Expository Writing 20: The Uses of Horror

MW 12-1:15 pm (Barker Center 316); 1:30-2:45 pm (Barker Center 218)
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“We live in Gothic times.” – Angela Carter

“When you’re writing, you’re trying to find out something which you don’t know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don’t want to know, what you don’t want to find out.” – James Baldwin

“How can I tell what I think ’til I see what I say?” – attributed to E. M. Forster

I. COURSE OVERVIEW

In a conversation with Stephen Colbert, comedian and filmmaker Jordan Peele referred to his 2017 horror film, Get Out, as a “historical biopic.” His claim that “the movie is truth” invites us to reflect on the relationship between horror and history – between fictional and filmic fantasies that terrify us, and our own lived realities. In this course, we’ll think about what happens when we encounter works of art that are disturbing, excessive, horrific, and about how horror as a genre has given us new ways of understanding and describing our experiences. The readings for this course – and our responses to them – will help us think through some key questions: How do we explain our sustained cultural preoccupation with the supernatural and the macabre? How might our intellectual and emotional engagement with terrifying works of the imagination link up with what we see and how we act in the world? While these questions are relevant to (and potentially answered within) a range of disciplines – from sociology to psychology to neuroscience, and beyond – our primary texts in this course will be works of fiction and film.

The course is organized into the following three units:

**Unit 1:** We’ll begin with one of horror’s American masters: Edgar Allan Poe. Known for his unreliable narrators, we’ll spend time in this unit attending closely to Poe’s narrative style(s): How do his stories and their tellers generate tension, terror, and uncertainty? Paying particular attention to moments when the supernatural and the psychological become difficult to tease apart, we’ll consider how Poe’s brand of American horror expresses anxieties about the unknown and the irrational and how it serves as a compelling allegory for psychic and social realities. Your first essay will give you the opportunity to engage in one of the most essential skills in academic writing: posing an analytical question or problem and engaging in a close analysis that argues for an answer.

**Unit 2:** Next we’ll examine another classic work of literary horror – Henry James’s 1898 novella, The Turn of the Screw – alongside The Innocents, Jack Clayton’s 1961 film adaptation of James’s story. Your job in Essay 2 is to conduct a comparative analysis, examining how these two different media affect the meaning of each text – what is illuminated and what might be
lost when we move from text to screen. As you analyze these two texts in light of each other, you’ll arrive at an argument about the relationship between them.

**Unit 3:** Finally, for our third unit, we’ll turn our full attention to horror’s most contemporary (and popular) iteration: the scary movie. Students will write a research paper about a horror film of their choice (some suggested options will include *Night of the Living Dead*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Babadook*, and *Get Out*). They’ll draw on philosophical and historical readings I’ll provide, as well as on their own discoveries in the research process, in order to develop an original argument about horror, social allegory, and visual representation.

These three sequences of instruction – and their accompanying texts – are designed to help you hone some important writing skills and develop habits of mind that will be useful to you both within and beyond Expos 20. Over the course of the three essay units, you’ll learn how to analyze and evaluate sources, develop your thinking with evidence, and structure clear and persuasive arguments. Each unit builds on the ones before it, asking you return to and sharpen these (and other) core writing moves as you tackle several important versions of the academic essay: the close analysis paper, the comparative analysis paper, and the multi-source paper that sets up a “conversation” with and around a primary text. The response paper assignments within each unit build on each other as well and are designed to help you develop the skills you will need to write your essays.

Some of our writing goals will change unit by unit. Other goals will remain our focus throughout the entire course: developing your sense of what you do well and challenging yourself to grow as a writer; expanding your repertoire and practice of revision techniques; and increasing the complexity and originality of your analysis as well as the effectiveness and elegance of your prose. One of the most exciting things to learn in a writing course is that the learning process never stops; one doesn’t “arrive” at being a good writer, but rather continually becomes one. With these goals in mind, we begin with these important premises:

**Writing is a process.** As you’ll see on our calendar, each essay unit is approximately four weeks long. During each of these four-week blocks, you’ll read carefully, take notes on your reading, write and revise response papers that help you focus your ideas, draft a full-length essay, and revise that draft in conversation with me and with your peers. This continued process of drafting and revision is the primary work of this class, and is the main way your ideas evolve and your writing grows stronger. While inspiration is the moment we all hope for in our writing, it comes most readily when that inspiration is earned – in other words, when you have dedicated sustained effort to that process of reading, thinking, questioning, drafting and revising. This course will also ask you to be reflective about that process and about what you want to accomplish in each assignment: in your cover letters about each essay and in your Writer’s Letters at the beginning and end of the term.

**Writing is thinking.** In Expos 20, we approach writing not as a static recitation of what you already know but as a means of thinking about what you don’t know – a means of inquiry. Writing is one of the best ways to figure out your ideas and you should expect these ideas to evolve throughout the writing process. You may find, for example, that what you thought was your thesis when you started your draft is less compelling than a point you make much later
on in your paper – one you’ve written your way toward. Your revision, then, will involve making that compelling point – the one you may not have realized you were building toward but “Eureka!” there it is on p. 5 – central to your paper. The frequency with which writers (both students and professionals) experience this “Eureka!” moment suggests that our best ideas come often come through and in our writing. “How can I know what I think ’til I see what I say?”

II. HOW THE COURSE WORKS

**Required Texts & Materials**

The main texts for the course are:

- Edgar Allan Poe, “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” I will distribute hard copies of these stories in class.

- Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw: A Norton Critical Edition*. 2nd Ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999. ISBN-10: 039395904X. Please be sure to purchase this edition of the novella, which will be available at the Coop (though you should feel free to order it online in advance of Unit 2). It’s important that we’re working with the same edition so that 1.) we can all be on the same page (literally and figuratively) during class discussions and 2.) you can easily access any short secondary readings contained in the Norton Critical.

- *The Innocents*, directed by Jack Clayton, 20th Century Fox, 1961. This film will be available on reserve at Lamont and can also be accessed online (there’s a full-length version on YouTube, and likely elsewhere).

I will distribute any other secondary readings for Units 2 and 3 in class and on our course website.

I will also assign reading from:

- *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*, available online at [http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu)

- *Exposé*, the magazine of student writing (available online or as handouts in class)

You should also have some writing handbook to consult when questions of grammar, mechanics, or style arise. I’m happy to recommend one if you don’t own one already.

Since Expository Writing courses generate a great deal of paper – response papers, in class writing exercises, drafts – I strongly recommend that you purchase a three-ring binder for this course. Each assignment builds on the next, and this will help you to keep those assignments (and my comments on them) organized for later reference.

**Classes and Conferences**
Class time is an essential part of this course, so please come to class ready to contribute. You are expected to engage in lively conversation about the readings, as well as to provide constructive criticism during workshops of writing assignments and, most importantly, of drafts. Much of what you learn in the course will occur to you in class discussions as you listen to each other’s ideas and enrich each other’s thought. 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. Put simply: class is a joint endeavor, and in everything we do this semester your participation is essential.

Conferences – individual tutorial sessions – are an extension of class, and in conference we will discuss your essays and work together to improve them. You will have at least three draft conferences with me over the course of the semester, and you should come prepared to talk about both process and product: What you’ve struggled with as you’ve drafted your essay and what has come more easily; what the draft at hand is doing well and what you feel needs work. Toward this end, you’ll submit a cover letter with each essay draft.

Miscellaneous class policies:

- The use of laptop computers and cell phones is not permitted during class as this is a time for group discussion and interaction. 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. There may be some class meetings that require the use of a laptop and I will let you know in advance when those are.

- Please bring a notebook to class for note-taking and in-class writing exercises.

Grading

You will develop each of your essays through a guided process of prewriting, drafting, and rewriting. At the end of this process, I will grade the final essay. Ideally, your essays should:

- Develop a fresh, insightful thesis and argue for that thesis in a logical and interesting way
- Explain the stakes of your thesis (i.e. trace its implications to a larger, more important topic)
- Thoughtfully reason with evidence
- Create an effective beginning, middle, and ending
- Supply your intelligent, public readers with explanations and background wherever they are necessary for your readers’ understanding
- Address your readers respectfully in a graceful, conversational style
- Express your thoughts in clear, economical prose that correctly uses the conventions of grammar, usage, and punctuation.

I will evaluate your work by these standards:
A-work creates an impression of excellence in all the listed criteria.
B-work creates an impression of excellence in most of the listed criteria, and competence in the others.
C-work is average but creates an impression of competence in all the listed criteria.
D- or F-work is below average and is deficient in one or more of the listed criteria.

The majority of your grade comes from your three essays, according to the following breakdown: **Essay #1 = 20%; Essay #2 = 35%; Essay #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). At the end of the course you will turn in your final Writer’s Letter so you can assess your own progress over the semester (so save all your work!). The remaining 5% of your grade represents a serious measure of your completion of response papers, your constructive participation in class discussion and conferences, the care with which you respond to fellow students’ work, and your ability to finish work on time.

**Attendance and Lateness**

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. It is an official program-wide policy that if you are absent without medical or religious excuse more than twice, you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed. On your second unexcused absence, you will receive a letter warning you of your situation.

You are expected to let me know promptly if you have missed or will miss a class; you remain responsible for the work due that day and for any new work assigned. Apart from religious holidays, only medical absences can be excused. In those circumstances, you should contact me before class (or within 24 hours); you may need to provide a note from UHS or another medical official, or from your Freshman 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, letting me know in advance. If you wish to attend an event that will put you over the two-absence limit, you must directly petition the Director of Expository Writing, who will grant such a petition only in extraordinary circumstances and only when your work in the class has been exemplary.

**III. WRITTEN WORK**

**Submitting Essays**

You will turn in drafts and revisions either by e-mail or to the Dropbox on the course website. Please be sure to check the syllabus for details on when things 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. (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.

I will only accept electronic copies of drafts, final papers, and writing assignments if I’ve explicitly asked you to e-mail them to me or upload them to Canvas. If the syllabus says “Due in class on…,” I expect you to have a hard copy for me in class – not after.

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 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 in this section is allowed ONE 24-hour extension on a response paper, draft or revision during the semester. To use that 24-hour extension without penalty, you must: contact me before that deadline; submit the late work to Canvas; and be on time with the other work due on that day as well. Otherwise, the work will be counted as late. And beware: taking that one-day extension can mean that you’re crunched for time at the beginning of the next unit.

Other than that “wild card” extension, all deadlines in the course are firm. Except in the case of medical or family emergency, I do not grant further extensions. Essay drafts or revisions turned in after the deadline will be penalized a third of a letter grade (from an A- to a B+, for example) 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.

**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.
**Completion of Work**

Because this course is a planned sequence of writing, it is an official Writing Program policy that 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 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. The letter will 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 (unless you have documented a medical problem), you are eligible to be officially excluded from the course and failed.

**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.

**Policy on Electronic Submissions**

You will submit at least some of your work electronically this semester. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document either as .doc or .docx in Microsoft Word. 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.

**Academic Integrity**

All writers in an academic community (from professors to first-year students) are developing their own ideas and interpretations, informed by the claims and perspectives of others; all writers are responsible for helping their readers see the distinction between their own ideas and the sources they draw on. In this class, we will talk about and practice approaches to working well with sources, developing your own ideas, and avoiding plagiarism or misuse of sources. 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. (Expos classes are great places for asking those questions!) 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 is also potentially eligible for 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/](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
- 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.

Please consult the unit calendar for details on what needs to be submitted with each draft and revision, and where each should be turned in (the course website and/or a printed copy in class or in my mailbox at One Bow Street).