

Core UA 400-080

Fall 2021

Texts and Ideas: Objectivity

Professor [Lisa Gitelman](#)

Recitation Leaders: [Ryan Healy](#), [Tim Pantoja](#), [Nicholas Silcox](#)

Lectures Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:30-10:45 Cantor 102

Recitations (Sections 81-87) on Thursdays or Fridays according to registration

Course Description

Bias. Spin. Propaganda. Hype. Fake news. 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, all realms in which we hope to be able to discern the right, the true, the safe, 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 this 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 ambition 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: I'm a professor in the departments of English and Media, Culture, and Communication. I use she/her pronouns and would prefer if you address me as either "Professor Gitelman" or "Lisa," whichever you are most comfortable with. My office is in 239 Greene St., room 720. Visit me during drop-in office hours Wednesdays 10:00-10:55 (no appointment necessary) or right after class. If those times don't work for you, I am always happy to make an appointment via email.

Required Texts

Four 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 eBook). Many additional readings will be available via NYU's Learning Management System (Brightspace) or via links on the syllabus below. Please report any dead links, and please try to bring the assigned reading to class with you as indicated on the schedule below. Hard copies strongly preferred (see laptop policy below).

- Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. Adam Beresford (Penguin Classics)
- Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Hammond (Oxford World Classics)
- Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (NYRB)
- Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Mariner; Houghton Mifflin)

Expectations and Assessment

(1) Readings are to be completed before class. Lectures provide context for better understanding the texts, and you will get a lot more out of both 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 in recitation is that everyone reads material ahead of time. Come to class prepared to engage. Remember, "skimming" is never enough. A few of our course readings are long. Not a few are difficult. Please plan ahead and budget your time.

(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. Don't be a distraction. Laptops must remain closed unless otherwise instructed for class activities. If you absolutely must use a laptop for note taking during lectures, then you must sit in the front row of the classroom.

(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 texts and a synthetic understanding of their themes. This kind of essay writing is a critical skill for thriving in college and beyond, and this class presents an ideal practice environment for honing precisely this kind of expertise. We will 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.

(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. If you are entitled to testing accommodations for the midterm and final exams, you *must* make arrangements with the Moses Center well in advance of the exams.

(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 during an interview with Professor Gitelman. Please note that repeated absences from recitation will have a depressing effect on your participation grade. Semester grades will be tabulated as follows:

a. Participation/Recitation (includes any homework assignments, details TBA) 20%

b. Essays 50%

 Essay 1 10%

 Essay 2 20%

 Essay 3 20%

c. Examinations 30 %

 Midterm 10 %

 Final (cumulative) 20 %

Schedule of classes and assignments.

Please be alert for any changes. Changes will be announced both in class and via Brightspace. In the unfortunate event that the course has to move to "remote" (Zoom) instruction, you can expect significant changes.

<u>Class session</u>	<u>Required reading</u>
Week 1	
Th Sept 2 Introductions	
No recitations this week; use the time to read	

Week 2

T Sept 7 Lecture #1 Plato's *Meno* pp. 85-113 The Ancient World
 Th Sept 9 Lecture #2 Plato's *Meno* pp. 113-134
 Recitation I

Week 3

T Sept 14 Lecture #3 Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* pp. 3-73
 Th Sept 16 Lecture #4 Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* pp. 74-107
 Recitation II

Week 4

T Sept 21 Lecture #5 Presentist interlude: Plato + Thucydides + Berkowitz's
 "[A Game Designer's Analysis of QAnon](#)" and
 Bridle's [Iraq War Wikipediography](#)
 Th Sept 23 Lecture #6 Alberti, *On Painting* The Early Modern
 Recitation III

Sunday, Sept 26 Essay #1 due by 5 PM.

Week 5

T Sept 28 Lecture #7 Montaigne, "On Idleness," "That It Is Madness," "On Cannibals"
 Th Sept 30 Lecture #8 Montaigne, "On Coaches"
 Recitation IV

Week 6

T Oct 5 Lecture #9 Bacon, "On Studies" (1625) and look at [Phil Trans Vol. 1, No. 1](#)
 Th Oct 7 In-class Review for Midterm
 Recitation V

Week 7

Th Oct 14 In-class midterm exam
 No recitations this week; use the time to read

Week 8

T Oct 19 Lecture #10 Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, Books I and II The Modern World
 Th Oct 21 Lecture #11 Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, Books V and VI
 Recitation VI

Week 9

T Oct 26 Lecture #12 Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, Books VII and VIII
 Th Oct 28 Lecture #13 Presentist interlude: Montaigne + Bird +
 Gevinston, [Who Would I be Without Instagram?](#)
 Recitation VII

Sunday, October 31, Essay #2 due by 5PM

Week 10

T Nov 2 Lecture #14 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (excerpt) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (excerpt)

Th Nov 4 Lecture #15 Hartman, "[The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance](#)"
Recitation VIII

Week 11

T Nov 9 Lecture #16 Freud, "Note," Borges, "Funes," and in-class screening of Bill Morrison's short film *The Mesmerist* (15:48)

Th Nov 11 Lecture #17 Loos, "Ornament and Crime"
Recitation IX

Week 12

T Nov 16 Reading day

Th Nov 18 Lecture #18 Agee & Evans, *LUNPFM* pp. i-106
Recitation X

Week 13

T Nov 23 Lecture #19 Agee & Evans, *LUNPFM* pp. 319-416

Week 14

T Nov 30 Lecture #20 Agee & Evans, *LUNPFM* pp. 197-224

Th Dec 2 Lecture #21 Nakazawa, *I Saw It*
Recitation XI

Week 15

T Dec 7 Lecture #22 Bush, "[As We May Think](#)"

Th Dec 9 Lecture Conclusion: Is Google objective?

No recitations this week: optional, student-led review sessions

Sunday, December 12, Essay #3 due by 5PM

Week 16

T Dec 14 Collaborative review for the final exam

Exam as scheduled by the Registrar. Please do not make travel plans until you know the date/time of the exam. No makeups will be offered.