

Course Syllabus - Uncommon Reading
True/False: Media Literacy or Making Sense of What We See, Hear, and Read
IDH 2930 - 136A - True/False - Spring 2018

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 9-10am or by appointment

Meeting time: Thursdays, Period 9 (4:05-4:55pm), Little 119

Required Text: Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Penguin.

Course Description:

Rarely has reality needed so much to be re-imagined. - True/False Film Festival

Topic: We live in strange times, indeed. Entertainment is among the chief industries of our society. All forms of public discourse somehow get reduced to that which will tantalize and, ultimately, that which will sell. Our all-access media streams flow to us in a full range of devices from smartphones to laptops to flat screen tvs to billboards. They are a constant flow of information, opinions, emotions, stories, images, and sounds that often feel like an overflow. Infuse these inputs with various ideological perspectives and marketing-savvy nuances, and it becomes too much to take in and make sense of. What we are often left with is a wholesale inability to decipher and process all the information. The news itself might be the best example of the problem of media over-stimulation. As we encounter this or that news bit, it comes with a backdrop of potential claims of “fake news” and warring voices among the talking heads. Of particular note, in our digital intake online, genuine issues are confused with the “comments” sections. In short, our media overflow turns worthwhile and complex things into simple commodities for consumption, entertainment, or ideological battleground. At the same time, seemingly we have more reliable ways to communicate, better forms of diverse media for thought provoking ideas, and access to cultural riches like the arts that is refreshingly at our fingertips. But how are we to consider the imprint any of this makes on our lives? Where is there space to sort truth from error, reality from fiction? And what is at stake in all of this anyway? How might we see various media streams as constructive and not merely destructive? Are there ways that our imaginations might craft a better way to navigate and process all that comes our way?

In short: this class is a reflective exploration of the nature and power of story through all the different ways we hear them told.

Approach: Inspired by the guiding philosophy of the True/False Film Festival, this seminar style course will involve a “slow read” of Neil Postman’s acclaimed book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Although it was originally published in 1985 when television was our primary form of media intake, Postman’s work has remained a steady point of reflection serving as a cultural pause button to stop and think about our engagement with media. With recent technological, cultural, and political developments, Postman’s ideas continue to offer much for consideration of our ongoing situation. Alongside Postman’s text, we will consider how the arts come to bear on the topic. Specific focus will be given to creative nonfiction film (a kind of documentary), and in particular the resources of the [True/False Film Festival](https://truefalse.org/).

What? A class that’s oriented by a film festival? Yes, and here’s why....

If anyone is interested in learning more about or attending True/False: <https://truefalse.org/>

Course Objectives:

1. Read *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (and related material) carefully and reflectively
2. Understand and articulate Postman’s ideas, placing in context of our own experience
3. Engage the text *critically and respond personally
4. Discuss the text in a thoughtful way that includes both careful reading and careful listening.

*Critically does not mean negatively only. It means that it is expected that you will be able to distance yourself enough to fairly and thoughtfully analyze the content, evaluating in ways that allow you to offer thoughtful response and not merely agree or disagree. This critical stance should be framed by a generous posture on your part. Please read “Reading Charitably” in Canvas.

A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility

(Note: the following is at least one way we seek to cultivate a different kind of classroom experience than what might be common.)

This is a humanities class that raises *existential questions* related to the human experience. It necessarily probes issues that are sometimes thorny, don’t always have clear answers and includes ones in which people can have strong differences of opinion. One way to think of the class is to see it as a big conversation about big issues. Optimal participation comes from the ability to be fully engaged: observant, reflective, and imaginative as we enter into conversation. In order for us to have a successful class, we need to have a sustained conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). There should be room for articulation of individual perspectives, while leaving room for disagreement and friendly critique. All of us should respectfully listen to the author’s views as well as each other’s, without becoming dismissive or defensive, a common default when disagreement is detected; and after listening, we need to be able to converse about what we hear. As these ideals are upheld we hope to create an environment where we all sense that,

fundamentally, we are in this together in spite of our differences. (Please see article in Canvas: "Reading Charitably".)

All in all, it will be useful to grant ourselves a freedom to think in large terms about life - at the deepest levels of personal conviction. This is not a facts and information class, although we certainly hope to be learning something; this is a class in which we will think about our cultural and media discourse through a lens: pondering and learning about what it means to be human by processing, thinking well about, and interacting over the big ideas that come to us through our reading and discussion.

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation 15% (150 points)

Weekly Blog Posts 25% (10 x 25 = 250 points)

Film/Creative Review 30% (4 x 75 = 300 points)

Final Essay 30% (300 points)

*Note: your own writing and how well you can communicate your own ideas (media messaging/stories) is the primary way you will be evaluated. Writing will be the culmination of our reading and conversation.

Each week we will read one or more chapters plus a supplemental article, video, or poem. Students will be responsible to read and actively discuss the material each week, as well as write a blog post that might also be posted in discussion. *If enrollment is small enough, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.*

All assignments will be submitted through Canvas/e-learning as directed. Students will receive ½ credit for all late assignments up to one week from the due date. Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. Grading for assignments will be based on 1) the accuracy of your understanding of the material; 2) the organization and clarity of your writing; 3) the persuasiveness of your arguments; and, 4) not least, your focus on responding to questions as asked.

Attendance and Participation:

Since this is a discussion-based class that meets only once a week, attendance is vital and assumed. Except for emergencies, absences must be cleared with the instructor prior to class. Students will be permitted **one** absence over the course of the semester. A second absence will lower the course grade by ½ a letter grade, and a third or fourth absence by an additional full letter grade each. Students cannot receive credit for the class if there are more than four absences.

In addition to attendance, students are expected to regularly contribute to classroom discussions. Participation will be measured by verbal contribution in class as well as interaction via online discussion in Canvas (e-learning). Regarding online Discussion, the instructor will

monitor and note both the frequency of comments and the quality of engagement. A worthy goal would be to initiate a discussion, comment on a discussion, or pose questions weekly in the Discussion forum in Canvas. Further participation could include making connections between class readings and your observations in culture (bringing to our attention related articles, books, poetry, film, artwork, thinkers, personal experiences).

In-class discussions will sometimes be led by the instructor, sometimes by class members, sometimes by the collective class. Each class member should come to class ready to contribute every week, and not merely to listen.

*Each week, students should come with 1-2 discussion questions that you would want to ask if you were leading a discussion on the assigned reading. As much as possible, questions should reference specific passages in the text. Questions should be included in the blog posts (see next).

Blog/Canvas Discussion:

Students will keep a weekly blog with brief reflections (100 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. The post should be copied and pasted into the discussion section of e-learning. Students may consider using the following questions as prompts: (these are also helpful for class discussion)

- Which of the author's thoughts most captured your attention this week?
- What do you find confusing in them?
- What do you find most compelling or affirm in his thinking?
- How would you criticize or improve his thought?

Each weekly blog post should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class.

Blog URLs will be submitted weekly **AT MIDNIGHT THE DAY BEFORE CLASS, with instructor response periodically. Details will be provided in class. See assignment sheet in Canvas - Assignments.

Film/Creative Reviews (4): film/art review essay - 250-500 words. Details given in class.

Final Reflection Paper: 1000-1250 words. Details given in class.

Grading Scale:

93-100 (A); 90-92 (A-); 87-89 (B+); 83-86 (B); 80-82 (B-); 77-79 (C+); 73-76 (C); 70-72 (C-); 67-69 (D+); 60-66 (D); 60-62 (D-); Below 59 (E)

Film Nights:

Film and other art forms are excellent avenues for gaining insight into the kinds of issues and

questions we will encounter in this class. Discussing film with others can nurture deeper understanding as well as forge connections with our fellow viewers. In this spirit, we will have one film night as a whole class outside of class time and one film night in groups in which we will view a film and have a short follow-up discussion. If you cannot make a film night, it will be your responsibility to view the selected film on your own. Dates and details to be announced.

Classroom Decorum:

Your full attention is expected while in class. Please turn off and store out of sight all cell phones, laptops, tablets, and electronic devices prior to class. No electronic devices should be turned on in class, without consent of instructor.

Academic Integrity:

Students are expected to act in accordance with the University of Florida policy on academic integrity. Cheating, lying, misrepresentation, or plagiarism in any form is unacceptable and inexcusable behavior. For more information, visit:

<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/honorcodes/honorcode.php>

Accommodations for students with disabilities:

If you require classroom accommodation because of a disability, you must first register with the Disability Resource Center <http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc>. The Disability Resource Center will provide documentation to you, which you then give to the instructor when requesting accommodation.

A brief note about how to read:*Late Request*

With love's confidence I'm asking,
if you should offer this book
to another, ask of him
as now I ask of you
to read slowly,
and thoroughly, tasting
each word's trouble.
Without doubt, certain passages
should never stand alone,
but will require assistance
offered by others to further
endow their meaning. I fear

for the reader who dabbles,
who gleans, who hurries to take
and flee, and who by doing so acquires
nothing but a novel form
of his current poverty and error.

—Anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

For week by week reading details and assignments, see Course Schedule