

COMPOSING DIGITAL MEDIA

writing as layering

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EngCmp 0610-1070, Class Number 22186

Spring 2023, TuTh 1:00-2:15pm

class location: Zoom (see Canvas) or 435 CL

Our course website: **<https://benmiller314.github.io/cdm2023spring>**

All this information and more will be posted (and updated!) there.

I'll also link from Canvas to connect with your existing workflow.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course (across all sections) requires students to compose digital media while exploring the rhetorical, poetic, and political implications of multiple writing platforms. Students learn how to compose a range of critical media objects using web-authoring languages, text, sound, and images. Classes will focus on theories of writing, composing, design, critique, delivery, and networked distributions; critique and analysis of digital media produced by professional and amateur digital media practitioners; and analysis and revisions of digital media composed by the students themselves.

This particular section will focus on the core concepts of *layers* and *versioning*, applying them in the context of sound editing; image editing; and web design. We'll be using primarily free and open-source software and platforms.

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REQUIRED MATERIALS

We will not have a required textbook; however, I will assign texts to read and videos to watch, as well as some tutorials and walkthroughs for which I expect you to produce your own copies of

files. Most of these assigned texts will be available by direct link online; for some, I will share a scanned copy in a limited-access space (so as to respect copyright through fair use). Please do not distribute the scanned copies further than our class members, and please let me know right away if you're having trouble accessing one of these files – or, especially, the course website.

Software

If you wish to use a personal or home computer (vs. the lab computers), you are responsible for downloading and installing the following software packages, all of which cost zero dollars:

- **Git** (<https://git-scm.com/>). Version control software for the command line.
 - I'm going to highly recommend the GUIs (graphical user interfaces) available for both Mac and Windows: go to <https://desktop.github.com/>.
 - If you prefer the command line, Mac users may wish to install via Homebrew (<https://brew.sh/>); Windows users may wish to install GitBash.
- **Audacity** (<https://www.audacityteam.org/>). Audio editing toolkit.
 - In addition to the main application, you may want the ffmpeg plugin to import and export in a wider variety of file formats. Look for separate download instructions on the page where you download Audacity.
- **GIMP** (<https://www.gimp.org/>). The GNU Image Manipulation Program.
 - If you strongly prefer Photoshop (which is not free, but which Pitt tuition does license), talk to me; I'll probably allow it, but may also ask for a rationale / feature comparison.
- **Visual Studio Code** (<https://code.visualstudio.com/>). A cross-platform plain-text editor, with syntax highlighting and other features to support programming.
 - Alternatives like Notepad++ (for Windows) and TextWrangler (for Mac) are acceptable, but you *cannot* use something like Microsoft Word for this.
- A full-featured open-source web browser, such as **Chrome** or **Firefox**, will serve you best in the web unit for inspecting design elements while on the page. Safari and Edge can do it, but not quite as well; and Internet Explorer just isn't all there.

I recommend downloading these at your earliest convenience.

HARDWARE

You'll be making original sound recordings and taking original photographs; a cell phone of recent vintage should be enough, or you can borrow equipment from Pitt. If you're worried about file storage, I highly recommend (but don't require) getting an **external hard drive**, which is also a great solution for regularly backing up your most important files more generally.

In addition, **you're going to want headphones**, pretty often: our first unit deals with sound, and beyond that, you might well want some sonic isolation even in non-aural units.

COURSE OUTCOMES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Students in this course will:

- compose frequently, building a habit of reading and composing as reciprocal activities;
- respond orally and in writing to the ideas in multimodal texts about digital media and composing;
- respond orally and in writing to the ideas and strategies in their peers' texts;
- revise in response to their own reflections and feedback from peers and the teacher;
- use a variety of modes to revise for emphasis and coherence;
- develop familiarity with principles of fair use and open licensing, so as to incorporate source materials ethically and cite where appropriate;
- develop proficiency with a number of digital tools for composing in aural, visual, and hypertext modes;
- develop proficiency in one popular tool for version control and collaboration;
- develop shared criteria for assessing multimodal compositions in particular genres and/or media, in consultation with the professor;
- gain various learning strategies for extending knowledge in practical and theoretical aspects of digital media composition;
- work individually and on a team to produce sharable multimodal texts;
- complete a portfolio containing, at a minimum, three revised multimodal pieces, one set of drafts, and an introductory reflection.

As the teacher in this course, I will:

- respond orally and in writing to students' ideas and the ideas of scholars;
- provide exercises for generating multimodal texts, analyzing the features of multimodal texts, and revising texts;
- provide links to extensive online resources for further individualized study;
- discuss with students rationales for what each exercise is designed to do, and why it ought to work;
- encourage students to retry earlier exercises in later contexts, to support the development of mastery;
- choose assigned texts that balance accessibility for novices with constructive challenges that allow for learning;
- provide background context and guidance in understanding difficult texts or genre features;
- structure in-class time, especially time spent working in small peer groups, so there is meaningful work to be done (even if we finish early or run out of time);
- build in flexibility to per-class and semester-long schedules, recognizing that the complexity of writing – including digital writing – means insights and lessons do not follow a linear order of development, but leap from teachable moment to teachable moment;
- guide the class in developing shared criteria for assessing multimodal compositions in particular genres and/or media;

- provide a detailed grading contract that outlines criteria for participation and success in the course, and communicate about students' successes, setbacks, and possibilities.

WELCOME LETTER

Dear digital media composers,

I'm going to start with that crucial question, of grades. There are no graded quizzes in this course, and no tests. Here's the deal: if you participate actively, and meet some baseline unit criteria that we come up with together, your minimum grade – the minimum, not a guarantee, but a floor – is a B. I've got a four-page packet / Canvas module explaining what that means, and how you can go up or down from there, but that'll be part of the reading for homework.

Feeling a little better? Or still curious about the course's actual content? (I hope it's both.)

I've arranged the units of the course to build on each other, adding a new layer or wrinkle while carrying forward something of what we'd done previously. In the first unit, we'll think about the *affordances of digital media*: that is, what's made possible by working with bits instead of paper, even when we are still working with words? How do the answers change, or shift, as we move beyond words into aural and visual modes? The vocabulary we build here, at the start of class, will carry through the semester as a set of lenses, shaping what we pay attention to. In this first unit, rather than build a particular object, we'll get used to using *version control software* with our writing – which is to say, we'll keep track of what's changing from microdraft to microdraft. The tools we'll use here are Git and GitHub, which were developed for computer programming, but are adaptable to any kind of digital composing. In fact, GitHub is how we'll be hosting nearly all the materials for this course, including our discussion forum and your projects-in-progress. (The occasional file I need to keep private, I'll post to Canvas.)

The second unit is focused on *soundwriting*; it adds a layer of simultaneity by allowing several audio tracks to play at once (as opposed to the single linearity of prose text). We'll take a little tour of our sonic neighborhoods to practice paying attention to sounds, and the stories those sounds tell, sometimes below the level of conscious awareness. The major project for this unit is an *audio narrative* of your own design, whether documentary, fictional, or even science-

fictional: I'll ask you to record and rearrange the sounds that surround you, using Audacity as our tool of choice.

Unit three moves into *visual rhetorics*, adding multiple layers of depth to our x-y grid, even as we lose the axis of time. (Apologies to anyone who was especially excited to work on video, but I had to sacrifice something in designing this course: 14 weeks is really not a lot of time!) The major project in this unit is *visual argument*: a kind of collage, but – importantly – a collage that aims to make an intervention in the world through its juxtaposition of images and text. Though some of you may have some experience with Photoshop, I'm going to focus on GIMP: it's nearly as powerful, and because it's free, you'll be able to keep using it easily after graduation. (Regardless of software, it's important to realize that the biggest differences are in surface trappings – which are a lot less important than the functions they invoke, and the design principles that help you decide what you're trying to do. If you feel strongly that Photoshop is more appropriate for your learning and career goals, talk to me about it in office hours, and maybe we can work something out.)

The fourth unit, and with it the third major project, take us deeper into the computer's stack: we'll be working with HTML and CSS to build beautiful *responsive websites* more or less from scratch. If you've never worked with *markup languages* before, don't worry; I know an amazing tutorial. As for tools, there are many excellent markup-sensitive text editors out there, but if you don't have a preference, I recommend the cross-platform Atom. (Just don't use a word processor like MS Word or even LibreOffice, which would add a lot of junk code behind the scenes.) We'll publish the websites using GitHub's built-in Pages functionality.

Unit five asks you to put it all together, revisiting earlier projects and/or skillsets to consolidate what you've learned and project forward beyond the semester. We'll talk more about how that will work as it gets closer.

Maybe you noticed that I'm not planning to teach you any "industry standard" software. This is a design choice I made, deliberately, if not without some hesitation. Here's why: even if I could teach you every aspect of a single program, there are many more out there, all of them changing with each new release, each new competitor. Ultimately, there's no way to learn all there is to know about Composing Digital Media in one semester, or maybe a lifetime. Instead, what I hope the course can teach you, what I hope you'll learn, are strategies for dealing with

that endless churn – a sense of what to look for, and where to look, to figure out the next new tool, and the next, and the next.

So I'll frequently ask you to pause, to notice where your attention is drawn, and to consider what possibilities are present or suggested. I'll ask you to read and respond to both model texts and arguments; to reflect in writing frequently on the choices you're making, and why. And, above all, I'll ask you to keep making choices, and making new things. As composition scholar Doug Hesse put it, you can't learn to play piano just by reading about the piano; why should we expect any differently about writing, in any form?

I don't expect us all to become concert-solo ready in fourteen short weeks. But I'm looking forward to rehearsals, just the same.

All best,

Benjamin Miller (please call me Ben)

CARING FOR YOURSELF AND THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Accessing Resources

I strive to set you up for success. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for succeeding, which might include adapting assignments to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

As appropriate, you may also wish to contact the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 / 412-624-3346 (Fax), as early as possible in the term. For more information, visit <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drs>.

I also ask that everyone in the class strive to help ensure that everyone can learn in a supportive and respectful environment. For my part, I will work to ensure multiple ways of accessing class materials, including written lesson plans in screen-reader compliant html, alternative text for images, and transcriptions for recorded videos. Because proofreading the latter is particularly time-consuming, I ask that you *please let me know if you will be relying on transcriptions*.

COVID-19 Considerations

Pitt currently expects us to all be physically present. Given the ongoing presence of Omicron and its variants, and the consequent need to remain flexible, I'm adopting a **classroom-first, Zoom-accessible** model. What this means is that I'll be in the classroom, but connected to Zoom from my own laptop; other in-person participants may wish to join as well, so long as they keep their

microphones and speakers off to avoid echo. On days when you need it, you can find the Zoom link on Canvas the first time; after that, you should be able to find it in your Zoom app's recent history. You'll need to enter the passcode, which is **beammein** (that's "beam me in" without spaces).

No matter what, you should expect that **wearing high-quality, tight-fitting masks** can protect both you and others, even when they are not mandatory. I myself will be wearing at least a KN95 mask in indoor spaces throughout the semester. When Allegheny County is in a high state of viral transmission, Pitt's current policy automatically shifts to require masking in university buildings. It's important for everyone's health that we all uphold the regulations, standards, and guidelines put in place by public health officials; for the latest guidance, please see coronavirus.pitt.edu.

Life requires flexibility and grace, now more than ever. If your Flex@Pitt is starting to need a little extra flex on top of what we've already baked in, please do let me know.

Avoiding Plagiarism

This is a collaborative class, in which we offer each other suggestions and constructive criticism. However, the goal of all this collaboration is to clarify the expression of original ideas – never to substitute someone else's ideas for our own, or to impose our ideas on someone else.

To misrepresent the origins of an idea is *plagiarism*, and it is a problem both for your own learning and for the well-being of the community, which depends on mutual trust.

If you want to incorporate materials that others have created, you can do so **if you give credit to your source**. At a minimum, readers of your work should be able to get back to the original, so be sure to provide at least the author's identity; the original title; the publication venue; the date of publication and/or access; and a URL if appropriate. The English department has some useful resources at www.english.pitt.edu/undergraduate/plagiarism. And if you want to collaborate with an AI, there are ways to do so without sacrificing your learning. Let's talk!

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask, because Pitt takes a very hard stance on plagiarism. It could get you expelled. Here's an excerpt from the official Policy on Academic Integrity, to give you the flavor:

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, from the February 1974 Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom reported to the Senate Council, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz or exam will be imposed.

A student has an obligation to exhibit honesty and to respect the ethical standards of the profession in carrying out his or her academic assignments. Without limiting the application of this principle, a student may be found to have violated this obligation if he or she: [...]

8. Depends on the aid of others in a manner expressly prohibited by the faculty member, in the research, preparation, creation, writing, performing, or publication of work to be submitted for academic credit or evaluation.

9. Provides aid to another person, knowing such aid is expressly prohibited by the faculty member, in the research, preparation, creation, writing, performing, or publication of work to be submitted for academic credit or evaluation.
10. Presents as one's own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or words of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgment of sources.
11. Submits the work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be one's own.
12. Knowingly permits one's work to be submitted by another person without the faculty member's authorization.

You have the right to a fair hearing, and I'll talk to you before I talk to anyone else, but it's far easier just to avoid plagiarism in the first place. All clear cases of deliberate plagiarism will be referred to the appropriate Dean for disciplinary action, including an Academic Integrity Board hearing. For the University's full policy on Academic Integrity and the adjudication process for infringements, including plagiarism, go to <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ai1.html>.

Taking Care of Your Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health

Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle this semester by eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, and taking time to relax. Despite what you might hear, using your time to take care of yourself will actually help you achieve your academic goals more than spending too much time studying.

All of us benefit from support and guidance during times of struggle. If you or anyone you know experiences academic stress, difficult life events, or difficult feelings like anxiety or depression, I strongly encourage you to seek support. Consider reaching out to a friend, faculty, or family member you trust for assistance connecting to the support that can help. The University Counseling Center is here for you: call 412-648-7930 and visit their website at <http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cchome>.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, call someone immediately, day or night:

University Counseling Center (UCC): 412 648-7930

University Counseling Center Mental Health Crisis Response: 412-648-7930 x1

Resolve Crisis Network: 888-796-8226 (888-7-YOU-CAN)

Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services (412-648-7930)

Combatting Sexual Misconduct

In an ideal world, everyone would respect everyone else's bodily autonomy. Unfortunately, we know that is not always the case. Because the University is committed to supporting victims and building a safer campus culture, all faculty and staff members are required to report to the University's Title IX office any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence; this allows the office to reach out to victims with appropriate resources and support

options, and to avoid serial offenses or offenders going undetected for a long time. To clarify: **if I become aware of an incident of sexual misconduct, I must alert the Title IX office; this does *not* mean the police will be automatically involved, but it *does* open options for investigation or accommodations, at the discretion of the victim.**

There are two important exceptions to this mandatory reporting rule. First, some University employees, such as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality; a list can be found at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix-compliance>. Another exemption to the reporting requirement exists for academic work: disclosures about sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office.

If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources:

- Title IX Office: 412-648-7860
- SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. MF) and 412-648-7856 (after business hours).
- If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121.

Other reporting information is available at <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/make-report>.

Drawing on the expertise of the Writing Center

The Writing Center, located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, is an excellent resource for working with an experienced consultant on your writing – and not only alphanumeric writing. They're a great resource for developing ideas, getting feedback from an outside reader, and getting organized for revision and reflection.

Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis or throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular skillset, or to make up for a missed workshop; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. To make an appointment, go to the Writing Center or call 412-624-6556. For more information, including answers to frequently asked questions, visit <http://www.writingcenter.pitt.edu/undergraduate-services/student-faqs>.

Contact Ben any time

If anything you've read about in this section strikes you as especially relevant to your life – or especially concerning – please know that you can contact me at any time. (For an emergency, please do call one of the hotlines on the previous pages.) I am most easily reached by email at benmiller314@pitt.edu; you can also schedule an office-hour visit at benmiller314.youcanbook.me.

PROJECTS

Over the course of the semester, you will complete four projects – three solo (albeit with feedback) and one collaborative. As the semester goes on, we'll add detail to these assignments and link out to examples; we'll also develop baseline criteria and aspirational goals for each project in class, collaboratively. As you complete each unit, I'll ask you to write a reflection on your process and final product, including your own sense of where you've met or exceeded the criteria.

Audio Narrative

In your first project, you will arrange layers of sound to convey a sense of place and story. In assigning this, I have two main goals for you: (1) to learn how to capture sound and edit it using digital tools, and (2) to explore the affordances of sound as a medium, with particular attention to its ability to communicate *immersive environment* and *narrative pacing and change*.

The genre of the narrative you convey is open: it could be documentary, fictional, even science-fictional. (The title you choose will help steer listeners' expectations, and thus their perceptions.)

Visual Argument / Rhetorical Collage

The second project challenges you to make a rhetorical intervention through the juxtaposition of images and text. It's kind of a collage, but a collage with an argument to make. In assigning this, I have two main goals for you: (1) to learn how to ethically obtain images and edit them using digital tools, and (2) to explore the affordances of still images as a medium, and especially their ability to *direct attention* and *help make ideas memorable*.

As with the sound project, the context for your argument is open: you could be making a social commentary, calling for action, constructing a parody, riffing on a pun, explaining a concept, inviting someone inside, and so on. Whatever you choose, you should consider your audience and what they would find persuasive or interesting, and how you therefore wish to attract and direct their attention.

Website Portfolio

For your third project, you will build a multi-page website using basic HTML and CSS files — as opposed to a site manager like WordPress or Wix — along with any media assets you wish to embed. In assigning this, I have two main goals for you: (1) to learn how to manage a composite project made up of multiple interlinking files, and (2) to explore the affordances of the web design stack as a medium, and especially its ability to *flexibly render content for multiple audiences or reading priorities*.

As with the earlier projects, content-selection is up to you. You could gather the materials you produced earlier in the term into a shared space; build a more sustainable and public-facing platform from which to manage your online identities; or make a mock-up of placeholder content just to develop and show off your web-design skills. Whatever you choose, you should consider your audience(s) and how they might land on your website, and where you therefore wish to direct their attention and next steps.

Consolidation Project

Throughout the term, I will periodically ask you to write blog posts thinking about how to integrate – and extend – what you've learned about composing across digital media. For the fourth project, you'll build on top of what you've already made and learned: a *revision*, *extension*, or *combination* of the modes and media you used in earlier units. The unit goals are (1) to integrate and consolidate the skills you've practiced across the semester; and (2) to assess your own skills as a digital media composer, to find ways *you* in particular might best contribute to a collaborative digital project (perhaps in the future). Collaborating on this project is optional, but encouraged.

Final Reflection

The last assignment for the semester is a reflective letter to me, articulating your learning in the class and illustrating your claims about learning by calling attention to features of your compositions or your process. The goal here is less a restatement of what you've already written than an opportunity to think synthetically, across units and into the future.

SCHEDULE PREVIEW

The following schedule is just a preview, and is subject to change; **the full and most up-to-date version will be posted on the course website (<https://benmiller314.github.io/cdm2022spring>)**, including more detailed explanations of each homework assignment and full lesson plans. This gives me more flexibility to adapt the specifics to our needs as a reading and writing community. I will also post links and announcements of any major changes to Canvas, for ease of access.

Assignments are listed (as HW) on the day they are assigned, and are **due online at 9pm the night before** the following class meeting, unless otherwise specified. You should in general **also bring a copy to class**, so that we have access to it for discussion and/or revisions. Digital versions are usually fine.

Unit I:	What Makes Digital Media New?	(weeks 1-2)
Unit II:	Soundscapes and Soundwriting	(weeks 2-5)
Unit III:	Visual Rhetorics and Argument	(weeks 5-8)
Unit IV:	Webslinging with Markup	(weeks 8-10)
Unit V:	Putting it Together (Bit by Bit)	(weeks 10-14)
Unit VI:	Reflection and Revision	(week 15)

Final portfolios will be due at the final exam slot, which has not yet been announced.

UNIT I: WHAT MAKES DIGITAL MEDIA NEW?

- Lesson 1, Tuesday 1/18 – Introductions
 - HW:
 - Surveys and sharing:
 - **Complete** two short modules on Canvas, about self- and community-care and the grading contract. This includes a short "quiz" (should take just a minute or two) and a chance to propose changes or adopt the contract.
 - **Respond** to the Tech Comfort Survey (<https://bit.ly/cdm2021survey>) if you haven't yet done so.
 - Written introduction to the people in the class:
 - **Join** GitHub (<https://github.com/>) if you haven't yet (you can use your Pitt email to get free private repositories!),
 - and **post** an introduction to yourself on the issue queue: <https://github.com/benmiller314/cdm2022spring/issues/1>
 - Prep software for lesson 2:
 - **Download and install** a plain text editor. I recommend VS Code (<https://code.visualstudio.com/>).
 - **Download and install** the GitHub Desktop application (<https://desktop.github.com/>)
- Lesson 2, Thursday 1/20 – What Can We Do With Digital?
 - HW:
 - Read / play through Tyler Su's "Playing Lev Manovich" (tylersu.github.io/o/).
 - Listen to example sound narratives (see lesson plan for links)
 - Write a short blog post about what you noticed, and what you wondered. Post this to the issue queue: <https://github.com/benmiller314/cdm2022spring/issues/2>

- Lesson 3, Tuesday 1/25 – Building a Repository

HW:

- **Download** the Audacity 3 audio editor (<https://www.audacityteam.org/download/>)
- **Watch** this Audacity 3 tutorial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oOaXWdmMcc>
- Come in ready to play with the software – and ask any questions that come up

*I'll post the rest of the lessons and homeworks **online**, but here are the essential dates:*

UNIT II: SOUNDSCAPES AND SOUNDWRITING

In this unit, you'll arrange layers of sound to project a sense of place, and of things happening in that place. The genre of the narrative is open: it could be documentary, fictional, even science-fictional. (The title you choose will help steer listeners' expectations, and thus their perceptions.)

Tu 1/24	Audio narrative proposal due
Th 1/26	Audio narrative preview due
Tu 1/31	Audio narrative full draft due
Sun 2/5	Aim to complete audio narrative, so you have time to reflect
Tues 2/7	Audio narrative + reflection due

UNIT III: VISUAL RHETORICS AND ARGUMENT

In this unit, you will make a claim through the juxtaposition of images and text. As with the sound project, the context for your argument is open: you could be making a social commentary, calling for action, constructing a parody, riffing on a pun, explaining a concept, and so on.

Tu 2/14	Visual argument proposal due
Th 2/16	Visual argument preview due
Tu 2/21	Visual argument full draft due
Sun 2/26	Aim to complete visual argument, so you have time to reflect
Tu 2/28	Visual argument + reflection due

UNIT IV: WEBSLINGING (HTML+CSS MARKUP)

In this unit, you will build a multi-page website portfolio, beginning with html and css files.

Th 3/2	Web portfolio proposal due
Tu 3/21	Web portfolio preview due
Tu 3/28	Web portfolio full draft due
Tu 4/4	Aim to complete web portfolio, so you have time to reflect
Tu 4/11	Web portfolio + reflection due

UNIT V: PUTTING IT TOGETHER (DEADLINES T.B.D.)

Th 4/20	Last day of class; final project presentations
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GRADING CONTRACT*

As composition theorist Peter Elbow has written in a number of places (see especially his “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking”**), grades are a surprisingly crude way of measuring or producing learning: they reduce complex phenomena to a single letter or number, and thus obscure the differences between, say, proofreading skills and ability to support an argument. Some teachers might try to get around this by assigning percentages of their grades to particular skill-sets, but I find I can’t know, in advance, what any one of you will need to work on: I want us to be free to give more targeted feedback, and set more targeted goals, than any pre-set percentage allows us to do. As I see it, each of you is here to become better than yourself, not better than anyone else. Grades distract from that, and distract from the particular reactions and suggestions that can help you improve.

So to shift our attention away from grading – and therefore toward thoughtful assessment – I’m going to do several things. First, I’ll put the bulk of your final grade into process and participation: *concrete, observable behaviors*, not subjective judgments of quality. No matter where you start out, this playing field is level. Second, for each major unit of the course, we’ll work as a class to develop the *baseline criteria* needed to demonstrate competency (not necessarily excellence) in that unit. **If you participate consistently at this minimum level, I’ll guarantee that your minimum grade for the course is a B.** Your grade can go up from there for excellent work, toward which we’ll set flexible and optional *aspirational criteria* within each unit – one of which will always be trying something new or risky, even if it doesn’t pay off.

Lastly, I’ll keep the final tally of those criteria open *until the end of the semester*, as measured in a final portfolio. My goal is to help you develop competencies for which it may take several failures to reach success, and I don’t want to penalize you by over-weighting an early project for lacking some skill you attained later on.

I hope you take this as an opportunity to explore, to experiment, and to trust that you will learn something in the process: even if you try a new move and fail, you can (in the words of Samuel Beckett) “fail better” next time, without being penalized.

Please respond on Canvas if you can; otherwise, print and scan. In that case, initial each item to signal you've read it, and sign at the very end. Students who have not turned in a signed contract by the end of the fifth class may be asked to leave the course.

* This grading contract, including some of the language, has been adapted from Danielewicz, Jane and Peter Elbow. “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching.” *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (December 2009): 244-268, as well as the online appendix to that article (see their note 1); and from Reilly, Colleen A., and Anthony T. Atkins. “Rewarding Risk: Designing Aspirational Assessment Processes for Digital Writing Projects.” *Digital Writing: Assessment and Evaluation*, edited by Heidi McKee and Danielle Nicole DeVoss, Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2013, http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/04_reilly.html.

** Elbow, Peter. “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting out Three Forms of Judgment.” *College English* 55.2 (1993): 187-206.

To earn a B for this course, you must:

Approach the work

1. Engage actively to make the most of class-time. Everyone has an off day now and then, but to the best of your ability, you should be putting in the full 75 minutes of work for each class meeting or asynchronous assignment period. (I'll do my best to ensure you have a clear sense of what to work on, including extensions for if you finish early.) This means you must also be consistently prepared for class: read, annotate, and bring any required readings, and bring a notebook and whatever drafts, files, or research you'll need. _____
2. During every workshop, push yourself to provide your class- and group-mates with thorough, thoughtful feedback. Taking their work seriously enough to both describe it and think hard about how it can be improved is crucial for your success, as well as theirs, in becoming better composers throughout this course. Note that this is not just about praise or criticism: ask questions, make connections, explore possibilities. Open space for them to do or say more. _____
3. Work with your group-mates to complete group assignments and exercises to the satisfaction of everyone in the group. Divide group assignments and time fairly, and complete, on time, all the work you take on. Note that this also means demanding satisfaction *from* your group mates: if one of you is slacking off, the whole group suffers. Let that person know. _____
4. For every assignment, produce a substantial, thoughtful product that follows the guidelines in the prompt – including deadlines and all baseline criteria. _____
5. Complete all assigned readings attentively enough that you could provide examples of key concepts; you may wish to mark up the readings or take notes as you go. _____
6. Help to develop baseline criteria for each major project, so that you are confident you can meet those criteria in the time allotted. If something proposed seems aspirational, more of a stretch goal than a requirement, say so. _____
7. Use the feedback provided by your instructor and your classmates to improve your projects. You don't have to make every change suggested, of course, because your work is yours, and after all, audiences will sometimes disagree. But you must take all feedback seriously, and your drafts (or reflections; see next bullet) should show evidence that you've carefully considered your respondents' suggestions: if a reader is confused or has an objection, don't ignore it, but instead try to clear up the confusion or incorporate and respond to the objection. _____
8. When turning in revisions (as well as for any earlier draft on which it feels appropriate), attach a brief note reflecting on what in particular you were trying to achieve in that draft. e.g., Were there particular comments you were responding to? A genre feature or model you were trying to emulate? You can also use this note to acknowledge suggestions you consciously decided not to take, explaining your reasons. (This may, in fact, help you to discover your reasons.) _____
9. Proofread final drafts to eliminate surface errors and typos to the best of your ability. Use your style guides (see the Resources page on the course website) and talk to classmates, me, or a Writing Center Consultant if you have questions. _____
10. Attend scheduled conferences with me or your Writing Center Consultant (if applicable), and come prepared to use the conference time productively. **If I indicate in feedback that I**

Write and revise

would like you to schedule an appointment to talk with me, please reply within one week. A missed conference counts as 2/3 of an absence (see #13). _____

11. Avoid plagiarism by (a) taking careful notes to help you distinguish between your own ideas and language and those you have borrowed from sources; (b) being generous about attributing ideas and acknowledging those whose work has influenced your own, i.e. by attempting to cite all sources correctly, even in first drafts; (c) mastering citation conventions and citing all sources correctly in all final drafts; and (d) never attempting to disguise another's work as your own, never purchasing someone else's writing services online for course credit, and never engaging in any other act of academic dishonesty.

This is a collaborative class, in which we offer each other suggestions and constructive criticism. But we do so to clarify the expression of *original ideas* – never to substitute someone else's ideas for our own, or to impose our ideas on someone else. If you feel you're making a Fair Use of someone else's intellectual property, include a rationale for your use in a reflection that accompanies your drafts (see #8). _____

12. Show respect for your classmates and your instructor. This includes taking each others' ideas seriously; using language that honors others' racial, ethnic, religious, political, economic, sexual, and gender identifications or positions; and refraining from distracting behaviors, such as gossiping, reading the news, or using electronic devices for non-class-related activities. Ensure that your cell phone doesn't ring during class. _____

13. Be present. For synchronous participation, be consistently on time for class, and be absent very rarely; for asynchronous participation, complete a check-in at the beginning and/or end of your work-time, no later than five days after the equivalent class-meeting. Each missed class is equivalent to three "absence tokens," and vice versa. Joining class after activities are underway earns one absence token, and missing more than 20 minutes of class – or completing async work between 5 and 7 days after it's assigned – earns two absence tokens (though you're still always welcome to come in, quietly). Twelve absence tokens throughout the semester, nine during any one unit, or completely missing a peer review workshop is a major breach of contract (see next section). Having more than 18 absence tokens (equivalent to six absences, or ¼ of the classes for the term) could be grounds for failure, given the hands-on nature of the course. Please talk to me before we get to that point! _____

14. Submit a complete, revised portfolio that meets all outlined requirements by the due date. The portfolio for this class will consist of three major projects (featuring sound, image, and web design), at least one with revision history and a selection of feedback; one additional consolidation project to which you have contributed significantly; and a reflective portfolio introduction. Details to follow, closer to the deadline. _____

If you fulfill all of these expectations, you are guaranteed a grade of at least a B overall. I will do my best to keep you informed and afloat with regard to your successful participation. If you're ever in doubt about your contractual status, feel free to email me and/or drop by my office hours.

Grades Below a B:

If you don't keep the contract, your contracted grade for the course will be lowered as follows:

- For minor breaches (e.g. missing or not bringing in a short homework exercise, missing up to one sixth of the baseline criteria, or failing to acknowledge direct revision-suggestions): in

each Unit, I will permit you one “Mulligan” – one minor misstep that will not break the contract. But two minor breaches during any Unit will lower your minimum grade by $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter, i.e. to a B–; another breach in the same unit or two minor breaches during the next Unit, and your minimum grade will be lowered further to a C+, and so on. These lowered minimum grades can still be exceeded by an exceptionally strong portfolio. _____

- For major breaches (e.g. missing more than one sixth of a project’s baseline criteria, failing to participate in peer review, not turning in a project reflection): no Mulligans; your minimum grade will immediately be lowered to a B– after the first major breach, C+ after the second, and so on. These lowered grades can still be exceeded by an exceptionally strong portfolio. _____
- For the final portfolio: each day it is late, the minimum grade drops $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter. _____
- The attendance policy is outlined above, in item #13 (though see also #10). _____
- A minimum grade falling below a C-minus is grounds for failing the course. _____

Again, I will do my best to keep you informed and afloat with regard to patterns that threaten to break the contract: my goal is to keep everyone engaged, active, and learning. If you are ever in doubt about your contractual status, or want to talk about possible extensions or extenuations, feel free to send me an email or drop by my office hours.

Grades Above a B:

There are two ways to earn a grade above a B: by demonstrating Excellence and Quality in your final *products*, and by demonstrating ambition in your *process* by meeting aspirational criteria. The best portfolios will likely involve both. _____

While the former terms are, unavoidably, rather fuzzy, in my defense I can say only this: First, most grades in writing, even digital writing, are somewhat subjective – and at least by using the contract above I’m doing my best to limit and control the arbitrariness of such judgment. Second, I promise to do my very best to articulate, in particular instances, what I think would most help the piece in question achieve Excellence and Quality, and to invite peer feedback I can see, so my perspective isn’t the only one considered. One of the characteristics of such work is that it tends to stand out as its own self, original and often surprising, and it is therefore far harder to give guidance in general terms.

The aspirational criteria we will develop collaboratively as a class, with some new goals for each unit, as they should vary with the genres and tools at hand. *To earn a grade above a B for ambitious process, you must make the case in your project reflections (or final-portfolio reflection) for how you have met the aspirational criteria.* _____

If your work is trending towards a better-than-B portfolio, I will do my best to let you know where you’ve leveled up over that line, so you can try to recapture and consolidate whatever was working so well. (Don’t worry, I’ll keep giving suggestions for where you can improve, as well, because I believe that even the best of us can.)

Once more, should you ever find yourself in doubt about your contractual status – whether your work is satisfactory for a B, unsatisfactory for a B, or excelling beyond the B-level, please feel free to send me an email, drop by my office hours, or even to set up a conference at a better time.