

Core UA 400-040 Spring 2015

Texts and Ideas: Objectivity

Professor [Lisa Gitelman](#)

Lectures Mondays and Wednesdays 9:30-10:45
19 University Place room 102

Recitations (Sections 41-46) on Thursdays according to registration
Recitation Leaders: [Rodrigo Ferreira](#), [MC Hyland](#), [Cameron Williams](#)

Course Description

Bias. Spin. Propaganda. Hype. These pejoratives are familiar to citizens of the twenty-first century, and by implication they privilege the same alternative: objectivity. Objectivity is a concept—or an ideal—that frames our understanding of pursuits as diverse as politics, journalism, and science, realms in which we hope to be able to discern the right, the true, and the real. But what is objectivity? Whose discernment counts as objective? How can we tell? Questions like these ask us to consider not only *what* we know but also *how* we know it.

The conditions of producing, possessing, and assessing knowledge turn out to be remarkably available to cultural change. In other words, objectivity has a history. This course considers objectivity within and against the Western intellectual tradition. By considering selected episodes in its emergence, both ancient and modern, we will ask how thinkers have thought about knowing: What routes have been available to the pursuit of certainty? What standards exist or have existed for knowledge about the past, about the self or about others, and about the world around us? Is it possible that the twenty-first century will involve new forms of objectivity? We will explore these questions by drawing on works of philosophy, history, criticism and the arts.

Like other Texts and Ideas courses, this one is conceived as a class in intellectual history or the history of ideas. Its foundational role in the curriculum mandates detailed attention in lecture and recitation to the written expression of ideas. It has a more sophisticated intellectual purpose than the chronological Great Books surveys to which it invites comparison. One way to think about Texts and Ideas courses like this one is as an opportunity to read important books, as young people in the company of others and with the support that the college classroom provides. The course is therefore defined by its objects of study—assigned readings in common—and its concern is to hone your skills as a reader, thinker, and writer. Ultimately we seek to cultivate the habits of mind, those habits of critique, prudential judgment, and self-reflection that are particularly important for citizens of a rapidly changing and increasingly global world.

Lisa Gitelman, Professor of English and Chair of Media, Culture, and Communication

Office: 239 Greene St., 812

Office Hours: M 11:30-12:30 and always also by appointment (please email my assistant, [Annette Morales](#), to schedule an appointment)

Required Texts

Six books have been ordered for you at the university bookstore. All are also available through online booksellers should you wish, but please obtain the specified editions in hard copy (not Kindle). A small number of additional readings will be available via Classes. Most of the books should also be available

for consultation in Bobst Library's [Course Reserves](#) area, Lower Level 2. Please bring the assigned reading to class with you as indicated on the schedule below.

- Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. Adam Beresford (Penguin Classics)
- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Hammond (Oxford World Classics)
- Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Maclean (Oxford World Classics)
- Montaigne, *The Essays, A Selection*, trans. Screech (Penguin Classics)
- Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (NYRB)
- Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Mariner; Houghton Mifflin)

I have not ordered Genesis and the Gospel According to St. Matthew (for Week 4) because they are so readily available online and in print. Please obtain a copy of the King James or "Authorized" Version of the Christian Bible, originally published in 1611. You may read the required sections of this work online if you prefer. There is an edition that lets you compare modern spelling and 1611 spelling [here](#).

Expectations and Assessment

(1) Readings are to be completed before class. Lectures provide context for better understanding the texts. You will get a lot more out of the texts and the lectures if you do the reading beforehand. Weekly recitations are an opportunity to work through these texts and related key concepts as a community. The prerequisite for high-quality discussion is that everyone reads material ahead of time. Come to class prepared to engage. Remember, "skimming" is never enough.

(2) Engaged participation. We will be looking for knowledge-building contributions that show not only that you are trying to understand the readings but also that you can contribute to the intellectual life of the class. A pre-requisite for active and intelligent participation in discussions is prompt and regular attendance. Plan on attending every class meeting this semester.

As a matter of common courtesy, please refrain from walking in and out of the room while class is in session, and please silence your phones and put them away. Please don't be a distraction. Laptops must remain closed unless otherwise instructed for class activities.

(3) Essay Writing: You will be asked to craft three essays as part of this class (details to follow). These essays are opportunities to demonstrate close engagement with the texts and a synthetic understanding of their themes. This kind of analytical essay writing is a critical skill for thriving in college and beyond. This class represents an ideal practice environment for honing precisely this kind of expertise, and we'll discuss the assignments in detail. Please email an electronic copy of each essay to your recitation leader as instructed.

Any plagiarism *no matter how accidental* will result in failure for the course. Remember, it is plagiarism if you use someone else's ideas without attribution or someone else's words without quotation. The university's [Writing Center](#) is an invaluable resource should you wish to take advantage of it. You are entitled to one-on-one writing tutorials if you plan ahead and make appointments. The Writing Center does not provide a copyediting service.

(4) Resources: [Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities](#) If you are entitled to accommodations in light of a documented disability, please be in touch at the beginning of the semester.

(5) Grading policy: Grading will be done by the entire teaching staff working together, including and closely supervised by Professor Gitelman. Recitation leaders will assign participation grades themselves at the end of term. Repeated absences from recitation will have a depressing effect on your participation grade. Semester grades will be tabulated as follows:

- a. Participation (includes homework assignments, details to follow) **25%**
- b. Essays **50%**
 - Essay 1 10%
 - Essay 2 20%
 - Essay 3 20%
- c. Examinations **25 %**
 - i. Midterm 10 %
 - ii. Final 15 %

Course Schedule (Any necessary changes will be announced in class and/or via Classes.)

1. Required reading The Ancient World
Monday, January 26 Introductions
Wednesday, January 28 Lecture #1 Plato's *Meno* pp. 85-113
Thursday, January 29 Recitation I
2. Plato's *Meno* pp. 113-134
Monday, February 2 Lecture #2
Wednesday, February 4 Lecture #3 Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* pp. 3-73
Thursday, February 5 Recitation II
3. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* pp. 74-106
Monday, February 9 Lecture #4
Wednesday, February 11 Lecture #5 Genesis 1-36
Thursday, February 12 Recitation III
4. Essay #1 (details TBA) due via email by Tuesday at noon.
President's Day holiday
Wednesday, February 18 Lecture #6 Gospel According to St. Matthew
Thursday, February 19 Recitation IV
The Early Modern
5. Genesis and Gospel of Matthew (continued)
Monday, February 23 Lecture #7
Wednesday, February 25 Lecture #8 Alberti, *On Painting*
Thursday, February 26 Recitation V
6. Montaigne, "On Idleness," "That It is Madness," "On Cannibals"
Monday, March 2 Lecture #9
Wednesday, March 4 Lecture #10 Montaigne, "On Coaches" and [Phil. Trans. No. 1](#) (browse)
Thursday, March 5 Recitation VI
7. Monday, March 9 Review for the Midterm

Wednesday, March 11 In-class Midterm Exam
Thursday, March 12 Recitations Cancelled for today

Spring Break – Enjoy!

8.

Monday, March 23 Lecture #11
Wednesday, March 25 Lecture #12
Thursday, March 26 Recitation VII

Lecture cancelled. Use this day to read ahead.
Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method* pp. 1-63

9.

Monday, March 30 Lecture #13
Wednesday, April 1 Lecture #14
Thursday, April 2 Recitation VIII

The Modern World

Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books I-II
Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books V-VI

10.

Monday, April 6 Lecture #15
Wednesday, April 8
Thursday, April 9 Recitation IX

Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books VII-VIII
Open mike (details TBA) and screening Bill Morrison's *The Mesmerist* (15:48), a required film
Essay #2 (details TBA) due via email

11.

Monday, April 13 Lecture #16
Wednesday, April 15 Lecture #17
Thursday, April 16 Recitation X

Freud, "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad"; Borges, "Funes Memorioso"; rescreening Morrison's *The Mesmerist*
Loos, "Ornament and Crime"

12.

Monday, April 20 Lecture #18
Wednesday, April 22 Lecture #19
Thursday, April 23 Recitation XII

Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. i-106
Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. 319-416

13.

Monday, April 27 Lecture #20
Wednesday, April 29
Thursday, April 30 Recitation XIII

Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. 197-224
Slide show (details TBA)

14.

Monday, May 4 Lecture #21
Wednesday, May 6
Thursday, May 7 Recitation XIV

Bush, "[As We May Think](#)"
Conclusion: On the question, "Is Google Objective?"
Essay #3 (details TBA) due via email

15.

Monday, May 11 Review for Final

Final Exam (scheduled by the [Registrar](#)) Wednesday, May 13, 8:00 AM