

**GEO 605**  
**Writing Geography**

**Spring 2019**  
**Eggers 155**

**Tuesday, 9:30am-12:15pm**

**Professor:** Bob Wilson

**Office:** Eggers 533

**Office Hours:** Fridays, 12:30-1:50pm  
or by appointment

**Email:** rmwilson@syr.edu

**Telephone and Text:** 430.7579 (cell)

**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 who are faculty in this department—most geographers write only for other geographers. This has far less to do with the nature 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 our disciplinary norms and the realities of academic publishing.

**Grading and Assignments**

To earn an A, students must complete all the assignments, carefully read and comment on fellow students' work, and have no unexcused absences.

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

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.

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 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?

Finally, I have left time open at the end of the course for what I call "Students' Choice." This will be an opportunity for us to discuss topics not included on the syllabus that you think we should address.

### **Students with Disabilities**

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue or call (315) 443-4498 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations and will issue students with documented disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

### **Religious Observances**

SU's religious observances policy, found at [http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp\\_ben/religious\\_observance.htm](http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm), recognizes the diversity of faiths represented among the campus community and protects the rights of students, faculty, and staff to observe religious holy days according to their tradition. Under the policy, students are provided 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 before the end of the second week of classes*. For fall and spring semesters, an online notification process is available through MySlice/Student Services/Enrollment/My Religious Observances from the first day of class until the end of the second week of class.

### **Texts**

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. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

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*, 17<sup>th</sup> 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

### **January 15 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.

### **January 22 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.

#### 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).

#### 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 the web site, what are strengths and weaknesses of your writing? 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?

## January 29    **Storytelling II**

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:

- Write the one-word focus/theme of the project (Word)
- The one-sentence description of the project (And/But/Therefore)
- The one-paragraph story of the project using the “hero’s journey” (Paragraph).
  - More difficult than the one-word and one-sentence exercise. At a minimum, identify the In a world/ordinary world, inciting incident, and stages of the journey.

## February 5    **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).

## February 12    **Titles and Openings | Personal Narratives**

Titles 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.” Chapter One: Introduction. MA thesis, Department of Geography, Syracuse University. (BB)

Erickson, Jon. "Remaking the Rural: National Land for People, Reclamation Law, and Agricultural Reform in California, 1975-1982." "Introduction: An Agricultural Reality Tour." MA thesis, Department of Geography, Syracuse University. 2018. (BB)

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.

Valentine, Gill. "Stick and Stones May Break My Bones": A Personal Geography of Harassment." *Antipode* 30, no. 4 (1998): 305-32.

### Assignment

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

Also, 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.

## **February 19 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*. *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: Jamie Winders, Department of Geography

### 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

**February 26 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.

Visiting Speaker: Laura Lautz, Department of Earth Sciences

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 5 Jargon | Employing Theory**

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 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.

Visiting Speaker: Tom Perreault, Department of Geography

**March 12 \*\* Spring Break. No Class.\*\***

**March 19 Scene**

Readings (Scene)

Hart, *Storycraft*, 89-106.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press, 2016, 221-230. (BB)

Assignment

Vividly describe a scene. Examples include a rally, meeting, or journey. (250-500 words)

Visiting Speaker: To be announced.

**March 26 Careful Writing: Grammar, English Usage, and Writing Guides**

Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*, 135-146.

*Chicago Manual of Style*, chapters on punctuation and grammar

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

Visiting Speaker: Steven Featherstone

### Assignment

Read the chapters in *Chicago Manual of Style* on grammar and punctuation. You'll be surprised at how many things you do incorrectly. Make a list of *at least five* rules with which you are unfamiliar with or frequently break.

Also, bring a writing guide you have found helpful to class. This could be a writing book or perhaps a handout a teacher or professor gave you years ago that you still find useful.

**April 2           \*\*AAG Conference. No Class.\*\***

**April 9           Settings and Sense of Place**

John Murray, *The Sierra Club Nature Writing Handbook*, 60-85. (BB)

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. "Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place." *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (2001): 17–48. (BB)

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)

Connie Chiang, "The Nose Knows: The Sense of Smell in American History," *Journal of American History* (BB)

- Optional. A fascinating piece exploring an underappreciated sense—smell—in American history. How can writers evoke smell in their writing? Why would they bother to do so?

### Assignment

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

**April 16           Grant Writing and Storytelling**

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

Visiting Speaker: To be announced.

### 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.

**April 23        Students' Choice**

\*\* This class will focus on a choice, or choices, by the class. Readings, assignment, and visiting speaker to be announced. \*\*

**April 30        Geography Slam! (optional)**