25</td>
<td>Thanksgiving</td>
<td>Nov 27</td>
<td>Thanksgiving</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Dec 2</td>
<td>Coetzee, <em>Disgrace</em></td>
<td>Dec 4</td>
<td>2nd DRAFT OF SECOND ESSAY DUE TODAY!</td>
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<td>Conclusion</td>
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Learning Outcomes:

This course may be used to fulfill one of the two following Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing undergraduate requirements (though not both):

1) "Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry" requirement. With dedication and effort, students should expect to improve and extend their skills in several broad areas. In particular, Writing Bootcamp students should be better able to

- appreciate the nature of human responses to meaningful cultural objects, and distinguish among the different methods to interpret those responses;
- acquire and assess techniques of interpretation (including close reading techniques), criticism, and analysis of cultural texts, artifacts, and practices;
- demonstrate facility with the analysis of arguments for and against different theories and interpretations;
- recognize the frameworks for thought and action implicit in human practices, and analyze the different assumptions underpinning those frameworks;
- understand diverse artistic, literary, and theoretical traditions, their characteristic forms of production, and/or their development across historical time;
- understand how expressive works articulate responses to fundamental human problems and convey important values.

2) The second is the "Creative Expression" requirement. (I make no distinction, obviously, between the creativity, vision, problem-solving, and verbal elegance needed to write a great essay and what one finds in any other form of 'creative expression.') A good essay is indeed a work of art. Herewith the official 'learning outcomes' associated with this requirement. Students will

- explore their own potential to produce original creative projects;
- engage in artistic collaboration and the creative reinterpretation of art made by others;
- take creative risks beyond their comfort zones;
- experience what it is to make the unimagined possible and real;
- appreciate how experimentation, failure, and revision can play a valuable role in the creation of successful and innovative works;
- consider multiple and possibly divergent solutions to a problem;
- explore the role of artistic expression in addressing issues that face society.

Finally, though our work toward better skills will remain paramount, the course
should also be **FUN**: a writing experiment in which you learn by doing; and **without**, as much as possible, the typical reading overload, crippling time constraints, and sour-making grade anxieties that so often plague students on the quarter system.

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**THE FINE PRINT:**

**Relevant University Coursework Policies:**

**Students with Documented Disabilities**

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: [http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae)).

**Honor Code**

The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

3. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.