

WRITING FOR WIDE READERSHIP

G54.0060.001

Professor Liza Featherstone

[generic syllabus]

Writing for Wide Readership is grounded in the idea that scholars need not operate in rarefied isolation, but can engage the world. The purpose of the course is to help you learn how to write for the public -- people outside of your academic discipline. You will strive to produce writing that is scholarly and rigorous, but never jargon-riddled or obscure: accessible to readers who have never been to graduate school, and compelling to people with little previous knowledge of its subject. A translator may struggle to render Sufi poetry meaningful to those of us who can only read English; your project of bringing the insights of your professional world to the wider reading public is a similar one.

This class is a workshop, meaning that you have writing assignments due almost every week. You must come to class prepared not only to discuss your own work, but also to constructively engage your classmates' writing.

The writing assignment will be due on the day before class. You will post it on Blackboard, and print out the works under discussion for the upcoming class. (The discussion will be more fruitful if everyone is looking at the text.) A workshop schedule will be determined at the beginning of the semester, so you will always know whose work we are reading. Not every piece you write will be discussed in class, but I will make sure that everyone gets equal access to class feedback.

Class participation is 25% of your grade. The other 75% is based on your writing, not only the quality of your prose -- though that is certainly important -- but the effort you make to improve your writing style, and find your voice, over the course of the semester. Revision is perhaps the most critical (and for many students, most challenging) part of this process; if you get stuck, come talk to me! I am available for conferences during office hours and at other scheduled times.

On writing topics: Choose topics about which you are not only enthusiastic, but also expert. If possible, practice writing on the same issue using different forms and styles. You're encouraged to write the op-ed and the 1800-word article on the same subject.

Readings will either be posted on Blackboard, or found in *The Princeton Anthology of Writing*, edited by John McPhee and Carol Rigolot.

Professor Bio

Liza Featherstone is a contributing writer to *The Nation* magazine. A free-lance journalist and essayist, she has also written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsday*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Salon*, *Slate* and many other publications. Featherstone is the author of *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers' Rights at Wal-Mart* (Basic Books, 2004). Last year, she was a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in Business and Economics Journalism at Columbia University.

Week 1

Reading: Excerpt from "The Common Reader," Virginia Woolf.
Welcome to the "Writing Politics" class. Introductions.
Discuss the Letter to the Editor assignment.

Week 2

Reading: GEORGE ORWELL, "Politics and the English Language" (*Princeton Anthology*)
Writing assignment: Letter to the Editor due
Workshop: Letter to the Editor
Guest speaker: Lawrence Levi, former editor at the *New York Times* letters page
In addition to his brief general remarks, Levi will stay for the workshop, providing feedback on your letters.
Discussion of the Op-ed Assignment (700-800 words)

Week 3

Reading: "How to be a Foreign Correspondent," Alexander Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire*.
Writing assignment due: Op-Ed.
Workshop: Op-Eds
Discussion of Revision Assignment

Week 4

Reading: George Orwell, "Why I Write" (*Princeton Anthology*)
Writing Assignment due: Op-Ed revision.
Workshop: Revised Op-Eds.
Discussion of Query letter and 1800-word article Assignments.

Week 5

Reading: JOAN DIDION, Selections from "We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live" (*Princeton Anthology*)
Writing assignment due: Query letter
Guest Speaker: Betsy Reed, *Nation* magazine editor
Workshop: Query letter

Week 6

Reading: Lewis Thomas, Selections from "Lives of the Cell"
Writing assignment due: Revised query letter.
Workshop: Revised query letters.

Week 7

Reading: John Berger, Selections from "About Looking"

Assignments due: After making further revisions, submit your query letter to a real publication. Write an outline for your 1800-word article.

Workshop: Outlines. Discussion of structure.

Week 8

Reading: "The Devil's Accountant," Larissa MacFarquhar, *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2003

"Enjoy Your Zizek!" Robert S. Boynton, *Lingua Franca*, October 1998

No Writing Assignment due: You are working on your 1800-word article.

Week 9

No Reading due.

Writing Assignment due: First draft of 1800-word article.

Workshop: First drafts

Week 10

Reading: title essay, Irving Yalom, *Love's Executioner*

Writing assignment: Revise 1800-word article.

Workshop: Revised articles

Week 11

Reading: John Allen Paulos, Selections from "A Mathematician Reads the Newspaper"

No writing due: You are working on next week's assignment.

Workshop: Revised articles

Week 12

Reading: Leonard Bernstein, "The Joy of Music" (McPhee)

Writing assignment due: Choosing either your 1800-word article -- or, if it can still be considered timely, your op-ed, revise again -- this time with the goal of submitting it for publication.

Workshop: Revised work

Week 13

Readings TBA

Guest panel of writers whose work reflects this "translation." This panel will likely include Clive Thompson, science writer for *New York Times* and *New York* magazines; historian Kim Phillips-Fein, author of the forthcoming *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement From the New Deal to Reagan*; cultural studies scholar Andrew Ross, author of *Fast Boat to China* and *The Celebration Chronicles*; and David Leonhardt, "Economic Scene" columnist for the *New York Times*.

Week 14

LAST DAY OF CLASS

Reading due: E. B. White, Selections from "Essays from E.B. White" (*Princeton Anthology*)

Assignment due: After revising again, submit your finished work (again, either the Op ed or the longer article) for publication. Turn in this last revision as your final paper for the class.