

## Expos 250: What is Health?

Spring Term, 2019

Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:30-11:45am | Memorial Hall 202

**Course Website:** <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/54285>

### INSTRUCTOR

#### **Eve Wittenberg, MPP, PhD**

Senior Research Scientist, Center for Health Decision Science  
Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health  
Senior Scholar in Residence, Global Health Education and Learning Incubator  
Harvard University  
Preceptor, Harvard College Writing Program  
ph 617.432.6933 (HSPH)/617.495.9353 (Incubator)

Email: [ewittenb@hsph.harvard.edu](mailto:ewittenb@hsph.harvard.edu)

Office: GHELI, 104 Mount Auburn St., 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, room 302

Office hours: Wednesdays, 12:30 – 2 pm and by appointment

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The U.S. is among the richest countries in the world and spends more on health care than any other. Yet are we more “healthy” than all of the world? How would we even know if we were healthier? What is health and what does it mean to be healthy? And is being healthy something to which we aspire—as individuals and as a society? If so, how do we get there, and how do we know when we arrive? These are the questions that challenge practitioners of medicine, public health, and health policy. To be “healthy” may be living very long, having healthy behaviors, or being happy. It could be a combination of all of these, and it could be different for different people. Understanding what we mean when we talk about health is important to promoting health, so we know what we’re aiming for, and to assessing health, so we know what we have or have not achieved.

This course will explore what health is, what it means to be healthy or not healthy, and how we can improve people’s health. The emphasis will be on writing from a science and social science perspective, highlighting the distinctions with writing in the humanities. In Unit 1 we will look at definitions of health, starting with the World Health Organization’s, and see how well they work in case examples—whether, for instance, someone like Stephen Hawking would or should be considered healthy, and the implications of our assessment for health care and policy. In Unit 2 we will evaluate policies, specifically focusing on obesity. We will read conflicting views of obesity as a medical condition or a descriptor of body size, and grapple with a situation where science points in different directions. The Unit 2 essay will consider how to develop policy around obesity in this context of contradicting perspectives. Unit 3 will introduce research papers—we will choose individual topics on ways to improve college students’ health, learn about the Harvard library system and resources, and conduct independent research to write a final paper. This third essay will build upon the previous units’ focus on what health is and how policies can address health outcomes. The materials for the course will consist of scientific articles (mainly in medicine and public health), online health data sources, commentaries and editorials, videos/TED talks, and a few newspaper articles and websites. Some classes will be held at Harvard’s Global Health Education and Learning Incubator to use exercises, both verbal and visual, to clarify concepts, practice articulating ideas, and develop a focus for writing.

## CURRICULUM DESCRIPTION

This course is divided into three units, each organized around an essay or a paper. You will write two versions of each essay in Expos, version 1 is “draft” and version 2 is “final.” The draft is a complete version of your essay, termed “draft” only because you will submit another version following feedback. It is not shorter or different than a final version. Good writing normally involves multiple drafts with iterations of revision and we model this process in Expos. Your “final” essay/paper will be your revised version following the feedback process, and the one on which you will be evaluated (i.e., graded).

All units have a series of “pre-draft” papers, or “response papers” (usually 2 or 3) that serve to prepare you for the unit’s essay. They may be content-focused or a preliminary draft of a section of the essay (an introduction or an outline for example). For units 1 and 2 I will provide the readings/materials that you will use for your essay—your “sources”. For unit 3’s research paper you will identify and find your own sources. The response papers are required but are ungraded; I will comment on some of them; and most will be discussed in class in one form or another. Your draft essay will be submitted next, after which we will have an individual 30-minute conference to discuss modifications and improvements. We will have at least one class session devoted to “workshopping” the draft essays—meaning peer critiquing of each other’s essays including written and verbal feedback. We will also have a “exercise” day at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator (GHELI) to refine thinking and articulation of ideas—to improve your writing. You will then write a revised essay based on all of this feedback and this will be your final submission for the unit. The revised essay will receive a grade. All other assignments and activities will be ungraded but will count toward your Preparation and Engagement grade (see grading section below).

Unit 3 focus will be an independent research paper. You will identify your own topic and locate materials (i.e., sources) relevant to your specific topic. The response papers for this unit will help with this process—they will be the initial components of your paper—your research topic/research question, thesis, your bibliography, an outline, etc. You will work in research “pods” for this unit, sharing materials and feedback in a group. You will write a draft paper and then a revision, with an intervening group conference and workshopping as in the other units. As always, only the revised, final version of the paper will be graded.

Throughout the semester we will **review your work in class**—in pairs, small groups, and as a group. You will become used to receiving feedback and providing critiques. Peer review will help you see weaknesses in your own writing as well as others’. It will help you to develop an “eye” for good writing and thereby improve your own.

You will write a set of **writer’s letters** (i.e., cover letters) throughout the semester—at the outset to describe your experience with writing, and with each essay/paper—the draft and final versions—to describe what areas you need/want help with and what you’re struggling with at that point. The letters are to help me help you, and to develop self-awareness of your writing. I will give you instructions for each one as we progress through the units.

Each unit will also have a **verbal/visual practice component**, held at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard (<https://gheli.harvard.edu/>; 104 Mount Auburn St., 3<sup>rd</sup> floor—same location as my office). These will be held during class time but at the Incubator instead of in our regular classroom. We will use oral exercises and videotaping to focus and refine the arguments and content of your essays. **These are practice sessions—and they help with writing!** They’re informal, and fun—in addition to being immensely helpful in focusing one’s thoughts.

The units are discrete chunks but build upon each other in content and skills. Each has a separate page on the course website including all the materials, assignments, and dates for that unit. The overall course schedule is also on the course site, as well as this syllabus and course resources.

**Please note that there may be changes in the syllabus and/or schedule during the semester. These will be announced via the course website and revisions to dates/schedules will be posted. You are responsible for any changes that are announced on the course site, so please make sure to check it regularly.**

## **UNIT 1: What is health?**

### **Unpacking a concept**

This unit will lay the foundation for our study of health this semester. We will look at different definitions of health to understand what we mean when we say someone is healthy or unhealthy, and by extension, what we are aiming for when we seek to promote, maintain, or improve health. While this is a broad topic that could be explored from numerous angles, we will focus on the preeminent definition devised by the World Health Organization 70 years ago and still widely used. As a way of grounding our study in the “real world”, we will consider individuals whose stories and circumstances provide insight into how we define health. Your essay for this unit will “unpack” the concept of health by analyzing individuals’ circumstances to consider what we mean by the concept of health. You will use evidence from the reading material and the individual cases to support your position.

## **UNIT 2: Obesity and health**

### **Handling conflicting evidence**

Obesity is in the news nearly daily, described as an “epidemic” against which we are fighting a “war”. A high volume of media coverage combined with alarmist language can lead to hurried and sometimes poorly considered responses, by individuals, health professionals, and policy makers. Think about the Ebola epidemics, or the “shoe bomber.” As humans we have a tendency to panic in the face of threats, and not always adequately consider scientific evidence in our policy responses. In this unit we will critically examine the relationship between obesity and health, based on science, and assess obesity prevention strategies in the US.

Building upon our study of the definition of health in unit 1, this unit’s reading will focus on the effects of weight on different aspects of health. Questions we will tackle include: what is the definition of “overweight”? How does the definition affect our assessment of health in this context? Are there differing views of the relationship between weight and health? What is the science underlying weight and health? What policies have been implemented to address the “war on obesity”? What effect have these had on health, and what policies should we be promoting?

For this unit’s essay you will write a critical appraisal of three childhood obesity prevention policies that have been implemented or are under consideration in the U.S., drawing on the perspectives and evidence of our readings. These policies are all hotly debated in legislatures across the country. Some are currently in place at the federal or state level, or as voluntary measures, but all are vulnerable to change as more evidence is collected and as political winds shift. You will use sources with different perspectives, sometimes conflicting evidence, and some unanswered questions, to arrive at a recommendation.

## **UNIT 3: How to improve health?**

### **Conducting independent research**

Unit 3 is about research papers. You will go through all the steps of writing a research paper based on your own topic. You will choose a topic, develop a research question, find sources that inform your question, develop a thesis—an argument related to your question, identify specific evidence from your sources that supports your argument, analyze (or interpret) the evidence, and draw conclusions from your analysis. These steps form the

basis of any research paper across disciplines. This paper will give you a framework for future research papers you will write in your college courses and beyond.

The topic for this unit is improving health. In previous units we have defined health, assessed ostensibly health-improving policies, and now you will choose a health topic that you are interested in and research ways to improve health in that regard. To narrow this potentially gigantic topical range, we will focus on the health of college students in the U.S. This is a topic about which you all have some knowledge and in which you have some investment. Your task for this paper is to choose an area of health that is relevant to U.S. college students and develop a question that you can research and write about in the time we have available. That means it cannot be too broad, but must be broad enough to say something meaningful. It must also be answerable—something for which sufficient evidence exists to inform your analysis and proposed improvement strategy(ies). You may call upon your knowledge and skills from the prior units for this paper—how we define health, how to understand concepts, and how to assess conflicting evidence. Research is a tricky business and this paper will give you a taste of the challenges.

Each essay/paper is of increasing length and complexity, and will give you a different writing experience and flex different writing “muscles.” They are of increasing challenge as well, asking you for higher levels of performance as you progress through the course.

## COURSE WEBSITE

Please check the website regularly for announcements, to turn in assignments, and to access resources:

<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/54285>

The site includes all materials for the units, assignments, resources, and a class schedule. Make sure that you look at the site to know what is there and when things are due.

*You are responsible for any course announcements, syllabus updates, or changes in assignments posted on the website.*

## MATERIALS

There are no books for this class but there are on-line resources that will be distributed via the course website or occasionally by email, or will be accessible via the Harvard libraries or other websites. These will be included in the course website page for each unit. **You are required to print all readings** for the course and bring the ones we are using in each unit with you to class in your workbook folder. Please make sure that you have access to a reliable printer or another way to print materials. On occasion materials will be handed-out in class; please keep these in your folder/binder as well because we may refer to them on subsequent days.

## WORKBOOK

You will use a notebook/workbook throughout the semester to take in-class notes, notes on readings/videos, notes during conferences and workshops, to collect sources, web sites, and to store paper copies of materials. Please get a notebook plus a binder/folder that you can bring to class. I may ask to look at your notes or lists or materials at some time during the semester so please keep things **just for this class** in your book/binder/folder. This will be in addition to electronic files that you will keep on your computer—you can scan/take photos of the paper versions to keep in your computer files for back-up. Please store your materials in a separate electronic folder and **BACK IT UP REGULARLY**. Computers crash and files vanish at the most inopportune times. Always. If it has not yet happened to you it will.

## CLASS EXPECTATIONS AND POLICIES

This course meets twice per week and attendance is required. You will have homework for every class—either reading, a thinking exercise, a written assignment (that usually but not always will be submitted), or a combination of these. **You are expected to complete all assignments on time and be prepared for class.** This is a

small seminar and everyone's participation is expected and required. You will work with one another in class and on exercises, critiquing one another's writing and learning how to provide feedback. Missing class is a loss for yourself and also for your fellow students.

We will meet on occasion at the [Harvard Global Health Education and Learning Incubator](#) (GHELI), 104 Mount Auburn St., 3<sup>rd</sup> floor (same location as my office). When class is held at GHELI it will be at the same time except at this location instead of our regular classroom. These class sessions are an integral part of the curriculum and attendance is required. They use verbal and visual exercises to improve writing. Please let me know if you have any questions about them.

## The Harvard College Writing Program follows specific policies for absences from class and completion of work that apply to all sections of Expos 20

### WRITING PROGRAM POLICY ON ABSENCES

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. *If you are absent without medical excuse **more than twice**, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.* On the occasion of your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation. This letter will also be sent to your Resident Dean, so the College can give you whatever supervision and support you need to complete the course.

Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In the case of a medical problem, you should contact your preceptor before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours, otherwise you will be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or your Resident 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; but again, you are expected to contact your preceptor beforehand if you will miss a class, or at least within 24 hours. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you should contact your Resident Dean and you must directly petition the Expository Writing Senior Preceptor, who will grant such petitions only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

### WRITING PROGRAM POLICY ON COMPLETION OF WORK

Because your Expos course is a planned sequence of writing, 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. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements if you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work, and will be copied to your Resident Dean. *If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and you have not documented a medical problem, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*

### ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any time that you quote, paraphrase, or integrate others' ideas into your work you must cite them. This is standard in science writing and is not something to be avoided. Indeed, many articles have a citation for nearly every sentence in an introduction where the stage is being set for the paper/essay. Plagiarism is using others' ideas without proper attribution—it is the lack of citation that distinguishes between proper integration of others' work and misappropriation of ideas (i.e., plagiarism). We will discuss ways to integrate others' ideas into your work and how to properly cite their work. Plagiarism is taken quite seriously, by me and by the University. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to review by the Honor Council, including potential disciplinary action. This is something we will work on throughout the semester and is a

focus of Expos. You should not be anxious about this but rather aware. And you should always feel free to consult with me if you are unsure about whether, when, and how to integrate ideas into your work.

Harvard Honor Code: *Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.* <https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code>

## COLLABORATION

Much of the work in this class will involve peer feedback and collaboration, including the group work of unit 3. Aside from what is included in the course by design, you may collaborate with other students **in this class** to develop or refine ideas, identify and assess sources, provide peer review of written work, and discuss writing techniques or challenges. You may also consult with student tutors at the Writing Center. **Any other collaboration with students or others, inside or outside of this class, must be approved by me.** All work **submitted** for this course must be your own: response papers, essay drafts and revisions. You may not co-write any assignments unless expressly directed to do so. If you have any questions about what constitutes collaboration or are unsure, please consult with me. Unauthorized collaboration on assignments is considered a serious offence by the university, so please exert caution around this issue.

**In addition, we will follow policies specific to our class:**

## ASSIGNMENT POLICIES

All assignments are submitted via the course website. They must be in Microsoft Word format (.doc or .docx). **You are responsible for them being uncorrupted and readable by me!** If I can’t open a file then I cannot give you credit for completing it.

Assignments are due on time. Class moves quickly and many assignments will be discussed in class immediately after they are due. Late submissions will therefore not be accepted except in extenuating circumstances (medical or family emergencies), and **only** with prior approval by me. You have one 24-hour extension that you can use on an essay or paper revision (the final version)—you can use this option just once so consider when it fits best for you during the semester (you cannot use this for response papers or draft essays because we work on this in class so it would gum-up the entire process).

## CLASSROOM CULTURE

Cell phones must be turned off or turned to silent and stored out of sight during class. You may take photos of work done on the board for your notes, or materials we are using in class or at GHELI, but please do NOT use your phone otherwise in class. It’s enormously distracting as you can imagine. We may at times use laptops during class, but aside from these instances keep them closed/off the table during class. Notes should be taken on paper and can be scanned/photographed for electronic storage if desired (information is retained better from hand writing notes than from typing). Handouts should be kept in your workbook and can similarly be electronically stored if desired.

You will be providing feedback to one another on your work throughout the semester. Providing constructive criticism is an acquired skill which we will practice. **Absolutely essential** is showing respect and consideration for the recipient at all times. I expect all feedback, whether written or verbal, to be delivered courteously and respectfully. That said, candid and constructive feedback is the most helpful, and we will discuss/practice how to give helpful feedback that is direct without being harsh (or personal).

Class begins on time and you are expected to be present and ready to participate at the start. Two late arrivals of 10 minutes or more will be considered an unexcused absence (please don't make this an issue that we need to address!).

### ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION FORMAT

All assignments will be submitted electronically via the course website. Files must be in Microsoft Word format (ending in .doc or .docx). You are responsible for the file being readable. Written documents should be formatted as follows:

- 11 or 12 point font
- Times New Roman, Ariel, or Calibri font
- Double spaced
- 1" margins on all sides
- Page numbers on all pages
- **Paragraph numbers preceding each paragraph (insert (1), (2), (3), etc. at start of each paragraph to make them identifiable for discussions in class and in conference)**
- Your name in header or footer of all pages

For essays/paper:

Essay title should be at top of first page (do not use title page).

Writer's letter (cover letter) should be at the end of the essay (do not need to number paragraphs in writer's letters and does not count toward page limit). *Note: writer's letters are for draft and revised/final essays/paper, NOT for response papers.*

### GRADING CRITERIA

There are two components that contribute to your final course grade:

#### **Preparation and Engagement (15%)**

Meaningful contribution to in-class exercises, discussions, and workshops; thoughtful completion of all response papers and drafts; participation in exercises/practice at GHELI.

#### **Competency (85%)**

Essay drafts are required but are ungraded; revisions are graded.

- Essay 1 (20%)
- Essay 2 (30%)
- Essay 3 (35%)

The essays are of increasing length and complexity so are weighted accordingly in grading.

### SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

If you need special accommodations please email me a copy of the letter from the Accessible Education Office: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~aeo>. I will work with you to ensure you are accommodated in class.

### QUESTIONS

If you have questions or concerns regarding the course, please do not hesitate to raise them with me during office hours or email me directly and we can set up a time to talk ([ewittenb@hsph.harvard.edu](mailto:ewittenb@hsph.harvard.edu)).

**WELCOME!!!**