

English 505: Seminar in Composition Theory
The Theory and Practice of Teaching Composition Spring 2011

Instructor: Dr. Brenda M. Helmbrecht

Office: 47-35F

Contact Info: bhelmbre@calpoly.edu (the best way to get in touch with me)

Office: 756-2178

Office Hours: M 1-3; T 2-3; W 1-3, and by appt.

COURSE OVERVIEW

English 505 is a graduate seminar focusing on the theories, practices, and arguments that populate the field of Rhetoric and Composition. The course curriculum essentially argues that serious intellectual engagement and a basic understanding of composition and rhetorical theory are necessary for effective writing, engaging pedagogy, and for informed participation within an English department. In designing this course, I have targeted three overlapping focal points: the history of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline, theories of composition pedagogy, and larger institutional and departmental challenges faced by members of the field. The ways in which these areas intersect and inform one another will create a dynamic course of interesting, productive, and useful conversations for us as teachers and students of writing.

The pace of the quarter is always quick, the thinking intense, and the material diverse and sometimes difficult, thus I expect that you will accept the challenge to complete *all* work in this course and to participate actively in rigorous conversations. At the same time, because this is a graduate course, some of the assignments have open due dates so you will have to motivate yourself to complete the work and use your time wisely.

OBJECTIVES

In this course, you will:

- understand the relationship between theory and practice
- become familiar with the history of Composition and Rhetoric as a discipline
- develop a proficiency with reading theoretical texts
- continue to develop your writing abilities
- present your impressions and responses to texts both orally and in writing

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Susan Miller, Ed., *The Norton Book of Composition Studies* (2009)
- Joseph Harris. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966* (1993) Since this text recently went out of print, I have posted the entire book on Blackboard as a pdf for you to download and print.
- One of the following (TBD soon):
 - a) Gilyard, Keith. *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.
 - b) Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger of Memory*. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.
 - c) Rose, Mike. *Lives on The Boundary*. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.
 - d) Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana: NCTE, 1993.

COURSE PROJECTS

- 1) **Daily Readings.** The amount of assigned reading for this course is reasonable for a four credit graduate seminar. I expect you to read critically and closely all assigned readings, and to be prepared to discuss them in detail during class.
- 2) **Reading Analysis (250 points – 25% of final grade):** You are required to produce **five analyses of three-four pages** that address the assigned readings. However, if you choose to do SIX responses, I will throw out the lowest score. **I will not accept more than two responses per week. In addition, responses must be kept current with the readings. Finally, one response must address the “rhetoric readings” we cover in weeks nine and ten.** (NOTE: See “Presentations” below.)

A tip: As you study for the MA exam, use these responses as study guides.

- 3) **English 134/145 Observations (200 points – 20% of final grade):** In an effort to put our theoretical and practical discussions of the teaching of writing and rhetoric into a real context, you need to visit **four hours** of English 134/145 courses during the quarter. For each hour, you need to compose a critical response wherein you not only discuss your observations, but also **apply** the course readings to help you interpret and understand what you observed. Avoid writing a point-by-point summary of what you observed. Rather, choose a theme or a passage from a text that helps you understand what you see.
(Note: if you observe a 50-minute class, write a 2-3 page response; if you attend a 2-hour class, your response should be 4-5 pages. Please indicate the length of the class in your header. If you intend to be a TA, I suggest seeing both class lengths.)
- 4) **Rhetorical Style Presentations (50 points – 5% of final grade):** In week two, I will assign you one or two rhetorical devices that you will research and then present to the class. I will model this for you – so don’t panic. You will work in groups of 2 or 3. These devices are intended to bring greater stylistic complexity to an argument, so I will expect you to use devices in your responses. Indeed, when you use a device, please highlight it and draw my attention to it. You must use at least two devices in your final two responses and you must use two in your final project.
- 5) **Reading Group Presentations (200 points – 20% of final grade):** Along with a group of your peers, you will read one of four books together (listed under class materials) and will then present the text to the class during the eighth week of class.
- 6) **Final Project (300 points – 30% of final grade):** Regardless of what option you choose for a final project, you will be required to present your findings to the class. I will ask you to submit a project proposal by mid-quarter. Ideally, your project should build on the intellectual inquiries we have engaged in during the quarter. There are a number of approaches to consider. I will hand out project options during the first few weeks of the quarter. (Note: 20 of the 300 points is devoted to the project proposal.)

COURSE POLICIES

- 1) **Grading:** Assignments will be evaluated on a 1000 point scale.
- 2) **Attendance.** I expect you to attend every day. If a problem arises and you are unable to attend class, please let me know as soon as possible. You are allowed to miss one class without penalty. Missing further classes will reduce your final grade by 1/3 (i.e. and A becomes an A-; a B- becomes a C+). You will still be expected to complete any work that is assigned for the day you will be missing.
- 3) **Classroom Participation.** I expect that your participation in the course will occur on multiple fronts, including reading, writing, and classroom discussions. I believe that learning is a collaborative activity and expect that you will be attentive to, engaged with, and respectful of everybody in the class. Please understand that silence, to me, indicates a lack of preparation. At the end of the quarter, I will account for your level of participation in the course by either rounding up or rounding down your final grade. For instance, if you remain mostly silent throughout the quarter, and choose not to actively and consistently contribute to class discussion and your grade totals 86.5% , I will round down to an 86% (a B) rather than round up to an 87% (a B+).

Reading and Writing Effectively in ENGL 505

A bit of advice....

I. Reading

- ✓ At the risk of oversimplifying, your first goal as a reader is to understand the argument being made. After you have a fairly steady grasp of at least some of the argument's main tenets, you can THEN begin to formulate a response. In short, you shouldn't offer a response to a text you don't understand.
- ✓ Read with an eye to inquiry, asking questions such as,
 - "How could the argument inform my teaching?"
 - "How does it affect how I perceive myself as a writer?"
 - "Does the author change my understanding of the field I know as 'English'?"
 - "What questions does this essay raise? Are they answered? If not, can I begin to answer them?"
 - "How does this essay fit in with other essays I have read this quarter?"
- ✓ The key word here is synthesis: work to make connections between the texts we read throughout the quarter.
- ✓ Frame questions and concerns that you would like to discuss in class.
- ✓ Most of the essays are theoretical in nature, so a last minute speed reading session right before class simply won't work.
- ✓ Take notes, underline the text, ask questions in the margin, draw arrows, underline key words/phrases: devise a system that helps you work through a text as you read it. These notations will also aid you as you discuss the essays in class and as you write responses. An essay without notation hasn't really been read.

II. Writing

- ✓ Your responses should benefit you as a student, a future writing instructor, and/or a student of writing/literature.
- ✓ Engage with especially difficult readings by using what you DO understand in the essay to think through what you DON'T understand. Work to understand the essay and accurately represent the author's argument(s). Don't shy away from difficulty: embrace it.
- ✓ Juxtapose current readings with past readings to tease out parallel or contrary arguments and themes.
- ✓ Determine which elements of the text require some summary so you can ensure that you and your reader are considering the same parts of the text.
- ✓ Analyzing a text doesn't mean that you need to find fault with it. Give the writers the benefit of the doubt. While you will encounter arguments that have gaps or holes that need to be addressed, that will not be true of all texts.
- ✓ Keep in mind your own ethos as a student of writing who is new to the field when writing.
- ✓ Quote the text sparingly and strategically. Engage with the author's words and ideas and cite text only when it helps drive your analysis further.
- ✓ Move beyond the obvious elements of the essay to deepen (y)our understanding of it.