

Expos 20 (#250): What is Health?

Spring Term, 2020

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:30-11:45am | Sever 204

EXCERPTED FOR EXPOS WEBSITE—SEE COMPLETE VERSION IF ENROLLED IN COURSE

INSTRUCTOR

Eve Wittenberg, MPP, PhD

Senior Research Scientist, Center for Health Decision Science

Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health

Senior Scholar in Residence, Global Health Education and Learning Incubator

Harvard University

Preceptor, Harvard College Writing Program

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Health care is on everyone's minds these days: polls show it is among voters' top priorities when considering candidates, it dominates headlines, and elected officials wrestle with options to improve our insurance system. Underlying all this talk is a fundamental goal of health—yet what in fact does this term mean? What does it mean to be healthy? What are we trying to achieve with our health system or with health insurance? How would we know if we've done a good or bad job? These are the questions that challenge practitioners of medicine, public health, and health policy. To be “healthy” may be living very long, having healthy behaviors, or being happy; it could be a combination of all of these, and it could be different for different people. Understanding what we mean when we talk about health is important to every facet of the health system and everyone with interacts with it, so we know what we are collectively and individually aiming for and whether it is achieved.

This course will explore what health is, what it means to be healthy or not healthy, and how we can improve people's health. The emphasis will be on writing from a science and social science perspective, highlighting the distinctions with writing in the humanities. It is an “active-learning” seminar, which means we will use in-class exercises and frequent assignments to build writing skills: you will write, critique others' writing, talk about writing, read writing aloud, draw diagrams of arguments—all sorts of varied exercises to understand, develop, and improve your own writing style.

Unit 1 will focus on the definition of health to form a basis for the semester, including the World Health Organization's definition and case examples of people who we may or may not consider healthy (for instance, would [Stephen Hawking](#) have been considered healthy?). Unit 2 will look at health policies, specifically focusing on childhood obesity prevention. We will read conflicting views of obesity as a medical condition or a descriptor of body size, and grapple with a situation where science points in different directions. Unit 3 will introduce research papers, and you will write on an individually-chosen topic around improving college students' health. You will gain experience using the Harvard library system and resources to write a final paper. The materials for the course will consist of scientific articles (mainly in medicine and public health), online health data sources, commentaries and editorials, videos/TED talks, and a few newspaper articles and websites. One class in each unit will be held at [Harvard's Global Health Education and Learning Incubator](#) to use verbal and visual exercises to clarify concepts, practice articulating ideas, and develop a focus for writing.

CURRICULUM DESCRIPTION

“Successful science writing demands a harmonious conglomeration of traits. In addition to a fascination with science and a knack for writing well, a good science writer reflects an inherent burning curiosity about the

world, a fondness for esoteric facts, and has the skill for communicating complex ideas clearly and engagingly.—[Bricker Award for science writing in medicine](#)

WORK FLOW AND ASSIGNMENTS

This course is divided into three units, each organized around an essay or a paper. All units have a series of “pre-draft” papers, or “response papers” (usually 2) that serve to prepare you for the unit’s essay. They may be content-focused or a preliminary draft of a section of the essay (an introduction or an outline for example). The response papers are required but are ungraded; I will comment on most of them and most will be discussed in class in one form or another. Your “first-version” essay will be submitted next, following which we will have an individual conference or a group (3-4 student) conference to review the essay and discuss possible improvements. In individual conferences we will discuss your and my reactions to your essay; in group conferences your peers will provide feedback/reactions to your essay. We will also use peer review sessions in class to provide feedback and discuss written assignments, including response papers and essays. As yet another source of feedback and practice, we will have an “exercise” day at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator (GHELI) to refine thinking and articulation of ideas. Following all of this, you will write a revised, “final version” essay based on all of this input and feedback and this will be your final submission for the unit—and will be graded. All previous assignments in each unit are required but do not receive a letter grade—your effort and completion of them contribute to your “participation and engagement” grade. Note that the “first version” essay is a complete essay, termed “first version” only because you will submit another version following feedback and conferences. It is not shorter or different than a final version, but is rather a step in the writing process that allows you to receive feedback before your graded submission. Good writing normally involves multiple drafts with iterations of revision and we model this process in Expos. Moreover, learning involves receiving and most importantly integrating feedback, and having the opportunity to receive feedback on an essay and then improve it is an integral part of this course.

Throughout the semester we will review your work in class—in pairs, small groups, and as a whole group. You will become used to receiving feedback and providing critiques. Peer review/feedback will help you see weaknesses in your own writing as well as others’. It will help you to develop an “eye” for good writing and thereby improve your own.

You will write a set of writer’s letters (i.e., cover letters) throughout the semester—at the outset to describe your experience with writing, and with each version of each essay/paper—to describe what areas you need/want help with and what you’re struggling with at that point. The letters are to develop self-awareness of your writing, and to help me and your peers provide the most useful feedback to you. I will give you instructions for each one as we progress through the units.

Each unit will have a verbal/visual/interactive practice component, held at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard (<https://gheli.harvard.edu/>; 104 Mount Auburn St., 3rd floor—same location as my office). These will be held during class time but at the Incubator instead of in our regular classroom. We will use oral exercises, videotaping, and group discussion to focus and refine the arguments and content of your essays. These are practice sessions—and they help with writing. They’re informal, and fun—in addition to being immensely helpful in focusing one’s thoughts.

THREE UNITS

The units are discrete chunks but build upon each other in content and skills. Each has a separate page on the course website including all the materials, assignments, and dates for that unit. The overall course schedule is also on the course site, as well as this syllabus and course resources.

UNIT 1: What is health?

Unpacking a concept

This unit will lay the foundation for our study of health this semester. We will look at the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health and some critiques of it that followed, to understand what we mean when we say someone is "healthy" or "unhealthy", and by extension, what we are aiming for when we seek to promote, maintain, or improve health. While this is a broad topic that could be explored from numerous angles, we will focus on the preeminent WHO definition because it has endured for nearly 70 years. As a way of grounding our study in the "real world", we will consider individuals whose stories and circumstances provide insight into how we define health. Your essay for this unit will "unpack" the concept of health by using individuals' experiences to consider what we mean by "health".

UNIT 2: Obesity and health

Handling conflicting evidence

Obesity has been described as an "epidemic" against which we are fighting a "war". A high volume of media coverage combined with alarmist language can lead to hurried and sometimes poorly considered responses, by individuals, health professionals, and policy makers. Think about the Ebola epidemics, or the "shoe bomber." As humans we have a tendency to panic in the face of threats, and not always adequately consider scientific evidence in our policy responses. In this unit we will critically examine the relationship between obesity and health, based on science, and assess childhood obesity prevention strategies in the U.S.

Building upon our study of the definition of health in unit 1, this unit's reading will focus on the effects of weight on different aspects of health. Questions we will tackle include: what is the definition of "overweight"? How does the definition affect our assessment of health in this context? Are there differing views of the relationship between weight and health? What is the science underlying weight and health? What policies have been implemented to address the "war on obesity"? What effect have these had on health, and what policies should we be promoting?

For this unit's essay you will write a critical appraisal of childhood obesity prevention policies that have been implemented or are under consideration in the U.S., drawing on the perspectives and evidence of our readings.

UNIT 3: How to improve health?

Conducting independent research

Unit 3 is about research papers. You will go through all the steps of writing a research paper on your own topic. You will choose a topic, develop a research question, find sources that inform your question, develop a thesis—an argument related to your question, identify specific evidence from your sources that supports your argument, analyze (or interpret) the evidence, and draw conclusions from your analysis. These steps form the basis of any research paper across disciplines, and this framework can be used for future research papers you will write in your college courses and beyond.

The topic for this unit is improving health. In previous units we defined health, assessed ostensibly health-improving policies, and now you will choose a health topic that you are interested in and research ways to improve health in that regard. To narrow this potentially gigantic topical range, we will focus on the health of college students in the U.S. This is a topic about which you all have some knowledge and in which you have some investment. Your task for this paper is to choose an area of health that is relevant to U.S. college students and develop a question that you can research and write about in the time we have available. That means it cannot be too broad but must be broad enough to say something meaningful. It must also be answerable—something for which sufficient evidence exists to inform your analysis and proposed improvement strategy(ies). You may call upon your knowledge and skills from the prior units for this paper—how we define health, how to understand

concepts, and how to assess conflicting evidence. Research is a tricky business and this paper will give you a taste of the challenges.

Each essay/paper is of increasing length and complexity, and will give you a different writing experience and flex different writing “muscles.” They are of increasing challenge as well, asking you for higher levels of performance as you progress through the course.

MATERIALS

COURSE WEBSITE

Please check the website regularly for announcements, to turn in assignments, and to access resources:

<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/64409>

The site includes all materials for the units, assignments, resources, and a class schedule. Make sure that you look at the site to know when things are due.

You are responsible for any course announcements, syllabus updates, or changes in assignments posted on the website.

PRINTED MATERIALS

There are no books for this class but there are on-line resources that will be distributed via the course website or occasionally by email, or will be accessible via the Harvard libraries or other websites. These will be included in the course website page for each unit. **You are required to print all readings for the course** and bring the ones we are using in each unit with you to class in your workbook folder (see below). Please make sure that you have access to a reliable printer or another way to print materials. On occasion materials will be handed-out in class; please keep these in your folder/binder as well because we may refer to them on subsequent days.

WORKBOOK/BINDER/ELECTRONIC FILES

You will use a notebook/workbook throughout the semester to take in-class notes, notes on readings/videos, notes during conferences and workshops, to collect sources, web sites, and to store paper copies of materials. Please get a notebook plus a binder/folder that you can bring to class. I may ask to look at your notes or lists or materials at some time during the semester so please keep things **just for this class** in your book/binder/folder. This will be in addition to electronic files that you will keep on your computer—you can scan/take photos of the paper versions to keep in your computer files for back-up. Please store your materials in a separate electronic folder and **BACK IT UP REGULARLY**. Computers crash and files vanish at the most inopportune times. Always. If it has not yet happened to you it will.

CLASS EXPECTATIONS AND POLICIES

This course meets twice per week and attendance is required. You will have homework for every class—either reading, a small written assignment (that usually but not always will be submitted), a critique of another student’s work, or a combination of these. **You are expected to complete all assignments on time and be prepared for class.** This is a small seminar and everyone’s participation is expected and required. You will work with one another in class and on exercises, critiquing one another’s writing and learning how to provide feedback. **You will be graded on your preparation for and engagement in class exercises and pre-draft assignments—these are an essential part of your success in the class and in your development as a writer.**

We will meet on occasion at the [Harvard Global Health Education and Learning Incubator](#) (GHELI), 104 Mount Auburn St., 3rd floor (same location as my office). When class is held at GHELI it will be at the same time except at this location instead of our regular classroom. These class sessions are an integral part of the curriculum and attendance is required. They use verbal and visual exercises to improve writing. Please let me know if you have any questions about them.

The Harvard College Writing Program follows specific policies for absences from class, completion of work, academic integrity, and collaboration that apply to all sections of Expos 20, as described below

WRITING PROGRAM POLICY ON ABSENCES

“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. *Absences aside from those described here will be penalized in your course grade.*”

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 (or email) reminding you of these requirements 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 will 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 (meaning a note from HUHS), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.*”

WRITING PROGRAM POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any time that you quote, paraphrase, or integrate others’ ideas into your work you must cite them. This is standard in science writing and is not something to be avoided. Indeed, many articles have a citation for nearly every sentence in an introduction where the stage is being set for the paper/essay. Plagiarism is using others’ ideas without proper attribution—it is the lack of citation that distinguishes between proper integration of others’ work and misappropriation of ideas (i.e., plagiarism). We will discuss ways to integrate others’ ideas into your work and how to properly cite their work. Plagiarism is taken quite seriously, by me and by the University. 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. This is something we will work on throughout the semester and is a focus of Expos. You should not be anxious about this but rather aware. And you should always feel free to consult with me if you are unsure about whether, when, and how to integrate ideas into your work.

“Harvard Honor Code: Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs. <https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code>”

WRITING PROGRAM POLICY ON COLLABORATION

Much of the work in this class will involve peer feedback and collaboration. Aside from what is included in the course by design, you may collaborate with other students in this class to develop or refine ideas, identify and assess sources, provide peer review of written work, and discuss writing techniques or challenges. You may also consult with student tutors at the Writing Center. Any other collaboration with students or others, inside or outside of this class, must be approved by me. All work submitted for this course must be your own: response papers, essay drafts and revisions. You may not co-write any assignments unless expressly directed to do so. If you have any questions about what constitutes collaboration or are unsure, please consult with me. Unauthorized collaboration on assignments is considered a serious offense by the university, so please exert caution around this issue.

In addition, we will follow policies specific to our class:

ASSIGNMENT POLICIES

All assignments are submitted via the course website. They must be in Microsoft Word format (.doc or .docx). You are responsible for them being uncorrupted and readable by me. If I can’t open a file then I cannot give you credit for completing it.

Assignments are due on time. Class moves quickly and many assignments will be discussed in class immediately after they are due. Some will be distributed to others in class to provide feedback or used for class discussion. Late submissions will therefore be penalized as a disincentive: in your grade for graded assignments or in your "preparation and engagement" grade for ungraded ones. You have one 24-hour extension that you can use whenever you like, when it fits best for you during the semester.

CLASSROOM CULTURE

Cell phones must be turned off or turned to silent and stored out of sight during class. You may take photos of work done on the board for your notes, or materials we are using in class or at GHELI, but please do not use your phone otherwise in class. We may at times use laptops and/or phones during class, but aside from these instances please keep them closed/off the table during class. Classroom phone use will be penalized in your "preparation and engagement" grade.

Notes should be taken on paper and can be scanned/photographed for electronic storage if desired, or on a tablet with a stylus (information is retained better from hand writing notes than from typing). When we use copies of work in class please bring paper copies. Handouts should be kept in your workbook and can similarly be electronically stored if desired. The class does use a lot of paper and requires printing, but it does not require any books so on balance it’s about the same use of resources. Please let me know if you have any problems accessing a printer and we can find a solution.

You will be providing feedback to one another on your work throughout the semester. Providing constructive criticism is an acquired skill which we will practice. Absolutely essential is showing respect and consideration for the recipient at all times. I expect all feedback, whether written or verbal, to be delivered courteously and respectfully. That said, candid and constructive feedback is the most helpful, and we will discuss/practice how to give helpful feedback that is direct without being harsh (or personal).

Class begins on time and you are expected to be present and ready to participate at the start. Two late arrivals of 10 minutes or more will be considered an unexcused absence.