

# COURSE SYLLABUS & POLICIES

Instructor: Jamie Smith

Course: Writing About Public Problems / EN 76:108 C1

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Office Hours / Location: WF 9:30-10:30 (or by appointment) / Wean Hall 1301

*If you have questions about the policies of this class, review the syllabus first, and then come see me. The course syllabus is subject to change. I will go over any changes in class or send new information via e-mail.*

## ***Writing About Public Problems Overview***

Most social and public problems we encounter require careful investigation and research so that we might propose solutions that connect with others to make change. In this class, we will learn how public problems are defined and argued across a range of texts, including various types of proposals and white papers. By analyzing a range of proposal texts, we will identify the different kinds of legwork necessary to write a successful proposal, arguably one of the most challenging aspects of writing a persuasive recommendation for change. We will examine how writers unpack problems rhetorically and use evidence to argue solutions for different stakeholders who may not share common values.

We will learn strategies for evaluating and synthesizing data from existing research to use in a proposal argument. By the end of the course, students will write their own proposal that recommends a solution and a feasible plan for solving a real problem.

## ***Required Readings*** (all available through Canvas)

Most of our readings will be journal articles, op-ed pieces and chapters from books. You may access these readings through the “modules” tab on Canvas. It is very important that you **print these readings and bring them to class on the days that they will be discussed**. It may be easier for you to print all of the readings at the beginning of the semester and keep them in a binder that you bring to class daily – this way, you will never forget readings, and you will be able to reference them later in the semester.

## ***Optional Books*** (any editions will suffice)

*Style* by Joseph Williams

## **Course Goals**

At Carnegie Mellon, we hope our students will be communicators who can understand their environments, assess rhetorical needs, and utilize their knowledge and resources strategically to craft documents that build consensus and connect with readers.

- Writers who can adapt their linguistic and rhetorical knowledge to write reader-centered texts across a variety of academic and nonacademic contexts.
- Writers who can read and use complex texts to understand and contribute to culturally significant problems.
- Writers who can position themselves as knowledge makers or agents of change within a discourse community, so that they can make meaningful contributions to others in that community.

## **Course Objectives**

This class is structured around three major writing assignments: the Memo, the E-mail Portfolio, and the Proposal. This course aims toward helping you build skills for noticing features of different

communication genres within the context of writing to change public problems. All of the work that we accomplish in our course builds toward your own written proposal that argues for some kind of change to a policy or practice that you have observed.

Our course “objectives,” or the academic literacy practices you’ll develop as a result of this class are listed below. After taking 76-101: Writing about Public Problems, you should be able to

- Analyze models of problem/solution texts for their genre norms and situations
- Produce reader-centered email and PowerPoint communication
- Employ design strategies for visual hierarchy in written documents
- Adapt “superstructures” for writing problem/solution texts
- Read and synthesize relevant information from research genres like white papers and IMRD research articles
- Demonstrate cultural consideration when investigating the stakes and stakeholders related to a given rhetorical problem
- Construct reader-oriented research plans for nonacademic communication
- Write a reader-centered proposal for a nonacademic purpose
- Exert metacognitive control over planning and producing written communication

### **Class Participation and Lateness**

You must do the assigned homework and come prepared to participate in class. You are expected to contribute to general class discussions and small group discussions, seek feedback from other class members on work in progress, and provide thoughtful feedback to other class members on their work. Being prepared for this class includes paying close attention to the assignments for each class, doing the homework, showing up on time to conferences, and bringing relevant materials with you to class.

Arrive on time. You won’t get an A in this class if you can’t get here on time. Lateness disrupts the class and is outrageously distracting. **For every three days you are late to class, you will be marked for one absence.** If you are more than 15 minutes late to class, you will be marked absent for that day. Sleeping, texting, and doing other work in class can result in being marked absent. *I will not interrupt class to scold you about tardiness, sleeping or texting; rather, I will simply deduct points from your grade without ceremony.*

### **Attendance**

Since this is a small discussion class, **attendance is mandatory.** You are allotted two absences in this class without penalty—once you miss a third class, **your grade will begin to drop by a half-a-letter grade per absence** (that’s 50 points from the total number of points earned in the semester). Treat this attendance policy like a “personal” or “sick day” policy you might find in a workplace. In other words, these absences usually occur because of minor illnesses or schedule conflicts. You are expected to keep track of your own absences. If you are consistently late or absent, you should not be surprised if your grade suffers.

**Plan ahead** if you think you might miss class for religious holidays or for other scheduled events. You need to plan your semester carefully so that you do not use all of your personal/sick days at once.

**In the case of university-sanctioned activities** (e.g., athletics or a course-specific trip that takes you out of town), you **must provide documentation** for these absences so that they do not count against your final grade. You must make me aware of these absences via e-mail *before* they take place.

If you have extenuating circumstances that could affect your attendance throughout the semester (such as an extended illness, athletics, or a family emergency), it is your responsibility to notify me about your situation ASAP and to get some sort of authoritative documentation from your advisor to excuse your absences. In this class, appropriate documentation for an excused absence due to illness typically should come from the Dean's office or your advisor, especially for recurring problems—**not from campus health services or from a family doctor.**

If you miss a class meeting, you are responsible to contact **your peers** for materials and information you've missed. Please do not e-mail me and say, "What did I miss?" Missing a class is no excuse for not completing the homework. All assignments and most handouts and course readings will be posted to Canvas for the entire semester.

### **Etiquette**

When e-mailing me (or any of your instructors), always write in a professional manner and allow for a 24-hour response time. I may not always check my e-mail in the late evening; if you have specific questions about your major writing assignments, you should send them ASAP to avoid missing me before I go to sleep. If my response time will be longer than 24 hours, I will notify the class.

You are expected to be respectful toward your peers and instructor, both online and in the classroom. Personal or identity-based rudeness (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, ad hominem attacks, general unpleasantness) will not be tolerated.

### **Using Sources Properly**

In this course, we will talk about the differences between plagiarism and the misuse of sources. There is a difference, and so the consequences for each are not the same. We will discuss how to use sources appropriately, and if you have any questions, always feel free to ask me. Working with sources is a developmental skill, and this issue of working with sources is different from blatant plagiarism. Plagiarism is a serious offense and can even result in failure of the course.

If you have any questions about using sources properly, **please ask me!** If you get so frustrated with an assignment that you feel like your only option is to plagiarize, **come see me.**

### **Deadlines**

All major written assignments must be submitted on the due date by the beginning of class. If you have trouble with Canvas, e-mail me a copy of your paper. Lateness will be dealt with as follows:

- Rough drafts for Major Writing Assignments: For every day that a rough draft is late, your final draft will lose ten points. If you do not submit a rough draft, I will not grade a final draft. Your grade (on the paper and in the class) will be a zero.
- Graded drafts for Major Writing Assignments: For every day that a final draft is late, you will lose ten points.
- Smaller homework assignments: **I will not accept late smaller homework assignments.** This includes assignments that are only one minute late. If you cannot attend class, e-mail or send your work in with another student.

Note:

If you are having trouble with Canvas, e-mail me your assignment **before** the due date/time.

All of our assignment deadlines are listed on the class calendar and on Canvas. You may need to plan ahead in order to meet these deadlines.

### **Cell Phones, Laptops, and Other Related Technologies**

Unless you have a *legitimate medical or accessibility-based reason* for using electronics in my classroom, cell phones, electronic tablets and laptops are not necessary for any in-class work we will be doing. As such, please

leave them turned off and in your bag or at home. Failure to comply will strongly and negatively affect your participation grade in the course.

### **Religious Observance**

If you have a conflict between a religious holiday and a graded assignment or class meeting, please contact me in advance so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

### **Disability**

If you have a disability or issue with accessibility that could impair your progress in this course, please contact the Equal Opportunity Services on campus (<http://hr.web.cmu.edu/dsrg/students.htm>). We can arrange to accommodate your learning style based on EOS recommendations. Please notify me at the semester's beginning of your learning needs--do not wait until the semester becomes overwhelming to acknowledge the problem.

### **Academic Integrity**

At Carnegie Mellon, we believe in the excellence of our students and in the integrity of our academic programs. We also believe that your good ideas become better when you test them against the ideas of others. So for this course, feel free to discuss your ideas about the major writing assignments with other students. However, collaborating on independent assignments or open-book quizzes is not acceptable because those types of assignments are designed for me, your instructor, to monitor how you are handling specific parts of the course materials. Blatantly taking someone else's words, ideas or concepts, and using them without citing your source is plagiarism. So is using another student's essay, or part of his or her essay, as your own. In the world of writing (academic writing especially), this is a serious crime, and is treated as such. Anyone who uses non-documented material from another source, including online sources, could receive a failing grade for the entire course and could be referred to the Dean's office for further disciplinary action.

### **Stress Culture and Personal Health**

College (especially freshman year) can be a difficult time for students on a personal level. Here are some general tips for navigating this difficulty:

*Don't buy into the "stress culture" games.* If people are staying up all night to complete homework long after a reasonable person would have gone to bed, that's their problem (and possibly their own issues with time management). If someone brags to you that they found obviously difficult assignments to be easy or unchallenging, you should know that they are probably lying or exaggerating. Ignore them. If someone is toxically competitive, limit your engagement with that person, or let them know that you don't want to discuss work with them.

*Cultivate a healthy lifestyle.* Go to bed at a reasonable hour. Set manageable work goals. Don't procrastinate. Drink lots of water. Eat fruits and vegetables. Get some exercise. Avoid illegal drugs and alcohol. Make time every day or week to relax, unwind, call your loved ones, practice self-care, engage in religious or spiritual practice (if applicable), or spend time with friends. All of these habits will help you develop a healthy, professional persona at CMU and beyond.

*Be mindful of your social media habits.* We live in a culture where lots of people publicly post the bests of themselves or even fictitious versions of themselves online – try to remember that these posts usually aren't the whole story, and you shouldn't compare yourself to unreal "perfection" or fake "happiness." It can also be healthy to limit the amount of time you spend on your phones and laptops. Get off your screens and get some fresh air!

*Seek help if you need it!* CMU Counseling and Psychological Services exists to help students with their mental and emotional health. If you are feeling overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, etc., please make an appointment with student health services. Their phone number is 412-268-2922.