



Barker 218/024
 MW 1:30–2:45/3:00–4:15

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Office: One Bow Street, 2nd Floor
 Office Hours: By appointment (via Zoom)

Course Description:

Scammers, flimflammers, snake oil salesmen: no matter what you call them, con artists have long haunted the American imagination—from the pages of *The Great Gatsby* to the boardrooms of Silicon Valley. And with good reason. “The con,” writes critic and journalist Jia Tolentino, “is in the DNA of this country.” In this course, we will study con artists both real and invented, exploring what these larger-than-life characters—and our culture’s boundless fascination with them—reveal about American notions of ambition, opportunity, and success. In unit one, we will begin by familiarizing ourselves with some of the ways that contemporary writers and thinkers have tried to define the con artist, and then apply these ideas to the story of Anna Delvey—a self-styled “wealthy German heiress” who spent her early twenties defrauding a series of banks, hotels, and wealthy New York acquaintances with little more than empty IOUs. Next, we will consider the role of the con artist in popular media, both as a literary archetype and a target of cultural commentary. Texts will include Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, its film adaptation, and coverage of the now-infamous Fyre Festival from Hulu, Netflix, and *Vanity Fair*. Finally, in unit three, students will research a con or a popular portrayal of a con of their choosing and make an argument about what it reveals about one or more facets of American life.

Required Texts (Available at the Harvard Coop Bookstore):

- ❖ Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. (1955) W.W. Norton & Company, 2008¹

¹ For the month of October, you should also plan to have access to Netflix and Hulu. However, because you’ll only need access for this month, getting a 30-day free trial for this period is more than fine.

Course Aims:

This course aims to equip students with the fundamentals of academic argument. By learning the conventions of college-level writing we will also work to grow as thinkers, stretching ourselves to rigorously engage with a variety of texts, contribute to conversations about them, and formulate original arguments of our own. Above all, however, we will use this class to hone the foundational skills of college success: how to listen, think, read, write, and research critically.

For this section of Expos 20, we will spend much of our time studying literary and pop culture portrayals of, arguably, the ultimate American antihero: the con artist. Some questions we will explore inside and outside of class include: in a country that famously celebrates “faking it till you make it”—where, for nearly two decades, the operating logic of every major Silicon Valley startup since Facebook has been to “move fast and break things”—what separates the con artist from the plucky go-getter? The entrepreneur? The visionary? And if there is indeed such a thing as a con “artist”—or, by extension, an “art” of the con—what can studying this nefarious craft tell us about the people and places that produce it?

Nonetheless, students should be aware that any content studied in this course will always be secondary to our study of academic argument. That is to say: this is—in the end—not a course about con artists. Rather, it is an academic writing course studied largely *through the lens* of the con. As I will repeat throughout the semester, the real value of this class comes less from the topics we study and more from the skills we develop by doing so. Whether we exit the classroom with our same opinions about these topics or formulate new ones in the process, all of us should leave equipped with the tools to make cogent arguments about them.

Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

Critically Read Texts. You should be able to analyze college-level expository and argumentative texts directed at advanced readers.

Critically Compare Texts. You should be able to put multiple texts in conversation and articulate new insights that arise from doing so.

Write Academic Prose. You should be able to marshal evidence, articulate claims, and organize your ideas in service to a substantial argument.

Demonstrate Awareness of the Writing Process. You should be able to identify and perform all stages of the writing process and develop a set of personal strategies for tackling future assignments beyond Expos

Critique Your Own Work and the Work of Others. You should be able to critically appraise the strengths and limitations of your own drafts and the drafts of your peers

Research. You should be able to gather sources effectively, evaluate them for reliability, employ MLA conventions, and present your findings in the form of a college-level research paper.

Class Conduct:

For this class to succeed it is essential that we hold ourselves to the highest standards of respect. With that in mind, you are forbidden to keep yourself from asking a question because you fear it will sound stupid or obvious. It follows that I also forbid any behavior that would make anyone else in the class feel attacked or the subject of ridicule, particularly on the basis of identity. Take care to remember your classmates' pronouns and how to pronounce their names. Do not repeat slurs or hate speech even if they appear in the texts we are discussing. **Most importantly: in this class we will treat others not as we wish to be treated, but as *they* wish to be treated.** If you ever feel the class is not living up to this promise—and especially if *I* am not living up to this promise—I would ask that you please write me directly so that we can repair the harm together.

Participation:

You are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. Being prepared for class means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assignments for the day and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussions. While in class, “participating” means contributing to class activities and discussions in ways that *raise the level of discourse*. That is: talking a great deal is not necessarily the same thing as great participation; indeed, talking too frequently can lead to imbalance and discomfort for others. Actively listening to classmates, responding with relevance to others' comments, and reflecting and building on your classmates' ideas leads to a strong participation grade.

Attendance (Repeated in “Official Expos Policy”):

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; you should also copy your Resident Dean on that message. In the case of extended illness, you may be required to provide medical 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.

Late Work and Extensions:

You are expected to turn your work in on time. Papers will be downgraded 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e., from B+ to B) for every day that they are late (**this applies to rough drafts as well**). Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. 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 e-mail or phone. In these instances, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an accommodation.

Canvas & Submissions

This course's Canvas site is our online home. Check Canvas for important class texts (this syllabus, assignments, readings, videos). I will do my best to communicate important information to you in class or via email, but when in doubt, first check Canvas. You should also feel free to email me with any questions.

As for your own written work, everything will also be submitted via Canvas. Please note that you are responsible for submitting versions that I can open. The document must either be in Microsoft Word or be easily compatible (your file should end in .doc or .docx.). 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.

Email:

Although we'll cover many of the nuts and bolts of this course in class, you should also expect additional updates via email. 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 feedback to your drafts and revisions. Likewise, I make sure to check my email at least once every weekday for questions from you. Please note, however, that unless prior arrangements have been made, you should not assume that I will check email later than 9:00 p.m. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

Office Hours:

Between class and conferences (more on those below) you'll see a fair amount of me this semester and hear even more through the written feedback I'll provide on your work. That said, I'm also more than happy to meet with you outside of class via Zoom to discuss your writing, reading, progress, or any questions related to our class. You can arrange to meet with me by appointment. Simply email me or speak to me before or after class to set up a time.

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://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.

Major Assignments and Deadlines:

There are three major written assignments for this course: a close reading of a single text, a comparative analysis of two texts, and a multi-source research paper.

For **Paper 1**, you will analyze a literary profile—Jessica Pressler’s “How Anna Delvey Tricked New York’s Party People”—and make a claim about how the profile argues we should understand the figure of the con artist.

For **Paper 2**, you will do a comparative analysis of two portrayals of the same fictional con artist—Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and the movie adaption of this novel—and make an argument about these texts’ differing representations of the story and its major themes.

For **Paper 3**, you will research a con or a popular portrayal of a con of your choosing and make an argument about what it helps us understand about one or more facets of American life.

Of course, I’ll give you more details about each of these assignments as the term progresses.

For each of these assignments, you will work with me and your classmates to come up with ideas, compose drafts, and revise your work. The composition process is fundamental to this course—it is a central part of what you will be learning—and is therefore a big part of what you’ll be graded on. The interim steps along the way to your final revisions are therefore mandatory components of the course,

Grade Breakdown:

The vast majority of your grade (95%) comes from the three major assignments. They are weighted more significantly as the semester goes along to reward improvement and acknowledge the assignments’ increasing complexity. Beyond these assignments, a smaller portion of your grade comes from an aggregate participation grade based on your completion of the preliminary writing assignments leading up to the major assignments and your participation in class.

❖ Paper 1	25%
❖ Paper 2	30%
❖ Paper 3	40%
❖ Participation	5%

Your Writing Process

A major goal of this class is to begin thinking of writing as a *recursive process*—that is, a multi-step journey in which your paper evolves through the act of writing and revising it. Accordingly, every major assignment for this class will be completed in the following stages:

1. **Response Paper**

After we've acquainted ourselves with the assignment prompt and the texts it asks you analyze, you'll be assigned one or two "response papers" to begin the drafting process. Like your drafts, your response papers will be ungraded, and are intended to give you a space to begin fleshing out some of the ideas you might pursue later on.

2. **Draft**

Building on the insights you've begun to articulate in your response paper, you'll then prepare a full-length draft to upload to Canvas. While it's important that this draft is technically complete, it's just as important that we continue to think of it as unfinished, as you'll still have at least two weeks to revise before your final submission.

3. **Workshop**

During class, we'll "workshop" a few drafts volunteered by you and your peers, coming together as a group to assess what's already working and what stands to be improved.

4. **Conference**

Around the same time, you'll also meet with me individually to go over my written feedback for your draft and discuss your plans for revision. If you miss a conference, I'll try to reschedule, but please note that I may not always be able to do so. Due to the jam-packed nature of the week between drafts and revisions, I will unfortunately *not* be able to provide feedback for second drafts, although you are more than welcome to receive additional feedback at the Writing Center (more on that below).

5. **Final Revision**

At least a week after our conference, you'll turn in your final revision for a grade.

Official Expos Policy

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.

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 for developing 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.

Policy on 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.

Policy on 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.

Policy on Attendance

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Policy on Feedback and Conferences

Feedback is central to Expos. As spelled out in each assignment, you will receive either substantive written feedback, a conference about your draft, or both. Every writer benefits from having an attentive reader respond to their work, and one of my roles as your preceptor is to provide that response: identifying the strengths of a draft; noting questions and reactions to help you develop your ideas further; and offering clear assessment of your revised work. There are educational reasons for the types of feedback I'll give you: they complement one another throughout the writing process and help you think about receiving feedback from different audiences at different stages of writing. Each form of feedback will help you think about another way you can ask for and receive feedback in future writing circumstances. (Feedback throughout the course also comes in other forms, such as peer review or principles from workshop that you apply to your own essays.)

There are also educational reasons for the amount and timing of the feedback I as your instructor will offer. The goal of all my feedback is that you learn to incorporate the principles I'm identifying into your *own* thinking and your revision, so that eventually you are making more independent decisions in your essays about what a reader needs to understand or what the most effective structure might be. If I as your instructor were to read a draft multiple times, offering several rounds of feedback, I would then in effect be taking over some of those decisions for you, and you would not be gaining the autonomy as a writer that you need to achieve this semester; that dynamic would shortchange the learning that you can accomplish in the course. I do accept a few thoughtful questions by email about specific instances in your revision-in-progress: a follow-up question about whether a thesis is now clearer, or whether some added sentences of analysis make your explanation of evidence stronger. In those instances, you are taking the important step of identifying what in your writing and thinking is *most* in need of targeted feedback, and you are using the Elements of Academic Argument to articulate the specific question you have about something you've tried out in the paper. (When you do want additional

feedback, the [Writing Center](#) is a very helpful resource. Here too, you will use that resource better when you arrive with specific and targeted questions.)

There are also important reasons that I schedule one draft conference per student for each essay. Conferences are important opportunities for thinking together about questions in your argument and strategies for revision; during conference week I am meeting with all 30 students across both of my sections and attempting to offer the same level of intensive work with everyone. If I were to grant a second full conference to any student, for reasons of equity I would need to offer a second meeting with everyone, and it is not possible to schedule a second round of meetings in an already busy unit.

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.