

Democracy and Representation in the USA

First year writing seminar

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Seminar description

For most of its history, the United States has had a mixture of democratic and authoritarian regimes. For example, the authoritarian regimes of the Jim Crow era existing alongside the democratic regimes at the national level and in most northern states. This course introduces students to the political science study of democracy and authoritarianism, focusing on the United States. Questions we will ask include: why did each emerge in the US, how did they interact, how and why did they change over time, and what is the threat of authoritarianism in the US today?

These are topics that have occupied most of my writing and research since I was a graduate student. They are issues I care deeply about, think a lot about, and about which I am continuously learning. They are also persistently contemporary issues for the United States. The study of their history connects very closely but in sometimes unclear ways with their present.

This makes it an ideal set of topics for me to try and teach writing as a continuous, cumulative, and collaborative process closely connected to reading and to thinking.

Learning Goals

The goal of the course is to improve your writing skills while developing a foundational knowledge of central debates in the study of democracy and representation in the United States. Improving your writing skills means, among other things, developing a firm grasp of the mechanics of writing, so that your writing communicates what you intend. Becoming a better writer requires that we become better readers; in the process of becoming better writers and readers, we also become better thinkers.

By the end of this course, your writing should demonstrate competency in the following areas:

- Identifying the argument of a text and accurately restating it in your own words. The purpose is not mirroring, but to accurately and concisely explain the viewpoints and arguments of others. This is part of what it means to understand someone
- Relating the organization and structure of a text to its argument, evidence, and persuasiveness
- Writing papers using the mechanics and conventions most common to the discipline of political science; modulating your writing to communicate with other audiences
- Situating your writing in wider conversations with others
- Developing a continuous practice of writing, from free-form thoughts on paper to outlining, drafting, peer review, and revising.
- Understanding what makes a good question.
- Understanding and engaging in key debates about the meaning, foundations, and limits of democracy and representation

Reading expectations

All readings will be available on Canvas at the beginning of the semester. They will almost all be in PDF format. If the texts are not accessible to you, it is your responsibility to let me know promptly.

This is a writing seminar, but to write well requires us to read well. The skills and practices we develop for reading are at least as important as those for writing.

- Read each assignment before class. Give yourself time to read thoughtfully and with care. For first-year writing seminars, there are not many readings for any session. You have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the reading to a greater extent.
- Take notes about what you are reading.
- Consider the following as you read: what is the genre of writing? who is the audience? what is the question, and what is the answer? why is the author writing this?
- Consider the mechanics of writing: what passages provoke you, or spark your interest? what passages move the reader along, getting you from point A to point B? what passages could be cut, and what passages are essential? how does the writer communicate to the reader who they are in conversation with? what choices does the writer make about themselves: is there an “I,” a “we,” or more third-person or passive constructions (“political scientists say ...”, “It is said ...”)?
- Be open to the possibility that the reading will spark ideas in you. Write these in your notes. Did you find anything new or curious in the text, puzzling, exciting, challenging, interesting, infuriating, confusing. What exactly sparked this? If you are moved, it usually means the writer has succeeded, at least in some respects: what have they done that worked this effect on you?
- Think about how the text connects to other material we have covered in the course. Start to create a relational map between them.

Over the course of the semester, you will learn skills that allow you to quickly identify different types of writing. Some of these will have conventions that make it easier to read casually. Others require constant and careful attention. Others flow like conversation – even if they’re long, they pass quickly. A critical skill to learn as a reader is what a text is expecting of you, so that you can be in a mindset that aligns your reading with the text. But be open to changing as you read.

Writing Expectations

We will discuss substantive ideas and writing in every class. But the balance will be to engage more with the substance of the ideas on Tuesdays and with the mechanics and practices of writing on Thursdays.

- **Every Thursday we will start by taking five minutes at the start of class where we will each write a brief journal entry.**
- **Students will be required to write 5 formal essays, totaling 25 pages or more of polished prose.** Three of these essays will go through several rounds of revision, following in-class and out-of-class peer review and instructor feedback.
- **All work (other than the journal entries) should be uploaded on Canvas through the assignment portal.** They should use any standard 12 point font. They should be double-spaced, with 1-inch margins. The pages should be numbered. A separate cover page should include your name and the essay title. Your name should otherwise not appear in the document (this will facilitate anonymous collaborative critiques).
- **All work that engages with the ideas and arguments of other writers needs to include citations.** We will discuss proper citation practices, starting with their purpose.
- **Each student will meet with the instructor in an individual conference twice during the semester, once near mid-term and again at the end of the semester.** The purpose of these meetings will be

to provide an overview of your writing progress and portfolio to-date, and to discuss areas for improvement.

Grading Policy

There are three main components to your final grade.

1. Attendance and participation – 35%
2. First writing portfolio – 30%
3. Second writing portfolio – 35%

If we think of writing as a process building to a goal of clear, effective, and deliberate communication, then our evaluation needs to reflect this. Preparatory writing other than journal entries (outlines, first paragraphs, first drafts) goes into your writing portfolios, but are given a simple grade of zero or one depending on whether you have completed it sincerely and on time. This will be part of your participation grade, as will your contributions to peer review.

The final versions of the different assignments will also go into your writing portfolio, one for the first half of the semester (essays 1-3) and the other for the second half of the semester (essays 4 and 5). The writing portfolio as a whole will be given a grade, reflecting the quality of the writing at the final stage but taking into account progress across each stage. These portfolios will both count toward the writing component of your final grade, but the portfolio for the second half of the course will be weighted more heavily to reflect your development and progress.

If you fulfill the requirements of the course and do good work, you will receive a grade in the B range. If you fulfill the requirements and do excellent work you will receive a grade in the A range. If you fall short in any aspect of the course, your grade will suffer.

Writing Assignment Schedule

The details of all required essays will be made available on Canvas in the assignment page. Do not think of these essays as having a single and final due date. They have different components or stages, each of which needs to be completed by a certain date so that the instructor and course has time to engage with the material before you move to the next component/stage.

First writing portfolio (due with final draft of essay 3 on Friday October 11)

Essay 1

- Post to Canvas on Friday September 6.

Essay 2

- Post outline and first paragraph to Canvas on Wednesday September 11
- Post final draft to Canvas on Friday September 20

Essay 3

- Post outline and first paragraph to Canvas on October 2
- Post final draft to Canvas on Friday October 11

Second writing portfolio (due with final draft of essay 5 on Friday December 6)

Essay 4

- Post outline and first paragraph on Wednesday October 16
- Post first draft to Canvas on Wednesday October 25
- Post revised and final draft to Canvas on Friday November 1

Essay 5

- Post outline and first paragraph to Canvas on Wednesday November 13
- Post first draft to Canvas on Wednesday November 20
- Post revised and final draft to Canvas on Friday December 6 (the Friday after our last meeting)

Standards for writing

- Standards for Good Work: To be considered good, your written work should be written with a minimum of technical errors. Papers should be engaging to read and should form coherent narratives. Your writing should be informed by the ideas and texts we study in the class. Papers should be thoughtfully and carefully written and should include proper citations where appropriate.
- Standards for Excellent Work: Excellent work includes all of the characteristics of good work. In addition, the writing will be exceptionally engaging, the insights notable. Readers will finish the paper feeling like they've learned something, and they will get the sense that the writer paid attention to every sentence.

Attendance and Participation

This is a discussion-based seminar, where you are evaluated on the basis of your collective and collaborative learning with peers. At a minimum, that requires regular attendance.

- You are expected to arrive in class on time and notify me in advance if you need to leave early.
- Unlike many university courses, I will be taking attendance. You are allowed three excused absences without consequence to your participation grade. If you have more absences, especially any unexcused absences, I will discuss with you what is going on and how your failure to participate is affecting your grade.
- If you have an excused absence, you are responsible for finding out from other students what happened in your absence (copies of any materials or assignments, discussion of work covered in class, etc.) Be on good terms with your peers. Share, and they will share in turn.

Attendance is important primarily as a necessary component of what we really care about, active and constructive participation.

- You need to have your readings with you and ready to consult them and refer to specific passages. You will also need to have evidence that you have taken notes on the readings. I will occasionally ask students to read from their notes, so be prepared.
- Genuine participation means showing respect for your fellow classmates, the opinions and perspectives shared in meetings, and a respect for the texts and their authors. Respect does not

mean agreement. It means recognizing the basic equality of our ignorance. We have no deeper insight into the universe, *a priori*, than anyone else.

- Respect is demonstrated by listening, by actively engaging with others, by being open to their perspectives and ideas, by not treating others as obstacles to expression your own experiences and perspectives. This is not a zero-sum practice we're engaging in. We make room for others, and room is made for us.

Instructor conferences

Students taking First-Year Writing Seminars should meet at least twice in individual conferences with their instructors. Time in the semester will be made available for these, after the completion of your first portfolio and before the submission of your second. Failure to meet will impact your participation grade, and likely lead to worse writing outcomes.

Rules about sharing

With the exception of your personal journal entries, all student writing may be read and shared to all members of the class. Peer review and engagement, including (sometimes anonymous) critical dissection of passages, will be essential to our learning practices. Journal entries will remain entirely private, even from the instructor.

Under no conditions can any student share someone else's material, anonymized or not, with anyone outside this class without the express permission of the author. Unless a student has a documented accommodation, no recording – video or audio – of class discussions is permitted. If a student has a documented accommodation, they are authorized to record within the specific scope of that accommodation, and under no can circumstances share or allow others to hear/see this recording.

If I believe a piece of writing might be beneficial for students in other courses, I will ask the author's permission before sharing. I will never share any writing outside this course that has not been anonymized, unless I have the permission of the author. I will not record any meeting of the course without the advance and express permission of the students.

Students can discuss what happens in this course with others outside of it. The purpose should be to continue and widen practices of learning and insights generated in the course. If referring to student discussion, they should adhere to practices of mutual respect. In some cases, this might mean not attributing statements to particular individuals. (This does not apply to describing problems with the instructor or quality of instruction, where you should speak freely and widely).

The purpose of these rules is to balance the need for a safe and private space to think and develop with the fact that learning is an intrinsically collaborative enterprise. Our goal is to learn. Sharing that facilitates that goal is desirable and to be encouraged. Sharing that undermines it is to be discouraged.

Rules about collaboration and co-authorship

All writing is collaborative. Even if you are holed up alone in a cabin with a typewriter, you are writing for someone and, in anticipating that someone, you are writing with a model of them in your mind; your writing has always learned from others.

But not all collaborative writing is co-authored. To collaborate is to share and work together; to co-author is to deepen collaboration to the point where two or more writers are giving direction to the writing and participating in crafting the words, making decisions as a team about what will be written and how.

Collaboration is encouraged in this course, and for some assignments will be explicitly required in the form of peer review and critique. Collaboration should be acknowledged.

Co-authorship is allowed only when a formal part of the assignment. For all other assignments, you are expected to author all writings by yourself.

Electronic Devices

The use of cell phones is prohibited. They need to be turned off and put away.

If you do not print off the course readings, or if you do not use a notetaking device that does not have access to the internet, then it will be your responsibility to have only material directly related to the course discussion open on your laptops or tablets. Repeated failure to adhere to this will affect your participation grade.

Academic Integrity

All the work you submit in this course must have been written for this course and not another and must originate with you in form and content with all contributory sources fully and specifically acknowledged. Any use of AI to write any part of your assignments, outside of exercises in which it is expressly authorized as part of a learning experience, is prohibited and will be treated as a violation of academic integrity.

Carefully read Cornell's Code of Academic Integrity. The Code is contained in *The Essential Guide to Academic Integrity at Cornell*, which is distributed to all new students during orientation. In addition to the Code, the Guide includes Acknowledging the Work of Others, Dealing with Online Sources, Working Collaboratively, a list of online resources, and tips to avoid cheating. You can view the Guide online at <https://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/academic-integrity/>. In this course, the normal penalty for a violation of the code is an 'F' for the term.

Cornell Writing Centers

The Cornell Writing Centers (CWC) provide support for individuals at any stage of the writing process. It is a free resource available to everyone on campus—faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students—for nearly any kind of writing project: applications, presentations, lab reports, essays, papers, and more. Tutors (trained peers) serve as responsive listeners and readers who can address questions about the writing process or about particular pieces of writing. They can also consider questions of confidence, assignment expectations, critical reading, analytic thought, and imagination. All tutors have training in supporting multilingual writers, working with writers remotely online, and in supporting writers working on application materials. The CWC welcomes walk-ins, but we also encourage writers to make appointments through our scheduling platform: <https://cornell.mywconline.net/>

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions

August 24 (Tuesday): Introducing each other and the course

- Harry Berger, *Situated Utterances*.

August 26 (Thursday): Introducing writing and reading political science

- Edmund Morgan, *Inventing the People*, preface.
- Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, *They Say, I Say*, 1-15
- Hjortshoj, "Language and Learning" and "The Whole Point of Writing"
- **Journal writing – focused on preparatory writing for essay 1**

Week 2: What is democracy?

September 3 (Tuesday)

- Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense."
- Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy*
- Sheri Berman, "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism."

September 5 (Thursday) No Class

- Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, *They Say, I Say*, 19-51
- Keith Hjortshoj, "Reading: How to Stay on Top of It"
- **Essay 1 due on Canvas on Friday September 6**

Week 3: Who are the people?

September 10 (Tuesday)

- Frederick Whelan, "Democratic Theory and the Boundary Problem."
- Charles Taylor, "The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion."
- **In-class discussion of Essay 1**
- **Outline and first paragraph of Essay 2 due on Canvas by Wednesday September 11**

September 12 (Thursday)

- Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, *They Say, I Say*, 55-77
- Hjortshoj, "Writing in reference to others"
- William Struck, Jr. *The Elements of Style*, 7-45 accessible as [e-book via Cornell Library](#)
- **Peer review of outline/paragraph for Essay 2**
- **Journal writing - reflections on peer review discussion**

Week 4: Why elections?

September 17 (Tuesday)

- Adam Przeworski, *Why Bother with Elections?*

September 19 (Thursday)

- William Struck, Jr. *The Elements of Style*, 45-72, accessible as e-book via Cornell Library
- Hjortshoj, "How Good Writing Gets Written"
- **Journal writing - free form**
- **Final draft of essay 2 posted to Canvas on Friday September 20**

Week 5: Democracy and/or capitalism?

September 24 (Tuesday)

- Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy*, pp. 48-61 and "Why all Democratic Countries have Mixed Economies"
- T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*.

September 26 (Thursday)

- William Struck, Jr. *The Elements of Style*, 45-72, accessible as e-book via Cornell Library
- Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, *They Say, I Say*, 92-101, 145-55
- **Journal writing - preparatory writing for essay 3**

Week 6: A Democracy not a Republic?

October 1 (Tuesday)

- Lisa L. Miller, "Checks and Balances, Veto Exceptionalism, and Constitutional Folk Wisdom"
- **Post outline and first paragraph of Essay 3 to Canvas by Wednesday October 2**

October 3 (Thursday)

- Graff, Birkenstein & Durst, *They Say, I Say*, 175-92
- **Peer review of outline/paragraph for Essay 3**
- **Journal writing - reflections on peer review discussion**

Week 7: Democracy in America: Empire and settler states

October 8 (Tuesday)

- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*
- Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*

October 10 (Thursday)

- Evsey Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom"
- Ronald Weitzer, *Transforming Settler States*
- **Journal writing – free form**
- **Post final draft of essay 3 to Canvas on Friday October 11**

Week 8: Instructor conferences

October 15 (Tuesday) Fall Break / No Class

October 17 (Thursday)

- **Time set aside for individual-instructor conferences**
- **Post outline and first paragraph of Essay 4 to Canvas by Friday October 18**

Week 9: Democracy in America: Subnational authoritarianism and the carceral state

October 22 (Tuesday)

- Robert Mickey, *Paths out of Dixie*.
- Robert Mickey, "Challenges to Subnational Democracy in the United States."
- **Post first draft of essay 4 to Canvas on Wednesday October 23**

October 24 (Thursday)

- Marie Gottschalk, *Caught*.
- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
- **Journal writing – free form**
- **In-class peer review of first draft of essay 4**

Week 10: In-Class Peer-Review

October 29 (Tuesday)

- **In-class peer review of first draft of essay 4, continued**

October 31 (Thursday) No Class

- **Post revised and final draft to Canvas on Friday November 1**

Week 11: What is representation?

November 5 (Tuesday)

- Hannah Pitkin, *On the Concept of Representation*.

November 7 (Thursday)

- Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*.
- **Journal writing – preparatory writing for Essay 5**

Week 12: Who gets represented?

November 12 (Tuesday)

- Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presences*
- Danielle Thomsen and Aaron King, "Women's Representation and the Gendered Pipeline to Power."
- **Post outline and first paragraph of Essay 5 to Canvas by Wednesday November 13**

November 14 (Thursday)

- Nicholas Carnes, "Why are there so few working-class people in political office? Evidence from state legislatures."
- Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics"
- **Journal writing – preparatory work for essay 5**

Week 13: The institutions of representation

November 19 (Tuesday)

- Richard Engstrom, "Partisan Gerrymandering: Weeds in the Political Thicket."
- J. Chen and J. Rodden, "Unintentional gerrymandering: political geography and electoral bias in legislatures."
- **Post first draft of essay 5 to Canvas on Wednesday November 20**

November 21 (Thursday)

- N. Stephanopoulos and C. Warshaw, "The impact of partisan gerrymandering on political parties."
- **Journal writing – free form**
- **In-class peer review of first draft of essay 5**

Week 14: Structural constraints

November 25 (Tuesday)

- Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints."
- Charles Lindblom, "The Market as Prison."
- **In-class peer review of first draft of essay 5, continued**

November 27 (Thursday) No Class / Thanksgiving Break

- Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*.

Week 15: Competitive authoritarianism and democratic backsliding?

December 3 (Tuesday)

- Corey Robin, "Trump and the trapped country" and "Why has it taken us so long to see Trump's Weakness"
- John Ganz, "What Happened Here?"
- Christopher S. Parker, "Status Threat: Moving the Right further to the Right?"
- **Course-Teacher Evaluations (online)**

December 5 (Thursday) Last day of class

- **Time set aside for individual-instructor conferences**
- **Post revised and final draft to Canvas on Friday December 6 (the Friday after our last meeting)**