

Course Syllabus - Uncommon Reading
True/False: Media Literacy and Making Sense of What We See, Hear, and Read
IDH 2930 - 27215, section TB01 - True/False - Spring 2024

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Office Hours: by appointment

Meeting time: Wednesdays, Period 9 (4:05-4:55), LIT 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, Columbia, Missouri

True/False is a class about media literacy: how we make sense of the constant stream of “content” we receive. Entertainment and media streams of all kinds are 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, leaving us “media illiterate”.

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 are 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 curate various media streams that are 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?

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](#).

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.

**Personally* means two things: 1) as you read you are not merely seeking to find what you like and dislike about the book; more than that, you are entering into a conversation with the book/author. 2) As you interact with the reading, you allow the content to be filtered through your own experience in life.

Class Structure and Flow:

The class’ structure will be quite simple: reading and in-depth conversation. Each week, students will come to class having read and entered a brief reflection of the content for the week. During class, we will discuss the reading. There will be no lecturing by the instructor, though sometimes a side bar at the white board will be used to enhance the conversation. Periodically, there will be additional assignments in the form of short Film/Creative Review essays.

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 reflection of personal engagement. *Depending on class size, students may have rotating responsibility to lead part of the discussion.* 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 reflections (see below).

A Word About Academic and Human Discourse: Going Beyond Civility

This is a humanities class that raises existential questions related to the human experience. It 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 be able to talk to and with each other well. That involves a conversation in which members are humble, respectful, thoughtfully engaged, and still free to critique (offer friendly push-back). We want to see the articulation and discussion 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.

Weekly Reflections

Students will write 10 weekly brief reflections (100 words minimum, 250 words maximum) in response to the reading assignments. Each weekly reflection should include 1-2 thoughtful questions that could lead to discussion in class. Reflection assignment details will be posted in Canvas.

Reflections 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.

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, each student is expected to contribute to classroom discussions weekly. 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).

Film/Creative Reviews (4)

There will be four film/art review essay - 250-500 words. Details will be given in class.

Final Reflection Essay/Project

The final assignment will be a culmination of each student's engagement in the class. While it will take some effort, it should be enjoyable to do. 1000-1250 words. Details given in class.

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 seek to have one or two film nights 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.

Assignments and Grades:

Attendance and Participation 15% (150 points)

Weekly Reflections 25% (10 x 30 = 300 points)

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

Final Essay/Project 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 and speaking will be the

culmination of our reading and conversation.

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.

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)

UF Grading Policies: [link to the university grades and grading policies](#)

Classroom Decorum:

In a sense, the classroom culture we will work to cultivate is a form of “public discourse” that will probably take some effort to make a pathway for healthy conversation. Specifically, we will need to work to overcome technological distraction. 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:

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the disability Resource Center. [Click here to get started with the Disability Resource Center](#). It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

Course Evaluation

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Click here for guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via ufl.bluera.com/ufl/. [Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students here.](#)

A brief note about reading in community:

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*

Weekly Schedule:

For week by week reading details and assignments, see Course Schedule document in Canvas.