

POL 493/POL 2893: Writing About Politics

Thursday 10- 12 pm in TC 24

Office Hours 1-2 pm (Sid Smith 3118)

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This workshop is focused on writing about politics. I use the term politics in a broad sense to include issues about social justice, identity (race, gender, sexuality, and class), and the reproduction or disruption of power. All students will be asked to complete two works of *creative nonfiction* (genres include personal essays, profiles, observational or descriptive essays, argumentative or idea-based essays, extended book reviews, and literary journalism). Nonfiction aims to provide true information about the world. Creative nonfiction differs from scholarly writing insofar as it also aims to interest, inform, persuade, and entertain readers, often all at once. A successful essay moves between the concrete particulars (character, place, conflict) and the general (theory, principle, policy). Writing about politics requires knowledge about politics and also skill at writing. This course builds on knowledge you have acquired throughout your coursework and helps you to communicate it to a broader audience.

A workshop has a distinctive format, and this class will be very different from a seminar or lecture course. Attendance and active participation are extremely important. You should think of yourself as a participant in collective project that aims to help each member to improve as a writer. You must be prepared to share your writing and to provide other students with feedback on their writing.

Readings: All readings will be either available through course reserves or will be provided as hard copies in class.

You may need to purchase a copy of the book that you select to read and write about in your journal. See the list below.

Assignments and Marking:

Writing Exercises: (10%) I will ask you to do short writing exercises that are intended to help you develop certain techniques. Some will be marked (“check, plus, or redo”) and others will be shared with workshop participants. Please submit them as part of your portfolio.

Reading Journal: (15%) Please keep a weekly journal with eight entries. The entries could include reflections on the assigned reading and/or your thoughts on other essays that are related

to your topic. All students must read one book of literary fiction from the list below and write about it in their journal. The total length should be around 2,000 words.¹

Essay One: (25%) and Essay Two: (30%): The total length of the writing you submit should be 4,000 words. You may write one shorter and one longer piece. One of two pieces should be revised and designated your main submission. The preliminary deadlines are individual, based on the date that you are workshopping your writing.² In this class part of the mark will be based on improvement and effort. You may include material from the journal or exercises in these essays.

Critiques and participation (20%): From weeks 4 – 12, half of each class will focus on a discussion of student writing. Each member of the class should read the writing samples before class and come prepared to provide feedback. Three students each week will also provide written comments on their colleagues' writing. **If you miss three or more classes you will receive a 0 for participation.**

PORTFOLIO SUBMISSION: WEEK 8 and APRIL 3³

Graduate Students should think about ways to deepen the experience of this course: completing more extensive reading (reading the whole book when the class reads an excerpt); organizing an extra grad only discussion group or workshop session; writing a longer essay.

Week One:

George Orwell, "Killing an Elephant" and "Politics and the English Language"

Exercise: Choosing your topic

Week Two:

James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

¹ Everyone can have a bad week. That is why you only have to write journals during eight of the ten weeks. If you miss one week, you can make it up the next week by writing two. Please do not do this more than once. The reason for the journals is to prepare for class discussion, so doing it late defeats the purpose.

² If you cannot complete your writing assignment by your workshop date, just share what you have. The more you have, the better quality feedback you will receive. The only way to make up your workshop session is to switch with someone else in the class.

³ Everyone automatically has a 72 hour grace period with no penalty and no documentation necessary, but I will not accept submissions after that date.

Joan Didion, “The White Album”

Exercise: Character

Week Three:

Zadie Smith, “Northwest London Blues,” *Feel Free* (2018)

David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster” *Gourmet* (2004)

Writing exercise: Place

Week 4: Ibram X. Kendi, excerpt from *How To Be An Antiracist*

Exercise: Personal history

Week 5: Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, chapters 1, 7, 9

Exercise: Interview

Week 6: Matthew Desmond, “Forced Out,” *The New Yorker* (2016)

Exercise: Scene

Week 7: Ta Ne-hisi Coates, “Letter to My Son,” *The Atlantic* (2015)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

Week 8: [Roxanne Gay, “Bad Feminist,” VQR \(Fall 2012\).](#)

Exercise: Voice

Week 9: Malcolm Gladwell, “Starting Over,” *The New Yorker* (2015)

Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt, “Why Vote?” *The New York Times* (2005)

Exercise: Summarizing a study

Week 10: Thomas King, “Too Heavy to Life,” *An Inconvenient Indian*.

Exercise: Popular culture

Week 11: Jill Lepore, “The Lie Factory,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2010.

Week 12: Final workshop. No reading.

Reading List:

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist* or *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*

Matthew Desmond, *Evicted*

Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

James Forman, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*

Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*

Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*

Thomas King *This Changes Everything, An Inconvenient Indian*

George Packer, *The Unwinding* or *The Blood of a Liberal*

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

Tressie McMillam Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*

Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*

Rachel Giese, *Boys: What It Means to Become a Man*

Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap*

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Rebel Sell*

Accessibility: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the AccessAbility Office as soon as possible. The staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let them and me know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.

Policy on the use of electronic devices during class: This is a workshop oriented course and there will be little need to take notes. Please do not use computers or cell phones during class discussions. You may use your computers in-class for reading the assigned texts and completed writing exercises.

Email Communication: If you have any questions about this course, please review the syllabus and the announcements on Quercus to see if I have posted an answer to your question. If you need further clarification or assistance, I am available during office hours and by email during the week. If I don't get back to you within 48 hours, please follow up. I try to respond to all emails but some days I receive dozens of emails, and I may miss one. During the term, I may decide to send out important course information by email. To that end, all UofT students are required to have a valid UofT email address. You are responsible for ensuring that your UofT email address is set up.

Quercus: Use your UTORid to log on to the course webpage: <https://q.utoronto.ca/>
Please check Quercus regularly for updates to the syllabus, announcements, etc.

Submission of essays, plagiarism, and turnitin: The University of Toronto policy states the following: "Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site." Further instructions about how to submit your writing assignments will be provided on the assignment sheet.

Academic integrity is fundamental to learning and scholarship at the University of Toronto. Participating honestly, respectfully, responsibly, and fairly in this academic community ensures that the U of T degree that you earn will be valued as a true indication of your individual academic achievement, and will continue to receive the respect and recognition it deserves.

Familiarize yourself with the University of Toronto's *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/policies/behaveac.htm>).