TUNI 110: Honors Seminar in Writing and Critical Inquiry

Spring 2017 Course Information

Instructor: Dr. Aery Clerico  
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Sections: 12:35-1:30 in BB B005

Course Description

University at Albany’s Overview of the Writing and Critical Seminar:

“The Writing and Critical Inquiry seminar emphasizes intensive practice in academic writing as well as writing in other rhetorical contexts. Based on established principles of rhetorical theory, WCI engages students in sustained inquiry into the nature of written discourse and the practice of writing. In WCI, writing is both a subject of study and a vehicle for academic inquiry. Students engage in rigorous guided practice in various rhetorical tasks in order to deepen their understanding of writing and enhance their ability to negotiate varied writing tasks in different academic and non-academic contexts.”

Dr. Aery Clerico’s Description of her WCI Seminar:

My Writing and Critical Inquiry seminar prepares you, the first-year student, to meet the demanding academic standards for writing and thinking at the university level. WCI will teach you how to participate in this inquiry-driven environment, through intensive instruction about writing as a subject of study and as a practice. In order to begin our work together, it is important that you understand two points. First, attending a university is a singular experience; a university is very simply a place to think. Second, attending the WCI seminar is also a singular experience; WCI is very simply a place to develop a new relationship to writing. During your time in WCI, you will learn to use writing to think. Thus, the Writing and Critical Inquiry seminar is based on the principle that writing is a sophisticated process that enables you to become capable of higher-order thinking.

You may wonder what I mean when I say that writing has a relationship to thinking, or what that relationship is exactly, or why it matters. Writing is a vehicle that drives critical inquiry. Critical inquiry is a systematic process in which you (1) seek out problems and (2) pose questions. You will hear me talk about inquiry as a state of “not knowing.” As you learn about writing and writing practices, you will learn how to comfortable not knowing, even value it, because it is the way to discover ideas and improve your thinking.

Now, when it comes to writing, students enter WCI with a range of writing experiences, some good and some bad. Some of you have written a lot, some have not written much. Some may like writing while others may find it quite boring. Whether you come to WCI as an eager writer or a reluctant writer, all students have encountered some of these dilemmas:

- Do you find writing easier when you are interested in a topic and find writing harder when you’re not interested?
- Would you say that you are often writing to report back what the teacher says? For example, you may feel that once you figure out what the teacher wants you’ll be okay, in which case you may find yourself writing about the teacher’s ideas rather than your own.
• Have you felt that teachers have unclear or arbitrary ways of grading your essays?
• Do you think good writing is a matter of following the rules?
• Has your teacher ever told you to develop your ideas but you’ve already written all there is to say?
• Do you feel that you can’t ever write fast enough to get your thoughts into words on the page?
• Outside of school, do you wonder why you should write at all, since writing can be hard and/or boring?

It’s not surprising if you have encountered some of these dilemmas. Most people have. They are the result of common misconceptions about writing. So it’s not just you. Misconceptions lead to chronic problems such as writer’s block. The good news is that these problems can be mitigated if you study writing. For example, perhaps the most common misconception is that there is a step-by-step formula or clear rules to follow in order to write a good essay when in fact research shows that there isn’t one way to write well. In WCI, you will learn that you have lots of choices and strategies to help you be effective in any writing assignment. In other good news about writing, research shows us that students can use writing to become interested in a topic. You will learn how to become curious about your writing assignments.

These researchers, writing studies scholars, treat writing as dynamic subject of study. They all ask key questions, none of which has a simple answer: what is writing? how does writing work? why does writing matter? As you consider these questions in WCI, you’ll begin to replace your misconceptions with knowledge about writing’s complexity and usefulness. Writing is much more than a mechanical, rule-following task. This doesn’t mean that you won’t encounter difficult or tedious writing tasks in the future. WCI gives you tools and strategies so that you can make the writing more manageable and meaningful.

Finally, you may wonder how writing, especially academic writing, can be meaningful. Using writing to problem-Pose, rather than just report, allows you to become engaged in your course materials, to find something that matters to you. What is more important, however, is that writing is empowering: it allows you to better understand yourself. Paulo Freire, an educational theorist and writer, argues that in “problem-Posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but at as reality in process, in transformation.” We might apply Freire’s ideas to the WCI experience to say that the inquiry-based writing you undertake in WCI makes you a more mindful and evolved person. So, while it is important to master your course materials, Freire is arguing that in a problem-posing education, you gain a deeper understanding, a transformation even, of who you are and how you experience and impact the world around you.

On a more practical note, you should know that WCI is a small and interactive class. You will work one-on-one with me and you’ll work closely with your classmates. You will get regular feedback about your writing and opportunities to revise.

Also, the position of problem-posing or “not knowing” may sound abstract or vague. I will give you a more concrete way to think about what it means to “not know” in the form of ghost stories. In my own research, in addition to writing studies, I study ghost stories. I know that being haunted is a lot like being in a state of confusion. I’ll bring this into the classroom to help you find your own place of “not knowing,” a position from which you can then look for problems, oddities, and curiosities. We’ll think about actual ghosts and ghost stories, as well as the feeling of being haunted. Within this loose framework of literal and figurative hauntings, you’ll have a fair degree of autonomy to pursue lines of inquiry that are of interest to you.
Course Objectives

All WCI students will

- learn to approach writing as an individual process of textual production, a form of inquiry, and a social practice;
- practice applying rhetorical principles to assess various rhetorical situations and complete varied discipline-based writing tasks;
- gain experience and develop competence in writing effectively for a variety of purposes, to different audiences, and in different media (including traditional, digital, and multi-media formats); and
- learn appropriate concepts and develop a lexicon for discussing and analyzing writing and writing situations.

WCI is based in the following principles about writing and thinking:

- **Writing** is a mode of thinking, a means to generate ideas, a subject of study, and a practice. It is also an experience, a way of being in the world, a form of communication, and a variety of physical activities.
- **Inquiry** is a process of exploration, analysis, and discovery of subject matter and of ourselves that we do in academia. It is characterized by curiosity and open-mindedness and it is driven by your ability to see problems and ask questions. To engage in intensive inquiry as we do in WCI, you need to motivated to discover new ideas and to understand subjects in more complexity.
- **If we pair the two—Writing and Critical Inquiry—we get the WCI philosophy.** We don’t simply write when you have an idea. We write in order to get ideas. I will give you strategies and practice and knowledge to help you see the relationship between the two and experience the changes to yourself that result from using writing to inquire.
- **Writing is learned over time.** Writing well is not a talent that some possess and others do not; rather, writing well is something that you learn over time. In order to understand writing, we’ll consider how your past writing experiences have influenced who you are now as a writer.
- **Good writing is a process.** Writing as process means that creating texts is multi-stage experience, not a task completed in a stroke of inspiration or an assignment that you write once and turn in to your teacher. You’ll learn about pre-writing, drafting, review, revising, reading, and editing. Process-based writing is key to being a critical thinker: it’s through sustained writing and many different forms of writing that you thinking can evolve beyond your initial ideas into a deeper inquiry.
- **Good writing results from an everyday practice.** “Good” writers write often (usually daily) and they write in shorter segments than you might think. A helpful rule of thumb: commit to sit down and write for 25 minutes a day. That’s all. Also, another tip: most writers can sustain the focused concentration needed to compose for no more than three hours a day.
- **Writing is a subject of study.** Scholars, students, and teachers benefit from thinking about what writing is, not just how to write. We will ask questions about the nature of writing and how it works. As you begin to understand writing as a complex subject, you will also come to know yourself as a writer and how to use writing mindfully and purposefully in your life.
• Writing is situational. There isn’t a set of universal rules as to what makes writing good. Writing is “good” to the extent that it meets the needs a writing situation. For example, the writing that makes an effective biology report isn’t the same type of writing that makes a text message effective. To write well, you’ll learn to make rhetorical choices: to consider aspects such as audience, purpose, exigence, context, convention, and constraint. Paying attention to writing situation and rhetorical choices will make you a flexible, and thus more effective, writer: you can adjust your writing to suit the variety of writing tasks that come with each new college class.

• Writing is Social. You may think of writing as a solitary activity, but professional writers rely on others as a key part of their process. Readers’ comments act as a fresh set of eyes, they give you new points of views to consider, and offer up fresh insights into what your writing is causing them to think about. All this helps the writer revise. WCI is based in peer-review: you share your writing and give each other supportive feedback to facilitate inquiry-based revision.

General Education Requirements

• WCI is a required course in the University’s General Education program that must be completed with a grade of C or better.

• WCI fulfills three General Education Requirements: Basic Communication, Information Literacy, and Oral Discourse.

Course Materials

These materials are required. You will also responsible for many other reading assignments posted to Blackboard. Prepare to spend money on printing costs: you will need to print multiple copies of your writing assignments.

  o Course Readers. In Rapid Copy Center. Business Administration B26A. To be purchased throughout the semester. Dates TBA.
  o Sturdy Two-Pocket Folder
  o Stapler

Assignments

Attendance and Participation (10% of final grade): Attendance is mandatory. In WCI, you are part of an interactive learning community. If you are not present to contribute meaningfully to the community, you will not be able to complete the course. Students with poor attendance are not likely to succeed in WCI. Meaningful participation in discussion, workshop, and group work is also mandatory. You will not receive high marks if you are silent during discussion, inattentive in classroom activities, or detached from your group work.

Homework Preparation (10% of final grade): You have three forms of homework. First, I give quizzes and short writing tasks based on reading assignments. These are graded pass/fail. You cannot make them up. Second, you will have to complete many short writing tasks that are not formal drafts but are critical to creating the drafts. Third, you must prepare drafts of your writing projects for workshop and review as specified by the assignment. You will receive a poor grade if you: consistently miss drafts, have chronic
printing/submitting issues, or fail to prepare drafts as instructed. Late, missed, or poorly assembled assignments cannot be made up and you will receive a zero for that assignment.

**Major Writing Assignments:** You have three major writing assignments. Each is written in stages and will require multiple drafts. You will revise at least once based on your evolving understanding of the course material and your own inquiry, feedback from peer-workshops, and comments from the instructor. Grades will be determined based on your commitment to the revision process, in which you demonstrate that you are making progress with each new draft. The three assignments are:

**Inquiry 1: Self (20% of final grade):** *Writing to explore or inquire into one’s experience of a problem, idea, concept, question, phenomenon, or issue.* For this assignment, you will use writing to inquire into your own experiences.

**Inquiry 2: Text (20% of final grade):** *Writing to analyze a text, idea, experience, event, or phenomenon for an academic audience in a conventional academic essay genre.* For this assignment, you will use writing to inquire into a text and its contexts. You will use analytical methods to write a formal analysis essay.

**Inquiry 3: Conversation (20% of final grade):** *Writing to participate in a conversation about a relevant question or problem.* You will extend your inquiries into self and text to complete your last assignment in which you use writing to inquire into and join an academic conversation.

**Collaborative Project (10% of final project):** Groups compose a project of their own design with digital content. Groups reflect on ideas that have emerged throughout the semester with the goal of making a final contribution to our knowledge about writing. In Honors College WCI Seminars, all students present their findings at the WCI Honors Symposium, which is held the end of the semester.

**Final Portfolio (10% of final grade):** You will submit a portfolio in which you demonstrate your learning, present your most effective writing, and reflect on your semester-long inquiry.

**Grading**

I evaluate your understanding of course concepts through the creation of original works. You will be judged on your progress: your writing needs to become most effective for the situation and your thinking must evolve in complexity.

**A:** reserved for excellent work. You exceeded the general requirements of the course and demonstrated an exceptional commitment to the writing process. You are an outstanding, thoughtful participant in class.

**B:** reserved for good work. You did well at meeting all course requirements and you demonstrated a solid commitment to the writing process. You participated regularly in discussion and workshops.

**C:** reserved for average work. You met the basic course requirements. You moved through the writing process but with minimal revision work. You participated but not regularly.

**D:** reserved for below average work. You did not meet the course requirements. Work does not demonstrate commitment to the writing process. You did not participate.

**F:** reserved for failing work. You have not completed assignments. Work fails to demonstrate an understanding of material. You were not present and/or did not participate in the classroom.
Policies

Classroom Community and Civil Discourse: The WCI classroom is a collaborative community. Civil discourse means that we communicate in a manner that supports the collective good. If you follow the principles of civil discourse, then you make sure that the WCI classroom is a safe place for you and your classmates to express your ideas and share your writing.

First: Sharing writing, particularly writing about personal experience or that tests new ideas, can make us feel quite vulnerable. It’s important that we provide constructive comments and supportive feedback.

Second: In WCI, we have conversations about ideas: our individual ideas, our collective ideas as a class, and the ideas in our course readings. Listen with an open mind. You must seek to understand and respect one another, even if ideas differ from your own.

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed two absences without penalty. For each unexcused absence beyond those two, I will lower your final grade by half a letter. If you miss more than six classes, you will be in danger of failing the course.

If you missed a class: To find out what you missed, do not email me. Rather, check the syllabus, Blackboard, or a classmate. You can visit office hours if you need further assistance.

Tardiness: Punctuality is required. You will be allowed two late arrivals to class. For each late arrival after that, I will lower your final grade by half a letter.

Course Communication: I communicate with the class through Blackboard. If I need to reach out to you individually, I will do so through your albany.edu email account. You must check Blackboard and UAlbany mail daily. You will be held responsible for that information.

Plagiarism: All University policies are in effect. Be aware that both intentional and unintentional plagiarism bring severe penalties including, but not limited to, failure of the assignment, failure of the class, and expulsion from the University. Refer to the University website for further information: http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html#integrity.

Reasonable Accommodations: Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with documented physical, sensory, systemic, cognitive, learning, and psychiatric disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring accommodation in this class, please notify the Director of the Disability Resource Center (Campus Center 137, 442-5490). That office will provide me with verification of your disability and will recommend appropriate accommodations.

Technology in the Classroom: Cell phone use is prohibited. If you use your phone, I will ask you to leave class and I will mark you as absent. Laptops are permitted for taking notes. If you use your laptops for non-classroom related purposes, you will be marked absent.
Semester Schedule. Subject to Change:

Inquiry 1: Inquire into Self

*Being Haunted*

**Week One:** Learn about Writing and Inquiry. Introduction to Haunting and Writing.

**Week Two:** Study How Others Inquire into Self. Begin Workshops.

**Week Three:** Learn about Revision and Begin the WCI Writing Contest.

Inquiry 2: Inquire into Text

*Reading Ghost Stories*

**Week Four:** Complete Inquiry 1 and Read Ghost Stories.

**Week Five:** Analytical Methods and Moves

**Week Six:** Revision and the Writing Contest

**Week Seven:** Conference Week

**Week Eight:** Complete Inquiry 2. Begin Inquiry 3.

Inquiry 3: Inquire into Conversation

*Conversations to Address Hauntings*

**Week Nine:** Introduction to Conversation and Argument

**Week Ten:** Research Methods

**Week Eleven:** Working with Sources

**Week Twelve:** Writing Contest

**Week Thirteen:** Complete Inquiry 3 and Begin Collaborative Project.

Collaborative Inquiry
Week Fourteen: Field Research

Week Fifteen: Collaborative Projects

Week Sixteen: Last Day of Class and the Final Portfolio