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 by Tim O’Brien, Michiko Kakutani, and J.L. Austin.

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.
MAJOR DEADLINES

Below are the draft and revision deadlines for the first two papers (Paper 3 deadlines will be announced early in the semester. After you submit a draft, we will have a one-on-one conference the following week to discuss the paper and your plans for revision. In order to give all students a full week for revisions following our conferences, revision deadlines will correspond to the conference schedule: Your revision will be due at 5pm one week after your conference (i.e. if your conference is held on Wednesday at 10am, your revision will be due the following Wednesday by 5pm). Note: In addition to these major unit deadlines, you will also have smaller response papers and exercises to complete. Those due dates will be made available unit by unit.

Paper 1:
Draft due Friday, September 20th at 5PM on Canvas
Conferences held Monday, September 23rd to Thursday September 26th
Revision due at 5PM on Canvas one week after your conference

Paper 2:
Draft due Friday, October 25th at 5PM on Canvas
Conferences held from Monday, October 28th to Friday, November 1st
Revision due at 5PM on Canvas one week after your conference

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. 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 do 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**

- 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
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 = 40%. 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 10% 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.

Three late arrivals of more than ten minutes will be counted as one absence.

**Submitting Essays**

You will turn in drafts and revisions to the assignment page on Canvas. Please be sure to check the unit syllabus for details on when assignments are due, and pay careful attention to the general guidelines about format, etc. explained at the end of this syllabus. When you are uploading documents to Canvas, you are responsible for submitting versions that I can open. This means the document must either be in Microsoft Word or be easily compatible (your file should end in .doc or .docx) 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. All work you submit to the course is for public readership—in other words, we will use essays and excerpts from the writers in the class (possibly yours!) 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 that—but please don’t make that request about everything you turn in this semester.

**Deadlines**

For many class meetings, you will have been asked to complete 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.

Except in the case of a documented medical or family emergency, I do not grant extensions. 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 may be required to produce a note from UHS; in the event of a family emergency, you must contact me right away, and may be required to ask your dean to contact me by e-mail or phone. In addition, please contact me as soon as possible so we can work out an alternative schedule.

**Revisions**

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 10 days after the draft is due. 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.

**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.

**Policy on Collaboration**

The following kinds of collaboration are permitted in this course: developing or refining ideas in conversation with other students or 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.

**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 this material. All the work that you submit for this course must be your own, and that work should not make use of outside sources unless that is explicitly part of the assignment. Any student
submitting plagiarized work is eligible to fail the course and to be subject to disciplinary action by the Honor Council.

Writing Center

At any stage of the writing process – brainstorming ideas, drafting or revising – you may want some extra attention on your essays. The Writing Center (located on the garden level of the Barker Center) offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. I can’t stress strongly enough the benefit of the service they provide; regardless of the "strength" or "weakness" of the essay, any piece of writing benefits from further review and a fresh perspective. Visit the Writing Center's web site at https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours at other campus locations; see the Writing Center website for details.

Submitting Essays

Following the guidelines below will ensure that I can focus on your ideas and your prose when I read your essays, rather than devoting time to issues of formatting, pagination, etc. The guidelines apply both to essay drafts and revisions. Forgetting to check your essays for these matters can result in a lower grade for the essay. All essays should adhere to the standard format:

• Double-space in a reasonable font, with one-inch margins
• Number all pages and paragraphs (a simple integer in parentheses beside the first sentence of the paragraph is fine) • Include your name, the course title, my name, the date, the essay number and your essay title on the first page (don’t use a title page)
• Include your name on each subsequent page
• Proofread thoroughly for typographical, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Consistent errors will lower the grades on your essays.
• Use the MLA in-text citation method to document your sources, and include a correctly formatted list of Works Cited. Consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources for the appropriate citation information.

Last word of advice: Keep a copy of all your work, and be sure to avoid computer disaster: you should both regularly save your work and periodically print working drafts as you write (in other words, you should never be in the position of having "finished" an essay or revision with nothing to show for it if your computer crashes)