

Expos 20. Ecological Crisis: Witnessing and Planning in the Age of Climate Change

Preceptor: Spencer Strub
Email: spencer_strub@fas.harvard.edu
Office: One Bow St., #207
Office Hours: TBA

Course Description

The news just keeps getting worse. Over the past few months, swathes of Australia, California, Amazonia, and even the Arctic have burned. Jakarta flooded; so did parts of Pakistan, India, and Iowa. In Massachusetts, 2019 brought a respite from the past years' disasters—Boston and its suburbs experienced two “hundred-year floods” in quick succession in winter 2018—but on the other hand, this winter has been a little too warm for comfort. Against this steady drumbeat of local calamities, our shared global crisis continues to unfold: international agreements are abrogated or ignored, global greenhouse-gas emissions continue to rise, and geophysical “tipping points” keep getting crossed. It's hard not to despair.

This course will ask you to move beyond despair. We will think seriously about the hard questions climate change poses: how should governments and peoples prepare for, and adapt to, a changing climate? How do we stave off the worst-case scenarios, and how should we mete out responsibility for the damage that's already certain to occur? How might our society—our politics, our culture, our sense of justice and our narratives of ourselves—transform as climate change continues to unfold? And how can we mobilize people and governments to fight climate change?

While these questions are usually left to activists, planners, and climate scientists, in this class, you will begin to answer them using the tools of the humanities. We begin in Unit 1 by exploring how writers have tried to represent climate change and its effects, looking back over decades of science writing and journalism to see what works, and what doesn't, in climate communication. In the second unit, we turn to questions of ethics and politics. We'll weigh Aldo Leopold's foundational “Land Ethic”—which calls for a society that respects an “ecological conscience”—against more recent works that advocate radical social transformation, technological solutionism, and despairing withdrawal respectively. Our third unit looks much closer to home: we'll study Boston's plans for climate change mitigation and adaptation, visit at-risk sites in the city, and consider how other communities could learn from what Boston does right and gets wrong, sharing what we find with local community organizations. Across each of these units, we will repeatedly return to the intersection of climate change with race, class, and environmental injustice.

Engaged Scholarship Requirements and Capstone Project

This course is part of the Mindich Program in Engaged Scholarship. That means you'll be asked to attend events outside of normal class meeting times, including a self-directed observation of a community meeting in Cambridge and a site visit in Boston. While these outside activities will be conducted according to your own schedule, *they are part of the course content and are not optional.*

You will also complete a collaborative capstone project. It will be shared with our partners in 350 Mass. That means you'll get to experiment with different forms of expression, but it also means that you'll do a little more research, writing, and speaking than is standard in Expos classes.

About the Writing

This course will teach you to pose analytical questions, develop complex arguments supported by evidence, and build research skills that will be applicable in your college writing and in your future career. The goal is continual development throughout the course and beyond. No matter how "good" a writer you are at the start, the aim is to end better: to write more clearly, persuasively, and confidently about complex and difficult topics. Keep these points in mind throughout the semester:

1. **Writing is a process.** In this class, you will take notes on your reading; write, revise, and discuss response papers; write drafts of essays; workshop those drafts; and revise them fully. This continued process of writing and revision is the main way your writing will grow stronger.
2. **Writing is thinking.** This class is designed to help you put your thoughts on the page. Writing response papers involves a relatively open-ended exploration of ideas. Writing and revising papers will involve testing those ideas against evidence, honing your thinking both on the page and in your head. Most important: write about what interests you and believe what you claim!
3. **Writing is a conversation.** When you write, you enter a conversation with your sources, your readers, and other writers. That means you need to learn to express yourself clearly and effectively, and give credit to others where it's due, but it also means that your writing will evolve in response to feedback from me and from your classmates.

Required Texts

All texts will be available as PDFs on our course Canvas site. (If you can't find them, email me.) Please print and annotate the readings and bring them to class for discussion.

We will regularly be reading selections of *your* writing, from response papers to revised essays. **All writing is assumed to be public in this class**, so if there is a particular piece of writing you *don't* want shared, please let me know when you turn it in.

Grading

Assignment	Value
Essay 1	15%
Essay 2	30%
Essay 3	40%
Capstone project	10%
Participation	5%

The participation grade includes active participation in class discussion, response papers, drafts, cover letters, workshop letters, and reading presentations. Come to class prepared to speak, having done the reading, and be prepared to listen and engage with the views of others. I understand that speaking in class can be daunting. Everyone benefits from hearing the widest range of voices possible. But come talk to me if you want to find other ways to participate.

Synopsis of Units and Assignments

Essay 1 – Single-Source Analysis: Witnessing

In our first unit, we'll sample from thirty years of long-form climate change writing. There's no clear way to write about climate change: greenhouse gases are invisible; their effects are invisible; their consequences are already being felt, but worse is always yet to come; and those consequences affect people, our built environment, our societies, and the non-human realm of nature in a wide variety of ways. We'll read five works that take distinct approaches to this challenge of representation.

In your paper, you'll choose one of these works as your object of study. Your argument will explain something to your reader that isn't immediately obvious from reading the text, and they should come away with a new understanding of it having read your paper. The goal of this essay is to make a clear, persuasive, and interesting argument in a short space. You will need to choose a manageable body of evidence, which may be as short as a paragraph or as long as a full essay; you will also need to choose whether to *critique* the argument the author makes or *analyze* their approach. (We'll get into the differences in class.)

- Reading:*
- Wallace-Wells, "Cascades," from *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019)
 - McKibben, "The End of Nature," from *The End of Nature* (1989)
 - Kolbert, "The Butterfly and the Toad" and "Man in the Anthropocene," from *Field Notes on a Catastrophe* (2006)
 - Thompson, "Climate Change: The Evidence and Our Options" (2010)
 - Rush, "Persimmons" and "Goodbye Cloud Reflections," from *Rising* (2018)

- Deadlines:*
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| Weds., Feb. 12: | Response paper 1.1. A "snag" and two analytical questions. |
| Weds., Feb. 19: | Response paper 1.2. A draft introduction. |
| Sun., Feb. 23: | First draft (4-5 pages) due. |
| Week of March 2: | Revisions due on a rolling basis. |

Essay 2 – Comparative Analysis: What Is to Be Done?

The second unit turns from witnessing to action. The solution to climate change is obvious to almost every climate scientist: every nation needs to decarbonize immediately. But achieving that goal isn't easy, and decarbonizing alone isn't necessarily sufficient to preserve a livable planet. Do we need to reimagine our entire economy and society? Do we need a mass movement to push for climate justice? Do we need individual initiative? Can we innovate our way out of this predicament?

The four works we'll read in this unit offer radically different answers to these questions. In your second essay, your task will be to articulate your own thesis by putting two of these works into conversation. As with the first essay, your goal will be to produce an argument with clear stakes that will persuade a reader by means of your analysis of textual evidence. But in this case, you will be comparing and evaluating two different approaches to nature and society.

You might choose to defend one thesis against another, contrasting thesis; you might use one work to critique another; or you might develop your own thesis that mediates between two viewpoints. Your goal is to reveal something that we wouldn't have understood by looking at one text alone.

You want to show your readers the conflict or problem that lies between two texts, and explain to us not only *that* these works are different, but *how* they are different and *why it matters*.

- Readings:*
- Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)
 - Klein, “The Right to Regenerate” and “The Leap Years,” from *This Changes Everything* (2014)
 - Multiple authors, “An Ecomodernist Manifesto” (2015)
 - Kingsnorth, “Dark Ecology” (2013/17)

- Deadlines:*
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| Fri., March 13: | Response paper 2.1. Comparative analysis of two arguments. |
| Thurs., March 26: | Response paper 2.2. Introduction and a <i>very</i> rough draft. |
| Fri., March 27: | First draft (6-8 pages) due. |
| April 6-10: | Revisions due on a rolling basis. |
| <i>Rolling deadline:</i> | Community meeting observation report-back. |

Essay 3 – Research Paper: Planning for Change

The third unit turns to Boston and its plans for climate resilience. In class, we’ll read the comprehensive Climate Ready Boston report together. Working from the report, we’ll build a vocabulary of climate-resilience planning, become familiar with the challenges greater Boston faces, and identify the promise and pitfalls of the official plans as they stand today. Meanwhile, in small groups, you’ll take on a specific neighborhood in Boston. With your group, you’ll visit the neighborhood and prepare a short capstone presentation extending the official report’s findings.

In your research paper, you will arrange and intervene in a scholarly conversation – across scholarly sources, historical documents, and potentially in-person observation – on a topic of your choice related to climate change. (It can be, but doesn’t *have to be*, related to the topic of your capstone project.) In the process, you’ll learn to conduct research independently and synthesize multiple sources into a single argument.

- Readings:*
- Selections from the Climate Ready Boston Report (2016)
 - Bullard, “Environmental Justice in the United States” (2015)
 - Dawson, “The Jargon of Resilience,” *Extreme Cities* (2017)

- Deadlines:*
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| <i>Rolling deadline:</i> | Response paper 3.1. Site visit report-back. |
| Fri., April 10: | Submit capstone presentation plan. |
| Sun., April 19: | Response paper 3.2. Annotated bibliography. |
| Thurs., April 23: | Response paper 3.3. “Messy draft.” |
| Sun., April 26: | First draft (8-10 pages) due. |
| May 6: | Revisions due. |

Finally, please note: All of the above is subject to change, depending on schedule constraints and the interests of the class. Any changes will be made abundantly clear in class. A number of shorter readings – newspaper articles, reports, and journal articles, as well as model essays and peer work – will be assigned throughout the semester.

Course Policies

Submission Policy

All papers should be in 12-point, double-spaced black Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. Both pages and paragraphs should be numbered; make sure your name, the essay title, and the date are on the first page. In-text citations and the works cited page should be done in APA style, which we will learn together..

Unless otherwise noted, all major assignments should be turned in via Canvas. All material submitted electronically must be in Microsoft Word-compatible .doc or .docx format. It is 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 may be subject to a late penalty.

Late Policy and Extensions

Because of the pace of this class, *all deadlines are firm*. However, everyone is entitled to *one 24-hour extension* on any one assignment during the semester (except for the Essay 3 revision). Please email me at least one day beforehand if you're intending to use that extension. Other extensions will only be granted in documented medical or family emergencies. Late papers will be docked one-third of a letter grade per day. See below for the official Writing Program policy on the completion of work.

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.*

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.

Accessibility

This class is intended to be as welcoming and inclusive as possible. If you need academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability, I ask that you provide a Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (<http://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/>) by the second week of class. If there are other concerns you need to share, please let me know.

Availability

- **Conferences:** We will have three formal draft conferences throughout the semester, in between the first draft and final version of each essay. These conferences are our chance to work closely on your writing and to focus your work in revision, and are most worthwhile when you are the one to guide them. Please come to each conference prepared: review your essay and my comments, consider your questions, and begin to think about revision strategies. You should take notes during our discussions. Because the schedule is tight, missed conferences cannot be rescheduled. We will also have several informal meetings, to be announced as the class goes on.
- **Office hours:** In weeks *without* mandatory conferences, I encourage you to come to office hours to discuss reading, writing, or any other questions you might have. If you can't make the set hours, email me to set up an appointment.
- **Email:** I'll do my best to answer all emails promptly: within 24 hours during the week, 48 during weekends. Don't expect quick responses to emails sent late at night. And **check your email!** I'll make important class-wide announcements over email, so please check it at least once a day.

Writing Center

The Writing Center, located in the basement of the Barker Center, offers both hour-long appointments and drop-in sessions with trained tutors. This is a free service for all Harvard students, regardless of year or level, at any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to revising. I strongly encourage making use of their services! Make an appointment on the website: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/>

Collaboration

Collaboration is part of how Expos works. The final unit of this course will involve a collaborative capstone presentation, and throughout the class we'll conduct peer reviews and workshops. It's a good idea to share a completed draft with a friend for proofreading or with a Writing Center tutor for discussion. 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.

But all work submitted in this class must be your own. Writing response papers, drafts, or revisions with other students is expressly forbidden.

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 the use and citation of sources. *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; if they are part of the assignment, they must be properly cited and acknowledged.* 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.