CLASS AND CULTURE

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Course web site: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/70630

Course Overview

It is commonplace to note that in the United States many people identify as “middle class” even though our society is marked by deep, persistent, and increasing class inequality. Such self-identification, however, can obscure the complex and often contradictory ways in which we experience social class in our everyday lives. This course explores the cultural dimensions of social class in the U.S. from an ethnographic perspective, focusing on the everyday lives and cultures of ordinary Americans. We will consider questions such as the following. What is it like to be a working class person in a society heavily invested in ideas of individual advancement and meritocracy? How do professionals (the “upper-middle” class) define themselves and how do they view those above and below them in the class structure? What role does elite education play in the creation and reproduction of class inequality? How does social class shape people’s values, political views, and tastes?

An equally important goal of the course is to develop your ability to write clear, engaging, and coherent analytical essays of the sort you will be asked to produce frequently at Harvard. With this in mind the class is structured to give you the opportunity to work in a sustained and systematic way on improving your writing. During the semester you will write three essays, each of which tackles a different aspects of the experience of class and is designed to highlight different writing skills. The thematic units and their associated writing assignments are described below.
Description of Units

ESSAY I: PROFESSIONALS AND “BULLSHIT JOBS”
(test a theory essay 5-6 pages)

In his recent book entitled Bullshit Jobs: A Theory, anthropologist David Graeber has argued that in recent decades we have seen the proliferation of “bullshit jobs,” which are forms of paid employment that are “so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify [their] existence.” Bullshit jobs, Graeber notes, are concentrated in upper middle or professional class occupations. In this unit, we will evaluate Graeber’s theory in light of evidence from an ethnographic study of what Graeber argues is the paradigmatic bullshit job, namely, Wall Street investment banker.

Focal Writing Skills: Devising questions and arguable theses; using evidence; integrating sources.

ESSAY II: EDUCATION, CLASS FORMATION, AND CLASS REPRODUCTION
(research paper, 10 pages)

Education has long been regarded as an important arena of class formation and reproduction. In this unit we will explore the role of educational institutions in shaping class inequality and the worldviews of members of the professional and upper classes. The unit will culminate in an original research paper analyzing primary evidence. In order to develop their research projects, student will read selections from Armstrong and Hamilton’s Paying for the Party, which analyzes class reproduction at a large midwestern public university, as well as Shamus Kahn’s Privilege, which explores life at an elite New England boarding school.

Focal Writing Skills: Problematizing arguments; presentation of evidence and analysis; argument structure; counterargument; devising research questions; research.

ESSAY III: CAPSTONE PROJECT
(format to be determined)

After completing their research papers, students will participate in a capstone project designed to share their research findings in a vivid and engaging way. The format of the project is yet to be determined, but will likely take the form of a conference presentation, video presentation, or podcast.

Course Readings

All of the course readings will be posted on the course website, here
How the Course Works

The main goal for the course is for you to produce an original, compelling, and analytically sound essay for each of the three units of the course. Such essays are not written on the fly; they take time, continual re-working, and critical reflection. The writing requirements outlined below are designed to provide you with the techniques for constructing good essays.

Class time will be split between grappling with the course readings and in-class work directed at improving some aspect of your writing. You should come to class with the relevant readings completed and ready to participate actively in discussion.

Writing and Revising

• **Response Papers:** Before you compose an initial draft of each essay, you'll complete one or more response papers that focus on particular writing skills that are important for the relevant essay type. Check the unit assignment packet for specific instructions and due dates, etc.

• **Drafts:** You will submit a draft of each of the three essays. On each draft you’ll receive detailed comments from the instructor (in writing and in conferences).

• **Draft Cover Letters:** Every time you hand in a draft, you'll include a cover letter in which you provide guidance to your reader about the aspects of the essay you are struggling with in addition to whatever other comments or questions you might have. I'll give you more specific instructions about writing draft cover letters over the course of the semester.

• **Draft Workshops:** Immediately after each draft is due we’ll have an in-class draft workshop in which we work through two student papers (chosen by the instructor) and offer the writers constructive criticisms and suggestions for improvement. I will email you the essays I have chosen before each workshop. You will be expected to provide written comments (in the form of a letter) on each draft that we workshop together. I'll hand out more guidelines on draft workshops later in the semester.

• **Conferences:** After I’ve carefully read your draft, we’ll meet for a 15-20 minute conference in which we’ll work together on strategies for revising the essay. You should also plan on taking notes during the conference. Missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

• **Essay Revisions:** You should expect to extensively revise each of your drafts before submitting it for a grade. I will provide written comments on essay revisions. Essay revisions must be submitted over email (not as hard copies), and I will also provide my comments in electronic form.
Other Policies

• **Grading:** I will grade only the revisions (that is, the last version) of your essays, not the drafts or response papers (although I may suggest, as an aid to interpreting my evaluations, what sort of grade a draft *would* receive if I were to grade it). Course grades will be determined as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revision of Essay 1</th>
<th>30%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 2</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision of Essay 3 (capstone)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and exercises</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grading will become more stringent as the semester progresses since I expect you develop as a thinker and writer. Please be advised that final grades (that is, grades on revised essays) are indeed final. I will not read or grade a further revision of a revision.

• **Attendance:** The policy of the Harvard College Writing Program is as follows: If you miss more than one class without the excuse of a religious holiday or illness, you will receive a formal warning letter, copied to your Freshman Dean. If you then miss another class without a legitimate excuse, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. Please note that absences to participate in athletic or other extracurricular activities are not excusable. If you have to be absent for a religious holiday or other important event, please speak to me before the date you will be away.

• **Deadlines:** We are on a very tight schedule, so it is imperative that you submit work on time. I will only accept late work if the student contacts me to request an extension *in advance* of the deadline and has a compelling reason. Otherwise late work will receive a significant grade penalty.

• **Completion of Work:** The policy of the Harvard College Writing Program is as follows: You must complete all three of the required courses essays (including drafts) in order to pass the course. All work must be completed by the relevant deadline unless you have made *prior* arrangements with me for an extension. If you then miss the extended deadline, you may be excluded from the course.

• **Collaboration Among Students:** 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, “You do not need to 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: All work submitted for this course must be your own work. Any outside sources you use must be cited properly. Any student submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and will be referred to the college’s Administrative Board for further disciplinary action, including expulsion from the university. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, consult the relevant sections of *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* and/or speak with the instructor.
Schedule of Topics and Assignments

UNIT I: Professionals and “Bullshit Jobs”

February 4th
Topic: Course introduction; the concept of class
Writing focus: Argument and analytical writing

February 6th
Topic: What is social class?
Writing focus: Questions and problems

Read:

Due in class: student questionnaire

February 11th
Topic: The professional-managerial class and “bullshit jobs”
Writing focus: Claims

Read:
February 13th
Topic: Bullshit jobs continued
Writing focus: Evidence and analysis

Read:

February 18th
Writing focus: Bullshit jobs continued

Read:

Due by 11 PM: response paper 1

February 19th
Topic: The Financial industry
Writing focus: Testing theories

Read:

February 20th
Writing focus: Introductions

Read:
- Sample introductions (to be emailed)

February 23th
Due by 11 PM: draft of paper 1
February 25th
Writing focus: DRAFT WORKSHOP

Due in class: 2 copies of your reader letters

UNIT 2: Education, Class Formation, and Class Reproduction

February 27th
Topic: Education and class reproduction
Writing focus: Reading critically

Read:

March 3rd
Topic: Mobility, credentials, and social closure
Writing focus: Problematizing

Read:

March 5th
Topic: Education and class trajectories
Writing focus: Summarizing

Read:
**March 10th**

**Due at 11 PM:** revision of paper 1

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**March 12th**

**Topic:** Education and social mobility  
**Writing focus:** Developing research questions

**Read:**

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**March 14-22 Spring Break**

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**March 24th**

**Topic:** Elites and inequality  
**Writing focus:** Developing research questions continued

**Read:**

**Due by class time:** Research Proposal

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**March 26th**

**Topic:** Elites and meritocracy  
**Writing focus:** RESEARCH PROPOSAL WORKSHOP

**Read:**
March 31st
Topic: Elite habitus
Writing focus:

Read:

April 2nd
Writing focus: Data analysis

April 5th
Due by 11 PM: Draft of research paper

April 7th
Writing focus: DRAFT WORKSHOP

April 9th
Writing focus: Revision strategies

April 14th
Writing focus: Research updates
### April 19th
**Due by 11 PM:** Revision of research paper

### Unit 3: Capstone Project

#### April 21th
**Writing focus:** Capstone project TBD

#### April 23rd
**Writing focus:** Capstone project TBD

#### April 26th
**Due by 11 PM:** capstone projects

#### April 28th
**Writing focus:** Present/share capstone projects