

THE KNIFE'S EDGE: SURGERY IN SOCIETY

Preceptor: Maria Stalford, MPH, PhD

Office: 1 Bow St., Room 207

Email: stalford@fas.harvard.edu

Class Time: Tues/Thurs 1-2PM, 2-3PM

Class Location: Boylston G-02

Office Hour: Thurs 4-5PM and by appt.

Course Description

Surgery is at the center of many of the most consequential moments in our lives. It may have brought you into this world, or saved your life, or that of a loved one, once you were here. Surgery will probably one day ease your pain, or reduce a risk you face, and it might even be a route you take to actualize your vision of who you want to be. But surgery has not always been such an integral part of how we live—and indeed it still is not in many parts of the world. While the average American will go under the knife seven times in his or her lifetime, an estimated two billion people worldwide are unable to obtain basic surgical care. The ability (or inability) to access particular kinds of surgical care has critical and far-reaching effects on our life chances and understandings of ourselves.

We often think of surgery as squarely within the domain of science and medicine, but as the surgeon and writer Atul Gawande has put it, when you are sick, “it’s not science you call upon but a doctor.” In other words, even as scientific advances promise to make surgery ever more controlled, precise, and bloodless, operations are still carried out by human beings who are fallible, and they can still carry a great deal of risk. Though we may think of the operating room as sealed off from the world outside, both figuratively and literally, many aspects of surgery reflect—and transform—the social and historical contexts in which it is practiced. This intermeshing of surgery with society is the subject of this course.

Overview of Units

Unit 1: Is the Quest to Build a Kinder, Gentler Surgeon Misguided?

Essay Assignment: Lens Essay

Surgery is distinctive among the medical specialties in that it requires its practitioners to literally invade the bodies of patients and perform acts that would be considered brutal assaults anywhere other than on an operating table. In the era before anesthesia, surgeons had to operate on conscious patients who were held or strapped down, and often screaming out in utter agony. What kind of psychological impact must that have had on surgeons—and what kind of person would have chosen a career in surgery at that time? How much of this legacy remains a part of surgery today? Nowadays it is generally agreed that doctors of all kinds should be kind and empathetic, but does this necessarily apply to surgeons to the same extent? Even in today's era of much more controlled and predictable surgeries, might there still be a benefit to, or justification for, surgeons maintaining some degree of emotional distance from their patients? Or as the surgeon Wen Chen has put it, "is the quest to build a kinder, gentler surgeon misguided?"

In this unit, we explore these issues through readings of two types: 1) brief academic commentaries on ethics, emotion, and decision-making in surgery, and 2) stories told from the surgeon's perspective which dramatize these themes. Among the stories we will read are a short story by the Russian literary great and doctor Mikhail Bulgakov and selections from memoirs by two celebrated surgeon-authors, Richard Selzer and Henry Marsh. For your Unit 1 essay, you will analyze one of the first-person stories **through the lens** of one of the commentaries.

Unit 2: Heart Transplants and Contested Definitions of Life and Death

Essay Assignment: Intervene in a Scholarly Debate

We next examine one of the fields of surgery that has generated the most controversy and soul-searching throughout its history in societies around the world: organ transplantation. Focusing on the world's first attempts at the transplantation of still-beating hearts, we ask how medical advances and surgical achievement have challenged our very concepts of life and death. We will first examine the implications of a major medical milestone that took place right here in our backyard: the 1968 formalization of the category of *brain death* by a committee at Harvard Medical School, a crucial step towards a growing medical and societal consensus that taking the heart of

one person to give to another would not be a violation of a physician's most fundamental oath to *do no harm*.

In your Unit 2 essay, your task will be to **intervene in a scholarly debate** about what is called the Dead Donor Rule, which is the principle that donors of vital organs must be declared dead before their organs may be procured. Although this principle might at first seem uncontroversial, it has sparked much debate and soul-searching amongst bioethicists, clinicians, and the public. Far from purely technical or clinical in nature, it is a debate that, as bioethicist Robert Veatch has put it, "forces on us some of the most basic questions of human existence: the relation of mind and body, the rights of religious and philosophical minorities, and the meaning of life itself."

Unit 3: Surgery by Choice

Essay Assignment: Research Essay

Lastly we consider an array of very different types of surgery that can significantly affect one's identity, self-presentation, and social position, such as cosmetic, bariatric, gender reassignment, and cochlear implant surgeries. Through **independent research projects** on topics of their choice, students will explore how the advent and availability of certain types of surgery in particular contexts has shaped social norms, concepts of the normal and the pathological, prevailing principles of medical ethics, and individual experience and self-understanding. What constitutes necessity, medical or otherwise? What should we be empowered to choose—and how far should we be allowed to go? What are the implications when the way we respond to social problems is with a surgeon's knife?

HOW THE COURSE WORKS

Communication and Logistics

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, and are most worthwhile when you are the one to guide them. Please come to each conference prepared – having reviewed your essay, considered your questions, and begun to think about revision possibilities and strategies. You should plan on taking notes during our discussions. Since the schedule during conference days is so tight, missed conferences may not be rescheduled.

In addition to our formal conferences, you are of course free to come discuss your developing ideas with me during office hours.

Course Website: Rather than take up our class time with announcements and administrative arrangements (and there will be many of them!), I use the **Announcements, Calendar, and Assignments** features on our course website to communicate most necessary information. Please make sure to adjust your personal settings on Canvas so that you will receive email notification of newly posted announcements and assignments.

Email: As part of your participation in the course, I ask that you check your official email linked to your Canvas account on a daily basis; **you are responsible for the information that I email to you.** Likewise, I will make sure to check my email (stalford@fas.harvard.edu) at least once every weekday for questions from you. I will make every effort to respond to your messages within 24 hours.

Google Apps for Harvard: We will be using some of the Google Apps for Harvard in the course of the semester, so if you have not done so already, please activate your **@g.harvard.edu** email account.

Class 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; 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.

Course Materials

There is only one required book for the course: *They Say/I Say* (3rd or 4th edition) by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. The book is currently available at the COOP, and many used and new copies are available on Amazon and other sites. The book will also be on reserve at Lamont Library if you prefer not to purchase it.

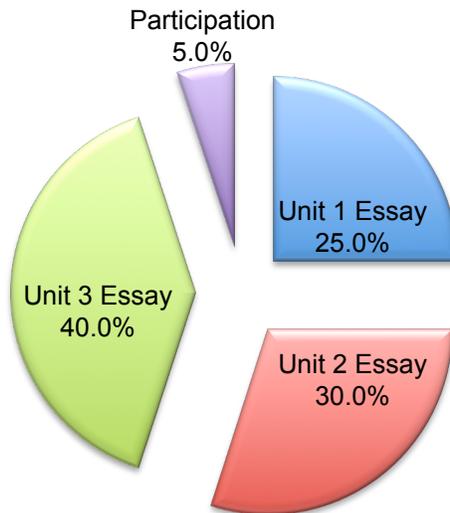
All other course readings will be posted to the course site.

Grades

The majority of your grade (95%) comes from your three essays. The standard for each essay becomes more demanding as we progress (since you are building on certain fundamental skills and techniques with each essay).

The remainder of your grade (5%) is made up of a **serious measure** of your constructive participation in class discussion, workshops, conferences, and online discussion forums; the care with which you respond to fellow students' work; and your conscientious and thoughtful completion of response papers, peer letters, cover letters, and other occasional assignments in the course of the semester.

Composition of Your Grade



ABOUT YOUR WRITTEN WORK

Deadlines

For many class meetings, you will have due a response paper or some other reading or writing exercise to help you develop the essay for that unit. Our work together in class will also often be based on those assignments. For those reasons, it is imperative that you turn your work in on time. Of course, even in the most carefully organized semesters, unexpected circumstances can arise—therefore each student is allowed **one 24-hour “wild card” extension** on a response paper, draft or revision to use at the time of his or her choosing during the semester. To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me *before* that deadline; submit the late work by the extended deadline; and be on time with the other work due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late.

Other than that “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter-grade on the final essay for each day they are late.

If you cannot meet a deadline due to a medical emergency, you must contact me right away and will need to present a note from UHS. In the event of a family emergency, please contact me as soon as you can, and ask your dean to contact me by e-mail.

Revision

Because of the emphasis this course places on revision, the schedule is designed to allow you as much revision time per essay as possible—always at least a week after the draft is due, and usually at least five days after your draft conference. Since you'll have a significant span of days in which to revise, the expectations for this aspect of your work in the course are high.

Sharing Your Work

All work you submit for the course is for potential public readership within our class – in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class as some of our texts this semester. If at any point you submit a draft or revision that you would prefer other students not read, please let me know—but please don't make that request multiple times in the course of the semester.

Working with Sources

One of the goals of Expos is to help you become familiar and comfortable with standard academic citation practices.

As you work to master these skills, it will make it easier for me to help you, and for you to help each other, if every student in the class uses the same citation style. To this end, all assignments submitted in the course should use the **Author-Date** citation style specified in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. (Don't worry if you are not familiar with this style! We will be mastering it together in the course of the semester.) Chicago is the one of the three most commonly used styles and will likely be acceptable in most of your other courses at Harvard. (Though when in doubt about which style to use in another course, ask!) As members of the university community, we have [online access](#) to the complete *Chicago Manual of Style*.

I also strongly recommend consulting the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#) for all conceptual and practical questions about using sources. We will be consulting this excellent resource frequently in the course of the semester.

POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

Academic Integrity

As noted above, 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 these issues.

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.

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.

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.

Laptop Policy

As a general rule, **you may not use laptops in class**. This is to help us all to be fully engaged participants and active listeners in our class discussions. There may be a few days when laptops are necessary, and I will let you know about them ahead of time. **In general, you should expect to print any materials that you will need for class.** Please do not hesitate to let me know outside of class if this policy poses a particular problem for you.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU

Office Hours

As noted above, I will have a regular office hour every Thursday afternoon. Please use the online sign-up tool on Canvas to let me know if you plan to come by. If you would like to meet but are unable to come on Thursday afternoons, please let me know and I will be happy to work out an alternate time with you.

Please note that I will not be holding a regular office hour in weeks when I am already meeting with each student individually, in particular for our introductory “getting to know you” chats and for our draft conferences.

Here are some possible reasons you might find it helpful to come to office hours, not just in this course, but throughout your time in college:

- I didn't understand what you said about this one thing in class this week.
- How can I use what we discussed on my paper?
- How can I use what we discussed in other classes?
- How can I use what we are learning in this class in my future life?
- I'm working really hard and I'm not improving. What can I do?
- I don't know how to start on this assignment. What can I do?
- I'm shy about participating in class. What can I do?
- In another class, we learned this other thing which seems different than what you said. What's up?
- I'm really interested in something mentioned in one of our readings. How can I learn more about it?

Harvard College Writing Center

The Harvard College Writing Center is a place for Harvard undergraduates to get help with any aspect of their writing, from specific assignments to general writing skills. The Writing Center is staffed by trained, friendly, approachable undergraduate tutors who provide individual conferences to students working on any writing assignment. Regardless of the essay's strengths or weaknesses, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. You don't have to have a finished paper to come for a conference at the Writing Center. You can come with ideas, notes, or a draft. The Writing Center is an absolutely fabulous resource and I cannot encourage you strongly enough to take advantage of it! For more information about the Writing Center, visit their website at <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu>.

The cornerstone document of the Harvard College Writing Program, the "Elements of Academic Argument" provides an overview of the vocabulary that all Writing Program faculty and its affiliates use whether teaching an Expos course, working with faculty across campus, tutoring a student, or thinking about their own writing.

Elements of Academic Argument

adapted from Gordon Harvey

What the essay is about:

1. Thesis: your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable; be limited enough in scope to be argued with available evidence; and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early and it should govern the whole essay.

Why it matters:

2. Question, Problem, or What's at Stake: the context or situation that you establish for your argument at the start of your essay, making clear why someone might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued (why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other theses might be less persuasive). In the introduction, it's the moment where you establish "what's at stake" in the essay, setting up a genuine problem, question, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma or violated expectation that an intelligent reader would really have.

What the thesis is based on:

3. Evidence: the data – facts, examples, or details – that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis; a *thorough* consideration of evidence (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); and sufficiently *concrete* evidence for the reader to trust.

What you do with the evidence:

4. Analysis: the work of interpretation, of saying what the evidence means. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: taking it apart, grappling with its details, drawing out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a thinking individual, in the essay.

Evidence and analysis add up to. . .

5. Argument: the series of ideas that the essay lays out which, taken together, support the essay's thesis. A successful argument will do more than *reiterate* the thesis, but rather make clear how each idea develops from the one before it (see "Structure," #7 below). The argument should show you not only analyzing the evidence, but also reflecting on the ideas in other important ways: *defining your terms* (see #8 below) or assumptions; considering *counter-argument* – possible alternative arguments, or objections or problems, that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; offering a *qualification* or limitation to the case you've made; incorporating any *complications* that arise, a way in which the case isn't quite so simple as you've made it seem; drawing out an *implication*, often in the conclusion.

Where the evidence comes from:

6. Sources: texts (or persons), referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. In some arguments, there will be one central primary source. In others, sources can offer (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the things you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts.

How to organize the argument:

7. Structure: the sequence of an argument's main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order which is apparent to the reader. But it should also be a progressive order -- they should have a direction of development or complication, not be simply a list of examples or series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). In some arguments, especially longer ones, structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.

The argument is articulated in part through:

8. Key terms: the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon. An essay's key terms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout; they should be appropriate for the subject (not unfair or too simple -- a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). These terms can imply certain *assumptions* -- unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. The assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.

You keep the reader clear along the way through:

9. Transitions and signposts: words that tie together the parts of an argument, by indicating how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous (transitional words and phrases); and by offering “signposts” that recollect an earlier idea or section or the thesis itself, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing earlier key words or resonant phrases.

. . . and through:

10. Orienting: brief bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient readers who aren't expert in the subject, enabling them to follow the argument, such as: necessary introductory information about the text, author, or event; a brief summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned.

Addressing your readers involves:

11. Stance: the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of format and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and should stay consistent.

. . . and:

12. Style: choices made at the word and sentence level that determine *how* an idea is stated. Besides adhering to the grammatical conventions of standard English, an essay's style needs to be clear and readable (not confusing, verbose, cryptic, etc.), expressive of the writer's intelligence and energetic interest in the subject (not bureaucratic or clichéd), and appropriate for its subject and audience.

And last (or first):

13. Title: should both interest and inform, by giving the subject and focus of the essay as well as by helping readers see why this essay might be interesting to read.