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 stories by Tim O’Brien and Kristen Roupenian.

In Unit 2, we’ll focus on subjective truths (or truths that differ for each individual) and examine the challenges these truths pose for our justice system and for fields like medicine and science. Students will choose from a number of potential topics that address the intersection of truth and race, including racial bias in witness testimony and in medical treatment. We’ll also explore podcasts, social media platforms, 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 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 design original research projects that fit their interests.
MAJOR DEADLINES

Below are the draft and revision deadlines for the three papers you will write this semester.

Paper 1 Draft: Friday, September 17

Paper 1 Revision: Friday, October 1

Paper 2 Draft: Friday, October 22

Paper 2 Revision: Friday, November 5

Paper 3 Draft: *Monday*, November 22

Paper 3 Revision: TBD

Prior to each paper draft, students will be asked to submit short, ungraded “response papers” (previous response paper assignments have included submitting a draft thesis, a draft introductory paragraph, or list of quotations along with a few sentences of analysis). They 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. I will provide these deadlines at the start of the semester.

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. This course is based on three premises:

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!

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.

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 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

Conferences

We will have three conferences throughout the semester, in between the draft and revision deadlines for Papers 1, 2, and 3. 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.

Individual Meetings

In addition to our draft conferences, I am always happy to meet to discuss your ideas or any questions you have that are not easy to address by email. 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.
Grades

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: Paper 1 = 20%; Paper 2 = 30%; Paper 3 = 30%. 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 20% 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 negatively impact your participation grade (see attendance policy below).

Harvard College Writing Program Policy on Attendance

The Writing Program attendance policy is intended to make sure that you get everything you can out of your Expos course. Because Expos has fewer class hours than some other courses; because the course is largely discussion-based; and because instruction in Expos proceeds by sequential writing activities, your consistent attendance is essential to your learning in the course.

While I of course encourage you to be present every day in class, you are allowed two unexcused absences for the semester with no consequence. Some absences (religious holidays and medical situations) are automatically considered excused; some family circumstances may also be counted as excused absences. If you miss two unexcused classes, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss any issues that may be keeping you from attending, and to advise you on your plan for catching up on the missed work. If you miss a third class, you will be required to meet with your Resident Dean about those absences, so that your Dean can give you any support you may need to help you get back on track in the class. Missing four classes—the equivalent of two full weeks of the semester—puts you at risk for missing crucial material necessary to complete your work. Unless there is a medical or other emergency issue preventing consistent engagement with the class, students who miss four classes will receive a formal warning that they are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

In the case of a medical problem, you should contact me before the class to explain, but in any event within 24 hours. In the case of a medical absence, you may be required to provide a note from UHS or another medical official to confirm that absence as excused; protracted or repeated illness will require such documentation. Absences because of special events or extracurricular involvement are not excused absences. If such circumstances lead you to want to miss more than two unexcused absences, you must petition the Associate Director of the Writing Program for permission.
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). If you are unable to complete your work on time due to medical or family issues, please contact me before the deadline to discuss both the support you might need as well as a possible new arrangement for your deadline. Communication about your situation is essential so that we can determine how best to help you move forward. If we have not already discussed your situation and you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of an essay by the final due date in that essay unit, you will receive a letter reminding you of these requirements and asking you to meet with me and/or your Resident Dean to make a plan for catching up on your work. The letter will also specify the new date by which you must submit the late work. If you fail to submit at least a substantial draft of the essay by this new date, and if you have not documented a medical problem or been in touch with your Dean about other circumstances, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and given a failing grade.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you think you will require some flexibility in deadlines or participation in the course for reasons of a documented disability, please schedule a meeting with me early in the semester so we can discuss appropriate accommodations. (To be eligible for such accommodations, you need to have provided documentation to the Accessible Education Office ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Accessible Education Office works closely with Expos courses, and we will develop a plan that is appropriate for your needs. Please note that it is always your responsibility to consult with me as the need for those accommodations arises.

Policy on Electronic Submissions

You will submit your work electronically this semester (through our Canvas site). As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document in a form compatible with Microsoft Word (as a .doc or .docx file). It is also 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 will be subject to a late penalty.

Policy on Collaboration:

As in many academic situations, our Expos class will be a setting that involves frequent collaboration--we will develop ideas together through class discussion, peer review, and draft workshops. 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). It is a form of academic integrity to acknowledge the impact someone had on your essay; you can 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.
Policy on Academic Integrity

One of the essential elements of the Expos curriculum is the work we do on effective source use, appropriate acknowledgement of sources, and expectations for citing sources in academic writing. In each unit, we will work on strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and how to develop your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of others, contributing ideas of your own, and signaling clearly for readers where each idea comes from. This complex relationship with sources is part of our work through the whole semester, and you should always feel free to ask me questions about this material.

As we become familiar with the expectations of an academic audience, we will also work on strategies to avoid errors in citation and unintentional plagiarism. As with all your courses, the expectation in Expos is that 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. 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.