

**Existentialism**  
**(Expository Writing 20, sections 236 & 237)**  
**Spring 2019**

**Classroom: Sever 212**

**Meeting Times: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30-2:45pm (section 236) or 3:00-4:15pm (section 237)**

**Course Website: TBA**

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**Office: 1 Bow Street, #224**

**Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-4pm and by appointment (email me with possible times).**

**No office hours on days between when drafts are handed in and end of conferences.**

**I'm also usually outside our classroom before class or can talk just after.**

**Course Description:**

“Existence precedes essence.” According to Jean-Paul Sartre’s slogan, we are not born with a purpose given to us by god, human nature, or society, but are instead “condemned to freedom,” to create ourselves through the choices we make. In our first unit, we will grapple with the idea that we create our own values, reading Sartre’s lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” and consider a recent philosopher’s attempt to understand what it means to describe life as absurd. Concerned as they were with concrete situations, existentialists also produced a great deal of literature in addition to philosophy. In our second unit, we will think about coming of age, inauthenticity, and the performance of gender and identity in stories by Simone de Beauvoir (Sartre’s lifelong intellectual partner) and David Foster Wallace. Finally, at the end of the course, students will write a research paper about a major existentialist literary text of their choice, examining themes like bad faith, despair, freedom, and authenticity in a classic novel by Sartre, Beauvoir, or Albert Camus, or in a more recent text influenced by that tradition, such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, Kobo Abe’s *The Face of Another*, Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, or Kamel Daoud’s *The Meursault Investigation*, among other possibilities.

**Our course will be organized into three units,  
each based on different readings and a different kind of paper:**

In **Unit 1**, we will read part of Sartre’s lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism” and Thomas Nagel’s article “The Absurd.” Students will write a paper that isolates a claim Sartre or Nagel makes, explains what argument they put forward for that claim, then analyzes and evaluates that argument, making one of their own.

In **Unit 2**, we will think about issues of identity and gender, performance and authenticity, reading Sartre on “bad faith,” or the way we inauthentically play roles and pretend we are not responsible for ourselves, and a selection from Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* on the idea that femininity is defined in reference to masculinity. We will also turn our sights to some works of fiction, reading Beauvoir’s short story “The Age of Discretion,” about the conflict between a mother and her son as he begins to set his own path through the world, and “Good Old Neon” by David Foster Wallace (not himself an existentialist, but very much influenced by Sartre and others) about a man who knows he is constantly inauthentic, acting only to produce an image of himself for others, but can find no

solution to what he thinks is his essential fraudulence. Students will write a lens essay, using a bit of the philosophy to offer a nuanced reading of one of the works of fiction.

In **Unit 3**, students will form discussion groups centered on one of the following works of existentialist literature (or, in one case, a pair of shorter works):

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* and Kamel Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*

Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (just part one, as originally published)

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

Kobo Abe, *The Face of Another*

Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*

Marie NDiaye, *My Heart Hemmed In*

(Students will rank their top choices mid-semester. I can't guarantee everyone will get their top choice, since a critical mass is needed around each work for class discussions, but everyone should get one of their top couple choices.) Each student will write a research paper, looking into existing interpretations of the work, other things written by the author, and/or finding places to put it productively into conversation with bits of existentialist philosophy.

**Each unit will follow the same general sequence of activities and assignments:**

First, we will discuss a number of **readings**, both in terms of their content (which you will take up in your papers) and in terms of their form and rhetoric (since some of our readings are academic arguments of the same sort you'll be writing yourselves).

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.

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. During each unit, we will also think about **transferability**, or how the skills we 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 figure how to think about, discuss, and go about revision in general. In addition, you will have a one-on-one **conference** with me, during which we will discuss how you are revising your draft.

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 only assignment, each unit, that receives a grade. The amount of reading 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:**

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, (New Haven: Yale, 2007).
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Women Destroyed* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
- David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).
- The work or works you write about for Unit 3. (Wait until mid-semester to purchase.)

The above are all available at the Coop.

-- The rest of our readings will be posted or linked to electronically on Canvas. **You are required to print out physical copies to bring to class.**

### **Technology:**

I don't allow laptops 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 our electronic readings. Our meetings will be grounded in discussion, requiring your full presence and attention. Note-taking will include things like marking up our readings, annotating handouts, and jotting down a few ideas, but

never extensive transcription.

### **Communication:**

You should check your Harvard email at least daily, and are responsible for updates I send you there. 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).

### **Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance:**

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.

Missed conferences will count as an absence and usually won't be rescheduled. Two latenesses of more than ten minutes will be counted as an absence. Chronic tardiness will lower your participation grade.

### **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. You will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements, therefore, 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 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.*

### **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 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.

**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.

**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. **A reminder for anyone who may have studied any of these works in the past, or is doing so in another class this semester: reusing old work or turning in the same work to multiple classes is a violation of the honor code.**

**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 <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr> 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 and workshops, and sincere efforts on exercises, response papers, and drafts. Chronic tardiness, failure to come prepared to class—including not bringing physical copies of readings—and any distractions caused by electronic devices will lower your participation grade.)

**Grading Rubric:**

For each essay, you will receive the particular goals of that assignment on the essay handout itself. 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.