Syllabus

Humans, Nature, and the Environment

Expository Writing 20.212; 20.213
Fall 2022

I. COURSE OVERVIEW

Deforestation, overpopulation, pesticide use, toxic oceans, endangered species, global warming. How are we to make sense of the many environmental problems facing the Earth today? Although the sciences provide a factual account of environmental threats and ways of countering them, scientific facts seem not to be enough, since artists, writers, filmmakers, and even scientists find themselves turning again and again to their imaginations to respond to the environmental predicaments of industrial society. They may be doing what English Romantic poet Percy Shelley powerfully described 200 years ago as an essentially human and creative impulse: “to imagine that which we know.” How, then, have creative minds imagined – in essays, books, and movies – the very idea of nature, the place of humans in it, and their power to change the environment? In this course, we will consider both the possibilities and the problems that writers and filmmakers have imagined about human interactions with the natural world. We begin with the nineteenth century, when Romantic writers were urgently contemplating the meaning of nature in an age of increasing industrialization.

Unit #1 Essay Assignment (close analysis of a single text)

Speaking a Word for Nature:
Thoreau’s “Walking”

In Unit #1, we will read “Walking,” one of Thoreau’s seminal essays – seminal because it encapsulates the author’s complex philosophy of nature. We will also go for a walk at Walden Pond, visiting the state park on a class field trip. “Walking” touches on many of the themes (such as the dynamic relationship between humans and nature) of his
longer memoir, *Walden*, and introduces many of the ideas (such as the value of “wildness”) so central to the environmental movement today. As a literary essay, “Walking” is a highly-stylized piece of prose with a complex structure, full of literary allusions, metaphors, striking images, philosophical ideas, and spiritual longings. In Essay #1, you will argue for an interpretation of “Walking,” a work that begs for interpretation – it’s a complex and challenging text that is open to being read in many different ways. Your evidence for your interpretation will derive from both your reading of the essay as a whole as well as your more focused close reading of particular paragraphs and sections. Your final essay should be about 4-5 pages. What matters is that you find something that interests you in “Walking,” some aspect of the essay that allows you formulate a strong, coherent position you’re prepared to argue. The ideas you offer in Essay #1 should be your own, informed by your analysis and by questions we develop during discussion. No outside sources are required, and you should not consult any (especially the internet).

**Unit #2 Essay Assignment (comparative analysis of two texts)**

**Arguments over the Environment:**

*Carson’s* *Silent Spring* & *Lovelock’s* *The Revenge of Gaia*

In Unit #2, you will read selections from two urgently argued books by writers who are both scientists and environmentalists. The first, *Silent Spring* (1962), had a huge impact when it was published. It helped establish the modern environmental movement and is now regarded as a classic of environmental literature. Carson’s skills as a nature writer are at times strikingly manifest and her connections to Thoreau are several. (Carson, for instance, used to keep a copy of Thoreau’s *Walden* by her bedside.) The second, *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006), sees Lovelock return to his Gaia hypothesis (named after a primal ancient Greek deity, a feminine personification of the Earth, which he first put forward in the seventies) with increasing urgency given the threatened state of the Earth. Essay #2 asks you to engage in a comparative analysis: to compare the two books and develop an argument about how they relate to each other. With this essay, which should be 7 pages in length, you will continue the goals you had with Essay #1: to engage in close analysis of each text; develop and state a clear thesis with something at stake; and make an argument that you support with textual evidence. Added to those goals are counterargument, comparative analysis, and working with contextual sources.

**Unit #3 Essay Assignment (analyzing a film in context/researching and using multiple sources)**

**Documenting the Human Animal**
Having considered a literary essay in Unit #1 and two strongly argued books by scientists in Unit #2, we’ll now move from the medium of print to that of film in Unit #3 where the central text is a documentary movie. At the same time, we’ll broaden our arguments by including a vaster universe of sources: other scholars’ writings about the films, theoretical essays about film, essays that offer cultural context or disciplinary perspective, film reviews, and interviews with the directors etc. One of the challenges of this essay is to work with multiple sources, creating a context within which to write about the film you choose. Another challenge – and also a great opportunity – is that you’ll work more independently in this essay: choosing one of the two films (either Grizzly Man or Blackfish) settling on a topic and research question, finding sources on your own (then evaluating them, selecting them, integrating them into your own writing), setting up a scholarly “conversation” which you will enter in your own writing etc. You have the chance to take this essay in pretty much any direction that interests you (either within the broad themes of the course or within another context, allowing you to argue something of consequence about one of the films), shaped by your own intellectual inquiry. Page length: about 10 pages.

Some of our writing goals in this course will change unit by unit, as you take on the particular challenges of several important versions of the academic essay. Other goals will remain our focus throughout the whole of the course: developing your sense of what you do well and challenging yourself to grow as a writer; expanding your repertoire and practice of revision techniques; and increasing the complexity and originality of your analysis as well as the effectiveness and elegance of your prose. One of the most exciting things to learn in a writing course is that the learning process never stops; you don’t "arrive" at being a good writer, but rather you continually become one. With these goals in mind, we begin with three important premises:

- Good writing is a recursive process: you will develop and write preliminary response papers and essays, which we will discuss in conference and for which you will receive feedback from your fellow writers; you will then revise those essays, giving your analysis time to evolve and grow more complex.

- Your writing will improve most when you possess clear ideas about what you want to accomplish in each assignment: what aspects of the writer's craft matter to you, and how you want to grow and improve. This class asks you to be thoughtful and self-reflective about your writing process: to question and evaluate your own work in each assignment (in your Cover Letters with each essay) and in the course as a whole (in your end-of-semester Writer’s Letter).

- While inspiration is the moment we all hope for in our writing, it comes most readily when that inspiration is earned – in other words, when you
have dedicated sustained effort to the process of reading, thinking, questioning, drafting and revising.

II. HOW THE COURSE WORKS

**Required Texts and Materials**

- Please note: the “texts” (including both books and movies) you need to purchase for the class are few in number, but you will be expected print out a great deal of pages for this class, so be sure that your printer cartridge or printing account is ready for the high volume. Moreover, as far as the books go, please purchase only the editions listed, so that we will all be on the same page during discussions in class.

- *Grizzly Man*, directed by Werner Herzog (available on Amazon for digital download or on DVD; possibly available on Netflix).
- *Blackfish*, directed by Gabriella Cowperthwaite (available on Amazon for digital download or on DVD; possibly available on Netflix).
- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/

**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:** In each unit of the course, you will submit response papers (which are short, pre-Draft writing assignments to help you get your thoughts in order and focus your interest in a source), a Draft essay, and a Revision essay. After you have submitted your Draft, you will get copious marginal comments from me on your writing. In units 1 and 3 we will discuss and expand upon this feedback in a conference (I will send you the written feedback either the night before or the morning of your conference – the schedule is very tight); in unit 1 your conference will be individual, and in unit 3, when you will be assigned to a “research group,” it will be with one or two other students. These
conferences are our chance to work together closely on your writing and to focus your work toward the revision of your essay, and they are most worthwhile when you are the one guiding them. My job during conferences is to talk through your ideas and clarify my feedback, and I’ll be in the best position to do this job when you come to our conference prepared. My job during conference is not to give you a to do list that will translate into an “A” on your Revision. Not only would that approach undermine the holistic nature of persuasive writing, it would also undermine one of the most important goals of Expos: to help you go from writing as a student for “the expert” to writing as the expert for your peers.

Being prepared includes having reviewed your essay, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies before we meet. You should bring a copy of your Draft (with my marginal feedback and feedback letter) with you to our conferences, and you should plan on taking notes, either with a pen and paper or by typing on your computer. Making an audio or video recording of the conference, either with your computer or phone, is strictly prohibited. Experience has shown that the most effective conferences last about 20 minutes, so the slots for each conference will be a cozy 25 minutes long. For the group conferences in unit 3, they will last for 50 minutes or 75 minute, depending on the size of the group. In unit 2, there are no conferences; we are looking to see how you respond to the written feedback on you own as part of our aim to foster intellectual independence, building on what you’ve learnt in unit 1. Please be aware, however, that you’ll have the option of a shorter individual meeting with me in office hours as you revise your essays, if you’d like, giving you the chance to ask questions about my written feedback and discuss your argument as it develops in the revision process. In unit 2, because there is no formal conference, the written feedback you receive will be in longer form, fleshing out the shorter marginal comments with a substantive feedback letter at the end.

Owing to the jam-packed nature of the time between Drafts and Revisions, I will unfortunately not be able to provide additional feedback for "second Drafts" leading up to your final Revision; however, by the time you are revising your Drafts you will have already received a number of stages of feedback and you can by all means make appointments with the Writing Center (see below for more details) if you would like to. Again, because of the tight schedule during conference weeks, it will not be possible to reschedule missed conferences, so please have your conference time clearly marked in your own calendar and show up on time.
• **Office hours**: In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come see me through the semester during office hours to discuss your developing ideas or ask questions about the source materials etc.

• **Email**: Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative business, I will use email to communicate much of this information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your email daily. You are responsible for the information I send you, including the written feedback on your Drafts and Revisions, exercises to complete, and documents to read ahead of section. Likewise, I will make sure to check my email at least once a day during the week, but if you email me after 6pm on a week day, I likely won’t see your message till the next day. I will aim to respond to you within 24 hours, except over the weekend when it will take me longer to reply. Please note, though, that short, logistical questions work well over email and can be easily answered. Longer questions about aspects of writing don’t work well over email; such questions – for example, about a revised thesis that you might be developing – really require a conversation if I am to fully understand you, ask my own questions in response, and then offer effective help. For this reason, the place in which to ask questions about your writing is office hours.

**Class Participation**
One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. This benefit is best realized when every student is fully ready for each class. Our time together is largely devoted to discussion and small-group work. Therefore you are responsible for being prepared for each class. Being prepared for class means that you have given careful thought to the readings, writing assignments, and any preparatory exercises for our class, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions and engage with your fellow students, thereby opening up and developing our discussions.

**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 successive essay). The remaining 10% of your grade represents a serious measure of your completion of preliminary exercises (including Drafts and response papers), your constructive participation in class discussion and conferences, your commitment to attending section and arriving on time, and the care with which you respond to fellow students’ work. Please be advised that final grades are indeed final.

**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 peril.

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 your Freshman Dean. Please note that 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 the stated time. It is your responsibility to get to the room prior to the start of class. For persistent lateness you will be subject to a grade penalty.

III. WRITTEN WORK

**Submitting Essays**
Draft essays, Revision essays, and response papers should be submitted to the Canvas course website; please don’t send any written work to me by email. For each essay that you submit – both for Drafts and Revisions – acknowledge your awareness of Harvard’s Honor Code; typically, you would write a sentence or two at the end of the Cover Letter, which you include with all essay submissions. The file format for your essays must be Microsoft Word format: that is, .doc or .docx. If you don’t already have it, please get Microsoft Word which you can download for free [here](https://www.microsoft.com) using your Harvard email address. Avoid using Google docs or basic word processors such as Pages, which will help minimize potential compatibility issues and formatting errors when you submit your work to Canvas. It is also your responsibility to ensure that the file you send 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.

**Deadlines**
For many class meetings, you will have a response paper due or some other reading or writing exercise that is designed 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 wildcard extension on a response paper, Draft, or Revision during the semester. To use that 24-hour wildcard extension without penalty,
you must: contact me before that deadline; submit the late work to Canvas; email me once you've submitted the essay; 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 wildcard 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. If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you should contact me right away, and may be required to produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you should contact me right away, and you may be required to ask your dean to contact me by email 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 the process of revision, the schedule is designed to allow you as much revision time per essay as possible. 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. The Draft is a first serious attempt at making an argument in coherent form; it is not what you might think of as a “rough draft.” Much will change radically in the Revision, as you respond to feedback, developing your thesis, changing the course of your argument, deepening your close analysis etc. The really significant breakthroughs in you thinking and writing come in the revision process, reflected in the Revision essay.

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.

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 Handbook for Students, “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.

**Policy on 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 signalling 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.

**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.) 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.

**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/](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.
A final note… Please send me an email when you have finished reading the syllabus. If you have any questions or concerns about the course, please let me know, and I’ll either address them in an email response or in class at the beginning of our next session. Even if you don’t have any questions or concerns, please send along an email – just so I know we’re on the same page about the upcoming semester.