Expository Writing 20:
Imagining the Wild West

“…that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom — these are traits of the frontier” - Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History"

Our project this semester

In 2000, George W Bush ran for president wearing a cowboy hat and boots. Seventy years before, Calvin Coolidge did the same, posing for pictures in ostentatious white chaps with his name - CAL - written in gold spangles down the thigh. Both men hoped a single picture would send a message about who they were and what they stood for. Their assumptions rested on the sure knowledge that Americans know what the Wild West was all about. Cowboys and gunsmingers are perhaps the most pervasive characters in American pop culture. Whether it is in a Will Smith radio hit or a scantily clad cheerleader on Thanksgiving Day, Americans constantly refer to what we assume to be a shared heritage of cowboys, one-horse towns, shootouts, and tumbleweeds. But where did these stories come from? And whose history do they represent?

When we tell a story, no matter how familiar, we are making a choice. We are choosing which ideas to include, and which to leave out - whose lives count, and whose do not. This semester we will focus our critical attention on the curious histories of the American West. We will ask whose stories mattered, and why? In each of three essays, this course will explore one vital question: what do the tales we choose to tell about the past say about who we are today?

The art of writing is the art of critical thinking. This class will challenge you to learn to organize your ideas, to differentiate argument from summary, to evaluate evidence, to develop analytical questions and to formulate original theses. As a class we will also develop the necessary skills to engage in peer editing, serious academic dialogue, and critical self-evaluation. These will be the guiding skills required for your Harvard education - and for any career you pursue hereafter.

We will pursue the goals of this course in three separate units:

Unit 1: Fragments of Forgotten Lives
In the first unit we will get to the heart of what is both most fascinating and most infuriating about cultural history: those whose lives we most wish to understand rarely left clues behind. Working class men and women in the late 19th century were often illiterate, and what few documents they left were frequently destroyed. In the first unit we will attempt to get a close look at the vast array of lives that unfolded in the American West, using the scraps of documents that were left behind. We will read excerpts regarding the lives of three groups whose histories are left out of the Wild West mythology: the Sioux, Chinese immigrants and homesteaders. You will write an essay that engages in detailed close reading to draw out arguments about the lives of these long-dead men and women. In this essay you will be developing the skills of finding and answering analytical questions, a skill necessary to get past the very first stumbling block of writing: the fear that we don’t have anything worth saying. You do. I promise.
Unit 2: How a Man Becomes a Myth
In our second unit we will begin to explore how the dominant narrative of the Wild West - that of the good guy in a white hat shooting out the villain in a black hat - came to dominate the American imagination, and erase all other histories. When Buffalo Bill Cody performed his Wild West Show for Queen Victoria in 1887, it was a meeting of two of the most famous people on earth. The old world, embodies by the Queen who ruled one-third of the earth, met the new, a cowboy impresario who had captured America’s imagination. In this unit we will write a paper utilizing a critical lens to analyze primary source materials. We will read two theoretical works on late 19th century ideas about gender and race and then use them to analyze a dime novel written at the height of Cody’s fame. What was it about his image that set America alight? What did men and women see in the Wild West that they could not find in Eastern cities? This challenging essay will ask you to learn to summarize, assimilate and then apply a theory - a skill you will need throughout college.

Unit 3: Welcome to the Wild Wild West
The cowboy was born only a century and a half ago, but it is hard to imagine what American pop culture would look like without his influence. Yet, while certain aspects of his image - whether it’s the hat or the swagger - have remained, much has changed. Joss Whedon sent cowboys to space in Firefly while Fred Zinneman used them to critique Cold War policy in High Noon. Movies like Unforgiven and McCabe and Mrs Miller have sought to tell us about the “real” West, but were deeply influenced by their own cultural contexts. For your final paper, you will pick one of six modern interpretations of the cowboy myth and write a paper putting it in its cultural context - what was it trying to say by using wild west imagery? What stories were saved, and which were forgotten? How can we explain these choices? In this paper you will take on the challenge of original research, using your skills in forming analytical questions and developing new skills in seeking answers and evidence.
What I expect from you

The skills of writing will take a lifetime of development. No one arrives at the final destination of being a good writer; rather, you continually become one. Regardless of your high school experience, there is always more to learn - new skills to incorporate and old ones to improve. This course rests on several vital premises which will guide our work this semester

- Writing is a process: this semester we will explore what it means to develop an idea through the process of writing. This means that the emphasis is not on the final product, but on the way your ideas emerged as you created it. While many of us dream for a spark of perfect inspiration, relying on it is no more realistic than assuming you’ll pay your debts through a lottery. Instead, writers discover, refine and revise our ideas by writing about them. This course will ask you to engage in writing response papers and drafts as you build towards a final paper, so you will never again worry that you “have nothing to write about.”

- Writing is a conversation: when we write, especially in an academic context, we are writing in conversation with other scholars. We are responding to the ideas we find in sources and entering into critical debates and dialogues. What this means in a more concrete way is this: you are not expected to reinvent the wheel. When I ask you for an original argument, I do not mean something so novel that no one has ever conceived of its like before, but rather that you contribute to the discussion. As in a classroom conversation, worthy input builds on the ideas of others.

- Writing is never finished: for each paper, we will workshop two papers as a class. You will also, for each of three papers, have an individual conference with me, as well as feedback on a draft. Even when you turn in your final paper, you should expect my comments to include skills to pay attention to next time. This amount of feedback will likely be new to you, and possibly overwhelming, but consider it a rare opportunity. We will be discussing constantly how these skills and this feedback transfer to your other courses. Rarely, if ever, are students in any university setting afforded this much time to revise and work on writing skills. Putting the work in here and now will pay off for years to come.
How this works in practice

Communication
The course works best when we treat it as a semester-long conversation about your writing. To make that conversation possible, there are a few important things to remember:

• **Conferences**: We will have three conferences throughout the semester, in between the first draft and final version of each essay. These conferences are our chance to work closely on your writing and to focus your work in revision, and are most worthwhile when you are the one to guide them. Please come to each conference prepared – having reviewed your essay, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies. You should plan on taking notes during our discussions. Since the schedule during conference days is so tight, missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come see me during office hours about your developing ideas or to set up another time to meet if office hours aren’t convenient.

• **E-mail**: Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them), I use e-mail to communicate most of that information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your Harvard e-mail account daily; you are responsible for the information I post there. Likewise, I make sure to check mine once every weekday for questions from you. Please note that I don’t check Harvard e-mail later than 6:00 p.m. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

Class Participation
I expect you to show up – and not just physically. One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class; as in any seminar, you learn much more from formulating, articulating, and questioning your own thoughts than from simply listening to what others have to say. Our time together is largely devoted to discussion and small-group work. Therefore you are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. "Being prepared” means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assigned for the day, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussion. If you find speaking in public particularly difficult, we will work on strategies together to make this easier, but not to make it optional.

Grades
The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Essay #1 = 20%; Essay #2 = 30%; Essay #3 = 40%. The standard for each essay also becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay). At the end of the course you will turn in your final Writer’s Letter so you can assess your own progress over the semester (so save all your work!). The remaining 10% of your grade represents a serious measure of your completion of response papers, your constructive participation in class discussion and conferences, and the care with which you respond to fellow students' work.
**Attendance and Lateness**
Because Expos has a shorter semester and fewer class hours than other courses, and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential. It is an official program-wide policy that if you are absent without medical or religious excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. On your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation.

You are expected to let me know promptly if you have missed or will miss a class; you remain responsible for the work due that day and for any new work assigned. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In those circumstances, you should contact me before class (or within 24 hours); you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or from your Freshman Dean. Absences because of special events, such as athletic meets, debates, conferences, and concerts are not excusable absences. If such an event is very important to you, you may decide to take one of your two allowable unexcused absences, letting me know in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you must directly petition the Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such a petition only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

Class begins promptly at seven minutes past the hour. Three latenesses of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence.

Hey! This syllabus is getting long, isn’t it? Take a second to send me an email confirming you’ve read this far.

**Computer Policy**

Study after study has shown that notes taken by hand are a vastly more useful tool than those taken on a computer. A lifetime of existing in the world has shown that when we’re behind computers, we shut down. To encourage the best classroom discussions and full engagement in the class laptops will not be allowed EXCEPT on days when I specifically tell you to bring them (this will be true for days, particularly, when we are reading documents that are online.) You may have noticed there are no required texts for this course. Everything we read will be PDFs of chapters or articles. If we are discussing and article or document in class, please print it out and bring it with you.

**WRITTEN WORK**

**Submitting Essays**
You will turn in drafts and revisions on the course website; sometimes a printed copy delivered to my Writing Program mailbox at One Bow Street will be required. Please be sure to check the syllabus for details on where or when things are due, and pay careful attention to the general guidelines about format, etc. explained at the end of this syllabus.

When you are uploading documents to the website, you are responsible for submitting versions that I can open. (The document must either be in Microsoft Word or be easily compatible; your file should end in .doc or .docx.) It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you are sending is not corrupted or damaged. If I cannot open or read the file you have sent, the essay will be subject to a late penalty.
All work you submit to the course is for class readership – in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class (possibly yours!) as some of our texts this semester. If at any point you submit a draft or revision that you would prefer other students not read, please let me know that – but please don’t make that request about everything you turn in this semester.

**Deadlines**

For many class meetings, you will have due a response paper or some other reading or writing exercise to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our work together in class will also often be based on those assignments. For those reasons, it is imperative that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise – therefore each student in this section is allowed ONE 24-hour extension on a response paper, draft or revision during the semester. To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me before that deadline; submit the late work to the course website (and to my mailbox, if a printed copy is required); and be on time with the other work due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late. And beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you’re crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit.

Other than that “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late. It may be that you take this option - all of us have found ourselves behind in college, but there will be consequences. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

**Revision**

Because of the emphasis this course places on revision, the schedule is designed to allow you as much revision time per essay as possible – always at least a week after the draft is due, and usually at least five days after your draft conference. Since you’ll have a significant span of days in which to revise, the expectations for this aspect of your work in the course are high.

**Completion of Work**

Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official Writing Program policy that you must write all of the assigned essays to pass the course, and you must write them within the schedule of the course (not in the last few days of the semester after you have fallen behind). If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements. The letter will specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date (unless you have documented a medical problem), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed.

**Policy on Collaboration**

It is vital, in acknowledging the Honor Code, to be clear on what forms of collaboration are acceptable in any course at Harvard. The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students or through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). If you would like to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay, it is customary to do this in a footnote at the beginning of the paper. As stated in the Student Handbook, “Students need not acknowledge discussion with others of general approaches to the assignment.
or assistance with proofreading.” However, all work submitted for this course must be your own: in other words, writing response papers, drafts or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

**Academic Honesty**
Throughout the semester we’ll work on the proper use of sources, including how to cite and how to avoid plagiarism. You should always feel free to ask me questions about this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless that is explicitly part of the assignment. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to disciplinary action by the Honor Council.

You will be required to acknowledge the honor code twice in this course – the first time on the first draft of your first paper, and the second time on the final revision of your second essay.

**Writing Center**
At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions – you may want some extra attention on your essays. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. I can’t stress strongly enough the benefit of the service they provide; regardless of the "strength" or "weakness" of the essay, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center’s web site at http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

**Submitting Essays**

Following the guidelines below will ensure that I can focus on your ideas and your prose when I read your essays, rather than devoting time to issues of formatting, pagination, etc. The guidelines apply both to essay drafts and revisions. Forgetting to check your essays for these matters can result in a lower grade for the essay.

**Format:**
All essays should adhere to the standard format:

- double-space in a reasonable font, with one-inch margins

- for printed copies, staple all pages securely together; paper clip accompanying materials to the stapled essay. Copies should be printed dark enough to read and photocopy clearly

- number all pages and paragraphs. In order to number a paragraph it is perfectly acceptable simply to write that number at the beginning of the paragraph (starting with the introductory paragraph as paragraph 1.) This will help us refer to parts of your essay in conference.

- include your name, the course title, my name, the date, the essay number and your essay title on the first page (don’t use a title page)

- include your name on each subsequent page
· proofread thoroughly for typographical, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Consistent errors will lower the grades on your essays. If you’re anxious about grammar, several style books or websites can help - I particularly recommend https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/ which can answer just about any question you might have.

· use the MLA in-text citation method to document your sources for the first two essays, and include a correctly formatted list of Works Cited. Consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources for the appropriate citation information. For the final essay you will use the Chicago Style. A guide can be found on the Harvard libraries website as well as at the Purdue OWL (link above).

Please consult the unit calendar for details on what needs to be submitted with each draft and revision, and where each should be turned in (the course website and/or a printed copy in my mailbox at One Bow Street).

At this point in getting through the syllabus, please reply to the email you sent a while ago and name the kind of pet you would most like to own.

And a word to the wise:
Keep a copy of all your work, and be sure to avoid computer disaster: you should both regularly save your work and periodically save to the cloud or an external hard drive (in other words, you should never be in the position of having "finished" an essay or revision with nothing to show for it if your computer crashes). This probably seems like common sense, but you’d be surprised how many students don’t do this.