

SEMINAR IN COMPOSITION



EngCmp 200, Summer 2016
University of Pittsburgh
Prof. Annette Vee

Meeting time: MW 9:00am–12:15pm
Meeting place: 2318 Cathedral of Learning
Term: June 27–August 3

Prof. Vee's contact information:
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Office Hours: MW 12:15–1:15pm and by appointment

Course Description

PERSONAL/HISTORY

For most of you, this class is a threshold: a passing from home to school (which may be 5 or 5000 miles away), from high school to college, into adulthood, and into a time where you will make important choices that shape your future. But we are always at thresholds: from yesterday to today, from history to present and from present to future. How you enter and move from one side of the threshold to the other is shaped by where you came from, where you want to go, and what resources you have to get there.

This class will give you an opportunity to reflect on where you came from and how you and others shape and have been shaped by histories big and small. It will also give you resources to get to where you want to go, specifically: more time and methods for thinking, reading, and writing.

Our readings will be focused on the connection between our selves and our histories. You will examine your own educational experiences and history, and read others who have looked carefully at how intersections of class, race, gender, religion and mindset shape the ways our personal histories are experienced. You will have a chance to research your own family or personal background and its connection to a history of your choosing. In this class, you will, hopefully, learn more about yourself: your choices, your background, your family, and your writing.

Assignments

Readings

Paolo Friere, "The 'Banking' Concept of Education," from *Ways of Reading 9th Ed.*, Eds. Bartholomae and Petrosky.

David Foster Wallace, “This is Water”, 2005 Kenyon College Commencement speech:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYGaXzJGVAQ>

Jonathan Safran Foer, “The Very Rigid Search” (from *Everything is Illuminated*), *The New Yorker*, June 18, 2001: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/06/18/the-very-rigid-search>

Jill Lepore, “The Prodigal Daughter,” *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2013:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/08/the-prodigal-daughter>

Ta-Nahisi Coates, “Letter to My Son,” *The Atlantic*, July 2015:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

Erin Anderson, “What Hadn’t Happened,” *The Atavist*, March 28, 2013:

<https://digitalstorymakers.atavist.com/story/4057#/>

Rebecca Skloot, “All That’s My Mother,” Chapter 32 from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010.

Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” from *Ways of Reading 9th Ed.*, Eds. Bartholomae and Petrosky.

Exercises

You will generally have a writing exercise or reading response due every day that we meet in class. I will give you these smaller, ungraded assignments in class.

Writing

You will write four major papers for this class, taking each of them through multiple drafts. Drafts will be assessed simply as done or not-done. Only the final versions, once you’ve had a chance to get feedback from your peers and me as your professor, will be graded. I will assign grades to drafts that are only temporary: “here’s what I would give you if you turned this in for your portfolio.” You can ask me at any point during the semester for feedback on your writing and your grade.

Paper 1: The ‘banking’ model in your own education

1000 words

Surely all of us, anyone who has made it through twelve years of formal education, can think of a class, or an occasion outside of class, to serve as a quick example of what Friere calls the “banking concept” of education, where students are turned into “containers” to be filled by their teachers. If Friere is to be useful to you, however, he must do more than enable you to call us quick examples. He should allow you to say more than that a teacher one treated you like a container or that a teacher once gave you your freedom.

Write an essay that focuses on a rich and illustrative incident from your own educational experience and read it (that is, interpret it) as Friere would. You will need to provide careful detail: things that were said and done, perhaps the exact wording of an assignment, a textbook, or a teacher’s comments. And you will need to turn to the language of Friere’s argument, to take key phrases and passages and see how they might be used to investigate your case.

To do this, you will need to read your account as not simply the story of you and your teacher, since Friere is writing not about individual personalities (an innocent student and a mean teacher, a rude teacher, a thoughtless teacher) but about the roles we are cast in, whether we choose to be or not, by our culture and its institutions. The key question, then is not who you were or who your teacher was but what roles you played and how these roles can lead you to better understand the larger narrative or drama of Education (an organized attempt to “regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ the students”).

Friere would not want you to work passively or mechanically, however, as though you were following orders. He would want you to make your own mark on the work he has begun. Use your example, in other words, as a way of testing and examining what Friere says, *particularly those passages that you find difficult or obscure*.

(taken from *Ways of Reading*, Eds. Bartholomae and Petrosky, 9th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011: 329-330.)

Paper 2: Personal/Style

1000 words

Jill Lepore and Ta-Nahisi Coates both tell personal stories in their essays “Letter to my Son” and “The Prodigal Daughter.” But these stories are embedded in longer histories of American race and gender relations, education, and opportunity, the fierce love and loyalty among families. Focusing on either Lepore or Coates, look closely at how they manage to weave together their personal stories and histories with the stories of others, and as a result, say something profound about American history more generally. What stylistic techniques do they use? How do they begin, and how do they conclude? Which groups of people are implicated in their histories? How do they describe their own identities and allegiances? What other texts are they in contact with? What kind of work do they leave for the reader? How does this personal style contribute to the complexity of their subject? And finally, what is the profound thing they’re able to say with these techniques? Here you can use your own personal reading process to help you describe the way they lay out their story. Avoid generalizing about “the reader” and focus on your own experience of the text, as an individual. Notice that’s what they both do as they encounter capital-H “History.”

Paper 3: Personal/History

1500 words

Begin with an artifact associated with your family, or with your own personal history—a letter, a photograph, a child’s toy, a rumored event, a piece of furniture or jewelry. This may be an object or event that you’ve known about for years but never quite understood (like Erin Anderson’s story). Or it may be something you learn about by talking to your family for this assignment. Then follow that object or story: where did it come from, and what does it mean? Talk to people in your family, research its material or historical context. (Use our library resources to help you!) Write a personal essay that describes the artifact or event’s historical significance to your family, and to a larger historical moment or context. Your process of learning about the event and object will necessarily be part of this essay, so keep track of how you learn about it.

Paper 4: On Curiosity

750 words

What is something you’ve always been curious about, but never had the time to follow up on? Or something you always assumed, but never examined? A particular Civil War battle, why the Towers dorms are constructed the way they are, the history of an idiom you use all the time. Take three hours to follow up on this curiosity or to examine it. If you’re doing the assignment correctly, three hours will be a cut off, not a stretch. Write a personal essay where you describe your process of following this thread of curiosity. You should introduce the something at the center of your search and what you learned about it, but the point here is your process, and your reflection on that process. Where did you begin, and where did you finish—or are you finished? What lingering questions do you have about this something, or about your process? What do you know now about linguistics or architecture or bookmaking that you didn’t know before, and where do you plan to go with that curiosity now?

Final portfolio

Revise all of your papers. Write a substantive, 300 word cover letter addressing the work you’ve done in both writing and reading in the class, and what work you have left to do.

Course Goals

Seminar in Composition is the course that most undergraduates take to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive requirements in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. While the readings and assignments in different sections of the course may vary, this section, like all the others, consists of a sequence of assignments that will require you to:

1. Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry.

In this course, you'll be asked to use writing to generate ideas as well as explain them. You'll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts, and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you'll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

2. Compose thoughtfully crafted essays that position your ideas among other views.

In response to reading and discussing challenging texts, you'll write essays in which you develop informed positions that engage with the positions of others. You'll analyze as well as summarize the texts you read, and you'll compose essays that pay close attention both to the ideas voiced by other writers and to specific choices they make with language and form.

3. Write with precision, nuance, and awareness of textual conventions.

You'll work on crafting clear, precise prose that uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. You'll be required to learn the conventions for quoting and paraphrasing responsibly and adeptly, and you'll be assisted with editing and proofreading strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning. You'll also have opportunities to consider when and how to challenge conventions as well as follow them.

4. Revise your writing by rethinking the assumptions, aims, and effects of prior drafts.

This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts—not as a thesis-driven argument that adheres to a rigid structure. Much class time will be devoted to considering the purpose, logic, and design of your own writing, and you'll be given opportunities to revise your work in light of comments and class discussion, with the aim of making more attentive decisions as you write.

You must earn a “C-minus” in order to pass *Seminar in Composition*.

Course Requirements

The focus of this class is on writing, so we'll be doing a lot of it in a short time: 2-5 pages of writing each week. To succeed in this course, you will need to stay on top of assignments, participate actively in class discussions, and respect your peers in conversation and reviews of their work. Specifically, you will need to:

- complete all course readings;
- arrive on time and prepared for class meetings and conferences;
- participate in class discussions;
- do reading prep assignments and exercises for class;
- draft, revise and submit all course projects;
- review your peers' work regularly and have your own work reviewed;
- submit a Final Portfolio including the work you've done for the class;

If, at any time, you have questions or concerns about your ability to fulfill the expectations for this course, please contact me. I aim to help you succeed in the course, and together we can resolve any issue that may come up.

Course Readings

Readings for each week are listed on the course calendar (see below) by the day they are due to be read. You are not required to purchase texts for this course; all readings will be available online through CourseWeb unless otherwise noted. Throughout the semester, you will also be reading your peers' work and your own. You should be interacting with all of these texts as you read them, so you may print them out to highlight and annotate them, take notes in a digital or physical notebook, or digitally annotate the texts using a program like Adobe Acrobat. We will regularly discuss your reading and writing strategies in class and in one-on-one conferences.

Grading

Your grade will be based primarily on your portfolio of work for the class (reviewed by your peers and me before I grade it). Your participation in the class, turning in drafts on time, and your preparation for class all count, too.

I will offer my thoughts on your work in the class any time you ask or anytime you drop by my office hours. Please keep in touch.

Four essay drafts on time (5% each):	20%
Final portfolio:	60%
Exercises and reading prep assignments:	10%
Participation (in-class):	10%

Late work: I offer extensions only in extreme circumstances. Please contact me if your work may be late.

Participation

Participation in the class consists of short writings in class, peer review, discussion, and your general contribution to the work we do together. Participation grades are by their nature subjective, which does not mean they are arbitrary.

Someone with an excellent participation grade:

- will have attended class and appeared engaged without fail;
- will have offered timely, insightful comments to his peers;
- will have always brought her readings or other materials to class;
- will have contributed regularly and thoughtfully to class discussions.

Some people are more likely to speak up than others and some are more comfortable sharing ideas after they have had more time to process them. If speaking up in class is a challenge for you, please talk to me about ways to support your participation in our class discussions. Small group discussions and peer reviews are also important to the class and count for class participation. Please see me if you have questions about how to participate more actively in any area of the class.

Policies and Procedures

Attendance

Regular attendance in this course is required. Because this is a low enrollment course, your presence and contributions affect everyone. Regular attendance also means that you are writing and responding to writing regularly, and it means that your peers and I can give your writing the attention it deserves. For these reasons, you need to be in class, on time, prepared, every meeting. Because each class meeting counts for more than a week of a regular term class, attendance at every class is required. Absences are allowed only in extreme circumstances (summer vacation is not an extreme circumstance). **If you have to miss class, please notify me as soon as possible, turn in the work due for that day,** and I will give you a way to make up the work you

missed. It is your responsibility to get the assignments, class notes, and course changes from a classmate or come to my office hours if you do miss a class. In-class work such as peer review cannot be made up.

Guidelines for Written Work

I specify word limits for assignments rather than page limits so that you do not need to use wide margins or tiny, strange fonts to display your work. Please use reader-friendly fonts such as Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri, Garamond, or Helvetica and sizes that are humane for your readers (10-12 point). Please use 1.5 to 2 line spacing. All peer review drafts should be printed out at the beginning of class the day they are due, one copy for each group member. All drafts to Prof. Vee should be turned in via CourseWeb for me to comment on electronically.

Academic Integrity

The University asks us to include in our course descriptions this quotation from Pitt's Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom (February 1974):

The integrity of the academic process requires fair and impartial evaluation on the part of faculty and honest academic conduct on the part of students. To this end, students are expected to conduct themselves at a high level of responsibility in the fulfillment of the course of their study. It is the corresponding responsibility of faculty to make clear to students those standards by which students will be evaluated, and the resources permissible for use by students during the course of their study and evaluation. The educational process is perceived as a joint faculty-student enterprise which will perforce involve professional judgment by faculty and may involve—without penalty—reasoned exception by students to the data or views offered by faculty.

Plagiarism hurts the relationships and scholarship we construct during this class. Assignments for this course are designed to be relevant to your specific contexts—your personal literacy narrative, your future work as a teacher or learner, etc.—and are therefore rarely plagiarized in full. More commonly, students plagiarize by improperly quoting and documenting their sources. We will review how to properly document sources in class and I am happy to answer questions about how you can ensure that work you do for the class is your own. Additionally, please visit the English Department's site defining plagiarism and explaining how to properly document sources: <http://www.english.pitt.edu/undergraduate/understand-and-avoid-plagiarism> .

Should you plagiarize, consequences are severe: students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted above, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process that I initiate. A minimum sanction of a failing grade for the paper or project will be imposed.

Disability Resources

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services as early as possible in the term. You can reach DRS at (412) 648-7890 or (412) 383-7355 (TTY) and you can visit their office at 216 William Pitt Union. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center is a free tutorial service for Pitt students. Writing Center consultants can help you learn how to generate ideas, organize your writing, and understand assignments. They can help you understand and deal with any sentence-level problems that you have, too. It's a great place to go in order to have a reader respond to your work so that you can do some intensive work on your writing. You can call for an appointment at (412) 624-6556 or make an appointment online: <https://pitt.mywconline.com/>

The writing center is located in 317B of O'Hara Student Center, at 4024 O'Hara St. Visit the Writing Center website at <http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/> for more information.

Technology etiquette

Please turn off or silence your cell phone **before** class begins and keep it inside your book bag, purse, etc—do *not* keep it on your desk or lap during class. I allow and encourage the use of computers, netbooks, tablets, etc. in class for those who want to take notes digitally during class. These devices are *not* for socializing during class, however—during class you must log out of Facebook, Twitter, IM, message boards you follow, and any other site or service that will distract you from class. Studies show that these activities impede our ability to learn and participate. You may visit our blog, Wikipedia or dictionary sites, etc. to help you understand a concept we’re discussing in class, but be prepared to explain any of your in-class Internet use to the entire class. If you are socializing online or on your phone (including texting) during class, then I will warn you only once during the term. After that, you will be considered absent for that class period. Please contact me if you have specific questions about this policy.

Course Schedule

Life is complicated; consequently, this schedule is subject to change.

Week 1 (Jun 27 & 29)

Mon, Jun 27: Intro to Course, watch David Foster Wallace “This is Water,” in-class writing, begin reading Friere in class.

Wed, Jun 29: Friere, “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education” and reading prep due; discuss Friere, Wallace, and the aims of your education; in class small discussions about writing, compare old and new “rules” for writing. Discuss assignment for Paper #1.

Week 2 (Jul 4 & 6)

Mon, Jul 4: University holiday; class canceled

Wed, Jul 6: Paper #1 (on education) draft 1 due, in-class peer review: model full class review then individual. Writing exercises, open time for writing/feedback. Begin reading Coates. Discuss assignment for Paper #2.

Friday, Jul 8, 11:59pm: Paper #1 draft 2 due to Prof. Vee on CourseWeb

Week 3 (Jul 11 & 13)

Mon, Jul 11: Coates’ “Letter to My Son” and Lepore, “A Prodigal Daughter” plus reading prep due. Discuss Coates and Lepore. 11am: go to Hillman Library for orientation to library services; meet in Digital Scholarship Services on the ground floor.

Wed, Jul 13: Paper #2 (on Coates’s or Lepore’s personal style) draft 1 due; peer review. In-class reading of Anderson. Discuss Lepore, Coates, Anderson and personal approaches to history.

Friday, Jul 15, 11:59pm: Paper #2, draft 2 due to Prof. Vee on CourseWeb

Week 4 (Jul 18 & 20)

Mon, Jul 18: Foer, “The Very Rigid Search” and reading prep due. Discuss personal approaches to history. Intro to Pratt. Workshop/reading time in class. Discuss assignment for Paper #3.

Wed, Jul 20: Mary Louise Pratt, “The Arts of the Contact Zone” and reading prep due. Discuss Pratt. Prep for Paper #3 (on personal/history) due: bring in an artifact and a connection to history.

Week 5 (Jul 25 & 27)

Mon, Jul 25: Paper 3 (on personal/history), draft #1 due. Peer review in class. Discuss Pratt. Class time for writing or exercises. Intro to Skloot in class. Discuss assignment for Paper #4.

Wed, Jul 27: Read Skloot, do reading prep. Discuss curiosity and the aims of education. Class time for writing or exercises.

Weds, Jul 27, 11:59pm: Paper #3, draft 2 due to Prof. Vee on CourseWeb.

Week 6 (Aug 1 & 3)

Mon, Aug 1: Paper #4 (on your curiosity) due in class. Peer review of all essays in prep for the Portfolio, and in-class writing time.

Wed, Aug 3: Turn in Final Portfolio, review of what we learned, final celebration