

Civil and Uncivil Disobedience
(Expository Writing 20, Section 228)
Fall 2021

Classroom: TBA

Meeting Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 12-1:15pm

Course Website: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/91939>

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Office Hours: in person, TBA, as well as quicker questions before and after class;
on Zoom by appointment.

Course Description: Recent years have seen a renewal of protest in the United States: against racism, police brutality, inaction on climate change, and much more. Notably new is the way in which conservatives have taken up the banner of resistance: a county clerk in Kentucky refused to sign marriage certificates for same-sex couples, huge numbers of people have rejected public health mandates, and many have retroactively described the events of January 6 at the Capitol in minimizing or even positive terms. When, if ever, is it justifiable to break the law for moral reasons? How can we fairly assess acts of civil disobedience by those of different political views? If you think you can ignore a law simply because you disagree with it, you are inviting others to ignore even laws you think are essential when they disagree with them.

To begin the course we will read influential selections, spanning the political spectrum, from thinkers such as Plato (the “Crito”), Kant (“What Is Enlightenment?”), Gandhi (from *Hind Swaraj*), and John Rawls (from *A Theory of Justice*) about these questions and their intertwinement with issues of free speech, non-violence, and our obligations in society. These texts are dense with claims and arguments, but not difficult to read. We will think about how to isolate one line of reasoning to analyze in your first papers, which will both be and focus on pieces of argument-based writing.

Next, we will turn to a number of concrete historical cases: Thoreau, who was jailed for refusing to pay his poll tax out of protest against slavery and imperialism (“Civil Disobedience”); Hannah Arendt’s coverage of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the main architects of the Holocaust, who defended his actions by claiming that his obedience, a virtue, had been taken advantage of by his superiors (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*); and Martin Luther King’s and Malcolm X’s different visions of the struggle for civil rights (“Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “The Ballot or the Bullet”). Students will write a paper putting one of these examples in conversation with a bit of theory, testing its claims, or using them to deepen their analysis.

Finally, at the end of the course, we will consider selections from a range of different approaches and methodologies about whether uncivil or even violent resistance is ever justifiable. These will likely include work by Kennedy School political scientist Erica Chenoweth, local philosopher Candice Delmas, Ijeoma Oluo on protests by football players, and selections from the book that grew out Vicky Osterweil’s controversial post-Ferguson essay [“In Defense of Looting.”](#) Students will develop final research topics of their choosing, which might examine a philosophical argument, a particular protest movement or action (historical or recent), or a film or other work of art about civil disobedience.

Our three units will each follow the same general sequence of activities and assignments:

First, we will discuss a number of **sources**, the works that you will eventually be writing about. These discussions will allow you to test your understanding of the sources, try out possible claims and arguments, calibrate your sense of what counts as good evidence, and hear from and debate other students who interpret things differently.

Early in each unit, you will write a short **response paper**, based on a prompt. This will focus on a particular aspect of writing and also allow you to begin thinking about your full draft. You will receive feedback from your classmates on this first bit of slightly more formal writing.

Throughout each unit, we will work on a number of **exercises**, both in class and at home. These will allow us to think about and practice specific writing moves and skills. We will also think about **transferability**, or how the skills you are working on will be useful beyond Expos in other classes, and beyond your time at Harvard.

As you are developing your papers, we will discuss a number of **models**, usually real student papers from the past, to help you think about how to structure your own.

In the middle of each unit, you will hand in a full **draft** of your paper.

We will then think about how to improve and revise your drafts in two venues. One class meeting each unit will be dedicated to a **workshop**, during which we will discuss two student drafts. Doing so will help the writers of those drafts but, even more, it will help everyone more generally figure how to think about, discuss, and go about revision. You will also get extensive feedback from me. In Unit 1, after reading my written comments on your draft, each of you will have a one-on-one **conference** with me, during which we will discuss how you are revising. In Unit 2, I will provide my most detailed written feedback in lieu of a conference (but be available to discuss questions you have), so that you can practice revising on the basis of this kind of feedback, which will be more typical in your courses going forward. In Unit 3, we will in effect combine workshop and conferences, holding small group conferences, in which you will both give feedback to your partners and receive it from them (as well as me).

At the end of each unit (actually, we will have begun the next one), you will hand in a final **revision** of your paper. This is the main assignment, each unit, that receives a grade. The amount of reading and viewing assigned in the class is limited so that you can have a lot of time to revise your papers; this means we expect to see a great deal of improvement during the process.

Some big-picture premises that will guide our approach:

Writing is a process: Good writing doesn't happen overnight; it is the result of a process that includes conception, planning, drafting, revision, and a lot of other work behind the scenes that isn't explicitly included in (but very much affects) what is finally handed in. In our course, we will self-consciously break the writing process apart, practicing and discussing it stage by stage, each building on what came before. In most of your classes, your instructor will ask for only a final draft—by forming good drafting and revision habits now, your work will be much better in the future.

Writing, reading, and thinking are deeply intertwined: Writing is not just a form of communication, but often the best way to discover what you think about something. Writing regularly, not just when required, will help you to understand difficult ideas, develop your beliefs, and your reasons for them. Reading what others have written about a topic or question is often the best way to begin to develop your own thinking. But it serves this purpose only when you read actively, not as a passive spectator. When I ask you to “read” something this is what I mean: that you should read it multiple times, with pen in hand, marking important claims, writing questions in the margins, and so forth. If you’ve really read something, you should be able to summarize its main claims and arguments, and have questions and possible objections, having begun to develop your own view. In the long term, one of the best ways to improve your writing is to read as much as you can. Reading works within a particular discipline helps you learn the argumentative, rhetorical, and stylistic moves of that discipline. More generally, reading good writing allows you to internalize more complicated grammar, syntax, and idioms, and to develop your own style and voice.

Writing is a conversation: Most writers don’t develop their views in isolation. They talk to others—literally, figuratively by reading, and rhetorically by discussing others’ views in their own writing. All the writing you do in our course is public: you will share it with me and your peers and, especially in workshop, we will use some of your drafts as our central texts of discussion. If, at any point in the semester, you submit a piece of writing that you would prefer other students not read, let me know—such a request should be rare, however.

Required Texts:

-- Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Penguin, 2006). ISBN: 9780143039884
-- *Essays on Civil Disobedience*, edited by Bob Blaisdell (Dover, 2016). ISBN: 9780486793818
Available at [The COOP](#). All other readings will be posted on Canvas.

Technology:

As part of the aim of learning to concentrate on and engage more deeply with our course materials, I don't allow laptops, tablets, or other devices in class, and phones should be turned off and put away. Because of this, you are required to print out physical copies of any electronic readings that the course schedule notes we will be specifically discussing in class. Our meetings will be grounded in discussion, requiring your full presence and attention. Note-taking will include marking up handouts and jotting down a few ideas, never extensive transcription. If you need to use a device for reasons of access, please talk to me right away at the beginning of the semester.

Communication:

You should check your Harvard email at least daily, and are responsible for updates I send you there, as well as announcements I make on Canvas. If you email me, I will almost always get back to you within 24 hours, but don't count on a faster response than that (especially at night and on weekends), so don't wait until the last minute with important questions (and check the course website, syllabus, and unit packet too).

Submission of Work:

You will often be asked to bring a physical copy of a completed exercise, response paper, or draft to class. Additionally, you will submit your major drafts and revisions (and some smaller assignments) electronically by uploading them to the course website. It is your responsibility to make sure your files upload correctly, and are not corrupted. (N.B.: please don’t upload work directly from Pages, as it only uploads a link, not a copy that I can comment on directly within the Canvas interface.) If I

cannot open or read the file, it is subject to penalties for lateness. Computer problems are not a valid excuse for late work. Get into the habit of regularly backing up your work. Do you count on me to remind you to upload or print work; due dates are all on the course schedule and Canvas.

Late Work:

Late revisions will be docked a third of letter grade per day. Late response papers and drafts will affect your participation grade. Our assignments build on one another, so it is very much in your own interest not to fall behind.

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.

Policy on Collaboration:

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). 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.

Policy on Academic Integrity:

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 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.

The 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. Regardless of its strength or weakness, 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.

Grades:

Revision of Paper 1: 20%

Revision of Paper 2: 30%

Revision of Paper 3: 40%

Participation: 10% (Participation includes contributions to class discussions, workshops, and conferences, and sincere efforts on exercises, response papers, and drafts. Chronic tardiness, failure to come prepared, and distractions caused by electronic devices will lower your participation grade.)

Grading Rubric:

For each essay, you will receive the particular goals of that assignment in the unit packet. Common to all three essays, however, is a fundamental goal: that your work *expresses an original idea in a way that engages, enlightens, and educates your readers*. It will help you reach that goal if you envision your work as intended not simply for your fellow students in this class, nor simply for me, but rather for a broader audience of educated, interested readers. It is a minimum expectation that your essays will be free of grammatical, spelling, and formatting errors (since such errors distract your readers, making it harder to focus on your ideas). Essays consistently exhibiting such errors may be penalized. In addition, grading becomes more stringent as the semester goes along, since you will have mastered certain skills and techniques from earlier essays. On the meaning of the letter grades themselves:

A: Work that is excellent (which is not to say perfect) and complete. It has a fully realized beginning, middle, and end, and addresses (which is not necessarily to say definitively answers) the questions that it raises. Such work is ambitious and perceptive, skillfully expresses an argumentative thesis, grapples with interesting and complex ideas, and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. It pays attention to alternate interpretations or points of view, avoids cliché, and engages the reader. The argument enhances, rather than underscores the reader's and writer's knowledge; it does not simply repeat what has been taught or what someone else has said. The language is clean, precise, and often elegant.

B: Work that is good and succeeds in many significant ways, but has one or more important areas still in need of work. Often this means that while the essay is an engaging and intelligent discussion, certain aspects don't yet live up to the rest of the essay, or to the promise the essay offers. The evidence is relevant, but it may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that a reader has to make the connections that the writer should have made more clearly. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not.

Or: Work that reaches less high than A work but thoroughly achieves its aims. Such work is solid, but the reasoning and argument are nonetheless rather routine. The argument's limitations are in its conception rather than its execution.

C: Work that possesses potential, but in its current form is flawed. Such work has problems in one or more of the following areas: conception (it has at least one main idea, but that idea is usually unclear); structure (it is disorganized and confusing); evidence (it is weak or inappropriate, often presented without context or compelling analysis); style (it is often unclear, awkward, imprecise, or contradictory). Such work may repeat a main point rather than develop an argument or it may touch, too briefly, upon too many points. Often its punctuation, grammar, spelling, paragraphing, and transitions are a problem.

Or: Work that is largely a plot summary or an unstructured set of comments on a text, rather than an argument about a text.

Or: Work that relies heavily on opinion rather than reason and argument.

D and below: Work that fails to meet the expectations of the assignment in a significant way.