

SEMINAR IN COMPOSITION

University of Pittsburgh
ENGCOMP 0200 (SEC 1090)
Spring 2024

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MWF 10:00 – 10:50 AM
313 Cathedral of Learning

Office Hours: Wed 11:10-12:10 after class (or by appointment), at CL 609L

COURSE OVERVIEW

The essay has been described as ‘an act of personal witness. The essay is at once the inscription of a self and description of an object.’ An amorphous, open-ended, even rebellious genre that desegregates the boundaries between self and other...

—Ruth Behar (quoting Graham Good) in “The Vulnerable Observer”

To essay is to try, attempt, experiment. In this course, you will compose essays—experimental writings—documenting a semester-long inquiry related to the poetics of bearing witness. Each essay will move you more deeply into this inquiry, so that you not only want to know more about the subject but may be also affected by it and inspired to teach others about it. Each of your essays is a landing point on a study: the first essay draws on observation and experience and practices description; the second interprets archival artifacts; the third synthesizes your previous findings and analyzes discovery; and the last invites you to re-see and re-envision a prior essay. As a *describing/inscribing* inquirer, you will be encouraged to admit uncertainty about complexities and to uncover your personal relationship to the topic of inquiry. In our class community, you will work closely with peers, sharing sources, reading and responding to one another’s drafts, developing a class project, and supporting each other throughout the journey.

Readings (you don’t need to buy any of these!)

All course materials will be provided on Canvas and through Kanopy. However, if you feel especially moved by the texts and would like to have a physical copy for both your personal archive and future in academic studies, the texts from which you’ll read excerpts are listed here. Again, don’t buy these unless you really want the book! We’ll be reading *maybe* a chapter or two of each.

1. *How We Fight for Our Lives*, Saeed Jones

2. Milk Blood Heat, Dantiel Moniz
3. *Fun Home*, Allison Bechdel
4. Poem by Ocean Vuong ("Not Even This")
5. Poem by Diana Khoi Nguyen (from *Ghost of*)
6. *Obit*, Victoria Chang
7. *DMZ Colony*, Don Mee Choi
8. *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi
9. *La Haine* (1995), directed by Mathieu Kassovitz
10. *The Undocumented Americans*, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio
11. Poems by Danez Smith (from *Homie*) and torrin a greathouse (from *wound from the mouth of a wound*)
12. *Paris is Burning* (1991), directed by Jennie Livingston

SC Course Goals

Seminar in Composition is the course that most undergraduates take to fulfill the first of three writing-intensive requirements in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. While the readings and assignments in different sections of the course may vary, all sections consist of a sequence of assignments that will require you to:

ENGAGE IN COMPOSING AS A CREATIVE, DISCIPLINED FORM OF CRITICAL INQUIRY.

In this course, you'll compose as a way to generate ideas as well as explain them. You'll form questions, explore problems, and examine your own experiences, thoughts and observations. Investigating a multifaceted subject, you'll be expected to make productive use of uncertainty as you participate in sustained scrutiny of the issues at hand.

COMPOSE THOUGHTFULLY CRAFTED ESSAYS THAT POSITION YOUR IDEAS AMONG OTHER VIEWS. In response to reading, listening to and discussing challenging texts, you'll compose essays in which you develop informed positions that engage with the positions of others. You'll analyze as well as summarize the texts that you read, and you'll compose essays that pay close attention both to the ideas voiced by other writers and to specific choices they make with language and form.

COMPOSE WITH PRECISION, NUANCE, AND AWARENESS OF FORMAL CONVENTIONS.

You'll work on crafting clear, precise prose that uses a variety of sentence and paragraph structures. You'll learn the conventions for quoting and paraphrasing responsibly and adeptly, and you'll be assisted with editing strategies that reflect attention to the relation between style and meaning. You'll also have

opportunities to consider when and how to challenge conventions as well as follow them.

REVISE YOUR WRITING BY RETHINKING THE ASSUMPTIONS, AIMS AND EFFECTS OF PRIOR DRAFTS. This course approaches the essay as a flexible genre that takes on different forms in different contexts—not as a thesis-driven argument that adheres to a rigid structure. Much class time will be devoted to considering the purpose, logic, and design of your own compositions, and you'll be given opportunities to revise your work in light of comments and class discussion, with the aim of making more attentive decisions.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Essays / Optional Revisions

You will write three essays this term. For each, you will compose the essay in stages and have the opportunity to revise. At the end of the term, there will be an opportunity to revise a few paragraphs from the essays as a part of a final project, should you want a better grade. Also, each essay after the first builds on those that came before it, allowing you to revise your course of research and *thinking* throughout term. Seeing your work again, in light of research findings, instructor or peer feedback, your own hunches, and/or a refreshed eye, should bring more than a few small changes to a draft.

In the past, you may have approached revision as a form of “tidying up” a paper—changing a sentence here and there, correcting spelling and punctuation. We will call that procedure *editing* (and we'll use an online style guide, like Purdue Owl, as a reference tool for such work). We'll reserve the term *revision* for much more extensive work on an initial draft. Serious revision means re-writing.

Short Writings and Workshop Feedback

To develop your ability to revise, you will 1) compose short assignments that lay the foundation for larger essays; 2) practice writing and research methods that help you to inquire deeply and resist easy answers; and 3) participate in *workshop*—that is, you will read, respond to in writing, and then discuss works-in-progress by classmates.

Reading Responses

The readings for this course are challenging. You are not expected to “get” them in one go-through, or to read them once and then move on. Part of what we will do is work on rereading, on using our own writing as a way to go back into a text to read further. As a way of lingering with a reading—and preparing for your important role in class discussion—you are asked to compose a reading response for each of the essays that we read, and to bring that response with you to class. They ask you to write a short response, to prepare notes, to frame a question or to go to a particular passage in the text. These responses will be turned in on Canvas, due shortly after the readings. These questions represent a way of reading complex texts—by focusing on a particular issue or kind of writing, by going back to read selected passages, and by testing claims based on your own experience, research, or writing.

Reflective Writing

Practicing reflection means approaching your writing and writing process analytically in order to examine its potential effect, work and reach in relation to your goals for them. It means trying to look at your writing from both “within” and “outside of” it. You will be asked to reflect on your writing goals as well as compositions throughout the course in order to deepen your ability both to revise and to coax revision from peer writers.

CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Attendance

Since composition courses focus primarily on the work of students themselves, whose reading and writing is central to class discussion, attendance is required! Come to class on time, prepared to talk about writing. If there is a time when you cannot come to class, it is your responsibility to communicate with me, to arrange to turn in written work, and to find out about subsequent assignments. Missing class is likely to affect your work (and grade). You get one week’s worth of absence for free! Further absences can be grounds for grade reduction.

If an emergency arises that will cause you to miss more than three classes, contact your teacher as soon as possible to determine the best course of action to try to accommodate the absence.

Statement on Class Decorum

I encourage an open classroom and the sharing of ideas in a safe, respectful environment. To facilitate this open exchange of ideas, as members of this class, we agree that we will not engage in derogatory language, writing, or expressions against race, ethnicity, religion, gender identification, sexuality, economic position, and political views. Any disagreement in class

discussion with me or with your fellow students should be respectfully expressed so that there can be an equal exchange of thoughts.

While we will deconstruct ideas and texts, we will not dismiss identities, cultural norms unfamiliar to us, and any other aspects of an author's own personal life insofar as it is unrelated to the work. Any discourse that speculates on the relationship between an author's identity and their work; that rejects the existence of whatever minority the author may be a part of; or engages with another student in a series of ad hominem or language considered inappropriate will be immediately confronted and not tolerated.

In terms of the slurs and outdated language that will appear in our readings: my general rule is if you experience some degree of close proximity to the subject of the slur (i.e. you are a member of the community with which this term is often used), you are free to proceed as you feel comfortable—with the caveat that should it make another student uncomfortable, it will be discussed and subject to the class' scrutiny. I am subject to this rule as well: should my use of language that I consider natural in my own community make members of the class uncomfortable, dialogue around this is always welcome. Any act of reading out loud constitutes an utterance, and in this class, all utterances are an opportunity to engage with rhetoric and our relationship to language in a safe, open-minded environment.

Content Warning and Class Climate

Our course readings and discussions will at times focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. Readings and discussions might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, frustration, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor and even boredom. Some of us may have emotional responses to readings; some of us may have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom. I expect everyone to discuss the readings in a mature and respectful way.

If you are struggling with the course materials, here are some tips: read the syllabus so that you are prepared in advance. You can approach me ahead of time if you'd like more information about a topic or reading. If you think a particular reading or topic might be especially challenging or unsettling, contact me to discuss an alternative assignment. If you are struggling to keep up with the work because of the course content, you should speak with me and/or seek help from the counseling center (see "Student Support" section below).

GRADING

For each assignment that you submit to Canvas, you will receive points toward a final letter grade for the course. Here is the breakdown of percent values per assignment toward that grade (assignment graded out of 100):

- Essay 1: 10%
- Essay 2: 15%
- Essay 3: 15%
- Archive Assignment + Persona writing with Archive: 10%
- Reflections: 5%
- Reading Responses: 10%
- Final Portfolio + Revision: 15%
- Attendance and Participation (includes in-class writing, workshop participation): 25%

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

A="superior attainment"
B="meritorious attainment"
C="adequate attainment"
D="minimal attainment"
F="failure"

Note that "meritorious" means praiseworthy; a "B," in other words, is earned for work that is above average.

Schedule

Week 1

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 1.8		Introductions & welcome. Explore Syllabus, questions about content / course schedule
W 1.10		Briefly introduce the expectations and ways we'll be engaging with work critically this semester. Grounding Essay (if not finished in class, can take home and finish by end of day)
F 1.12	Read for 9/26: chapter 1 / opening poem up to Ch. 3 of <i>How We Fight for Our Lives</i>	Read Zora Neale Hurston's <i>How it Feels to be Colored Me</i> essay in class, using her as a template for the sort of writing and work we'll be studying. Practice/learn annotating work in real time with physical copies. Practice the way we'll break down and respond to texts.

Week 2 (Working Description)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 1.15 (MLK Day—no class)		
W 1.17	Keep reading <i>How We Fight for Our Lives</i> in chapter 4	Preview Essay context and what relevant skills we'll be looking to glean in this week's reading ahead of Essay #1 next week.

		Freewrite on our first thoughts and reactions to the work.
F 1.19 (Note: Add/Drop Ends Today)	Read for 9/11: Milk Blood Heat chapter	Discussion on Saeed Jones poems / chapter 4 w/ directed, guided questions, in groups and in round circle (students can use RR in responses) Time to write RR on How We Fight

Week 3 (Description Contd.)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 1.21	Keep exploring Milk Blood Heat Consider ideas for Essay # 1	Discuss Milk Blood Heat w/ guided questions Description activity: use the most recent photo in your phone and describe it
W 1.24	For 9/15: Write a paragraph (or more) of Essay #1—can be a messy draft, or just some brief thoughts.	Continue Discussion of Milk Blood Heat Work on draft of Essay 1 in class
F 1.26	Read for 9/18: Fun Home chapter	Peer workshop in pairs your brief draft from essay 1 Time to work on Essay # 1 in class

Week 4 (Composing Narratives in Writing)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 1.29		

	<i>Work on Essay #1</i> Read for 9/20: first 10 pages of Fun Home Ch. 2	Process check in/questions: Essay #1 Use Essay #1 sample to go through a guided revision Introduce Fun Home with Bechdel interview
W 1.31	<i>Work on Essay #1</i>	Example of working Essay thesis statement Fun Home Discussion
F 2.2	Essay due by end of day (11:59 PM) Read for 2.5: Obit	Essay Reflection prompt Brainstorm reflection responses Work on essay reflection in class Take questions on essay

Week 5 (The Archive as a Personal Source)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 2.5		Victoria Chang interview Discuss Obit Discuss the sources students are interested in researching in relation to their lives, show how to navigate JSTOR Introduce Archive Building Assignment prompt / discuss exploring sources and how to summarize
W 2.7	<i>No Class—Professor will be at a conference</i>	N/A

F 2.9	<i>No Class—Professor will be at a conference</i> <i>Read for 2/12:</i> Ocean Vuong’s “Not Even This” and a few poems from Diana Khoi Nguyen’s Ghost Of <i>Listen for 2/12:</i> Vs. poetry podcast episode on Ghost Of	N/A
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Week 6 (Composing the Personal Archive)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 2.12	Work on Archive Building Assignment	Discuss Ocean Vuong and Diana Khoi Nguyen reading, thinking about the elegy as an archive of grief, how sources are live in and through personal experience. 12 questions by Bhanu Kapil exercise
W 2.14	Continue exploring sources	Finish Discussion on Ocean Vuong and Diana Khoi Nguyen RR assignment Work on finding sources in class
F 2.16	Finish a summary of at least one of your 3-4 sources	Talk about class plan for midterm conferences – conference sign up Introduce/invite questions on Essay #2 Examples of Sources & summary / analysis Source building assignment

Week 7 (Midterm Conferences)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 2.19		<i>Conferences</i>
W 2.21		<i>Conferences</i>
F 2.23	Due: Essay #2 / reflection	

Week 7 (Putting your Sources into Conversation)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 2.26	Think about potential topic for Essay #2 Read for 10/9: First part of Magic Fish	Archive Library Visit Day
W 2.28	Archive Assignment Due tonight Have a draft of Essay #2 opening paragraph ready by Friday	Activity for opening paragraphs and main idea sentences Touch-in on Archive Assignment
F 3.1	Keep working on Essay #2 Read for 10/23: Sections from Homie	First half a Writing day—time to compose Essay # 2 reflection in class (note: you do not have to be done with the essay to reflect on its process), or work on catching up with any late/missed assignments so far. Rotating Peer workshop of opening paragraph from Essay # 2

Week 9 (Honing the Inquiry / Gathering What You Need to Dig in)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
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M 3.4		Discuss Danez readings
W 3.6		Conclusion lesson ft. Bio papers, Hanif, concluding scenes from films, etc. Work on RR in class (due Friday)
F 3.8	No Class—Instructor Traveling Watch for 3.18: La Haine	

Week 10: Out for Spring Break!

Week 11 (Finding Your Story in this Inquiry—Putting in the “I”)

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 3.18	Introduce Essay 3 Read for 11/1: Guernica Back Draft Excerpts, consider revision	Discuss readings in groups and as a whole with guided questions
W 3.20	Write/revise for 11/3: Revise an opening paragraph with a before and after	Talk Revision with Guernica Back Draft series
F 3.22	Watch for 11/6: Watch Paris is Burning (1990) on Kanopy (or watch in class)	Talk over revisions, discuss what changed over the course of revising; experiment with erasure as a way of revising Time to write Essay #3

Week 11

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 3.25	<i>Listen for 11/8:</i> Finish watching Paris is Burning + read essay	Continue discussion on the practice of rethinking / revision Watch Paris is Burning, thinking about key vocabulary and their connection to the personal act of witness and survival
W 3.27	For 11/10: read essays / poems inspired by Paris is Burning in dialogue with the film	Practice revision and adaptation with help from the film Time to write RR or Essay #3 / ask questions
F 3.29		Finish discussions and discuss essays/art in dialogue with Paris is Burning Talk about the language, style, and world of the film

Week 12

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 4.1	<i>Due 4.3:</i> Work on a conclusion to your own current writing – can be preemptive and imagined, rather than a real ending you want to write toward, or can be the literal conclusion to your Essay 3	Field trip to Carnegie Art Museum
W 4.3		Ekphrastic Exercise / creative revision using notes taken from Art Museum Conclusion peer workshop
F 4.5		

	Due Sunday (4.7) at 11:59: Essay 3	In class Studio time to write Essay #3 reflection and finish the essay or work on conclusion, as well as ask any questions needed to help steer essay
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Week 13

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 4.8		Introduce Final Portfolio + Creative Revision or regular revision Talk homage with examples of “after” poems and odes and remix/sampling from DJs Time to write
W 4.10		Introduce/invite questions on final project Time to work on Creative Project
F 4.12		Activity to think through revision

Week 14

Date	Readings & assignments	In Class
M 4.15		OMETS + Reverse Outline Exercise
W 4.17	For 12/8: Find a paragraph from a piece of writing you’ve done this semester that you’re proud of	Watch & discuss / studio time for Final Project & anything not turned in

F 4.19	Final Portfolio + Revision due 4/22	Course wrap-up (share out: paragraph of something you're proud of)
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COURSE POLICIES

Non-Discrimination Policy

As an educational institution and employer, Pitt values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability or status as a veteran. For more info, visit <http://cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/policy07-01-03web.pdf>.

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/non-sexist language (gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432). Following these guidelines fosters and inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices. Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and those gender identities and gender expressions should be honored. Those guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/07/07-01-03.html>.

Sexual Misconduct, Required Reporting and Title IX

The University is committed to combatting sexual misconduct. As a result, University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office so that the victim may be provided appropriate resources/support options. What this means is that as your instructor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware.

There are two important exceptions: a list of the designated University employees who, as

counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found at <http://www.titleix.pitt.edu/report/confidentiality>. An important exemption to the reporting requirement exists for academic work. Disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office. If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources: *Title IX Office: 412-648-7860 *SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. MF) and 412-648-7856 (after business hours). If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121. Other reporting information is available at <http://titleix.pitt.edu/report-0>.

Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. (For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to: <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ai1.html>.)

STUDENT SUPPORT

Disability Resource Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course. For more information, visit: www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drsabout.

Counseling Center

Pitt offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center, located on the 2nd floor of Nordenberg Hall, offers Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services (412-648-7930) (8:30 am-5:00 pm, Monday-Friday) or (412-648-7856 after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). To make an appointment, go to this website: <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/>. For after-hours support: UCC Mental Health Crisis Response: 412-648-7930 x1. Or Resolve Crisis Network: 888-796-8226. Sexual Assault Response: 412-648-7856. For more on emergencies, go to <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/crisisemergency/>

Email Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their email via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on Edit Forwarding Addresses, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html.)

Canvas Support

If you have trouble logging on, call the help desk at (412) 624-HELP.

24/7 support directly from Canvas is available for Pitt students via chat, phone, and contact form by clicking the “Help” button that you see at the bottom of the blue toolbar to your left. If you run into issues or have questions, click that button for immediate support. Tutorials are also located here.

[Frequently Asked Questions](#) will link you to answers to many of your Canvas-related questions. The Canvas Student mobile app is available for [Android](#) and [iOS](#).

The Writing Center

Located in 317B O’ Hara Student Center, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for undergraduate students. Although consultants do not correct, edit, or proofread papers, they can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a consultant once or regularly over the course of the semester. In some cases, your teacher may suggest that you visit the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; or you can seek assistance on your own. These services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment (live or virtual) by visiting www.writingcenter.pitt.edu.

