



Emerson 106
 MW 1:30–2:45/3:00–4:15

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 Office Hours: Tuesday, 9–11 a.m.,
 and by appointment

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 Sorokin—a self-styled “wealthy German heiress” who famously defrauded a long line of banks, hotels, and wealthy New York acquaintances between 2013 and 2017 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 the novel and film adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* as well as recent coverage of the Fyre Festival debacle from Hulu, Netflix, and *Vanity Fair*. Finally, in unit three, students will research a con or a popular portrayal of a con—a book, a documentary, a movie—and make an argument about what it helps us understand about one or more facets of American life.

Required Texts:

- ❖ Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. (1955) W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

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 Environment:

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. Be willing, even when it is difficult, to learn from each other. **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:

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. 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 our class, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussions for the day. 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.

Absences 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 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 as soon as possible (and please note you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or 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 on time. Being late will negatively impact your participation grade. Being late three times will be counted as an absence.

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.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the unattributed recycling of others' words or ideas and constitutes intellectual theft. Harvard has a uniform policy for proceeding when students plagiarize. The academic honor code is available in the [Harvard College Student Handbook](#).

That's technical talk. Here's the simple way of saying it: don't plagiarize. If you're worried about accidentally doing so, fret not—you can expect to spend some time this semester learning how to correctly quote and attribute information. Still not sure if you're plagiarizing? Just ask me to help—that's what I'm here for.

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 or in person—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.

Major Assignments:

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 portraits of what makes a con possible beyond the willingness of the con artist.

For **Paper 3**, you will research a con or a popular portrayal of a con—a book, a documentary, a movie—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 speeches and papers are therefore mandatory components of the course.

Grade Breakdown:

The vast majority of your grade (90%) 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	20%
❖ Paper 2	30%
❖ Paper 3	40%
❖ Participation	10%

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 a brief response paper 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 (which I will have provided you beforehand) 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.

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.

Official Expos Policy

Completion of Work

Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official program-wide 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.

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 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 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.

Accessibility Accommodations

Students with accessibility needs should definitely be in touch with the Accessibility Services office at <http://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/> or 617-496-8707, but they are also encouraged (by yours truly) to be in touch with me if I can be of any help in any way.