Syllabus

English 357W: Theories of Grammar and the Composing Process
(MW 4-5:15 in G 339)

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Required Texts and Materials:

3. Sturdy standard-sized notebook
4. *Additional readings on E-Reserve to TBA


Course Description: Our course examines the structures and effects of the English language. The course has two main purposes: to enrich and solidify your rhetorical skills, and to encourage thought about the social and political implications of language issues. We will analyze sentences and paragraphs, and you will learn to employ language more consciously and effectively to bring about desired effects. We will also study the history of grammar and writing instruction. Overall, you should begin to appreciate the dynamic nature of human language.

Because ours is a Writing-Intensive (W) course, you will learn to conceive of writing according to the process model, and to learn and practice strategies for inventing, refining, drafting, revising, and editing polished essays. Toward these ends, you will:

a) maintain a dialogic journal of informal responses to our readings and to a partner’s ideas;
b) confer with me (at least twice) and with classmates about your writing-in-progress;
c) employ several pre-writing techniques;
d) engage in critical response to classmates’ writing.

The course is equally interested in sociolinguistics—i.e. the racial, ethnic, class, and gender issues associated with language. So, we will be asking basic questions, such as Why teach grammar? Is there such thing as standard or correct English? Should we refer to the language as singular—English—or is it more accurate to speak of the plural—Englishes? Is “good English” necessarily defined by those in power? How can we teach grammar and writing while still respecting our students’ sociolinguistic differences?
How can we teach them to master the dominant, “standard” dialect even while we acknowledge and value their home languages?

**Course Objectives:** By term’s end, students will learn to

1. understand the history of grammar and writing instruction.
2. analyze English sentences, identifying grammatical and syntactic structures.
3. distinguish meaningfully between descriptive and prescriptive grammars and the implications of each.
4. recognize and effectively use sophisticated rhetorical strategies.
5. identify and analyze grammatical errors
6. appreciate sociolinguistic dimensions of language study, including class, ethnicity, race, and gender.
7. conduct basic field research and analysis of linguistic practices.
8. locate, digest, and appropriately cite sources to support an analysis of a current language issue.
9. generate, revise, and edit prose in various styles for multiple purposes.
10. effectively engage in peer response workshop.
11. appreciate the implications of language study for the teaching of English.

**Essays:** Each student will invent, develop, draft, revise, edit, and submit three major essays (and a brief summary and evaluation) using MLA format and style. All three major essays require analytical, newsworthy theses with explicit implications, and all three must be carefully vetted for logic, clarity, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I encourage you to solicit as many critical readers as time allows.

**Essay #1:** 3-5pp. Rhetorical/Linguistic Analysis of a literary passage. a) Choose a passage of about 250 words from a published work of prose literature; b) analyze the passage’s rhetorical style according to the course guidelines; c) then, synthesize your findings into a short analytical essay with a sharp thesis, supported by your carefully distilled and organized data; finally, include approximately 250 words of autobiographical prose in which you mimic the writer’s style. Draft due Monday, February 4; final due Monday, February 11.

**Essay #2:** 3-5pp. Field research in linguistics: You will need to record (with explicit permission), transcribe, and analyze approximately ten minutes of unscripted conversation in English. We will negotiate the precise source[s] and occasion of this speech. Once you have recorded the speech, analyze the dialogue using the same guidelines as in Paper #1, noting extensively all perceptible linguistic features discussed in class and in our readings to date. Review your findings until you arrive at some essential insight(s). Then, organize your findings into a short analytical essay with a sharp thesis (your newsworthy insight) supported by your carefully arranged and distilled data. Draft due Wednesday, March 5; final version due Monday, March 10.
Essay #3: 5-7pp. Sociolinguistic Research: Choose one sociolinguistic topic raised by Thomas and Tchudi’s *The English Language: An Owner’s Manual* and extend the investigation *beyond* theirs to produce new insight about the issue. **NOTE WELL:** The assignment asks for a researched thesis—newsworthy, with larger implications—and **NOT a “report.”** Draft due Wednesday, March 26; final due Monday, March 31.

***I strongly urge you to avail yourself of the Writing Center (G 332; X-2636) for help with each of these essays, well before its due date.***

**Dialogic Journal:**

By the end of week one, you will need to find a partner for a *dialogic journal*. You and this partner will take turns responding informally but critically to the weekly readings and to each other every Tuesday, starting in week two. For example, Partner A will write a journal entry in response Thomas and Tchudi’s chapter on “The Play of Language” (or to a course-related issue of her/his choosing) by class time on Tuesday of week two, whereupon s/he will exchange the entry with Partner B, who will then 1) **respond to, extend upon, and/or start up a new thread.** By extending, I mean that respondent must a) venture her/his own critical response to the original entry, and then b) assess the issue’s larger implications. The format—handwritten, work-processed, IM, or e-mail—is up to you, but be sure to keep hard copies in any event. In this way, each pair of journal partners should end up with at least ten entries each by term’s end. Entries should be at least 250 words in length, addressing critically and substantively an issue relevant to the readings, the class discussion, or the course content. Keep careful records of your exchanges. Toward the end of term, I will assign one grade to both partners, based on the apparent level of critical engagement and conscientiousness overall. If you are stuck, feel free to use the journal prompts on page 7, below.

The purposes of the dialogic journal are several: You should consider it a pretext to help each other record and think through both your visceral and, later, your more critical responses to the readings, the essays, the research, and/or any other course related issues. You should also use it as a way to invent and develop your ideas for the essays. In any event, you and your partner need always to push each other to think more about larger implications of course issues. If at any point the journal feels to you like a mere chore, let me know immediately so we can try to fix it. Our goal is an authentic conversation on paper.

It may happen that, instead of pairs, some students will work in triads; thus, the partners—A, B, and C—would exchange on a different though still alternating schedule. Triads will end up with fewer total entries (four), and respondents will need to respond to two new entries whenever their turn arrives.

Of course, the success of the journal depends upon the conscientiousness of its writers. Clearly, you should choose your partner advisedly. If, however, that partner fails to maintain the journal or its quality, and if you don’t feel you can solve the problem yourself, you need to tell me as soon as possible, and to make sure you keep up your own part in the meanwhile. I will collect and evaluate these journals at term’s end, based on their critical insight and substantiveness.
Conferences: I will typically offer conference time slots during the preparation stages of the essays; each student must make it her/his business to meet with me at least once during the term for a writing conference. Also, you and your dialogic journal partner will meet with me, on another occasion, to discuss your progress. Of course, I encourage you to meet with me any time during my office hours, or at a mutually convenient time.

Oral Presentation: You will present the findings of your research toward Essay #3 in a ten-minute presentation to the class, to be evaluated for its clarity, organization, sophistication, interactivity, and intellectual rigor. Technological resources and visual aids are welcome, but not required.

Grammar Test: You will be tested on your knowledge of grammar to date on Wednesday, February 27; while the test counts toward your grade, think of it as a self-diagnostic, too. The test should show you which concepts you have mastered, and which areas still need your attention.

Characterizations: All students will be asked to volunteer to characterize assigned readings; that is, you will be responsible to 1) very briefly distill the thesis or key points of the day’s reading, along with any new terms or vocabulary; do not summarize the reading; rather, assume we have all read it; 2) assert your own critical response to the reading; 3) relate the reading to our class discussion. Be responsible to volunteer at least twice during the term. These are to be informal and very brief synopses, intended only to provide the class with a quick point of departure for the class, along with your critical reaction.

Final Examination: A comprehensive final exam (date and time TBA) will assess your ability to recognize and apply grammatical and linguistic concepts from all the readings and from our class discussions.

Policies:

1) Students are responsible to back up all formal assignments; also, students must keep copies of all graded work and of all pre-writing;
2) Only hard copies of assignments will be accepted; no e-mail attachments, please.
3) Students are responsible to notify me in case of emergency absence.
4) Students must attend regularly and promptly; any more than two absences or excessive lateness will substantially lower your course grade.
5) By the second week of class, you must formally designate one of your classmates as your contact person—i.e. the person who will be responsible to supply you with any missed notes, announcements, assignments, or handouts.
6) Students must be scrupulous in ascribing proper credit to sources; see below:
Academic Honesty:

Because your student handbook and several other readily available sources discuss plagiarism and its consequences, I will assume your understanding of the law, unless you indicate otherwise. Essentially, you must give credit when you use the ideas or even the words of a source. In our course, use MLA style for documentation. If you ever have questions about whether to cite a source, you should err on the side of caution. Also, you should consult me, the Writing Center, and/or the library Reference Desk.

Grading: I will determine your final course grade using the following guidelines:

- Essay #1 15%
- Essay #2 15%
- Essay #3 15%
- OP 5%
- Grammar Test 10%
- Dialogic Journal 10%
- Final Exam 25%
- *Discretionary 5%

* Refers to adjustment based on students’ apparent and demonstrable level of intellectual engagement with the course, as evident in prompt attendance, preparation, contributions, conferences, critical questioning, characterizations, etc.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

1  M 1/14  Introduction
   W 1/16  Syllabus; designate Class contact and DJ partners; EGW, Chapter 1: Speech vs. Writing
2  M 1/21  T&T, Chapter 1: The Play of Language
   W 1/23  EGW Chapter 2: The Major Parts of Speech
3  M 1/28  T&T Chapter 2: The Nature of Language
   W 1/30  EGW Chapter 3: The Minor Parts of Speech
4  M 2/4   Draft Essay #1 due; workshop
   W 2/6   T&T Chapter 3: Language and Society; editing workshop
5  M 2/11  Essay #1 due; EGW Chapter 4: Phrases: The Art of Chunking
   W 2/13  T&T Chapter 6: Traditions in Grammar
6  M 2/18  T&T Chapter 7: Modern Grammars
   W 2/20  T&T Chapter 8: Comparing Grammars
7 M 2/25  *EGW* Chapter 5: More on Phrases  
W 2/27  **Grammar Test**

8 M 3/3  *EGW* Chapter 6: Grammatical Roles: Distinguishing Identical Elements  
W 3/5 Draft Essay #2 due; workshop

9 M 3/10 Essay #2 due; prewrite and prep for research; *BPH* 178-226 (Recommended text)  
W 3/12 Library class

***Spring Break: March 17-24***

10 W 3/26 Draft essay #3 due; *BPH* 227-242 (Recommended text); workshop

11 M 3/31  T&T Chapter 5: A Brief History of the English Language  
W 4/2 Essay #3 due; film: “The Story of English”

12 M 4/7  *EGW* Chapter 7: Adverbials and Other Elements in the Clause  
W 4/9  T&T Chapter 9: Varieties, Dialects, and Registers

13 M 4/14 Presentations on Research A  
W 4/16 *EGW* Chapter 8: Passive? Tense? What’s on That Verb?; presentations on research B

14 M 4/21 Presentations on research C  
W 4/23 T&T Chapter 10: Language and the Marketplace of Ideas; presentations on research D

15 M 4/28 Last Day of Class

**Journal Prompts**

(Note: I intend these prompts to be default “starters” for your dialogic journal if you feel stuck; you are always welcome to pursue an issue of your own choosing, as long as it clearly relates to the course.):

Week 2: What does language have to do with magic and power? How can a person’s facility with language confer power and/or statue on her/him?

Week 3: Why do you think the study of grammar inspires such fear and distaste in so many people? How should we understand the term *grammar*?

Week 4: Does the English language help to shape our worldview? Do English speakers experience a reality distinct from, say, that of a Hindi, Tagalog, or a Russian speaker?

Week 5: What, if anything, can we learn from studying the prose styles of our favorite writers? What have you noticed about your own style in the course of preparing Essay #1?

Week 6: When, if ever, do you think students should be required to study grammar—i.e. when are we ready? What was your experience of grammar and language instruction in elementary though high school?
Week 7: Repeatedly, studies seem to show that knowledge of correct grammar does not make a person a better speaker or writer. How can you account for this? What are the implications of such conclusions?

Week 8: Describe the experience of your field research—i.e., of recording, transcribing, and analyzing unscripted human communication. What insights, so far? Any surprises?

Week 9: Have you changed any of your thinking about grammar, usage, and correctness so far? Explain.

Week 10: What was your most interesting insight from your research? What did you think of the research process?

Week 11: What is the point of studying the history of the English language? Do we need to know where it came from? Do we need to know about the Battle of Hastings or about Proto-Indo-European? Explain.

Week 12: What’s the difference between an accent and a dialect? Do you consider that you speak with either?

Week 13: When you think of the origins of language, which parts of speech do you suppose came first, second, and so on? Explain why.