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### WTS 090T.01: Critical Writing Skills

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*In teaching writing, we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it.*

“Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories” James Berlin

*...[inexperienced] writers are limited by the way they imagine writers behave and by their assumptions of how writers think.*

Mina Shaughnessy

### **Course Description**

As with all first-year, college-level writing courses, a primary goal of WTS 090 is to help students come to view critical thinking, reading, and writing as connected and recursive processes. The course will help students recognize these as complex practices, accomplished over a period of time with practice and instruction.

WTS 090 students will use inquiry – questioning and analyzing – as a way to make meaning of another writer’s text as well as a strategy for discovering and to communicating their own ideas. Students will read and construct texts in a variety of genres, including electronic and visual documents.

Finally, 090 offers students strategies and behaviors intended to help them locate themselves as critical readers and writers in an academic community.

### **Workload and Expectations**

WTS 090 will focus on reading and writing. Reading, like writing, is a messy, recursive process. Critical reading is not a matter of reading the text, looking for the ‘answers’ to a midterm or final. Critical reading demands that students ‘converse’ with a text, a conversation—like the kind we have with each other—that is at times clear and concise and at times—and more often than not—confusing and muddled. The goal of critical reading is to make meaning of a text. Students will read a variety of challenging non-fiction texts. These readings will come from a variety of sources and will be available either electronically (electronic reserve and Blackboard) or in hard copy (handouts and COT Library Circulation Desk). There is no “traditional” text. Students will be required to bring a copy of all assigned readings to class. Options will be to print out an electronic text here on campus or from your home printer. Students will make photo copies of any readings held at the circulation desk.

A major reading goal is to use student writing as one of the primary text. 090 will employ a whole-class workshop model. This will demand that students begin to understand and to become comfortable with the workshop process. Peer response to a writer’s draft is an essential part of the writing process. The basic aim of writing is to communicate, and sharing drafts with readers will help the writer assess a work in progress.

Always lingering on the fringe of a writing class is the grammar demon. Do composition classes, especially an 090 class, teach grammar? Yes and no\*. No, it never or rarely gives grammar ‘lessons.’ They were deadly 50 years ago, and they are still deadly boring. Yes, there is instruction about sentence-construction and boundaries as well as about the effective use of writing conventions for clarity, conciseness, completeness, and, alas, for “correctness.” (Beware: “correctness” is a slippery and deceiving creature.) Writing is not a linear process, and neither instruction nor construction begins with rules which precede words that will be systematically gathered into sentences that will be then grouped in paragraphs, and finally paragraphs corralled neatly into an essay. That’s not messy and challenging and fun; that’s formulaic. Writing is challenging, messy, and, yes, satisfying, but it is not linear. (If

students have doubts about this, listen and map conversations in and out of classes, in the hallways, at work, and at home. No one talks in a linear manner until they are in a formal presentation mode...or angry and/or desperate.) *This does not mean that writers do not strive for arrangement that is clear, logical, and artistic. They do.* Seasoned writers want that more than anything else; they just know it does not shape itself easily into a pretty package. (\*To be clear and fair, I can only answer for my classes, but, if you want to know what my colleagues across campus and across the country say, ask me.)

## **Outcomes**

An outcomes statement lists proficiencies that students should attempt to develop and/or improve during the semester. Although the list below is tailored for WTS 090, it reflects UM standards for first-year writing courses.

### Identity as a critical thinker, reader, and writer

By the end of the term, students should begin to:

- Connect critical thinking, reading, and writing to making meaning
- Replace writing and reading misconceptions with clear definitions and effective strategies for multiple literacies
- Understand that writers learn from reading other writers
- Develop and locate an identity as a thinker, reader, and writer in academic and professional communities

### Reading

By the end of the term, students should begin to:

- improve their ability to comprehend and interact with a variety of reading material
- summarize, agree and disagree with, and question alternative points of view
- cope with ambiguity and disagreement between opposing views
- read and analyze electronic and visual texts for their rhetorical effectiveness

### Writing

By the end of the term, students should begin to:

- build a repertoire of strategies for generating multiple drafts
- develop strategies for generating effective development and support of ideas
- recognize the essential nature of audience in the rhetorical process
- understand the recursive nature of writing
- to develop and define their own writing process
- understand that the writing process grows from “truth-seeking” and an awareness of writing as a social act

## **Policies, Procedures, and all the other ‘whatnots’**

### Required Work, Course Policies, and Classroom Practices

For grading purposes, I do not attach percentages to the following requirements and assignments. Preparation and participation are organic elements in my teaching model; therefore, no grade is assigned. However, a lack of preparation and participation always begets lower grades.

Your end-of-semester grade must reflect the level of proficiency you have reached as a writer. To this end I will employ a basic portfolio model for assessment as well as grading rubrics. With each assignment I will give a letter grade and a summative assessment.

Note: A frequent student concern involves the timely return of papers and an awareness of grades: “Where I am in this class.” Although the concerns are valid, the process for assigning an accurate grade includes a comprehensive reading, analysis, evaluation, and response to each student text. This process is complex and can be for writing faculty an intellectually, emotionally, and physically taxing responsibility. There is no valid, reasonable, or effective assessment and grading strategies for writing teachers that involve ‘scantron’-based, multiple-choice, or fill-in-the-blank testing practices. Although by midterm, you should know what ‘grade’ or ‘percentage’ you are holding in another class, the same may not be true in this writing class.

Thinking, reading, and writing processes are complex and occur unevenly over an extended period of time. The same is true for assessment and grading. The complexity of these processes is further complicated and compounded by the number of students any one writing faculty might be assigned in a semester. As the number of students increase, the hours needed to read, analyze, evaluate, and assess student texts grows higher and higher—I think any elementary exercise in a math class would substantiate this claim.

To mitigate this situation as much as I can, you may schedule a conference with me to discuss your writing. If I have sufficient writing from you, and I have had adequate time to read and to assess it, I will give you the most accurate and balanced assessment the semester’s constraints will permit.

Students will have, on average, at least one reading assignment for each class. Secondary readings assignments will be posted as needed.

#### Attendance

More than two absences from a MW or TTh class will compromise your grade. 5 or more absences from a MW or TTh class will result in a failing grade. Here’s the breakdown.

4th absence: final grade drops one letter grade

5th absence: final grade is an F

Here’s the reasoning behind the attendance policy. Without attending class, you cannot perform your role as a student involved in learning, planning, inventing, drafting; discussing reading and writing; learning and practicing rhetorical moves and concepts; or collaborating with your instructor and classmates.

If you must miss class, you are responsible for obtaining any handouts or assignments for the class: relevant handouts and information should be available on Blackboard within 24 hours after each class. However, there is no guarantee that information will be available consistently, and students should develop contingencies.

Participation includes coming to class prepared and on time, taking part in class discussions, asking questions, contributing your knowledge and insights in whatever form is appropriate, and striving to make all your contributions excellent. It also includes doing the required reading and writing for each class. Note: Please come to class on time. If the door to the classroom is shut, then you’re late. Habitual lateness will affect your grade because it is an unnecessary interruption and because latecomers are likely to miss valuable information.

There will be small-group work environments.

Turn off cell phones. If you have a special-need use for your phone, use a silent mode.

[Please note: Everyone suffers a certain amount of reticence when it comes to speaking to a group. Although this is a writing class, expressing your ideas as well as entertaining other points of view in a

discussion forum never fails to create at least some fodder for your writing. Students are expected to take a strong interest in group discussions.]

For all major writing assignments, you will be expected to complete at least one first draft and one final draft.

Writing workshops will be held during ‘workshop week’ – dates posted in weekly announcements. Each student will be responsible at least once (but possibly more) for a draft during ‘workshop week.’ A schedule will be determined in advance so that students will have ample time to prepare a draft. Failure to submit a draft for workshop when assigned will be recorded as an absence and count toward the two allowable absences.

### Procedural Basics for Writing Assignments

1. Complete all reading and writing assignments on time. Use Microsoft Word for all written assignments (except for in-class work).
2. Use the following format for submitting written assignments unless instructed otherwise or unless you’re following specific genre conventions:
  - Your name
  - Course section and number
  - Instructor’s Name
  - Date
  - Double-space the text
  - Use one-inch margins
  - Use 12-point font, Times New Roman
  - Number all pages in the upper right hand corner starting with page 2
  - Use a works cited page as needed – optional except for final research essay
3. Keep copies of all your work, as hard copy and on CD, disk, or memory stick.
4. Save everything in your working folder.

You are invited to make individual appointments with me to talk about your ideas, about comments you don’t understand, about problems you’re having with learning in this class. Feel free to email me. I will respond as soon as possible. If you want to discuss any specific grade, please wait 24 hours, giving yourself time to consider my assessment and your response. Please bring all drafts (with or without grades and/or comments) to any conference about papers/grades.

No late papers will be accepted for workshop and/or evaluation. Because you will submit assignments electronically, I will make an assignment folder available during the posted period of time for submissions. If the folder is ‘closed,’ please do not ask to submit a hard copy. Plan to move to the next draft. If you missed a final-draft deadline, you will receive an ‘F’ for that paper.

All writing will be submitted electronically using Blackboard assignment folders. All papers should follow the Modern Language Association (MLA) format (see above). An example of MLA format and links to websites for such formatting will be available in Blackboard.

Please note: this is a writing course and not a computer course; however, you will be expected to work with computers for class assignments, and correspondences will be conducted via email/Blackboard. With the exception of some initial explanations during our first classes, please do not expect extra time in class for any learning curve you might face with technology. Likewise, please do not expect any

extensions on due dates for an assignment because of any technical difficulties you have not conquered. Backup all work.

Please read the policy statement on plagiarism in the University Catalogue.

<http://www.umd.edu/studentaffairs/CODE.htm>

In brief, plagiarism is any attempt to misrepresent another writer's work as your own. This includes scooping something off the Internet. It is expected that you will adhere to this policy.

Plagiarism of any sort will result in a course grade of F, and I will follow the disciplinary procedures as stated in the Student Conduct Code <http://www.umd.edu/studentaffairs/CODE.htm>

Students may be asked for their research or sources at any time.

WTS 090 is only offered for traditional grades, A-F, and I will employees the 'plus & minus' option. No student taking WTS 090 should expect to receive an incomplete.

#### Computation of Cumulative Grade Average

I employ a plus/minus grading system. Valid grades and their point values per credit under the traditional grading system will be:

Quality points are assigned as follows: 4 quality points for each credit of A; 3.7 quality points for each credit of A-; 3.3 quality points for each credit of B+; 3 quality points for each credit of B; 2.7 quality points for each credit of B-; 2.3 quality points for each credit of C+; 2 quality points for each credit of C; 1.7 quality points for each credit of C-; 1.3 quality points for each credit of D+; 1 quality point for each credit of D; and 0.7 quality points for each credit of D-.

Please verify grade values at the UM website for your own records:

<http://www2.umd.edu/catalog/acpolpro.htm>

Auditors of WTS 090 must meet all requirements established for traditional-grade students.

Reminder: The dates for the last days to drop this class with and without a refund are posted on Cyberbear: <http://cyberbear.umd.edu/>. Likewise, students are responsible for all academic dates and deadlines for the semester. <http://cyberbear.umd.edu/>

Although the standards and rubrics for grading will vary by genre, stated below is a general grading rubric. One staple of consistency will apply: the three elements of the rhetorical situation--message, audience, and writer--represent criteria connected inextricably to any act of writing

I am willing to provide accommodations for students with special needs and circumstances with the proper verification from the Office for Disability Services.

Final words. I subscribe to the theories and research that characterize writing as a truth-seeking, social, and political act. Because of this approach, writing classes will explore and discuss most subjects and readings from a variety of perspectives and will employ various theoretical and, at times, ethical frameworks. Although this can make for a politically-charged and/or emotional atmosphere, this class will welcome, respect, and make room for ideas and beliefs that are presented with an intelligent, informed, and considerate voice.

### Grade Descriptors for WTS 090

**A → A-** Superior paper will demonstrate initiative and rhetorical sophistication that goes beyond general expectations. A text at this level is a well-edited text representing an exceptional understanding of the assignment and a comprehensive understanding of the appropriate rhetorical strategies for the assignment and genre. Paper exhibits an error-free use of writing conventions, including mechanics. The paper demonstrates consistently a highly developed understanding of the connected sense of audience, purpose and development. The writer is able to analyze his or her own writing, reflect on it, and revise accordingly. The paper highlights the writer's attempt to construct a specific style and to take risks with the work.

**B+ → B** This paper meets the rhetorical goals in terms of purpose, genre, and writing situation without need for further major revisions of purpose, evidence, audience, or style/conventions, including mechanics. The writer demonstrates some initiative and rhetorical sophistication although it may be inconsistent or uneven. The writer is able to reflect on his or her own writing and make numerous and significant choices about revision. The writer takes risks, although they may not all be successful.

**B- → C** This paper represents consistent writing that meets the basic requirements, yet the writing would benefit from further revisions of purpose, evidence, audience, or writing style/mechanics (or some combination). Likewise, the text lacks a strong or consistent understanding of rhetorical decision-making involved in the writing situations and genre. The writer composes across strategies, practices, and conventions at varying levels of success with mostly surface revision. The writer has taken some risks in writing and exhibits some style.

**C- → D** This text does not fully meet the basic evaluative standards. Text is brief and underdeveloped. The text reflects a writer's composing process that lacks complexity in terms of a rhetorical understanding specific to the genre. The writing calls for extensive revision, specifically to purpose, development, audience, and style and mechanics. The general writing does not present a text that is clear, effective, and convincing.

**F** Unacceptable writing: text exhibits pervasive problems with purpose, development, audience, and style and mechanics. These issues interfere with the writer's expression of meaning and a reader's comprehension of the text. An unacceptable text is often incomplete. A specific text will also earn an F if it does not represent the writer's original work.