

Writing About Politics

ENGL S121
Summer 2025, Session B
Room: TBD
T/Th, 1-4:15pm

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“Since every sort of knowledge and every deliberate choice reaches after some good, let us say what it is politics aims at — that is, what the topmost of all the good things doable in action is.” — Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (C.D.C. Reeve, translator)

Course Description:

This course guides students through the process of looking at, analyzing, and writing about the inherited discourses and traditions we call *politics*. Aristotle once suggested that the practical-wisdom “starting points” that give rise to politics ought to be self-evident—at least to a noble audience. Citing the poet Hesiod, he also placed a priority on “speaking well.” But what if you don’t count yourself as nobly trained? And *who decides* what amounts to “speaking well”? Editors of the Harvard University Press text “The Anthology of Rap” hypothesize that the Roman lawyer and politician Cicero might have had little taste for the ornate fillips of modern literary essayists (think David Foster Wallace). Instead, these academics suggest that the famed orator would likely have preferred the more direct speech of the emcees in the group N.W.A.

Such questions (and answers) continue to animate what we think of as “politics,” writ large. When you join this long parade of analysts/respondents, you’ll be joining the ranks of philosophers, candidates for office, and citizens who have worked to address these urgent prompts.

In this class, we will look at some ideas from antiquity and the Enlightenment, before settling into a particular focus on the post-WWII United States. (This arc will permit me to show you some work from my own career in journalism. Though since some of that on-deadline work has taken me to other capitals, I will also endeavor to connect America’s domestic traditions to a variety of global political conversations.)

PREREQUISITES

ENGL 114, 115, 120, or another writing-intensive course at Yale.

A note about what this class is NOT: put simply, this is not a policy-debate society. (Yale has those, already.) While your ideological priors will come into play, as a natural part of discussion, the primary goal here is not to seek converts to your particular conception of an ideal politics. Instead, you will be encouraged to use — and critically examine — your own opinionated vantages, in the pursuit of the liveliest possible prose about what you deem to be “all the good things doable in action.”

To promote this work, everyone will have a chance to encounter the work of liberals and conservatives alike. We will keep an eye out for virtues, as well as blind spots, in all the texts that pass beneath our collective lens. (Remember, hardly anyone can see everything.)

ASSIGNMENTS: You will write and revise three essays in all, one of which will share the focus during a workshop. (You will notice there are four units in this five-week session. Read on.)

The first essay will be a profile of some consequential political agent or cadre/institution you can observe, currently. The second essay will be an “Issue Map”—aka your reasonably comprehensive attempt to give readers the lay-of-the-land regarding a policy issue of particular interest to you. (This might follow the putatively neutral, “explainer” mode of some contemporary online publications, such as Vox. Or, instead, you might attempt overt forms of persuasion in this unit, while also making sure to take care of the empirical fact-pattern, regarding diverse points of view on your selected issue.)

The third essay will be a “Culture Read.” Specifically, this will involve your analysis of the political valences that you see as being connected to works of art, in the present moment. (Though if you’d like to consider older artistic artifacts, we can talk about that.) The fourth unit will be Satire. More on this when we get there—but this final unit will permit you to explore some forms of creative writing. (After all, many political writers have doubled as acerbic writers of satiric fiction, as we will see.)

You'll have a choice to make, about which essay you'll skip, in the middle of this summer session. (All students will complete the essay for Unit 1. Students will have a choice of completing either the essay for Unit 2 or the essay for Unit 3. For the skipped unit, a short written exercise will ensure that you're keeping up with the readings. After that, all students will choose a novel to read from the list provided in Unit 4, while completing the satiric writing component in that same unit. More details on all this, once we're in the room together!)

Many readings listed below will be available on our Canvas course page under the Modules>Week x Readings tab. Others can be easily obtained via Yale library's digital holdings. You'll likely need to purchase a couple of inexpensive books, as well. (This syllabus will be updated in early May regarding required book purchases.)

Please come to class having printed out and carefully considered and annotated your version of each reading. Attendance is also mandatory; participation will account for approximately 20% of your overall grade. (We cannot recreate our in-class discussion environment outside of our allotted time! So there are no participation "make-ups" for missed class sessions.)

Especially brief readings are marked with a [b], especially long ones with an [L], and the absence of both codes means the reading is of average length.

NOTES ON SUBMITTING ESSAYS

1. Deadlines are clearly marked in the syllabus.
2. For full credit, you must submit your essay by 11:59pm on the day of each deadline.
3. Please use Pages or Word documents. No PDFs or Google Docs.
4. Remember to put your name on the first page.
5. Please use font Times or Times New Roman, size 12, double-spaced.
6. Upload your essay to Canvas (Assignments).

SUMMER SCHEDULE

Class schedule is subject to change

UNIT 1: PROFILE OF AN AGENT

Assignment (1,000-1,500 words): Write an essayistic profile of a political agent of some note. This can be a city councilor you may have noticed (and perhaps spoken

with), or else a national figure (whose work you are likely only to have seen via media, or from afar). You can do original reporting, or quote from widely available sources — but special attention will be paid to picking the most salient data-points. (How to determine salience? We will look at examples from history.) Write for a wide audience.

WEEK 1

TUE 7/1

-Introduction to the course

-Please come having already read:

-Harvey C. Mansfield, *A Student's Guide to Political Philosophy* [L]

-James Madison, Federalist No. 10 [b]

-Frederick Douglass, "The Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln"

-Kendrick Lamar, "XXX" [b]

-Jason Aldean, "Try That in a Small Town" [b]

(Available before class on our course's Canvas site under the Modules > Week 1 Readings tab.)

THU 7/3

-Isaac Kramnick, Introduction from *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*

-Plato, "Apology"

-Jill Lepore, "The Press, the Propagandists, and the Election of 1800"

-Joan Didion, "Clinton Agonistes"

-Seth Colter Walls, "Gen. Clark: McCain Is 'Untested And Untried' On National

Security" and "Behind The Rise (And Fall) Of Gen. Clark's Veep Prospects" [b]

DUE: Profile Ideas List (to be discussed on 7/1)

WEEK 2

TUE 7/8

-Aristotle, excerpts from *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*

-Olympe de Gouges, "The Rights of Woman" [b]

-W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of the Ruling of Men"

-Norman Mailer, "How the Wimp Won the War" and "Gaining an Empire, Losing a Democracy" [b]

-Mary Gaitskill, “Worshipping the Overcoat: An Election Diary” [b]

DUE: UNIT 1 DRAFT

THU 7/10

WORKSHOP 1

plus

-Edmund Burke, “The Sublime” [b]

-John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration” [b]

-Voltaire, Reflections on Religion, Political Essays

-William F. Buckley, Jr., “Religion at Yale” [L]

SUN DUE: UNIT 1 FINAL Draft.

UNIT 2: ISSUE MAPPING

Assignment (1,500-1,750 words): This prompt can permit you to move a bit closer to the classic op-ed or pro/con position paper (that is, after you take care to represent the complexity of the issue at hand). But that is not your only option. This can also be an “explainer” style article, reported with neutrality. Also: more abstract, essayistic modes may be appropriate. In any event, we are not interested so much in your prosecution of a narrow policy case. Instead, we will be interested in a certain essayistic tunneling around your chosen subject. Resist the urge to “settle everything” in your analysis of some roiling nexus of political activity. (If the problem/controversy were easily solved, it likely would have been solved before your arrival on the scene.)

As much as possible, the goal here is to interrogate the peripheral causes/beliefs that keep your chosen political controversy *going* in the public imagination. What can you reveal about those animating forces, via your analysis? Consider a wide range of myths or assumptions (even if only to rebut them). Your chosen issue to “map” could be an ideology, an observable change in a political coalition, or even a trend that leaves an imprint on society-at-large. It can also be a profile of a “movement” (as opposed to a single agent)—since movements are complex, and need mapping! In any case, write for a wide audience. This essay is non-fictional: all details put forth as true must be verifiable.

WEEK 3

MONDAY DUE DATE: Issue Map ideas list (for those writing Unit 2)

TUE 7/15

- Didion, "The Women's Movement"
- Gore Vidal, excerpts from *United States*
- Unsigned *National Review* editorial, "This Trump Indictment Shouldn't Stand"
- Noah Rothman (also in *National Review*), "January 6 Was a Crime"
- Walls, "Striking a Syrian Pose?" and "Lebanon: Setbacks in Selecting a President"

WEDNESDAY DUE DATE: Unit 2 First Draft (for those writing Unit 2)

THU 7/17

WORKSHOP 2

plus

- Thomas Paine, "Common Sense"
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," excerpts from *The Social Contract*
- Lorenzo da Ponte, libretto for Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro"

SUNDAY DUE DATE: Unit 2 Final Draft (for those writing Unit 2)

UNIT THREE: CULTURAL READS

Assignment (1,500-1,750 words): Cultural critics tasked with writing reviews — of books, movies, plays, songs, paintings, anything — will often stray onto grounds of political commentary. (The same will happen with op-ed writers who are a little bored of their perch on the opinion page; in this case, they'll venture out to the world of movie or TV reviews, in order to make some of their ideological points hit in a new way.) Here, you'll put on your critic's cap by writing an essay that gives your reader a strong, unified impression of a particular cultural artifact. How is that artifact communicating, on questions of politics? (Is the artifact aware of its political valence?)

Is its creator? How would you be able to tell?) This essay is non-fictional: all details put forth as true must be verifiable.

WEEK 4

MONDAY DUE DATE — “Culture Reads” Ideas list (for those writing Unit 3)

TUE 7/22

- Ellen Willis, selections from *The Essential Ellen Willis*
- Mansfield, excerpts from *Manliness*
- Darryl Pinckney, “In Ferguson”
- Paul Beatty, Introduction to *Hokum*
- Gaitskill, “The Trouble With Following the Rules”

WEDNESDAY DUE DATE — “Culture Reads” First Draft (for those writing)

ALSO ON WEDNESDAY (FOR EVERYONE): PICK A NOVEL TO READ OVER THE FINAL WEEK, FROM THE FOLLOWING LIST:

- Beatty, “The Sellout”
- Buckley, “Who’s on First”
- Didion, “Democracy”
- Mailer, “An American Dream”
- Vidal, “Myra Breckinridge”

THU 7/24

WORKSHOP 3

plus

- Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”
- Hilton Kramer, “Susan Sontag: The Pasionaria of Style”
- Walls, “The Hollowness of *The Hurt Locker*”

FRIDAY DUE DATE DUE: Essay 3 Final Draft.

UNIT FOUR: SATIRE

Assignment (1,500-1,750 words): When all your carefully judged reporting and critiquing has failed to move civilization to a more enlightened state ... you may want to make

fun of everyone/everything. In this closing unit, you'll have an opportunity to lampoon a wide range of the political topics considered thus far in class. The format will be up to you. You might write a set of parodies of various forms of news-writing (see: The Onion). You might also create a dialogue between characters (a la Plato) in the service of making political/ethical points in dramatic fashion. Or you might craft a substantial work of short prose fiction. This time the writing need not textbook-verifiable, but writing produced in this unit should be based on something true. You'll see that we're revisiting many of the authors we've already read, in class. (Now it'll be your turn to make this same move!)

WEEK 5

MONDAY DUE DATE: Unit 4 Draft

TUE 7/29

-Du Bois, "The Comet"

-Gaitskill, "The Agonized Face"

Plus

WORKSHOP 4

THU 7/31

FINAL CLASS: Wrap-up! Plus: Student presentations on readings chosen from the available list of satiric novels.

FRIDAY DUE-DATE: SATIRE FINAL DRAFT (plus end-of-class reflection)

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