

Writing assignments

This is a preliminary and generalized description of the required writing assignments for the course. Please attend class for more specific information and discussion of assignments.

I. Due Tuesday, September 19th (hard copy, in class): Literacy Autobiography

On no days of our childhood did we live so fully perhaps as those we thought we had left behind without living them, those that we spent with a favorite book.

--Marcel Proust, "On Reading" (1905)

Two major discoveries came out of [my interviews in the 1990s] (discoveries at least for me!). One was the curious contrast in the ways that most people cast their earliest memories of reading versus their earliest memories of writing, more readily associating reading with leisure, worship, pleasure, intimacy, and social approval and writing more readily with work, adult business, trouble, embarrassment, subterfuge, and trauma.

--Deborah Brandt, *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy* (2015)

Other writing assignments in this course will ask you to make arguments; this one asks for sustained reflection. Those essays will require you to mobilize evidence; this one asks you to tap your own experience. Write a personal essay that describes and reflects upon some element of or episode in your literacy autobiography. Try to discover and illuminate something about your own history as a reader. There is no wrong answer, and there's also no need to reveal your deepest secrets or to be too sentimental. We'll discuss your essays in class. I'll evaluate them based upon the clarity of your writing, the creativity of your response, and the effectiveness with which you develop and structure your ideas into a meaningful whole. Essays should be 3-5 double-spaced pages.

II. Due Saturday, October 14 (via email, before 8 PM): Mid-Semester Essay

We'll discuss this assignment in detail during class on October 10, and I'll introduce it to you in detail the week before that. This assignment asks you to write a persuasive essay. A successful persuasive essay makes an original argument (has a thesis) and mobilizes evidence in support of that thesis. The evidence you'll need in this case is specifically textual evidence; you'll be drawing on two or more of the texts we've discussed together in class. These essays will be evaluated based upon the clarity of your writing, the clarity and sophistication of your reasoning, and the effectiveness with which you develop and support your argument. Completed essays will receive written comments from one class member in addition to those they receive from me.

III. Due by class on October 24th (via email, Cc me): Peer comment

You will be assigned one mid-semester essay by another student in the class. Please make a constructive comment on that essay and share it with the author. Comments should be approximately 200-250 words. Think about describing what the essay accomplishes in your own terms (rather than just the terms used by the essay). Make any suggestions for improvement. What questions does the essay leave open? Your peer comment will be evaluated based on its discernment and the generosity of its attention (even if critical).

IV. Revised Essay (due in hard copy by November 28; hand in with the unrevised version)

Part of writing well is revising, so this assignment asks you to improve your mid-semester essay. Whether in light of comments you received or based upon additional thinking, make your essay more persuasive. You may: adjust your claims, reconsider your evidence, sharpen or restructure your argument, improve your writing stylistically, or make other revisions. Your revision will be evaluated based upon its improvement—as writing, as argument, as insight—over the earlier version.

V. Take-Home Final (due via email December 15, before 8 PM)

Because the persuasive essay is such an important genre to have at your disposal in college and beyond, this take-home final asks you to draft two more short persuasive essays based on readings in the course and with the goal of showing off what you've learned. One question will ask you to make an argument about the syllabus, as if to revise it for next year's seminar. The other question will ask you to make an argument about the digital materials we discussed during the last four weeks of class. Here you'll be under more time pressure, but you'll have greater freedom to shape your topic than in earlier assignments. We'll discuss this take-home extensively on the last day of class as a conclusion to the seminar.