

## English S421: Writing About Cities

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*“This is the city and I am one of the citizens,  
Whatever interests the rest interests me...”  
-Walt Whitman*

*“Say more than you thought you knew how to say  
In sentences better than you ever imagined  
For the reader who reads between the lines.”  
-Verlyn Klinkenborg*

### **Course Description:**

Big cities present a unique set of opportunities and challenges. They are hubs of art and culture, media and entertainment, business and finance, and food. They serve as canvases for architects and urban planners with visions for the future. They represent the greatest potential for diverse populations to interact and thrive. At the same time, cities are often sites of injustice, economic inequality, violence, and social division. Cities constantly challenge us to forge communities on a large scale and to learn how to live harmoniously with each other.

In this course, we will explore city life through reading and writing about cities in several non-fiction modes. Major assignments will include a literary personal essay, a reported journalistic feature (which can be a profile), a film review about a city film, and a policy memo/proposal about a change to city infrastructure. We will supplement our course readings in these four genres with other types of short readings, as well as with other kinds of “texts” (images, films, recorded talks). We will also look for opportunities to use New Haven, the city around us, as a source and a test case for our ideas. Through our study and practice of non-fiction writing for a range of audiences, we will seek to join an ongoing (written) conversation about the past, present, and future of the modern city.

### **Required Course Texts:**

Course Packet: Available at Tyco Printing, 262 Elm Street

Digital editions of all course readings can be found on Canvas (Files).

### CLASS SCHEDULE

*Note: Class schedule is subject to change, including the addition of readings and homework assignments*

#### Week 1

M 7/1

Intro to Class and to Unit 1: Exploring (The Personal Essay)  
Personal Essay Assigned  
Look at short essays together in class

W 7/3

Read: Colson Whitehead, “City Limits” from *Colossus of New York*  
Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting” from *The Death of the Moth*  
Garnette Cadogan, “Walking While Black” from *The Fire This Time*  
Zinsser, “Writing About Yourself: The Memoir”

F 7/5 Read: Nora Ephron, “Moving On, A Love Story” from *The New Yorker*  
Peter Hessler, “Hutong Karma” from *The New Yorker*  
Phillip Lopate, “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character” from  
*To Show and To Tell*  
**Due: Personal Essay Draft 1—on Canvas by end of day**

Week 2

M 7/8 Read: Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That” from *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*  
Eula Biss, “Goodbye to All That” from *The North American Review*  
George Saunders, excerpt on revision from *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*

W 7/10 WORKSHOP 1: PERSONAL ESSAY  
Introduction to Unit 2: Reporting (The Journalistic Feature)  
Journalistic Feature assigned  
**Due: Peer Review comments on workshop writers’ drafts—on Canvas by class time**

F 7/12 Read: Malcolm Gladwell, “Starting Over” from the *New Yorker*  
Eli Saslow, “Anger and Heartbreak on Bus No. 15” from *The Washington Post*  
**Due: Personal Essay Final Draft and Process Letter—in class**

Week 3

M 7/15 Read: Maria Cristina Caballero, “Academic Turns City into a Social Experiment” from  
*The Harvard Gazette*  
David Freedlander, “Six Months into a Highly Energetic Mayoralty...” from *New York Magazine*  
Hannah Goldfield, “Kwame Onwuachi’s Cuisine of the Self” from *The New Yorker*  
Zinsser, “Writing About People: The Interview”

W 7/17 Read: Suleman Anaya, “The New New Haven” from *The New York Times Magazine*  
Any feature news article of your choice about New Haven in the *New Haven Independent*, the *New Haven Register*, the *Yale Daily News*, or another reputable New-Haven-based newspaper or magazine.  
“What Makes a Good Pitch” from NPR  
**Due: New Haven writing exercise—post results on Canvas (Discussions) by class time**  
**Pitch Letter for Journalistic Feature—in class**

F 7/19 Intro to Mini-Unit 3: Critiquing (The Film Review)  
Film Review Assigned  
Read: Pauline Kael, “*West Side Story*” from *Film Quarterly*  
Anthony Lane, “An Earthier, Sweatier *West Side Story*” from *The New Yorker*  
Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “The Generic Latinidad of *In the Heights*” from *The New Yorker*  
A.O. Scott, “*The Forty-Year-Old Version*: Rappers’ Delight” from *The New York Times*  
Zinsser, “Writing About the Arts: Critics and Columnists”  
**Due: Journalistic Feature Draft 1—on Canvas by end of day**

Week 4

M 7/22

In-class work on copy-editing and fact-checking journalistic features  
In-class screening of video and podcast clips on cities  
Share film reviews in class

**Due: Film Review—in class**

W 7/24

WORKSHOP 2: JOURNALISTIC FEATURE  
Introduction to Unit 4: Proposing (The Policy Memo)  
Policy Memo assigned

**Due: Peer review comments on workshop writers' drafts—on Canvas by class time**

F 7/26

Look at policy memos from the offices of Jackie Bray in class  
Read: Jane Jacobs, "Downtown is for People" from *Fortune*  
Nathan Heller, "What Happened to San Francisco, Really?" from *The New Yorker*  
Policy Brief: "The Death of Downtown?" from the School of Cities

**Due: Journalistic Feature Final Draft and Process Letter—in class**

Week 5

M 7/29

In-class peer review of policy memos  
Watch TED Talk Amanda Burden: "How Public Spaces Make Cities Work"  
Read: William H. Whyte, "The Life of Plazas" from *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*  
Alexandra Lange, "The Future of Public Parks" from *The New Yorker*  
Winnie Hu, "What Does Queens Need More, a New Park or a New Train Line?" from *The New York Times*  
"Policy Briefs Handout" from UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center (online)

**Due: Policy Memo Draft 1—share with members of your peer review group on Canvas by class time**

W 7/31

Presentation assigned—prepare for presentations in class  
Watch TED Talk Eduardo Paes: "The Four Commandments of Cities"  
Read: Adam Gopnik, "Jane Jacobs's Street Smarts" from *The New Yorker*  
Charles Montgomery, "The Secrets of the World's Happiest Cities" from *The Guardian*

**Due: Policy Memo Final Draft and Process Letter**

F 8/2

PRESENTATIONS ON POLICY MEMOS  
Class wrap-up

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & POLICIES

**Course Format:**

The class will meet as a small in-person seminar. In some cases, we may use Zoom to allow students to join remotely. Note that the option of "Zooming in" should only be used in cases when you are quarantined because of a positive Covid test but feeling well enough to join. For all other illnesses, if

you're not feeling well enough to join class, please stay home and rest. If you have questions or concerns about your access to working technology, please talk to me. (See also this helpful [this helpful Poorvu Center Zoom guide](#).)

### **Canvas Site:**

Our official class website is on Canvas. On our Canvas site, you can find a digital version of our syllabus, including our daily class schedule, which I will update as necessary. Our Canvas site also includes digital copies of Course Packet readings, additional readings, and class handouts (Files); a forum for posting reading responses and engaging in written discussions with each other (Discussions); a place to hand in first drafts of essays (Assignments); and a forum for workshop feedback and peer review of each other's essays (Collaborations).

### **Assignments:**

The course requires four graded papers, all of which will be done in multiple drafts (except the Film Review). Note that the stronger your first draft is, the more I can help guide you toward an even stronger final version.

There will also be a few informal/ungraded writing assignments throughout the semester. In some cases I may ask you to share your informal work with others in class or to read it aloud.

### **Format for Papers:**

All drafts of essays should be written in a standard, serifed font, such as 12-point Times New Roman or Garamond, and double-spaced. Please include a word count at the bottom of the last page of every draft (first or final) and endnotes listing any sources you consulted. (More on endnotes below.) You should also attach a process letter to every *final draft* (see guidelines below). For every draft, include a heading at the top of the page with your name, my name, the date, and the assignment, and include a title for your essay—even if it's only a placeholder title on a draft—and page numbers.

### **Guidelines for Process Letters:**

At the end of each final draft, please include a brief process letter, reflecting on the process of writing this essay. In your process letter, you may want to address the following:

- \*What were your main intentions for this essay?
- \*Which parts of the essay do you think are most successful and why?
- \*Are there any areas that you are not as satisfied with and why?
- \*Share any significant takeaways from the writing process—reflections on planning/pre-writing, drafting, revising, writing multiple drafts, incorporating feedback, etc.
- \*Share any techniques, devices, approaches, or ideas that were inspired by course readings or class discussions. Please mention relevant authors and works by name.
- \*Acknowledge anyone outside of class who helped you in the writing of this essay (writing partner, writing tutor, friend, etc.).

### **Workshops:**

Over the course of the semester, each class member will have a chance to present their work in a writing workshop. In class on workshop days, a few students' essays will be discussed by the rest of the class. You will be randomly assigned to a group during an early class period so that you will know well in advance your workshop date.

### **Instructions for Workshop Comments:**

\*Workshop students: Please put your essay into a Google Doc, using Canvas (Collaborations). Name the document “Workshop [Number] [Your Name]” (for example, “Workshop 1 Pam Newton”). Make sure you share the doc with everyone in the class (select all names at the bottom of the screen).

\*All students: Read the workshop drafts on Canvas. Make marginal comments of any kind (using the “comment” function)—things you think are working well or not working, suggestions for line edits, suggestions for structural changes, recommended additions or subtractions of text, etc.

\*Then, in a separate doc, write up a holistic response to the essay, addressed to the author, of at least 150 words. In your comment, state what works best in the draft and why. Be specific. Then suggest at least two significant improvements the writer might make and describe precisely HOW the writer could begin to make the improvements. Be as specific as you can. For example, if you think the piece needs to be reorganized, please give specific suggestions for how it should be structured.

\*Email this holistic comment to the author and then upload one doc with your comments to all the workshop authors to Canvas (Assignments).

### **Nonfiction and Citing Sources:**

The writing in the course is nonfiction, meaning it must be true and verifiable. As you gather information, keep track of your sources (as professional writers of nonfiction do). If you have used any outside sources in writing your piece, please include endnotes with an alphabetized list of sources to indicate where factual information came from. Sources may include interviews, books, articles, videos, and more.

For a discussion of the use of sources, please see the [Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, “Using Sources”](#). The site gives good conceptual guidance as well as practical information, including this helpful tip about using internet sources: “The general form of a citation from an Internet source is: Author’s name. Title of Document. Title of Website. Sponsor of Website. Date of Document. Date of Access. URL.”

Here's a typical endnote for a website:

Malcolm Gladwell. “Listening to Khakis.” *New Yorker*. 7/28/97. Visited 8/16/2017.  
<<http://gladwell.com/listening-to-khakis/>>.

### **Academic Honesty:**

Endnotes (above) are one way to help you avoid plagiarism. Please make sure that you always give credit where credit is due and never try to pass off someone else’s ideas or words as your own. Plagiarism is taken extremely seriously by the university, with a range of consequences depending on the seriousness of the offense. Note that use of an AI chatbot, such as ChatGPT, to complete written work constitutes academic dishonesty, unless it is used for a specific purpose and with permission from me. As with any source, use of AI requires appropriate citation. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty, please talk to me. There is also useful information about [avoiding plagiarism](#) on the Poorvu Center’s website.

### **Grading:**

Personal Essay	20%
Journalistic Feature	30%
Film Review	10%
Policy Memo	20%
Presentation	10%
Short Writing Assignments	10%

### **Attendance and Participation:**

Your grade is based primarily on the breakdown above, but it may also be affected by your attendance and participation in class. Class participation includes thorough preparation for and useful participation in discussions, as well as thoughtful workshop and peer review feedback. Attendance means showing up on time for class and staying for the whole class. Because the summer session is so short and the curriculum moves so quickly, it is crucial that you attend every class (barring illness or other unforeseen circumstances). More than one unexcused absence may affect your final grade. Note that an unexcused absence is one that is not accompanied by a note from a college administrator or medical professional.

### **Deadlines:**

You are expected to hand in all work on the due date. If you need an extension, please make arrangements with me beforehand. Late papers that do not have extensions (or a dean's excuse) will go down one grade step (A to A-) for every day (not class) they are late. Late first drafts of essays run the risk of not receiving comments. Note that you may not get an extension on a workshop draft.

### **Diversity and Equity in the English Department:**

This course is fully in accord with the Department of English, which has committed to establishing an equitable and inclusive environment where all members feel safe, supported, and valued. The English department believes that a diversity of experience, positionality, and perspective is of central importance to excellence in literary studies. We believe that all students, faculty, and staff deserve to pursue their work free from any form of harassment. As educators, intellectuals, writers, students, and staff, we ask ourselves how we can ensure that all members of the department—and all the students in our classes—will be able to succeed, especially those who have been historically underrepresented at Yale. You can find out more about the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work of the English Department [here](#).

### **Accessibility:**

Yale supports its students in all of their neurological, physical, and learning diversity. Accommodations can be requested through [Student Accessibility Services](#). Students can also engage with the resources offered by the [Academic Strategies Program](#). First-years are invited to fill out a [request for a peer liaison](#) to help with accommodations.

### **Additional Help:**

The Poorvu Center, an excellent resource for student writers, is located in Sterling Library and offers drop-in sessions with a student Writing Partner. For more information, go to the Poorvu Center's [tutoring page](#). Note that some Writing Partners may be conducting meetings over Zoom.

### **Communication:**

If you are having trouble attending class or fulfilling assignments for any reason, please talk to me about it as soon as you can. You can always email me with any questions or concerns, or we can talk during office hours or make arrangements to meet at another time. Please aim for clear and honest communication, consideration for others, and a strong sense of personal responsibility.