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Expository Writing 20: Journey to Mars

I. COURSE OVERVIEW

Evoking President Kennedy's famous speech to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s, on October 11, 2016, President Obama called for the United States to launch humans to Mars by 2030 and to one day settle there. The quest to achieve this goal has dominated recent headlines from NASA's landing of the Curiosity Rover to Hollywood's renewed fascination with the red planet. Mars has become the next great frontier in human conquest and exploration. Why Mars? What is at stake in our efforts to reach Mars? What does it say about life here on Earth? The case for Mars will examine how environment shapes human behavior and capabilities and how our future is conceived and conceptualized through the union of science and science fiction. Over the semester, we will look at a range of scholarly literature on Mars as well as films, science fiction, and virtual reality simulations to examine some possible futures in which humans have colonized outer space and become a multi-planetary species.

While our discussions and case studies center around Mars, our engagement with course materials intends to help us become strong and articulate writers. Unlike most other courses you will take at Harvard, this is not a course about the content but about critical reading, analysis, and writing. Within it we will learn strategies such as: Asking analytical questions, conveying critical insights, articulating complex ideas, and mastering academic writing conventions. We will foreground how authors develop and communicate ideas. What we learn about Mars will entwine with our investigations into why and how we write about it. The skills you develop here can be utilized for writing about other topics and extend across a range of academic disciplines.

Throughout the course you will focus on developing your sense of what you do well and challenging yourself to grow as a writer. This includes expanding your repertoire and practice of revision techniques; thinking critically, imagining your audiences, 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; one doesn't "arrive" at being a good writer, but rather continually becomes one.

With these goals in mind, we begin by keeping three aspects of writing in mind. Writing is a process: you have to continually and repeatedly work on it, note-takings, revising, and reflecting on your writing. Writing is thinking, that is writing is one of the best ways to figure out your ideas and good writing comes with thinking carefully and clearly. Writing is a conversation with an audience you intend to communicate with as well as with the authors and ideas you draw from to write your paper.

The course is structured in the following units:

Unit 1: Mars Mania

In the first unit, we will examine the current media fascination with Mars. Why are we so taken with the red planet? What possible futures for humanity does this fascination reveal? How has advancements and endeavors in space technology mediated these anxieties and futures? We will focus on the recent Hollywood film *The Martian* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2015). Our efforts to understand this rich and complex filmic text will provide us with a way to also tease out the assumptions and themes of this larger moment of Mars fascination, as well as an opportunity for you to delve into topics connected to your own personal interests.

You will write a five page close analysis of *The Martian*. Your essay will make an argument about a specific topic or theme that relates to space exploration and human futures represented in the film. In what ways does the film reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about Mars? How does it engage with current scientific research? What does it say about the future of life here on Earth? What does it leave out? Your evidence for your interpretation will derive from your critical reflection on the film as a whole, the course readings, as well as a focused analysis of a single scene from the film.

Unit 2: Life on Mars

In the second unit, we will delve a little deeper to explore the intertwined social, technological, and political issues that life on Mars evokes. We will read from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, as well as examine essays and videos on Mars "analog" environments on Earth. Students will also have an opportunity to attend a telescope viewing at the Harvard Observatory and take part in a Mars mission through a virtual reality simulation. Readings will approach how ways of viewing and imagining Mars produces the relationship between humans and aliens and Earth and Mars. Our discussions will think about the way technologies and power work in multi-planetary worlds.

In this unit, you will write a six page essay that uses the theoretical essays read in class as “lens” to illuminate your own personal analysis of Bradbury’s text. You will use the theoretical essay as a tool to take apart the text. You are expected to challenge or resist a simple application of the theoretical framework and instead, build an argument through the friction between different sources.

Unit 3: Multi-planetary Futures

In the final unit of the course, we will undertake a broader inquiry of Mars as the next frontier of human entrepreneurship that critically engages with the science and ethics of colonizing Mars. We will examine several case studies of proposed future Mars missions (Mars One, NASA’s Mars 2020 Rover, SpaceX’s Interplanetary Transport System, United Arab Emirates Mars 2117, among others) that envision the eventual settlement of Mars and a multi-planetary human future. How do conditions of space challenge how we might live in these places? What futures for humanity are imagined by their stakeholders? In turn, how are these intertwined with an understanding of Earth’s history? You will write an eight to ten page multi-sourced interdisciplinary research paper on a topic of your choice that builds on course readings, activities, and discussion.

II. HOW THE COURSE WORKS

Required Texts and Materials

On many class days, some of the texts we turn to will be your own writing: your response papers, drafts and revised essays will be part of what we read and discuss. All writing you do for this class is public – in other words, it may be chosen as one of the examples for us to consider. If there is ever a particular piece you *don’t* want others to see, please just let me know.

Please note that there is only one required text you need to purchase for the course. But you will print a great deal for this class, so please plan accordingly.

- Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (available via Amazon). New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

All other assigned readings will be posted in PDF form on the course website or handed out in class. *The Martian* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2015) will be available on reserve at Lamont.

Other Resources

- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

- *Exposé*, the magazine of student writing (available online or as handouts in class)

You should also have some writing handbook to consult when questions of grammar, mechanics or style arise. I'm happy to recommend one if you don't own one already.

Expos Notebook

You are also required to have a notebook dedicated to this class. It should be a full-size, single-subject notebook that is used for this class only. Throughout the semester you will use the notebook to take notes from class, readings and conference meetings, brainstorm and organize ideas for essays, and complete in-class work and some assignments. This notebook is for you. However, at certain points in the semester, I will check that you are using it faithfully. This will be a source of the participation portion of your grade.

Laptop Policy

Ordinarily I will ask that you not use laptops in class. There may be a few days when they are necessary, and I will let you know about them ahead of time. In general, you should expect to print any materials that I send you or post on the course website and bring those with you to class.

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 a response paper, a draft, and a revised essay. After you have submitted your draft, we will meet to discuss my feedback, which I will have sent to you beforehand. 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 guiding them. Please come to each conference prepared – having reviewed your essay and my comments, 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 email account daily; you are responsible for the information I post there. Likewise, I will make sure to check mine once every weekday for questions from you. Please note that I don't check e-mail later than 7:00 p.m. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

Class Participation

One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. That benefit is best realized when every student participates fully in the class. 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. Being prepared for class means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assignments, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussions.

During the semester, we will also have a few organized events and activities that take us outside of the classroom, such as film viewings, observatory visits, virtual reality sessions, and talks with experts. These outings are intended to enrich your experience in the course, and may provide opportunities for further engaging with topics in your written work. They are not required but you are strongly encouraged to make every effort to attend.

Grades

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Essay 1 = 20%; Essay 2 = 35%; 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). The remaining 5% of your grade reflects your participation during class discussion, your completion of preliminary exercises, and your thoughtful responses to the work of your peers.

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 late arrivals of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence.

III. WRITTEN WORK

Submitting Essays

You will turn in drafts and revisions to the dropbox on the course website. Please be sure to check the syllabus for details on when things are due, and pay careful attention to the guidelines explained in assignment handouts. If you use word-processing software such as Pages, please be sure that you are saving your work in a Microsoft Word-friendly format. This will help minimize potential compatibility issues when we share our writing with one another. 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 public readership – in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class 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 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 Canvas; 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.

All other deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. A third of the letter grade on the final essay will be penalized for each day an essay draft or revision is late. 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 email or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

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 print working drafts as you write (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).

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

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.

Writing Center

At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, drafting or revising – 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 <https://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.