OE010: Textual Analysis and Argumentation

Course Description

Textual Analysis and Argumentation is a two-semester seminar course in the analysis of diverse modes of writing in the first half of American history. The specific theme of the course, “The World in America, 1550-1850” focuses on the rich complexity of writing as it reflects the intense cross-cultural struggles and reinventions of the period.

Course materials are both literary and rhetorical, and include poetry, fiction, reportage, autobiography, and official documents. Students practice a range of approaches to these genres, and learn to formulate original, cohesive, invested, well-supported arguments about them in the form of short close reading exercises and more extensive critical essays. Topics in literary history covered in the course include: narrative effects of early colonial contact; Puritan colonial writing; captivity and slave narratives; the writing of the American Revolution; the rise of the public sphere; and written and visual representations of the American frontier. Analytical and compositional topics include: vocabulary and basic etymological analysis; strategic clausal and sentence construction; rhetorical tactics; the construction of authorial personas; approaches to close reading poetry and prose; and structures of argumentation.

Writing Assignments

Students compose pieces ranging from speculative, paragraph-length responses to complete, five-page critical arguments. Assignments comprise a sequence of increasingly complex challenges, each building on earlier skills and allowing students greater freedom to choose the texts and issues they will address.

In the first semester, students produce two major papers in addition to their shorter assignments: the first focuses on the close reading of small sections of colonial poetry, and the second on the rhetorical strategies employed in captivity narratives and abolitionist treatises. Two major essays in the second semester deal with the relationship between textual and painted depictions of the frontier, and with a close analysis of the poetry of Dickinson and Whitman.

Writing Workshops and Debates

Revision and peer response are important to the course, particularly in the first few months. For many small assignments and most major essays, students engage in peer critique during class writing workshops. These workshops help students to become good readers of others' work and to become more skilled at critiquing their own writing. The workshops give students a real audience—their peers—which helps them to move beyond simply writing for a teacher or for a grade. By sharing their work, students learn how an audience shapes their rhetorical strategies and choices.

One debate is held in the Fall semester, and one in the Spring: the first derives from a Susan Faludi article arguing for the ongoing importance of early captivity narratives in contemporary American responses to national tragedy; the second measures the year's State of the Union address and opposition response against the vision of government outlined in the The Federalist papers.
Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

• Critically read and discuss fiction and nonfiction texts, including poems, plays, essays, memoirs, letters, and speeches
• Develop close reading of formal elements into original theses
• Execute all steps of the writing process including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing for papers up to 5 pages long
• Write a critical essay with a compelling introduction, an original thesis, unified paragraphs, and a satisfying conclusion
• Cross-analyze textual and visual materials
• Approach in-class/timed writing exercises strategically
• Analyze literature for point of view, symbolism, plot, figurative language, allusion, and imagery
• Apply conventions of writing about literature in essays on authorial voice, character, structure, and theme
• Understand inference and deduction
• Recognize basic tools of literary theory
• Identify rhetorical structures and incorporate them into their own writing
• Understand the difference between a straight summary and a critical summary
• Write with an eye toward a specific audience
• Identify the rhetorical devices used in persuasive and argumentative writing
• Understand and rebut opposing arguments
• Locate secondary sources, evaluate evidence, and document sources according to MLA format

Sample Assignments

• Athenian Mercury exercise
  For this short exercise, you will compose a question that might be submitted to a present-day version of Dunton's Athenian Mercury project, answer it in Dunton's style, and briefly explain how the question and answer relate to the rise of a public sphere. Your answer and your explanation should be roughly a paragraph (3-5 sentences) each.

• Sample Essay
  Identify and analyze one strategy used by the writers we have read so far when they encounter the limits of their known world. You should use close readings as evidence: as much as possible, tie your main thesis to the details of form that you uncover in those close readings (in fact, it may be helpful to start with a close reading or two before you even decide on your thesis). Remember that the limits of what is known and familiar to a given writer will be often be reflected in the limits of the kind of writing they are doing, and in the limits of the authorial persona they are constructing. Your job is to show your reader some particular aspect of the author's struggle to deal, as a writer, with situations that challenge those limits.
Texts

Required textbooks:

Recommended textbooks:
- A Concise Guide to MLA Style and Documentation (2009)

Examples of texts assigned, in whole or in part, in the Norton Anthology or in electronic handouts:
- Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, La Relacion.
- Native American creation stories.
- Roger Williams, A Key into the Language of America.
- Mary Rowlandson, The Sovereignty and Goodness of God.
- Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book."
- Cotton Mather, Wonders of the Invisible World.
- Daniel Defoe, A General History of the Pyrates.
- Phyllis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America."
- Olaudah Equiano, Narrative of the Life.
- United States Declaration of Independence.
- J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer.
- Red Jacket, "Speech to the U.S. Senate."
- Phillip Freneau, "On Mr. Paine's Rights of Man"
- Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.
- Henry David Thoreau, Walden.
- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself."