

Writing Power, or Dueling in Print with Lightsabers:

An RIC Seminar on Scholarly Composition
100.490.01



Mace Windu, played by Samuel L. Jackson, *Star Wars* (Lucasfilm)

Wednesday
1:30pm – 3:50 pm

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Office Hours: Tues. 9am-11am

Description

This course explores the practice of composition for professional writers. It considers the “light” and “dark” sides of clear, direct scholarly writing and intentional, academic obfuscation. Attendees will also learn strategies and potential hazards that accompany the written description of power in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

A first-of-its kind seminar hosted by the Program in Racism, Immigration, and Citizenship, participants will consider how authors advance and challenge power dynamics, particularly those which originate from historical processes like capital accumulation, white supremacy, and the act of writing itself. Lessons will emphasize close reading and the making of intentioned composition choices in order to empower students, ensure the realization of successful analytic arguments, and improve the participants’ pathway to publication.

Required Text:

Joseph M. Williams and Joseph Bizup, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 12th ed. (Pearson, 2010).

Conferences

You will attend at least three mandatory conferences with me, Prof. Connolly. Scheduled for the weeks of Feb 17-21, Mar 9-13, and April 20-24, each will occur after you have submitted rough drafts of the course's writing assignments.

Conferences provide a valuable opportunity for us to work one-on-one to assess and improve your writing. Writers should come to each conference prepared to describe their struggles or perceived successes in a given essay. They should also be mindful of what they can do better. The more work you do in preparation for our conferences, the more productive the conversations will be.

Evaluation and Assessment

This class takes an unconventional approach to grading, combining and averaging a participation grade and a writing grade.

Participation Grade

Your participation grade will reflect your in-class contributions, attendance, your preparedness for conferences, and the overall quality of comments you provide on the written work of your peers. Simple enough.

Writing Grade

Now, pay close attention. In most other classes, you receive grades on individual written assignments, and each assignment carries a certain weight in the calculation of your final grade. That will not happen here. This class focuses on your mastery of a set of writing skills. Thus, you will get one grade after the first assignment, reflecting your handle on composition techniques and course concepts *at that time*. As we complete subsequent assignments, I will adjust or maintain that *one grade* accordingly until we reach the end of the term. By semester's end, you'll have a single "writing grade" that captures how well you can execute analytic writing on a given subject.

There are a couple of reasons for evaluating students in this way. One, students come to this course – as they come to every course – with dramatically different intellectual commitments and different preparation in composition. It is therefore necessary to assess both a given student's current skill set and his or her improvement over the course of the semester. This seminar is designed to improve every student's writing, regardless of their previous preparation. As your writing exhibits the expected improvement, you will not be unfairly encumbered if, perhaps, you had a rough start. Furthermore, your grade cannot be completely derailed by a bad day that just happened to coincide with a major

assignment. Instead, I will assess your handle of course material and composition techniques as reflected by your performance on the page at a given time.

This brings me to the second reason for evaluating students through the “writing grade” approach. The purpose of this class is to have students develop analytic and composition skills approaching that found among professional, published writers. Given that professionals are evaluated by their results, not their effort, you shall be measured by a similar standard. As you’ll see from the rubric below, a high “writing grade” comes only through meeting the highest standards. Below describes how I will measure your writing assignments, particularly the three longer essays.¹

A – Excellent in every way, though not necessarily perfect. Ambitious and perceptive. Addresses complex issues in clear and interesting ways. Responsive to counter-arguments. Framed effectively and originally so that the author’s contributions represents new knowledge, not a simple restatement or compilation of source material. Begins with more than simple assertion, inviting the readers to read further. Holds readers’ attention with clean, precise, often elegant prose. Ends with more than summary or sweeping generality. An “A” essay, in sum, is a document that you would confidently send off for publication or as a writing sample to a prestigious internship or fellowship program.

B – Reaches high and achieves its aims. Built on solid ideas and sound use of evidence. Contains only a few thinly sourced claims or stray thoughts that don’t necessarily fit in with the paper’s stated argument. Generally clear and sharp prose, becoming unclear only infrequently. Makes strong claims, though perhaps without recognizing plausible counter-arguments. May occasionally leave unexplored the context for important pieces of evidence (i.e. authorial intent, social setting, etc.), diminishing the essay somewhat.

C – Real problems in an essay’s conceptual, structural, evidentiary, or prosaic qualities. Possibly repetitive, or plagued with several apparently unrelated and under-sourced ideas. Lacking depth and/or patently disengaged from other written sources. An essay that is largely summary with little to no close readings of sources. Contains a distracting frequency of catch phrases, platitudes, or grammatical and/or spelling mistakes. Could also be an essay built largely on opinion and/or personal reaction, albeit well-written reaction.

D – Falls far short of the assignment’s requirements. Problematic in several areas. Generally unintelligible. Unable to hold the attention of even the most charitable reader (i.e. your best friend, a parent, or even the professor).

F – Fails to meet the minimum requirements of the assignment.

****Given this rubric, any student diagnosed with dyslexia or other forms of learning difference should let me know immediately and contact Dayna Geary or Terri Massie Burrell, Shaffer 101, 410-516-4720****

¹ Rubric adapted from Maxine Rodburg. A version of this rubric appears in Kerry Walk’s booklet *Commenting and Grading: A Guide for Preceptors*, which is used in the Writing Program at Princeton University.

Assignments

Essay 1 – The Exquisite Art of Summary

A one-paragraph summary of one of the two scholarly pieces from Weeks 2 and 3

Draft due Feb. 14th – Final version due Feb. 21st

Essay 2 – Editorial

A 3-page editorial on a topic relative to current events

Draft due Mar. 6th – Final version due Mar. 13th

Essay 3 – Assessing a Debate

A seven-page essay weighing the positions and efficacy of the debate over the New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project. Outside citations only allowed after *all* listed sources on the syllabus have been utilized.

1st Draft due Apr. 17th – Final version due Apr. 24th

Essay 4 – Thematic Essay

A 5-page essay exhibiting your powers of analysis, composition, and concision.

Due May 14th

Expectations

Students will submit all written work on due dates in hard copy. You can have at least one extension of any deadline, no questions asked, if you request it at least a day ahead of time. Beyond that, I will not accept late writing assignments of any kind, nor will I reschedule any missed one-on-one conferences. Prolonged lateness for written work, especially after a student misses an agreed upon extension, will immediately compromise one's participation grade and may damage it irreparably, depending on the degree of tardiness. A missed conference without notice constitutes an absence. Three unexcused absences will result in failure of the course. Legitimate reasons for missing a class, a conference, or a deadline include serious illness, injury, or family tragedy. Such explanations may have to be verified by the Dean of Students.

Given that "Writing Power" is a grad/upper-level undergrad seminar, the success of this course depends on your ability to arrive prepared and on time for every class and conference; to make regular, substantive contributions to discussions and workshops; and to engage your classmates' work with respectful, supportive intellectual critique.

Manuscript Forms

1. *Pre-Draft Writing Assignments.* Writing assignments should be double-spaced, in a 12-point font, on one side of white paper. Use margins of about an inch, and single-space your name, the course title, our names and the number of the assignment (Writing Assignment 1.1) in the upper right-hand corner of your

first page. Begin your opening paragraph two double spaces beneath this single-spaced block of information. Number your pages, beginning with page two.

2. *Drafted Essays.* Essay manuscripts should also be double-spaced, in a 12-point font, etc. Single-space your name, the course title, our names, and the number of the essay (or draft) in the upper right-hand corner of the first page. Put your title in UPPER CASE LETTERS. Please do not underline it or place it in quotation marks. Number your pages, beginning with page two.

3. *Electronic Submissions.* Any time you submit an assignment via email (again, not preferred), you must save it as a word file (ending in .doc) and include your last name and the title of the assignment in the file name and in the subject of your email. For example, the subject line should say “Your Last Name WA 2.2” and the file should be saved as “Your Last Name WA 2.2.doc”. DO NOT save your files simply as “Essay 1.doc”, as that is confusing and leads to lost drafts.

Calendar

Week 1 – Jan. 29

Introduction – Light Side/Dark Side: Prof. Connolly’s “Star Wars” Approach to Writing

N. D. B. Connolly, “Notes on a Desegregated Method: Learning from Michael Katz and Others,” *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 4 (2015): 584-591.

Unit 1. Basic Principles

Week 2 – Feb. 5

Big Stakes, Few Words: Writing to Busy People

William H. Sewell, Jr. *et al*, Program in Comparative Study of Social Transformations (May, 1987) [provided by Prof. Connolly]

Williams and Bizup, “Understanding Style,” and “Correctness,” pp. 2-25

Week 3 – Feb. 12 – Actions and Verbs

Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” *Daedalus* 109, No. 1 (Winter, 1980): 121-136.

Williams and Bizup, “Actions,” and “Characters,” pp. 28-63

Feb. 14 – Writing Assignment 1.1, draft of report summary, due by noon

Week 4 – Feb. 19 – Characters and Subjects

In-class Peer Review: Character and Actions

Feb. 21 – Writing Assignment 1.2, final draft of summary, due in office mailbox, hardcopy by noon.

Week 5 – Feb. 26 – Sentence Clarity, Despite Length

Williams and Bizup, “Cohesion and Coherence,” and “Emphasis,” pp. 64-92

Week 6 – Mar. 4 – Old and New Information, Issue Positions

Williams and Bizup, “Motivation,” “Global Cohesion,” and “Concision,” pp. 93-136

Mar. 6 – Writing Assignment 2.1, 3-page draft of Editorial, due in office mailbox, hardcopy by noon.

Week 7 – Mar. 11 – Attacking: How to Identify and Describe Problems

In-class Peer Review: Problem and Structure

Mar. 13 – Writing Assignment 2.2, 3-page final draft of Editorial, due in office mailbox, hardcopy by noon.

Week 8 – Mar. 18 – * SPRING BREAK *****

Week 9 – Mar. 25 – Blocking: Deflecting Skepticism and Rebuttal

Williams and Bizup, “Shape,” “Elegance,” and “Ethics,” pp. 137-192.

Unit 2: Scholarly Applications

Week 10 – Apr. 1 – Problem

Wendy Anne Warren, “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England,” *Journal of American History* (March, 2007): 1031-1049.

Week 11 – Apr. 8 – No Class Meeting

Week 12 – Apr. 15 – Debate – The 1619 Project

Nikole Hannah Jones, “The Idea of America,” *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>

Jake Silverstein, “Why We Published the 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/20/magazine/1619-intro.html>

Jake Silverstein, “We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued the 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>

Adam Sewer, “The Fight Over the 1619 Project is Not About the Facts,” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 23, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>

Sean Wilentz, “A Matter of Facts,” *The Atlantic*, Jan. 22, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152/>

David Waldstreicher, “The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy,” *Boston Review*, Jan. 24, 2020. <http://bostonreview.net/race-politics/david-waldstreicher-hidden-stakes-1619-controversy>

Apr. 17 – Writing Assignment 3.1 – Assessing a Debate, 7-page draft due

Week 13 – Apr. 22 – Locating Debate, Picking a Fight

In-class Peer Review: Clarity and Grace

Apr. 24 – Writing Assignment 3.2 – Assessing a Debate, 7-page final draft due

Week 14 – Apr. 29 – Wielding Metalanguage – Light/Dark Sides Revisited

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274.

George Derek Musgrove, "Good at the Game of Tricknology: Proposition 209 and the Struggle for the Historical Memory of the Civil Rights Movement," *Souls* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 7-24.

Ronald Reagan, 1980 Neshoba County Fair Speech, August 3, 1980
<http://neshobademocrat.com/main.asp?SectionID=2&SubSectionID=297&ArticleID=15599&TM=60417.67>

May 14 Due Final Assignment – 5-page Thematic Essay