

Christina Becker
Expos 20
Spring 2022
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 10:30am – 11:45am or 12:00pm – 1:15pm
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Reading Museums

Course Description

As a repository of treasured cultural objects or a labyrinth of imposing masterpieces, museums can loom large in the public's imagination. Because they often command reverence as hallowed institutions of culture and education, it can be difficult to decode museums beyond the authoritative guides and scripted tours. Sometimes, as art historian Svetlana Alpers notes, "[m]useums can make it hard to see." In this course we will learn to "see" museums for ourselves – as cultural critics and personal stakeholders, examining the museum as a vital mode of cultural representation. We will analyze its visual language (e.g. its architectural design and layout, the curation and staging of its collections, its use of lighting, installations, and multimedia) as well as its written one (e.g. wall text, signage, and catalogue). Moreover, we will explore different genres of museums (e.g. large public art museum, private house museum, local gallery, natural history museum, etc.). We will investigate how these categorical differences can affect the way museums tackle the following questions: How do museums attempt to represent a nation's collective past, its singularity and diversity, and what do they reveal about our present values? How do museums grapple with the haunting legacies of historical atrocities in the case of slavery and colonialism? How do museums open themselves up to diverse (and sometimes contradicting) perspectives of race, class, and gender? Those questions allow us to examine how museums communicate and mediate our most cherished and contested values about who we are as individuals, as a society, and as a nation.

Course structure: two essays and a final capstone project

The course is divided into three units. Each unit consists of a series of preparatory readings and ungraded assignments that culminate in the graded final research paper and academic conference presentation. The specific assignments within each unit are arranged so you may practice writing and argumentative skills, which increase in complexity. The three units are organized sequentially for a similar reason; as the semester progresses, you should be able to build on the skills and knowledge you have acquired from your work in the preceding units.

- The **first essay** will give you practice in close reading a primary source, which is one of the fundamental skills you will be expected to master in a college-level humanities

course. Close reading or close looking (for our purposes, we will use these terms interchangeably) refers to the process of analyzing the formal and material elements of a text in order to create an evidence-based argument about how a text operates. In our case, we will “read” museums as texts, looking closely at its constitutive elements (such as space, installations, exhibits, and curatorial choices) to see how they function as modes of cultural representation and communication. We will closely read, analyze, and interpret a range of different types of museums (e.g. large public art museum, private house museum, local gallery, state history museum, etc.) to prepare for the first paper. For this close reading essay, you will be asked to choose one museum as your primary source (you can choose one of our case studies, a different 3D virtual museum, or a local museum you can frequent in person)¹, devise an investigative question about it, and then answer that question by conducting a close reading of your museum-text.

- The **second essay** will build upon the work you have already done for Essay 1. Once you have mastered the skill of creating your own unique argument about how a particular museum functions, you will be ready to place it into a scholarly conversation with different types of primary and secondary sources. Whereas the first unit effectively brackets off scholarship so you may engage one-on-one with the primary source, this second unit asks you to actively explore scholarship in order to advance your own argument. Ideally, you will be able to use much of the conceptual framework and close reading analysis from Essay 1 as an important starting point. However, don’t be surprised if – after placing your ideas in direct conversation with that of other scholars – your argument changes subtly or drastically. This dynamic process of allowing external ideas to bear pressure upon your own (and vice versa) will help you to refine your initial claims. Moreover, the incorporation of important contextualizing and/or theoretical scholarship will help you to insert your argument into a specific debate or on-going conversation in the field that will add to our collective understanding of the text.
- The **final capstone project** will require you to transfer the argumentative skills from the first two essays to a formal oral presentation format – the academic conference. By the semester’s end, you will be an authority on your particular museum topic and have the opportunity to share some of your finalized findings not only to your classmates but also to an academic audience of specialists from museum studies and other related fields in the humanities. During this 10-minute presentation (plus an additional 5-minute Q and A session with your audience), you will demonstrate your mastery of the following elements of argument in the realm of public speaking: thesis, scope, analytical lens, motive, close reading of primary source evidence,

¹ Please note that due to Covid, the accessibility of museums will most likely depend upon the rates of infection. If you decide to use a local museum as your primary source, you should look for one that has a good virtual 3D platform that enables you to access and revisit its space during a potential lockdown. You should also take ample photographs and video footage to document your primary source evidence. Ultimately, students will be responsible for providing sufficient visual evidence for their argument.

implementation of secondary sources, key terms, organization and structure. By crafting and performing a compelling and in-depth oral presentation out of your research topic, you will be participating in a key scholarly activity in the academic profession – the conference.

Elements of argument discussed throughout all three units include thesis, keyterms, motive, evidence, analysis, sources, counter-evidence and counter-arguments, orientation, transitions, structure, stance and style. We will also look closely at introductions and conclusions.

Required Texts & Materials

All course readings will be made available on Canvas. If you click on the “Files” tab, they will be in the “Course Readings” folder. Please create a course reader by downloading and printing them out in preparation for class discussions.

Also available online:

The Harvard College Writing Program’s [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#)

The Harvard Writing Center’s [Strategies for Essay Writing](#)

[The MLA Style Center](#)

[Purdue Online Writing Lab's MLA Guide](#)

[Sample paper and Works Cited in proper MLA format](#)

You will also need the Zoom software for some classroom discussions and a reliable headset with headphone, microphone, and a USB port (Academic Technology recommends the Logitech headset, which can be found on [Amazon](#)).

Course Policies and Requirements

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance

The Writing Program attendance policy is intended to make sure that you get everything you can out of your Expos course. Because Expos has fewer class hours than some other courses; because the course is largely discussion-based; and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential to your learning in the course.

While I of course encourage you to be present every day in class, you are allowed two unexcused absences for the semester with no consequence. Some absences (religious holidays and medical situations) are automatically considered excused; some family circumstances may also be counted as excused absences. If you miss two unexcused classes, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss any issues that may be keeping you

from attending, and to advise you on your plan for catching up on the missed work. If you miss a third class, you will be required to meet with your Resident Dean about those absences, so that your Dean can give you any support you may need to help you get back on track in the class. Missing four classes--the equivalent of two full weeks of the semester--puts you at risk for missing crucial material necessary to complete your work. Unless there is a medical or other emergency issue preventing consistent engagement with the class, students who miss four classes will receive a formal warning that they are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours. In the case of a medical absence, you may be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official to confirm that absence as excused; protracted or repeated illness will require such documentation. Absences because of special events or extracurricular involvement are not excused absences. If such circumstances lead you to want to miss more than two unexcused absences, you must petition the Associate Director of the Writing Program for permission.

Harvard College 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). If you are unable to complete your work on time due to medical or family issues, please contact me before the deadline to discuss both the support you might need as well as a possible new arrangement for your deadline. Communication about your situation is essential so that we can determine how best to help you move forward. If we have not already discussed your situation and 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 and asking you to meet with me and/or your Resident Dean to make a plan for catching up on your work. The letter will also 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, and if you have not documented a medical problem or been in touch with your Dean about other circumstances, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

Lateness

Punctuality and attendance are mandatory. Class starts promptly. *If you are late to class, please be sure to notify me afterwards via email.* Otherwise, I will have marked you as absent during roll call. It is the student's responsibility to keep track of their absences and lateness. Excessively late arrivals and absences during class (more than ten minutes) will be marked as unexcused absences. Frequent late arrivals can also add up to an unexcused absence. Furthermore, please note that your prompt attendance is part of your participation grade.

There is no way to make up a missed class. You will be responsible for keeping up with the course readings and assignments for the missed day. Additional tutorials during office hours will not be given in lieu of class attendance. If you miss a class due to medical or religious reasons, however, I would be happy to answer targeted follow-up questions about the day's readings or assignments during office hours or via email.

For *all* assignments promptness is *mandatory* and part of the grade so please schedule your work accordingly. ***YOU WILL NOT RECEIVE FEEDBACK ON YOUR RESPONSE PAPERS AND DRAFTS IF YOU TURN IN THESE ASSIGNMENTS LATE.*** Regarding your revisions, the penalty for late written work will be a deduction of 1/3 of the final grade for each day that it is late. (So if you were three days late in turning in an essay that would have received an "A-", you would receive a "B-" for it.) Please note that weekends are included in the deduction of a grade for late work. Late work more than 5 days after the due date will not be accepted.

Collaboration

As in many academic situations, our Expos class will be a setting that involves frequent collaboration--we will develop ideas together through class discussion, peer review, and draft workshops. The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students and through peer review of written work (including feedback from Writing Center tutors). It is a form of academic integrity to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay; you can 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.

Class Participation

Unlike a large lecture course, a small seminar demands its participants to be rigorous and active co-producers of knowledge. As a seminar, the success of our class depends on the active involvement of *all* of its members. By involvement, I mean a number of things: taking part in class discussion; coming to class having done the reading and exercises, and being prepared to talk about them; providing other students in our class with thoughtful feedback on their writing during our draft workshops and peer-editing; participating in an academic conference (in class); being cooperative with others and respectful of opinions that differ from your own. Participation in general describes your efforts to make the course work. Thoughtful oral participation also reflects your commitment to practice the critical thinking skills that will enable you to improve your writing. *Every class should be considered a verbal "workshop" of your ideas for the day and should ultimately reflect the daily effort you make in improving your argumentative and interpretive skills.*

In-Class Workshops

The texts used in these sessions will be the drafts that you and other students have produced for our class. The purpose of these workshops is to develop our appreciation for audience and to give you and others practice in evaluating your own work. Before the workshop takes place, I will either email or upload onto the course website the workshop essays we will discuss, along with some guidelines for discussion and analysis. As with any class discussion, you are responsible for coming to the workshop having read and thought about the material carefully. Also, you will have to sign up for a time slot for a small group workshop in Unit 2 outside of class, which is a mandatory requirement for the course.

Course Materials

The work we do together in class—discussions, exercises, workshopping essays—is intended for the members of our class. Students are not allowed to record class and are not allowed to post video or audio recordings or transcripts of our class meetings. (Students needing course recordings as an accommodation should contact the [Accessible Education Office](#).) While samples of student work will be circulated within the course (and all work you do may be shared with your classmates), you may not share fellow students' work with others outside the course without their written permission. As the *Handbook for Students* explains, students may not “post, publish, sell, or otherwise publicly distribute course materials without the written permission of the course instructor. Such materials include, but are not limited to, the following: video or audio recordings, assignments, problem sets, examinations, other students' work, and answer keys.” Students who violate any of these expectations may be subject to disciplinary action.

Academic Integrity

One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will work on strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and how to develop your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of others, contributing ideas of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that all the work that you submit for this course must be your own. That work should not make use of outside sources unless such sources are explicitly part of the assignment. 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.

Electronic Submissions

You will submit your work electronically this semester through Canvas. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with **Microsoft Word doc or docx** (No PDFs or .pages for written essays please!). 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 written assignments (including short writing exercises, the draft, and final essay) must be typed, double-spaced, titled, paginated, and proof-read. Please use Times New Roman for the font and set the font size to 12pt. On the first page, you should have a double-spaced header at the top left-hand corner with your name, the instructor's name, the course, and the date. You should also set the margins for your essays at 1 inch all around. Please be warned that if your essay displays numerous spelling or grammatical errors, it may receive a lower evaluation. Also, I expect you to be consistent in the style of citation you adopt in any given paper. For our humanities course **we will be using the MLA format**. Mastery of correct citation usage (which is an integral part of research) will be part of the criteria for passing this course.

Please refer to [Purdue Online Writing Lab's sample paper and Works Cited](#) for the proper MLA format.

Electronic Devices

Cell phones must be turned off during class.

You will need to bring your laptop to class sometimes for group work and discussions. We will also use Zoom occasionally when we need to "Share Screen" our visual evidence during small group work and/or if we have guest speakers visit outside of class time. Moreover, we will use Zoom if changes in Covid protocol at Harvard mandate that we pivot to remote learning. If necessary, by facilitating the simultaneous audio and video participation of all members of the course, Zoom will enable us to mimic an in-class experience. Before our first class, please be sure that you can log into Zoom and enable the video and audio functions. You will also need a headset with headphone, microphone, and a USB port. High speed connections are best to ensure a smooth uninterrupted participation in class. **Ultimately, you will be responsible for ensuring that you have all the proper equipment and smooth connection for this course by our first class.**

Whether we are conducting a Zoom class or conference, please be mindful of the fact that this course will simulate an in-person classroom or one-one-one conversation in order to

engage the students in a dynamic scholarly conversation. As such, please be considerate and keep your video on ***in a quiet and private atmosphere*** that is conducive to discussion. **If you happen to be “on the go” (e.g. in a café, in the car, etc.) when the class or conference is in session, you will not be allowed to participate and your absence will be counted as an unexcused absence.**

That said, I would like to limit our use of screen time whenever we can and take full advantage of our in-person learning. The internet will not be used in class to look up course readings. **Please create a course reader by printing out our class readings and handouts and putting them in a binder or folder.** You should bring this course reader to every class so that we can reference readings from previous weeks in a specific manner.

Grading

I will grade only the revisions (that is, the final version) of your essays, not the drafts or response papers. Course grades will be determined as follows:

- 15% Participation (attendance, in-class discussions, exercises, draft conferences, and workshops)
- 25% Unit 1 Close Reading Essay (4-5 pages)
- 10% Research Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
- 25% Unit 2 Research Essay (8-10 pages)
- 25% Unit 3 Capstone Project: 15-minute Oral Presentation with Slides for Museum Studies Conference

Your participation grade includes credit for turning in each of your assignments. You are expected to submit all assignments, including drafts, on time; failure to do so will affect your participation grade.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you think you will require some flexibility in deadlines or participation in the course for reasons of a documented disability, please schedule a meeting with me early in the semester so we can discuss appropriate accommodations. (To be eligible for such accommodations, you need to have provided documentation to the Accessible Education Office ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Accessible Education Office works closely with Expos courses, and we will develop a plan that is appropriate for your needs. Please note that it is always your responsibility to consult with me as the need for those accommodations arises.

Contact Info & Office Hours

Please do not message me via Canvas if it is a time-sensitive issue since Canvas can go through a significant period of delay in notifying its recipients of messages. If you need an immediate response, it is always best to email me instead.

My email address is ckbecker@fas.harvard.edu. I generally check email twice a day (once in the morning and once in the afternoon) between the hours of 9:00am – 5:00pm (EST) from Monday to Friday. If you email me in the morning or early afternoon, you will most likely get a same day response from me (EST). If you email me in the late afternoon or evening, you may get a response by the following day. If you email me during the weekend or holiday, you will receive a response by the next business day.

Office hours are via Zoom *by appointment* on ***Thursdays from 1:15pm – 2:30pm***. **To sign-up for a 15-minute time slot, please email me *at the latest by Wednesday noon* so that I can confirm a specific time with you.** If you cannot find a quiet or private place to Zoom for office hours, please let me know. We can then meet in my office at One Bow Street, Suite 234.

