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Expos 20: Breaking the Norm



Course Description

“I would prefer not to,” utters Bartleby in response to the workplace demands of his lawyer boss in Herman Melville’s eponymous short story from 1853. More than 150 years later, Bartleby’s refrain would become a rallying cry for the Occupy movement that sparked an international debate about the globe’s capitalist norms. But what, in the first place, are norms, and how do they get established, enforced, and altered throughout history, so that what we consider normal today might be abnormal in the future? Why does the *normal* quickly become the *normative*? What might we learn by breaking norms, or recognizing the plights of those who deviate from them? This course will explore various norms and their transgression in literature, film, cultural theory, and philosophy. In the first unit, we will close-read short literary works such as first-wave feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) and Harlem Renaissance novelist Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), examining racial, gender, and mental health norms that prompt us to question what is an “appropriate” response to seemingly unreasonable circumstances. In the second unit we will turn to norms of sexuality and desire, applying theoretical lenses from queer theorist Michael Warner and film critic Laura Mulvey to films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019). Does acceptance into mainstream social institutions like marriage come at the cost of more radical change and the celebration of true difference? Do standard ways of looking in visual media and film perpetuate the sexual objectification of women? And in the third unit, after reading excerpts from the French literary critic Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957), students will research how an artwork of their own choosing depicts, reinforces, or transgresses a norm.

Unit 1: Close-Reading Scenes of Transgression



In the first unit, we will read four canonical literary narratives published in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century: Nikolai Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman” (1835); Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853); Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892); and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). Paying close attention to each text’s language and structure while entering the distant historical context of the story, we will ask what norms the characters are breaking, how those transgressions manifest themselves, and whether they achieve any clear outcomes. In the process, we will consider the ways these norms have evolved since the period in which they were penned.

Writing Goals: Learn to close read a single text (paying attention to form and content), recognize interpretive problems within it, ask more specific analytical questions, and form a sufficient thesis towards a clear and well-structured persuasive essay supported by evidence.

Unit 2: Seeing Ab/normal Sexuality through a Lens



In 1999, the queer theorist Michael Warner responded to prominent conservative gay writers like Andrew Sullivan by writing that “the official gay movement... [has become] more and more enthralled by respectability.... Repudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians.” The debate between Warner and Sullivan about sexual difference versus “normal sexuality” will foreground this unit, which will begin with Ang Lee’s film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and proceed to two other films, Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1991). Throughout the unit, we will be using theoretical lenses by film and gender critics such as Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler to enrich and complicate our filmic analyses.

Writing Goals: Learn to analyze visual media, understand and engage with theoretical secondary sources, problematize arguments and counterarguments, intervene in a debate, and distinguish the uses of different academic disciplines.

Unit 3: Researching the Norm



We will begin in the third unit with Roland Barthes' 1957 book *Mythologies*, which deconstructs the ideologies embedded within everyday objects—from action figures to soap detergent—providing a model for how research and analysis can interrupt habituation. Next, we will look at some sources, such as journal articles, that we didn't have a chance to explore in the first two units. With these additional tools in hand, students will research an artwork they select from a pre-approved list (or one for which they gain approval), making an argument about how that work depicts, transgresses, or itself perpetuates a norm.

Writing Goals: Learn to conduct independent research, gather and cite multiple secondary sources, and contextualize and enter into an academic conversation.

Required Materials

The majority of our course materials will be on Canvas. In the second unit, however, you may need to take a trip to the library (Lamont or Widener) or rent/purchase our films online through JustWatch, Netflix, YouTube, etc.

Writing Principles

- Writing is a concentrated form of thinking.
- Writing is a form of communication or conversation with a reader.
- Writing is a complex, multi-step process with drafts and revisions.
- Writing begins with active, close readings.
- Writing means asking questions and embracing uncertainty, or “negative capability.”
- Writing requires practicing theory of mind and metacognition.
- Writing well requires crafting clear, well-ordered, purposive sentences and paragraphs.

Writing Process

1. Response Paper

After we've acquainted ourselves with the assignment prompt and the texts it asks you analyze, you'll be assigned one or two "response papers" to begin the drafting process. Like your drafts, your response papers will be ungraded, and are intended to give you a space to begin fleshing out some of the ideas you might pursue.

2. Draft

Building on the insights you've begun to articulate in your response paper, you'll then prepare a full-length draft. While it's important that this draft is technically complete, it's just as important that we continue to think of it as unfinished, as you'll still have at least a week to revise before your final submission.

3. Workshop

During class, we'll "workshop" a few drafts volunteered by you and your peers, coming together as a group to assess what's already working and what stands to be improved.

4. Conference

Around the same time, you'll also meet with me individually to go over my written feedback for your draft and discuss your plans for revision. Due to the jam-packed nature of the week between drafts and revisions, I will *not* be able to provide feedback for second drafts, although you are more than welcome to receive additional feedback at the Writing Center.

5. Final Revision

At least a week after our conference, you'll turn in your final revision for a grade.

Grades

Unit 1 Close-Reading Essay (5+ pages):	25%
Unit 2 Lens Essay (6+ pages):	30%
Unit 3 Research Essay (7+ pages):	35%
Responses, Engagement, and Participation:	10%

Each final essay for the progression will receive a letter grade from A (or A+) to F. Your final course grade will be computed on the 4.0 scale. Each letter grade signifies the following:

- "A" essays not only fulfill the goals of the assignment, but push beyond those goals in surprising ways. This is more likely to be possible when the writer has found something insightful and compelling to write about and has taken great care to attend to his or her language, argumentation, and form. "A" essays reflect excellence and artistry.
- A "B" range essay is one that is ambitious but only partially successful, or one that achieves modest aims well. A "B" essay must contain focused ideas, but these ideas may not be particularly complex, or may not be presented or supported well at every point. It integrates sources efficiently, if not always gracefully. "B" essays come in two basic varieties: the "solid B" and the "striving B." The solid B is a good, competent paper. The striving "B" may excel in certain areas, but is sufficiently uneven to preclude it from receiving an A. "B" essays reflect superior understanding of the assignment's goals.

- “C” essays reflect struggle in fulfilling the assignment’s goals. This kind of essay may show a fair amount of work, but it does not come together well enough to be a competent paper. A “C” range essay has significant problems articulating and presenting its central ideas, though it is usually focused and coherent. Such essays often lack clarity and use source material in simple ways, without significant analysis or insight.

Rich, consistent, and ethical participation is crucial to the successful completion of the course. You must strive to be actively and intellectually engaged, not simply present. Hence, “participation” in this course includes but is not limited to:

- completing reading and writing activities
- volunteering to respond when questions are posed to the class
- responding thoughtfully and respectfully to classmates’ ideas
- asking questions that advance and contribute to the discussion at hand
- volunteering to read when a text is to be read aloud
- contributing meaningfully during small group activities
- engaging in focused work and dialogue during peer workshops
- freewriting diligently when required
- volunteering for activities that aid the class goals e.g. writing on the white board
- sharing your point of view, feedback, perspective while respecting the diversity of opinions, ethnic backgrounds, gender expressions and sexual orientations, social classes, religious beliefs, and ethnicities within the class and larger society
- presenting research to the class professionally in the spirit of increasing collective knowledge and understanding
- seeking out, carefully considering, and incorporating feedback during your revision process

Note that there are many ways to participate that do not require being hyper-vocal in class.

Electronic Submissions

You will submit your work electronically through Slack. As you send or upload each document, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have saved the document as a word or pdf 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.

Deadlines and Extensions

Expos is a course that builds sequentially: the class exercises and response papers prepare you for the draft; your work in the draft lays the foundation for a strong revision; the skills and strategies you learn in Unit 1 remain essential in the new challenges of Unit 2. Because of this sequential work, keeping up with the course deadlines is necessary to your continued learning. For this reason, I grant extensions only in exceptional circumstances. However, each student will be allowed one 24-hour extension on a draft or revision during the semester. Use it wisely!

As a first-year student, part of what you are learning is how to manage your time, to balance your academic and extracurricular responsibilities, and to build habits of working that allow you to complete long and complex assignments independently. These are challenges that every student in the class faces this semester. However, situations can arise that go beyond these typical first-year challenges. If you find yourself dealing with medical issues, family emergencies, or extraordinary situations that genuinely interfere with your work, please let me know. I won't need to know personal details, but we can meet to make a plan to help you move forward in a reasonable way in light of the circumstances you are facing. In these situations I also urge you to reach out to your Resident Dean, your proctor, or your adviser so that you have the necessary support in all of your courses.

Feedback and Conferences

Feedback is central to Expos. As spelled out in each assignment, you will receive either substantive written feedback, a conference about your draft, or both. Every writer benefits from having an attentive reader respond to their work, and one of my roles as your preceptor is to provide that response: identifying the strengths of a draft; noting questions and reactions to help you develop your ideas further; and offering clear assessment of your revised work. There are educational reasons for the types of feedback I'll give you: they complement one another throughout the writing process and help you think about receiving feedback from different audiences at different stages of writing. Each form of feedback will help you think about another way you can ask for and receive feedback in future writing circumstances. (Feedback throughout the course also comes in other forms, such as peer review or principles from workshop that you apply to your own essays.)

There are also educational reasons for the amount and timing of the feedback I will offer. The goal of all my feedback is that you learn to incorporate the principles I'm identifying into your *own* thinking and your revision, so that eventually you are making more independent decisions in your essays about what a reader needs to understand or what the most effective structure might be. If I as your instructor were to read a draft multiple times, offering several rounds of feedback, I would then in effect be taking over some of those decisions for you, and you would not be gaining the autonomy as a writer that you need to achieve this semester; that dynamic would shortchange the learning that you can accomplish in the course. I do accept a few thoughtful questions by email or Slack about specific instances in your revision-in-progress: a follow-up question about whether a thesis is now clearer, or whether some added sentences of analysis make your explanation of evidence stronger. In those instances, you are taking the important step of identifying what in your writing and thinking is *most* in need of targeted feedback, and you are using the Elements of Academic Argument to articulate the specific question you have about something you've tried out in the paper. (When you do want additional feedback, the Writing Center is a very helpful resource. Here too, you will use that resource better when you arrive with specific and targeted questions.)

There are also important reasons that I schedule one draft conference per student for the first and final essay. Conferences are important opportunities for thinking together about questions in your argument and strategies for revision; during conference week I am meeting with all students and attempting to offer the same level of intensive work with everyone. If I were to

grant a second full conference to any student, for reasons of equity I would need to offer a second meeting with everyone, and it is not possible to schedule a second round of meetings in an already busy unit.

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. You are expected to notify me ahead of time about those absences unless circumstances make that impossible. If you miss a third class for unexcused reasons, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss your plan for catching up with any missed work, as well as issues that may be affecting your attendance or that might require attention or support from your advisers or from other College resources. If you miss a fourth class, your Resident Dean will be notified 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; you should also copy your Resident Dean on that message. In the case of extended illness, you may be required to provide medical 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.

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. (In the research paper assignment, the paper must include work with multiple sources to be accepted.) 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.

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.

Writing Center

At any stage of the writing process—brainstorming ideas, reviewing drafts, approaching revisions—you may want some extra attention to or feedback on your essays. Harvard’s Writing Center offers hour-long appointments with trained tutors. Visit the Writing Center’s web site at writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu to make an appointment. Tutors also hold drop-in office hours where students can receive feedback in briefer sessions.

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 practice strategies for working with the ideas of other authors and sources, and for developing your own ideas in response to them. Most forms of academic writing involve building on the ideas of other writers and thinkers, 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. (See here also: <http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>).

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. Your 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.

In addition to acknowledging how other writers have contributed to your work, doing your work with integrity means developing ideas that are wholly and genuinely yours. For this reason, students are prohibited from using ChatGPT or other generative AI tools for any stage of the writing process in Expos. The reasons for this policy in Expos are important: you discover your

ideas in the messy process of drafting and revising them. Engaging with that writing process develops your ability to think clearly, organize that thinking, find appropriate evidence, pursue deeper nuances in and counterarguments to your claims and the evidence you use to present them, and work through alternative positions and evidence. To outsource any of that process to AI robs you of the practice with these skills that will strengthen your thinking; turning to AI essentially means you are giving up *your voice* in an essay, accepting instead an average and generic answer (which is what generative AI produces). In your Expos course, submitting work as yours that you did not develop or create on your own is a violation of the Harvard College Honor Code.

While the product of an Expos class may be the papers that you write, the broader goal is to strive to become better *thinkers*. The ability to participate independently in important discussions, the confidence to add your voice to challenging topics, the precision of mind to understand when a speaker is credible and should be taken seriously and when that isn't the case—these are all skills you develop through that rigorous thinking process that writing fosters. Allowing generative AI to take the place of that thinking shortchanges your development as a writer, a thinker, and a creative participant in developing ideas. In our class, your classmates and I are eager to hear what *you* have to say.

Course Materials

The work we do together in class—discussions, exercises, workshopping essays—is intended for the members of our class. Students are not allowed to record class and are not allowed to post video or audio recordings or transcripts of our class meetings. (Students needing course recordings as an accommodation should contact the [Disability Access Office](#).) While samples of student work will be circulated within the course (and all work you do may be shared with your classmates), you may not share fellow students' work with others outside the course without their written permission. As the *Handbook for Students* explains, students may not “post, publish, sell, or otherwise publicly distribute course materials without the written permission of the course instructor. Such materials include, but are not limited to, the following: video or audio recordings, assignments, problem sets, examinations, other students' work, and answer keys.” Students who violate any of these expectations may be subject to disciplinary action.

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 [Disability Access Office](#) ahead of time. Please let me know if you are unfamiliar with that process.) The Disability Access 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.