

***THE GALLATIN SCHOOL OF INDIVIDUALIZED STUDY***  
***NEW YORK UNIVERSITY***  
***WRITING SEMINAR I***  
***THE FAITH BETWEEN US***  
***(K10.0353)***  
***FALL 2009***  
***MON. AND WEDS., 8:00-9:15***

Instructor: Scott Korb

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Classroom: 715 Broadway, Rm. 401

Office Hours and location: 715 Broadway, Rm. 431, Weds., 9:30-11am

***COURSE DESCRIPTION***

Look at the headlines, flip through a magazine, or click the link to your favorite blog, and increasingly you'll find that whether faith *comes* between us, separating one believer from another, or *lives* between us, forming the glue that holds communities together, is a question we all must face. No matter your tradition, or lack thereof, these days everyone seems to have something *pressing* to say about God, faith, belief, practice, or, yes, even *unbelief*. Through a consideration of a variety of (mainly) contemporary religion writing – mostly from newspapers, popular magazines, and journals – this course asks you to take your own excursions into faith and faithlessness, and through a process of writing, workshopping, and the all-important *rewriting*, create the stories that, in Joan Didion's words, "we tell ourselves in order to live."

***COURSE OBJECTIVES***

Writing should be pleasurable, hard work. And when done well, it should exhibit a Democratic Spirit. I've tried to select readings that, above all, make this point obvious. The aim of this course is to help you merge cogent, lively writing with precise, exploratory thinking. Over the course of the semester you will expand your repertoire of styles, forms, and techniques while finding and explaining (in writing) ideas that are new to the world. Most importantly, you will learn to construct interesting, arresting essays that build upon the work you do for your daily assignments.

***COURSE REQUIREMENTS***

Throughout the course I will help you learn to write effectively; you can also expect a great deal of help from your classmates. We will often have workshops in class. You can expect to write for every class. Major course requirements are as follows:

1. At least ten instructor-evaluated writing exercises. Required lengths for each will be specified when we discuss the exercise in class.
2. Four peer-evaluated/instructor-graded essays; the first three essays must have one rough draft (with significant revisions) in addition to the final manuscript, and the final essay must have two rough drafts in preparation for the final manuscript. (All

drafts of all four essays must be submitted with the manuscript on that essay's due date.)

The four essays, like our readings, will all consider questions of "faith." How you understand and define "faith" – that is, what ideas we might include under that label – will likely (I hope) change over the course of the semester. Through your writing, you are expected to help me and your classmates follow you on this journey. Again, where you need it, we'll be there to help you along the way.

The first essay will be a familiar, narrative essay that primarily derives its evidence from personal experience but enters into conversation with at least one other voice. (2-3 pages; no more than 900 words.)

The second essay will require you to debate with or elaborate on, with fresh insight, one generally recognized idea or commonly held belief. Reckoning with this idea – whether you agree with it or not – will help you to develop and express your own idea that is new to the world. (3-4 pages; no more than 1,200 words.)

The third essay will require you to combine the techniques you developed in your first essay, which required you to create a narrative from personal experience, and in your second essay, where you were asked to reckon with an idea that seems to exist independent of you. Now, this essay requires you to draw evidence from the *experience* of another person – either through interviews or other research – and create a narrative that, through its telling, reveals your own thinking about the person and *his* or *her* ideas. (4-6 pages; no more than 1,800 words.)

The fourth essay is a literary-critical one, which requires you to gather evidence from a variety of other thinkers and writers and develop an *organizing principle* around which you present this evidence in support an idea of your own that, once again, is new to the world. This final piece of writing may be a further development of the ideas you've presented in the previous essays, but ***no material*** from your other essays may appear word-for-word in the final one. (7-8 pages; no more than 2,400 words.)

All essays and out-of-class writing exercises should be typed, double-spaced, in twelve-point font with one-inch margins. I prefer you use Times New Roman, but other clearly legible fonts are acceptable (for instance, this one, Garamond). Please use MLA citation style (with in-text citation and a Works Cited list) for all papers. We will go over the specifics of citation in class.

### ***COURSE EXPECTATIONS***

This course requires a great deal of class participation. You'll be expected to share not just your responses to your classmates' writing and the required readings, but also to question both me and your classmates and to be ready to defend (and, occasionally, abandon) your own ideas.

Every student will have marked at least one passage from each class's required reading that you will be prepared to read aloud and discuss with the class. The selection may be a

beautiful paragraph, or a revealing turn of phrase, or an example of what you believe to be awful thinking. Whatever it is, it should be *marked*. This means that you must **print out** those readings you access either from on-line sources or through a library database, and if you're not comfortable writing in books, now is the time to learn how. (Or to make extensive use of sticky notes.)

You'll treat every appointment with your classmates and me as if it was your first job interview, or more appropriately for our purposes, a meeting with your first publisher – that is, you won't even dream of being late, or of leaving your cell phone on, or of showing up less than fully caffeinated. Likewise, you'll treat every deadline as if it's your first big break. If, due to illness, emergency, or religious holiday, you cannot attend class, please be in touch with me directly as soon as possible so that you can be prepared for your next class. Please be aware that more than two absences will jeopardize your course grade.

### ***STANDARDS AND GRADES***

All final essays must:

- explore and develop an idea from diverse evidence in a coherent, interesting way;
- have a thoughtful, elegant beginning, middle, and end;
- be grammatically correct; and
- have a tone appropriate for the intended audience.

A work achieves excellence in all listed standards. B work achieves general superiority in all listed standards. C work is average in each standard. D or F work is seriously deficient in one or more of the listed standards. Final grades break down as follows:

Each of four essays:	80% (essay 1, 15%; essay 2, 15%; essay 3, 20%; essay 4, 30%)
Daily writing assignments:	10%
Participation and attendance:	10%

### ***CONFERENCES***

You and I will schedule one required conference during the semester. Each student will have the option of a second. I will also meet with you when you think you need to see me. I may also ask you to meet with me if I think you need additional help. I may also refer you to the Gallatin Writing Center, where junior and senior Peer Writing Assistants can provide additional help.

### ***A NOTE ON PLAGIARISM***

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of someone else's work as one's own in all forms of academic endeavor (such as essays, theses, examinations, research data, creative projects, etc.), intentional or unintentional. Plagiarized material may be derived from a variety of sources, such as books, journals, internet postings, student or faculty papers, etc. This includes the purchase or "outsourcing" of written assignments for a course. A detailed definition of plagiarism in research and writing can be found in the fourth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, pages 26-29. Please, don't plagiarize.

**REQUIRED READINGS**

Many of the readings listed in this syllabus are available in various formats either online or through the library, by which I mostly mean the library's vast database resources. (Hard copies of most of the magazines and journals are also available.) Because I would like to use this class as an introduction to the information and resources available to you as writers, I have not prepared a reading packet. Instead, during our first few meetings – and beyond that as much as necessary – I will explore with you several research tools that I'll expect you to use to find the required readings. You should be prepared each Monday to discuss that week's reading.

**REQUIRED BOOKS:**

Armstrong, Karen. *A Short History of Myth*. New York: Canongate, 2006.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

Sharlet, Jeff. *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952 (2008).

You can find the required books at the Bluestockings bookstore, 172 Allen Street:

***Remember: You are required to print out all required readings and bring them, marked up, to class.***

**COURSE CALENDAR**

**WEEK ONE**

Weds., Sept. 9 – *Introductions*

**WEEK TWO**

Mon., Sept. 14

Weds., Sept. 16 – *First draft of personal, narrative essay due. (Full-class workshop, Group 1)*

*Readings:* David Foster Wallace, “Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2001; Marilynne Robinson, “Jack,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Aug. 2008.

**WEEK THREE**

Mon., Sept. 21– *Small-group workshops.*

Weds., Sept. 23

*Readings:* Marilynne Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals,” *American Scholar*, June 2006

**WEEK FOUR**

Mon., Sept. 28 – *Final draft of personal, narrative essay due.*

Weds., Sept. 30

*Reading:* Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, pp. 1-73

**WEEK FIVE**

Mon., Oct. 5

Weds., Oct. 7 – *First draft of debate/elaborative essay due. (Full-class workshop, Group 2)*

*Reading:* Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*, pp. 287-335.

**WEEK SIX**

Mon., Oct. 12 – *Small-group workshops.*

Weds., Oct. 14

*Reading:* Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, Chapters I – IV.

**WEEK SEVEN**

Mon., Oct. 19  
Weds., Oct. 21

*Reading:* Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, Chapters V-II.

**WEEK EIGHT**

Mon., Oct. 26  
Weds., Oct. 28

*Reading:* James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (1962), from *The Fire Next Time*.

**WEEK NINE**

Mon., Nov. 2 – *First draft of reported narrative essay due. (Full-class workshop, Group 3)*  
Weds., Nov. 4 – *Small-group workshops.*

*Reading:* Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Chapters I and II

**WEEK TEN**

Mon., Nov. 9  
Weds., Nov. 11 – *Final draft of reported narrative essay due.*

*Reading:* Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Chapters VII and VIII; Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 2007.

**WEEK ELEVEN**

Mon., Nov. 16  
Weds., Nov. 18 – *First draft of literary-critical essay due. (Full-class workshop, Group 4)*

*Readings:* Christopher Hitchens, excerpts from *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, from *Slate*, Apr. 24-27, 2007; Benjamin Anastas, "The Final Days," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 1, 2007.

**WEEK TWELVE**

Mon., Nov. 23 – *Small-group workshops.*  
Weds., Nov. 25

*Readings:* Karen Armstrong, "Violent Islamic radicals know they are heretical," *The Guardian*, July 8, 2006 and "Resisting Modernity," *Harvard International Review*, Winter 2004.

**WEEK THIRTEEN**

Mon., Nov. 30

Weds., Dec. 2

*Readings:* Irshad Manji, "Moderate Islam on the March," *L.A. Times*, July 21, 2006; Reza Aslan, "Holy Orders," in "What America Must Do," *Foreign Policy*, Jan./Feb. 2008.

**WEEK FOURTEEN**

Mon., Dec. 7 – *Second draft of literary-critical essay due. (Full-class workshop, Group 5)*

Weds., Dec. 9 – *Small-group workshops.*

*Reading:* Garret Keizer, "Turning away from Jesus," *Harper's Magazine*, June 2008.

**WEEK FIFTEEN**

Mon., Dec. 14

Weds., Dec. 16 – ***Final draft of literary-critical essay due.***

*Reading:* Scott Korb, "All That I Have Is Yours: The Scars of a Christian Inheritance," *Harper's Magazine*, Dec. 2005.