

## Expos 20: Truth Claims in a Post-Truth World



Veritas, Goddess of Truth

**Julia Tejblum**

[jtejblum@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jtejblum@fas.harvard.edu)

We often describe an idea or phrase as having “the ring of truth,” but what does truth *sound* like? And what happens when politicians, news organizations, and advertising agencies learn to reproduce or mimic that sound? This course addresses recent claims that we are living in a “post-truth world,” and considers the fate of argument in a world in which truth is subjective, and fact divided into mainstream and alternative forms. Is it possible to draw clear lines between fact and fiction, truth and lies? And if, as Oprah Winfrey has insisted, there is value in the transformative power of “speaking your truth,” what does this mean for debate and the project of seeking a truth that exists beyond our personal experience?

In **Unit 1**, we’ll consider the methods we use to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lies, as we examine fictional texts that blur these lines, philosophical texts that seek to define them, and non-fictional texts that explore the real-world stakes of these distinctions. Readings will include short fiction, non-fiction, and philosophy.

In **Unit 2**, we’ll explore a variety of media from both sides of heated debates that challenge the idea of “expertise.” Focusing primarily on the debates surrounding climate change and vaccination guidelines, students will delve into scientific and anecdotal evidence in order to understand how each argument is constructed, and how the disagreements formed in the first place. Readings will include recent news articles, governmental reports, and scientific articles. We’ll also look at social media platforms, comment threads, and interviews to explore how the internet has shaped our relationship to truth and argument.

**Unit 3** will take us where the quest for truth reaches its extremes: the conspiracy theory. We’ll look at the complex anatomy of conspiracy theories from the world-wide (the moon landing “hoax” and “crisis actors,” among others) to the local (Harvard-based conspiracies), and students will have an opportunity to interview peers and local members of the community as they conduct research on a relevant topic of their choosing.

## ASSIGNMENTS

All Expos 20 students submit drafts and revisions of **three** papers. For this class, these papers will consist of a shorter analytical paper (4 pages), a comparative paper (5-6 pages) and a research paper (8-10 pages). Drafts are not graded—you will receive extensive comments on your drafts, and we will discuss these comments in individual conferences before you write and submit your revision for a grade.

## WRITING GOALS

The most important thing you will work on this semester is your own writing. Our three units will build on each other in their content and in the writing skills you will develop. In addition to the unit papers which you will submit in draft and in revised form, you will also be asked to submit a set of shorter “response papers” throughout the semester. These response papers are designed to get you started on the writing process early, and to let you practice new skills that will help you with your papers. We will occasionally take up these response papers in class, but they are primarily for your own benefit. 3 Our course is based on three premises:

1. **Learning to write is learning to think.** In this course we don’t believe in great ideas that can’t be expressed or put into words. Writing clearly and cogently is how we distill our thoughts and develop our ideas. This also means you should expect your thinking to deepen, grow, and even change course as you engage with the writing process – plan your time accordingly!
2. **Writing is a conversation.** As we’ll see from the materials we read in our course, we live in a world where people engage each other in written arguments. When you produce your essays, you will also write to an audience – whether it’s your peers, me or even other critics. And your peers and your preceptor will engage you in a written conversation, in the form of feedback for revisions.
3. **Writing is an ongoing process.** From first-year students up to tenured faculty, every writer at Harvard is constantly drafting, revising, redrafting and revising further. This continued process is the primary work of this class, and is the main way your writing grows stronger. In this course, I will also ask you to reflect on this process by writing cover letters for each essay where you carefully consider your aspirations for your paper and describe any difficulties you’re encountering so far.

## GENERAL COURSE INFORMATION

### Accessing Materials

**You will not need to purchase any texts for this course.** All texts will be circulated in class or scanned and made available online. You will occasionally print material for this class,

so please plan accordingly. On some class days, the texts we turn to will be your own writing: your response papers, drafts, and revised essays will be part of what we read and discuss.

### **Additional Course Materials**

- Harvard Guide to Using Sources, available online at <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>
- Exposé, the magazine of student writing (available online or as handouts in class)

## **OFFICIAL COURSE POLICIES**

### **Laptop Policy**

Ordinarily I will ask that you not use laptops in class. There may be a few days when they are necessary, and I will let you know about them ahead of time. In general, you should expect to print any materials that I send you or post on the course website and bring those with you to class.

### **Communication Policy**

The course works best when we treat it as a semester-long conversation about your writing. To make that conversation possible, there are a few important things to remember:

### **Conferences**

We will have three 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. They are most worthwhile when you are the one to guide them. Please come to each conference prepared—having reviewed your essay and my comments, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies. You should plan on taking notes during our conferences. Since the schedule during conference days is so tight, be sure to arrive on time. Missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

### **Meetings**

In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come see me about your developing ideas. Please email me to set up a time.

### **E-mail**

Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them), I use e-mail to communicate most of that information. As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your Harvard e-mail account daily. I can answer most questions within 24 hours, except over the weekend.

## **Class Participation**

One of the benefits of Expos is its small class size. As in any seminar, 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. Therefore, you are responsible for being in class, prepared and on time, each time we meet. "Being prepared" means that you have given careful thought to the reading and writing assigned for the day, and that you are ready to offer ideas and questions to open our discussion.

## **Grades**

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Paper 1 = 20%; Paper 2 = 30%; Paper 3 = 35%. The standard for each essay also becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay).

The remaining 15% of your grade represents your completion of all response papers and all cover letters, your participation in class discussion and conferences, and the care with which you respond to fellow students' work on peer review exercises (showing up to class and making the occasional comment is not sufficient grounds for an A in participation). Additionally, unexcused absences from class will also negatively impact your participation grade (see attendance policy below).

### **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.