

GEO 605
Writing Geography

Spring 2021

Wednesday, 2:10-5:00pm

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Office Hours: By appointment via Zoom

Introduction

We read and write articles, books, and dissertations. We hire, promote, and tenure people based on their writing. But for the most part we do not teach writing in graduate school. Students are expected to learn how to write by reading articles and books, hoping to master the craft of writing through osmosis. If students are lucky, their supervisors will show them how to write. Yet their professors might have trouble doing so since they learned how to write mostly through trial and error.

GEO 605 Writing Geography is designed to rectify this. This course introduces graduate students to the fundamentals of storytelling and tools of creative nonfiction for writing in geography and related disciplines. It is a techniques course like qualitative or quantitative methods but focused instead on the craft of writing. We will discuss weighty matters such as how to structure dissertations and write research grants. We will also address such seemingly mundane topics as punctuation, grammar, and the pros and cons of different citation styles. Your other courses may have touched on these matters, but we will explore them in more depth and likely from a different perspective.

Yet there are deeper justifications for this course beyond equipping you with tools to write clearer theses and articles. Except for a few notable exceptions—some of whom are faculty in this department—most academics write only for other academics. This has far less to do with the nature of our research or the topics we explore than the manner in which we present our work. We can find ways to alter this state of affairs even given the disciplinary norms we must follow and the realities of academic publishing.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this class, you should be able to

- Explain story structure and use this knowledge in course assignments.
- Identify common problems in academic writing and correct these shortcomings in your own writing.
- Demonstrate understanding of creative nonfiction techniques such as explanatory narrative, personal narratives, and scene and character description through course assignments.
- Identify how to situate your work in a body of scholarly literature and how to structure a grant proposal.

Grading and Assignments

25%	Class Attendance and Participation
25%	Short Assignments
15%	Oral Story
35%	Final Paper

Class Attendance and Participation

Students are expected to attend all classes, read course material carefully and critically, and participate in class discussion. During many classes, students will also read and comment on their fellow students' writing assignments.

Class participation is important in this course—probably more important than any other class you will take in graduate school. I expect you to complete the short assignments and comment on other students' work. If it becomes clear you are not reading course material carefully and critically and participating in class, it will affect your course grade. I will *definitely* lower your participation grade if you are not reading and commenting on your classmates' assignments.

Short Writing Assignments

This is a writing seminar. You will spend a considerable amount of time writing and discussing your classmates' writing. A couple days before each class, you will submit the required writing assignment on Blackboard. By noon the day before class, I will select three or four submissions for us to discuss and post them in a folder on Blackboard. Students are expected to read these carefully come to class prepared to discuss them. Questions to consider include How effective are these pieces? Are they clear? Evocative? Scholarly? Why or why not?

Oral Story

In the last class meeting, students will present an 8-10 minute story related to their research using the principles learned in the course.

Final Paper

In addition to class participation, this course includes weekly short writing assignments related to course topics. At the end of the course, students will produce a 15-20 page paper, possibly a major revision of a thesis chapter or essay from a previous course, employing the techniques we discussed in the class.

Texts

Dicks, Matthew. *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life through the Power of Storytelling*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2018.

Greene, Anne E. *Writing Science in Plain English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Hart, Jack. *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Olson, Randy. *Houston, We Have a Narrative: Why Science Needs Story*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Sword, Helen. *The Writer's Diet: A Guide to Fit Prose*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

** All of these books are available for purchase at the SU Bookstore. Of course, cheaper copies are probably available from Amazon and other online retailers.

Highly recommended...

Garner, Bryan. *Garner's Modern American Usage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

- Accessible for free via the SU Library-Summons. I recommend bookmarking a link to this resource on your browser.

Schedule

February 10 Why does academic writing stink?

Diagnosing the Problem

Ball, Phillip. "It's not just you: science papers are getting harder to read." *Nature*, March 30, 2017.

(BB)

Rothman, Joshua. "Why is Academic Writing so Academic?" *The New Yorker*, February 20, 2014. (BB)

Pinker, Steven. "Why Academics Stink at Writing." *The Chronicle Review*, September 24, 2014. (BB)

Ross, Bob. "The Limits of Revolutionary Geographic Thought." *Antipode*, 2016. (BB)

- especially p.4-7.

Billig, Michael. *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 1-39. (BB)

Alternatives and Solutions

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 3-22.

Olson, *Houston, We Have a Narrative*, 1-21.

February 17 Writer's Diet | Introduction to Storytelling

Writer's Diet

Sword, *Writer's Diet*

- Read entire book focusing on the end of each chapter and appendix where Sword explains how to address common problems in academic writing (e.g., weak verbs, overreliance on abstract nouns, etc.) and how the Writer's Diet web site works.

Greene, *Writing Science in Plain English*, 6-28.

- Complete exercises 1-5

Assignments

After reading the chapters from *The Writer's Diet*, submit a sample of writing from a paper you wrote for another course (~250 words) to the [Writer's Diet](#) web site (Google "Writer's Diet"). Print the response and be prepared to discuss it in class. Then, submit a sample from an academic writer you admire and print that response. According to the web site, what is your writing's strengths

and weaknesses? Of the scholar you admire? To the best you can tell, how does the web site assess writing? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this tool?

Storytelling

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 35-57, 122-134.

Hart, *Storycraft*, 5-40.

Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *The Journal of American History*, March (1992): 1347-1376. (BB)

Cronon, William. "2013 Annual Meeting: William Cronon's Presidential Address: Storytelling," YouTube (BB)

- This is optional but *highly* recommended. Storytelling was the focus of his address. Plenty to consider here. (Skip the intro material and start watching around ~10:00).

February 24 Storytelling II

Greene, *Writing Science in Plain English*, 40-62.

- Complete exercises 10, 11, 12.

Olson, *Houston, We Have a Narrative*, 68-173.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press, 2016, 135-151. (BB)

- Read the selection and mark/note different plot pts. (ordinary world, inciting incident, etc.) in the Deep Story Hochschild narrates. Who are the protagonists in the chapter? Who are the antagonists?

Assignment

Using the movie narrative handout on Blackboard, watch one of the listed films and identify the "beats" and plot points.

The WSP Model. Using one of your former articles, seminar papers, or your MA thesis (if you've written one or in the midst of writing one) do the following:

- The one-sentence description of the project (And/But/Therefore)
- Write the one-word focus/theme of the project (Word)

March 3 Explanatory Narrative

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 87-98.

Hart, *Storycraft*, 183-202.

Pollan, Michael. "Power Steer," *The New York Times Magazine* (BB).

Kosek, Jake. *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (BB)

- For these pieces by Pollan and Kosek, highlight or mark all the scenes in the article or chapter. How do the two writers divide their works into sections of scenes and explanations? How do they move the plot along? (Remember, a narrative has to "move". There has to be some sort of journey—of a person, an idea, a thing, an animal, etc.)

Assignment

Write an explanatory narrative. Two scenes with an explanation in the middle. Use the explanatory narrative techniques described by Hart and demonstrated by Pollan and Kosek. (500-750 words).

March 10 Titles and Openings | Personal NarrativesTitles and Openings:

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 63-86.

Wilson, Robert. *Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway* (BB)

Cutler, Kristin. "Pets in the City: Surplus Dogs in Syracuse New York." MA thesis, Department of Geography, Syracuse University. (BB)

- Introduction

Lindberg, James. "The Road That Made Mountains: Highway Design and the Production of Landscape in Vail, Colorado." MA thesis, Department of Geography, Syracuse University, 2020.

- Introduction: A Cycling Journey Over Vail Pass

Personal Narratives:

Hart, *Storycraft*, 208-214.

Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative." *The Journal of American History*, March (1992): 1347-1376. (BB)

- Reread the parts of the article where Cronon discusses his own intellectual and scholarly journey (basically, the beginning and end of the article). Note the plot points in his story.

Longhurst, Robyn. "Becoming Smaller: Autobiographical Spaces of Weight Loss." *Antipode* 44, no.3 (2012): 871-88.

Wilson, Robert M. "Relinquished." *GeoHumanities* 6, no. 2 (2020): 413-23.

Assignment

Retitle at least one (or more if you feel like it) seminar paper, conference presentation, etc. using the guidelines Sword offers at the end of the assigned chapter in *Stylish Academic Writing*. Be prepared to share your original and new title in class.

Write a personal narrative following the structure in Hart, *Storycraft*, 208-214.

March 17 Character

Hart, *Storycraft*, 75-88.

Meyer, Rick. "14 Tips for Building Character." *Nieman Storyboard*, June 1, 2005. (BB)

Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. "Total War: Newt Gingrich," "Her Own: Oprah Winfrey," "Radish Queen: Alice Waters," "Prairie Populist: Elizabeth Warren." (BB)

Biehler, Dawn. *Pests in the City: Flies, Bedbugs, Cockroaches, and Rats*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013. (BB)

- In Biehler's book, the "characters" are animal pests. How does she describe these non-human animals as characters? Is she using the same sorts of techniques explained by Hart and Meyer?

Guest Speaker: Nancy Langston – Distinguished Professor of Environmental History, Michigan Technological University

Assignment

Vividly describe a person from your research, or if you have not begun your research, describe a friend or someone in your family. To do this effectively, you might need to embed this character description in a scene or brief narrative. If you are really daring, you might choose an institution, such as a NGO, animal, or government agency as your character. (~ 250-500 words)

Also, bring a photocopy of part of a nonfiction book or article that describes a character vividly. In class, be prepared to discuss why this is an evocative character description

March 24 Literature Reviews

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Brikenstein. *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, 1-132.

Kamler, Barbara, and Pat Thompson. *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014.

- 3 - Persuading an octopus into a jar
- 4 - Getting on top of the research literatures

Guest Speaker: Trevor Barnes – Department of Geography, University of British Columbia

Assignment

In an article of your choosing, identify with a notation or a highlight places in the text where the author is summarizing other scholars' work ("they say") and explicitly discussing how his or her approach builds upon, differs, or challenges these scholars' ideas ("I say"). Be prepared to discuss in class the interplay of the author's ideas and that of other scholars. How is the author situating himself or herself in the literature?

March 31 Jargon | Employing Theory

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, "Jargonitis," 112-121.

Miller, James. "Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language." *Lingua Franca*, 2000.

Billig, Michael. *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, "Jargon, noun, and acronyms," 67-94. (BB)

Greene, Anne E. *Writing Science in Plain English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, "Choose Your Words With Care." (BB)

Assignment

Identify an article or book where an author uses jargon (or what, perhaps, other academics or non-academics might call jargon) in a clear, effective, or even artful way. Be prepared to discuss it in class.

Guest Speaker: To be announced.

April 7 Grant Writing and Abstracts

Grant Writing

Kelsky, Karen. *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your PhD into a Job*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015. (BB)

- “The Foolproof Grant Template”
- “Proving Your Project is Worthy”

Abstracts

Kelsky, Karen. *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your PhD into a Job*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015. (BB)

- “The Dissertation Abstract”

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 147-58.

Featherstone, Steven. “DestiNY Syracuse, USA.” In *City by City: Dispatches from the American Metropolis*, 445-74. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. (BB)

Assignment

Write a one-page-grant proposal for your thesis or PhD dissertation project using the Foolproof Grant Template. Upload on the course Blackboard page.

Rewrite the abstract for your MA thesis or a journal manuscript using Kelsky or Sword’s advice.

Guest Speaker: Andre Ortega - Department of Geography and the Environment, SU

April 14 Settings and Sense of Place.

Miller, Brenda, and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2012.

- “Taking Place”: Writing the Physical World

Carson, Rachel. “A Fable for Tomorrow,” *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962. (BB)

Pachirat, Timothy. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. (BB)

Brown, Kate. *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. (BB)

- Being There
- Returning Home to Rustaliga

Solnit, Rebecca. "Detroit Arcadia." *Harper's Magazine*, July 2007, 65-73. (BB)

Ipsen, Heather. "Catching the Cloud and Pinning It Down: The Social and Environmental Impacts of Data Centers." MA thesis, Department of Geography, Syracuse University, 2018. (Selections - BB)

Assignment

Vividly describe a setting. Perhaps visit a place in Syracuse such as Armory Square or the shore of Onondaga Lake. (300-500 words)

Guest Speaker: To be announced.

April 21 * Wellness Day. No class. *

April 28 **Metaphors | Cultivating Positive Writing Habits**

Sword, Helen. "Snowflakes, Splinters, and Cobblestones: Metaphors for Writing." In *Innovations in Narrative and Metaphor: Methodologies and Practices*, edited by Sandy Farquhar and Esther Fitzpatrick, 39-55. Springer, 2019.

Sword, Helen. *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. (BB)

- "Preface: The House of Writing"
- "Introduction: Building the BASE"

Assignment

Complete Helen's Sword's [Writing Base](#) tool. Print and/or save your results. You will share them in class. I'll be sharing mine, too. (Trust me, my results are not all positive!)

** After completing the tool, identify the area of your greatest weakness: **B**ehavioral Habits, **A**rtisanal Habits, **S**ocial Habits, or **E**motional Habits. Then, read the section of *Air & Space* that discusses the habit. After reading the three chapters in that section, do the following:

- Each chapter lists additional articles and books to read about the habit. Read these lists carefully and identify three articles and books that you plan to review and study to improve your weakest writing areas.
- Also, discuss your specific plans on how you will work in the coming months to improve your behavioral, artisanal, social, or emotional habits.
- * Be prepared to share your three articles/books and plan with the class.

May 5 **Oral Storytelling**

Dicks, *Storyworthy*, 23-35, 93-138, 195-205.

Guest Speaker: Aaron Sachs – Department of History, Cornell University

May 12 Oral Storytelling

Dicks, *Storyworthy*, 269-79, 283-88, 311-21.

Dicks, Matthew. [“Strategies for Communicating and Performing Via Video Conferencing Platforms.”](#) *Speak Up Storytelling*.

Use of Class Materials and Recordings

Original class materials (handouts, assignments, tests, etc.) and recordings of class sessions are the intellectual property of the course instructor. You may download these materials for your use in this class. However, you may not provide these materials to other parties (e.g., web sites, social media, other students) without permission. Doing so is a violation of intellectual property law and of the student code of conduct.

Academic Integrity

Syracuse University’s Academic Integrity Policy reflects the high value that we, as a university community, place on honesty in academic work. The policy defines our expectations for academic honesty and holds students accountable for the integrity of all work they submit. Students should understand that it is their responsibility to learn about course-specific expectations, as well as about university-wide academic integrity expectations. The policy governs appropriate citation and use of sources, the integrity of work submitted in exams and assignments, and the veracity of signatures on attendance sheets and other verification of participation in class activities. The policy also prohibits students from submitting the same work in more than one class without receiving written authorization in advance from both instructors. Under the policy, students found in violation are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered as described in the Violation and Sanction Classification Rubric. Syracuse University students are required to read an online summary of the University’s academic integrity expectations and provide an electronic signature agreeing to abide by them twice a year during pre-term check-in on MySlice.

This is what the university obliges me to tell you. This is my own simple take on the matter: plagiarize a paper or cheat on an exam and you will fail the assignment. Period. Other professors may let issues of academic dishonesty slide or let you off with a warning. *I am not one of those professors.*

Religious Observances

Syracuse University’s Religious Observances Policy recognizes the diversity of faiths represented in the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious

holy days according to their traditions. Under the policy, students are given an opportunity to make up any examination, study, or work requirements that may be missed due to a religious observance, provided they notify their instructors no later than the academic drop deadline. For observances occurring before the drop deadline, notification is required at least two academic days in advance. Students may enter their observances in MySlice under Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances/Add a Notification.

Students with Disabilities

Syracuse University values diversity and inclusion; we are committed to a climate of mutual respect and full participation. There may be aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion and full participation in this course. I invite any student to contact me to discuss strategies and/or accommodations (academic adjustments) that may be essential to your success and to collaborate with the Center for Disability Resources (CDR) in this process.

If you would like to discuss disability-accommodations or register with CDR, please visit Center for Disability Resources. Please call (315) 443-4498 or email disabilityresources@syr.edu for more detailed information.

The CDR is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic accommodations and will work with the student to develop an access plan. Since academic accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact CDR as soon as possible to begin this process.