

English 602
Writers in the World: Text and Context
University of Southern California
Spring 2018

Monday, 4:30-6:50 PM
WPH 200

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 4:30-6:00 PM, and by appointment

Course Description:

We are the sum of our influences. Writing, reading, thinking ... all exist as part of a conversation going back 10,000 years. Language itself is part of the process, the ocean in which we are swimming, inescapable and everywhere. But even more particularly, we are defined as writers from the beginning by what we read. "A writer," Saul Bellow has noted, "is a reader moved to emulation" – and yet, in this culture, we are often taught to play down, or even distrust, the role of influence. This class will offer a full-throated celebration of influence, without which it is impossible to write. We will work our way through a variety of assigned readings. And, of course, we will write. Be prepared for in class exercises around the themes of our discussions, and for take home assignments that we will workshop. Each student will also be expected to produce one longer piece of writing: 10 pages, in any genre, that grow out of the idea of influence, on whatever terms. The hope is to open up the process by embracing writing as an interaction, not a solitary activity but our own small piece of a continuum. The class is multi-genre, and students are encouraged to experiment with forms outside their comfort zones, as a way of exploring new territory and thinking about this as a form of influence, as well.

Required Texts:

Devotion, Patti Smith
The Vanishing Princess, Jenny Diski
Uncle Vanya, by Anton Chekhov

The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin
Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates
The Orchid Thief, by Susan Orlean
Adaptation: The Shooting Script, by Charlie Kaufman
The Great War, Joe Sacco

Course Requirements:

- 1) **Attendance:** You are expected to attend every class meeting and to be on time and attentive, both to your fellow students and to the work under review. If you have to miss a class, you must contact the instructor by email beforehand. A portion of your grade will be based on attendance and punctuality.
- 2) **Readings:** Please read the assigned materials, per the class schedule, prior to coming to class. A portion of your grade will be based on your participation in class in the discussion of these materials.
- 3) **Writing:** Each student will be workshopped during the semester, on a schedule to be determined.
- 4) **Comments:** You are expected to read your classmates' work, and to hand in two pages of typed comments, one copy for the writer and one for the instructor. You are also expected to make margin comments on the manuscript. Comments are due the day each submission is workshopped. We will discuss workshop etiquette during the first class meeting.

This syllabus is, as the saying goes, written in water, which means that it is subject to change at the discretion of the professor.

Grading:

1. Class participation (15%): This means active participation in class and workshop sessions, meeting deadlines, completing and turning in other assignments, and participating in discussions of assigned readings.
2. Comments and writing exercises (35%)
3. Final Project (50%)

Class Schedule:

Week 1, January 8:

Instructor and student introductions.

Syllabus overview and course logistics and expectations.

General discussion: The art of influence.

Week 2, January 22:

Read for class: Patti Smith, *Devotion*.

Also: Jonathan Lethem, “The Ecstasy of Influence”

<http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/the-ecstasy-of-influence/?single=1>

News reports on 23 ultraconserved words and what they mean for language and communication.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/linguists-identify-15000-year-old-ultraconserved-words/2013/05/06/a02e3a14-b427-11e2-9a98-4be1688d7d84_story.html

<http://news.discovery.com/history/15000-year-old-words-130507-2.htm>

Week 3, January 29:

Read for class: From *The Vanishing Princess*: “The Vanishing Princess,” pp. 1-8; “Shit and Gold,” pp. 107-124.

Also: Jonathan Franzen, “On Autobiographical Writing” (handout)

Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”

<http://www.online-literature.com/franz-kafka/metamorphosis/1>

Week 4, February 5:

Read for class: Gogol’s “The Overcoat”

<http://www.shortstoryarchive.com/g/overcoat.html>; T.C. Boyle’s “The Overcoat 2” (handout)

Workshop

Week 5, February 12:

Read for class: Nathan Englander’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank”; Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (handouts)

Workshop

Week 6, February 26

Read for class: Carver’s “Errand” (handout) and Anton Chekhov’s

Uncle Vanya

Workshop

Week 7, March 5:

Read for class: Selections from the Sonnets, and work by Joan Larkin, David Trinidad, and Claudia Rankine (handouts)

Workshop

Week 8, March 19:

Read for class: James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Workshop

Week 9, March 26:

Read for class: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Workshop

Week 10, April 2

Read for class: Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*

Workshop

Week 11, April 9:

Read for class: Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation: The Shooting Script*

Workshop

Week 12, April 16:

Read for class: Joe Sacco, *The Great War*

Workshop

Week 13, April 23:

Final class.

Workshop.

Course recap.

University Policies on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage sarc@usc.edu describes reporting options and other resources.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs* http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.