

PP 750 -- Storytelling in Policy Writing: People and Numbers
Winter 2018

Classroom: 1220 Weill

Dates and Time: T/Th, 4 – 5:30 pm. Our first class is on Tuesday, March 6

Credit hours: 1.5

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Readings: All readings will be posted on our Canvas site. The one exception, and which you should purchase, is Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb's *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace* (4th Edition). There are now twelve editions of this book, many of them quite pricey. We'll use the 4th Edition as it's perfectly swell and you can find lots of affordable new and used copies.

Course Overview

This half-semester course takes its inspiration from Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations." In his essay, Coates employs a mix of writing modes—the statistical and the anecdotal, as well as the journalistic and even the biblical—in order to argue for a policy idea that might be otherwise all too quickly dismissed. In our course, students will choose a policy topic they care deeply about and, like Coates, use a variety of methods and modes to make a "case" for it.

Students will write drafts and revisions of two interrelated papers. The policy topic itself is entirely up to the student. The first paper (4 - 6 pages, double-spaced) will seek to define the problem, showing its origins and impact. In the second paper (4 - 6 pages, double-spaced), students will argue for a specific policy to address this problem.

To make their case, students will draw upon the qualitative and quantitative. From our readings, we'll analyze not just an author's argument but how she crafts this argument. Our principle here is "productive theft": i.e., what techniques can we learn (or learn to avoid) and consider applying to our work. As such, we'll examine how authors tell stories through numbers; best practices for translating the quantitative into effective prose; persuasive usage of anecdote or history; and honest, ethical approaches to writing about people and data.

The class will be a mix of discussion, workshop, and writing exercises. Readings will range across the political spectrum. Our class will be highly collaborative; we'll work to ensure we create a classroom dynamic that fosters respectful debate, encouragement, and constructive feedback.

Grades and Paper Assignments

The two papers will constitute 70% of your grade, participation the remaining 30%. Your participation grade includes the following:

- *Attendance and punctuality.* If you miss more than one class, I'll lower your participation grade by one letter grade for each missed class. Ditto for punctuality; if you're late more than three times, I'll lower your participation grade by one letter grade. Basically, we have a whopping 13 classes together, if you have to miss class for a medical or family emergency please let me know in advance. You're responsible for making up the work. The less energy we expend on classroom housekeeping, the more effectively we can concentrate on producing our best work.
- *Peer critiques.* You'll write peer critiques for each of the two papers. The purpose of doing so is two-fold: to provide your peers with insightful feedback that will help them produce stronger work, and to develop your own analytical writing skills. I'll provide peer critique guidelines the first week of class. Your peer critiques will be graded on a check-plus to check-minus scale.
- *Active classroom participation.* This includes doing *all* the readings in advance of class and forming opinions and questions about them. It also includes generously sharing your ideas and being respectful of others, be it the authors we read or your classmates. And, finally, it includes posting responses to the readings.

A detailed break-down of the paper assignments and their grading can be found on the last three pages of this syllabus.

Essay Format & Logistics:

All papers—including first drafts—must be typed, double-spaced, proofread, and stapled. Page numbers and titles are a must. Use a reasonable font and a reasonable point size (12 point). Sloppy work (e.g., typos, tangled syntax, grammatical lapses) affects your grade.

Essays are due at the beginning of class.

Late papers will be graded down *one full grade per day*. If you foresee a conflict with a due date, speak with me at least one week in advance.

Our Classroom Values

Below I have included some information from the Ford School that you've probably seen on the syllabi of other Ford classes. I do, though, want to add to this statement of values by elaborating a bit on both my initial motivation for teaching this class and some of my expectations. Last winter was the inaugural term for "Storytelling in Policy Writing," a

course I'd wanted to teach for several years. From my non-statistically tested observations, Ford grad students tend to have fewer writing opportunities in their second year than their first, and so I'd wanted this course to act as a small corrective. Moreover, I'd thought it beneficial for students to engage in policy writing that extended beyond the memo and the "role plays" (i.e., you're pretending to work for an organization and writing to a fictitious boss) that are entailed when producing memos in an academic rather than professional setting. Through PP521, a course I enjoy teaching, I've found that, given the shortened nature of the course and the pre-selected assignment content, students come away with improved mechanics and knowledge of policy writing forms but are not necessarily producing work of which they're most proud. "Storytelling in Policy Writing," simply put, is an effort to combine more advanced policy writing mechanics with subject matter that students are passionate about. My unoriginal contention is that if students write about a topic in which they're deeply invested, and if they're given the time and encouragement to think hard about the topic, as well as to read compelling authors to inspire their own prose, then their work—your work—will be all the richer. To steal a line from Luke Shaefer, it's my hope that in this class you'll begin to write the paper you came to grad school to write.

You all are the second class for "Storytelling in Policy Writing"—and I've made a number of changes to the readings with the intent to improve the class content and fine-tune our goals. In my experience, both as a teacher and a student, the first two times a course is taught can be highly productive—and also contain some kinks. The teacher—and this will be true of me—won't have worked out a pre-set pattern, as the material and the discussions about it are still too new. What this can also allow for, assuming I've done my job to create a space that encourages respectful, heartfelt participation by all its members, is a more fully collaborative learning environment. To this end, over these seven weeks we'll read authors who will espouse views that may or may not align with your own. Our authors—and perhaps also your peers—will be writing about race and racism, sexism, poverty, gay marriage, immigration, the ethics of international development, welfare, and middle-aged existentialism. We won't always agree with how these authors define a policy problem, nor with their proposed solutions. But I will expect us to dig in to these readings both critically and respectfully. Passionate opinions and hard questions will be encouraged, but ad hominem attacks and too quick generalizing won't.

As your teacher, it's my responsibility to do my very best to ensure that each one of you feels respected and listened to. If conflicts arise, if you feel uncomfortable with something I or a classmate has said, please do let me know right away. To reiterate, my goal is to help you to write the strongest papers you can—but it's also to help create a classroom space that prioritizes learning and that pleasurable snap that comes from a meaningful exchange of ideas.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The Ford School academic community, like all communities, functions best when its members treat one another with honesty, fairness, respect, and trust. We hold all members of our community to high standards of scholarship and integrity. To accomplish its mission of providing an optimal educational environment and developing leaders of society, the Ford School promotes the assumption of personal responsibility and integrity and prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty, plagiarism and misconduct. Academic dishonesty may be understood as any action or attempted action that may result in creating an unfair academic advantage for oneself or an unfair academic advantage or disadvantage for any other member or members of the academic community. Plagiarism involves representing the words, ideas, or work of others as one's own in writing or presentations, and failing to give full and proper credit to the original source. Conduct, without regard to motive, that violates the academic integrity and ethical standards will result in serious consequences and disciplinary action.

Additional information regarding academic dishonesty, plagiarism and misconduct and their consequences is available at: <http://www.rackham.umich.edu/current-students/policies/academic-policies...>

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

If you believe you need an accommodation for a disability, please let your instructor know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of courses may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make your instructor aware of your needs, they can work with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office to help determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information you provide will be treated as private and confidential.

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The University of Michigan is committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of its students. We acknowledge that a variety of issues, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, and depression, directly impacts students' academic performance. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, services are available. For help, contact [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS) and/or [University Health Service](#) (UHS). For a listing of other mental health resources available on and off campus, visit: <http://umich.edu/~mhealth/>.

INCLUSIVITY STATEMENT

Members of the Ford School community represent a rich variety of backgrounds and perspectives. We are committed to providing an atmosphere for learning that respects diversity. While working together to build this community we ask all members to:

- share their unique experiences, values and beliefs
- be open to the views of others
- honor the uniqueness of their colleagues
- appreciate the opportunity that we have to learn from each other in this community
- value one another's opinions and communicate in a respectful manner
- keep confidential discussions that the community has of a personal (or professional) nature
- use this opportunity together to discuss ways in which we can create an inclusive environment in Ford classes and across the UM community

Class Schedule

I. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

1. Tuesday, March 6

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations"

(Some of) What to read for:

Approach: Gatekeepers, or how Coates finds a way to keep a huge scope specific. Also, for your own essay, without pre-determining your "solution," you may want to start thinking about where you're headed. My suspicion is that Coates knows he's headed towards a call for reparations before he starts writing the piece. That doesn't, however, mean that this is the right model for you or for every essay.

Style: The usefulness and risk of avoiding caveats. Sentence rhythms. Stacking short lines. A "wall of sound," or how Coates shifts from the specific to the universal. Quotes—how he integrates them without the quotes feeling extraneous to his voice.

2. Thursday, March 8

Sarah Kliff, "Do No Harm"

Charles Murray, "Trump's America"

Due: Pre-Draft "Sell" of policy topic

(Some of) What to read for:

How Kliff structures her essay's "problem" by using anecdote. The utility of a fresh analogy to get the reader to see a problem in a new way.

With the Murray piece, look for how you might generalize without employing specificity. This is a hard essay (technically) to write. Last year, Murray's essay didn't work for a number of students, but it led to a productive discussion about our authority as authors, how we create (or fail to create) it, and what relationship we want to strike with our readers.

II. ESTABLISHING SCALE AND SCOPE

3. Tuesday, March 13

Christopher Caldwell, "American Carnage"

Amanda Ripley, "How America Outlawed Adolescence"

(Some of) What to read for:

Look how Ripley structures her opening sections and how she moves you from the anecdotal—to have you meet and care about an individual—to how she then puts this individual's story into a national context. You, as authors, will most likely need to handle "scale and scope"—how is Caldwell's approach like or unlike Ripley's?

III. RESISTING NARRATIVES

4. Thursday, March 15

Masha Gessen, "How Democrats Fall Short in Challenging Trump's Ant-Immigrant Fervor"

Brett Stephens, "Repeat: Repeal the 2nd Amendment"

Due: Draft #1, Paper #1

(Some of) What to read for:

Look how both Gessen and Stephens "situate themselves in the conversation." A key for your own essay is to determine what view(s) you're arguing against. Doing so can help clarify what you're attempting to add to your topic. And notice how both Gessen and Stephens attempt to distinguish their views from that of multiple camps (e.g., X thinks this and that's mistaken, but Y thinks this and that's also incomplete), which lends their essays a potentially fresh perspective.

IV. STORYTELLING WITH PEOPLE, PART I

5. Tuesday, March 20

Matt Desmond, "Forced Out"

Joseph Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, Ch. 1 – 2

Due: Peer Critiques

(Some of) What to read for:

Notice how Desmond moves from description to analysis. Look also for his “mixed methods” approach—how he interlaces numbers, anecdote, and analysis into a paragraph rather than sectioning them off. The effect, at least for me, is to add a “thickness” to his evidence, as well as a limberness to his voice.

6. Thursday, March 22

Donovan Hohn Class Visit. Read “Flint’s Water Crisis and the Troublemaker Scientist.” Other D. Hohn reading TBD. (Come to class with prepared questions.)

Due: Draft #2, Paper #1

V. *TRANSLATING THE TECHNICAL*

7. Tuesday, March 27

David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”
Joseph Williams, *Style*, Ch. 3

(Some of) What to read for:

With DF Wallace, there’s so much to say. Notice how he handles voice when translating technical info, be it data, summary, or integrating source material. Look also for what sort of relationship he cultivates with his readers.

8. Thursday, March 29

Nate Silver, “Less and Less and Less Wrong”
Joseph Williams, *Style*, Ch. 4 – 5

(Some of) What to read for:

Examine how Silver structures his essay. And look for why, in terms of handling a good deal of technical information, he’s opted for the structure that he has. Also, note how Silver uses people—their lives and ideas—to animate the technical and the quantitative.

Other (optional) resources for this “Translating the Technical” unit. In Canvas, see The Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers and Stephen Weinberg’s “An Economist’s Guide to Numbers.”

VI. STORYTELLING WITH PEOPLE, PART II

9. Tuesday, April 3

Atul Gawande, “The Heroism of Incremental Care”

Emily Nussbaum, “Last Girl in Larchmont”

(Some of) What to read for:

Both Gawande and Nussbaum focus on an individual or a set of individuals to define and grapple with a problem. Note also their respective approaches to using first person, and what this does for tone.

Nussbaum is also a great stylist. Look to her topic sentences to see how analytical—and alive—you can make them.

VII. OFFERING SOLUTIONS

10. Thursday, April 5

Jonathan Mahler, “The Case for the Subway”

Charles Murray, “A Guaranteed Income for Every American”

Due: Paper #2 Draft

(Some of) What to read for:

Look how Mahler takes you to an unexpected solution. Note also his authoritative declarative sentences (e.g., “Most countries treat subway systems as national assets”). And note how Murray acknowledges—and frontloads—the counter-arguments. What’s this do for persuasion?

11. Tuesday, April 10

Nikole Hannah-Jones, “A Prescription for More Black Doctors”

Joseph Williams, *Style*, Ch. 6 – 7

Due: Peer Critiques

(Some of) What to read for:

Note Hannah-Jones’ distillation of a history, and also her technique for grounding the solution in the personal, allowing her to make you think and make you feel.

VIII. RECONSIDERATIONS: FORM, VOICE, AND THE ETHICS OF STYLE

12. Thursday, April 12

Valeria Luiselli, "Tell Me How it Ends"

Joseph Williams, *Style*, Ch. 8 - 9

(Some of) What to read for:

Note the form of Luiselli's essay and how she has found a way to tell us something distinct about a potentially familiar subject. Notice, too, her attempts through this chosen essay form to show how a bureaucracy works, and (I think) to raise layered, ethical questions about our own role as readers.

What, finally, do you see as notable (or possibly) over-stated distinctions between storytelling in policy writing versus policy writing?

13. Tuesday, April 17

Joseph Williams, *Style*, Ch. 10

Note: This is our "overflow" day, namely, where we get to discuss what we skimmed over in an earlier week.

Due: Monday, April 18: Final Revisions of Papers #1 and #2

Assignments Overview

In this class, you'll write two interrelated papers on the same topic. In the first paper (4-5 pages, double-spaced), you will seek to define the problem, showing its origins and impact. In the second paper (4-5 pages, double-spaced), you'll argue for a specific policy to address this problem. The second paper will pick up where the first ended; as such, you don't need to re-introduce your topic or reiterate background material.

The topic is up to you. Most of you will presumably write about a topic about which you already have some knowledge and about which you feel strongly. This can be beneficial: as we only have seven weeks together, you'll need to be savvy about what you focus on as you conduct your research. That said, and while it's fine to write about a topic (or aspects of it) you've researched and/or written about in previous classes, your actual writing for our class must be entirely new.

To facilitate your best work, you'll write drafts of each paper and receive feedback from me and your peers. Good writing is an iterative process. Our goal is not perfection—whatever that is—but hard work and attention to process. Deadlines are helpful in this pursuit, procrastination less so.

Assignment Grades and Deadlines:

Assignment	Due Date	Percentage of Final Grade
The Pre-draft "Sell"	3/8	Ungraded
Paper #1, Draft #1	3/15	Ungraded
Paper #1, Draft 2	3/22	17.5%
Paper #2, Draft	4/5	Ungraded
Paper #1, Final Revision	4/18	17.5% (Your grade will be an average between the final revision of Paper #1 and Draft #2 of Paper #1)
Paper #2, Final Revision	4/18	35%

The Assignments

The Predraft “Sell”

For this ungraded assignment, write two paragraphs justifying your topic. What question will you pursue? What’s interesting or important about it? Briefly, what have researchers or policymakers said about the topic? What’s potentially missing from these explanations? What relevant statistics or data sets, if any, stand out? Finally, why are you personally invested in this topic? What does it mean to you?

A definitional note about “topic.” For the purposes of these two papers, you’ll want to think about what you can reasonably tackle in ten (or more) pages and seven weeks. If you’re interested in, say, writing about homelessness, it would be a mistake to leave the topic as “homelessness” as that’s too broad. Instead, you might focus on one particular factor or subgroup (mental health, the economic recession, drug addiction, or teenagers, veterans, the city of Cleveland, etc.). Generally speaking, the more specific the topic, the greater the chance for depth. As such, a policy topic can be an implemented policy or law (e.g., FMLA, Right-to-Work) or a policy or law that could be implemented (e.g., John Conyers’ H.R. 40 legislation, repealing “school disturbance” laws). And embedded in your topic should be an action that can be taken.

Paper #1 – Defining the Problem (4-6 pages, double-spaced)

The purpose of this first paper is to explain the origins and effects of your particular topic—and to do so through telling a compelling story that retains analytic rigor. Assume your audience is an informed reader, not an economics doctoral student; as such, your challenge will be to efficiently translate complex ideas and detailed evidence into clear expository prose. There is no one right way to achieve this; much will depend on the topic and your interpretation. Nonetheless, here are key questions you’ll likely want to address:

- *Justifying your project:* Why does your topic matter? What’s at stake?
- *History:* What’s the “origin story”? How did we get here? Are there competing interpretations about the origins of this problem? Further, what about the policy surrounding this problem—or the effects of this problem—have changed over time?
- *Scale and Scope:* Who’s affected by the problem and current policy, and why? How many people are directly impacted? What are the statistical trends? Are there differing opinions (from reputable sources) about what conclusions we should draw from the data?

To do this paper well—and the same will be true for Paper #2—you’ll need to conduct some high-quality research. While a seven-week, 1.5-credit course means you don’t have

the luxury of a month of intensive research, I do nonetheless expect serious engagement with the relevant literature. Between the two papers, you should use 8 – 20 sources.

I'll expect your papers to be proofread and contain minimal to no grammatical or careless errors. *You will be graded both on your persuasiveness and the clarity of your prose.* To steal a phrase from Tolstoy, I value some “flesh in the ink pot.” Translation: Meaningful engagement (and struggle) with the material matters.

Paper #2 –Making Your Case, i.e., The Solution (4-6 pages, double-spaced)

Now that you've defined the problem, you'll make a case for a solution. This can take any number of forms, from a highly specific, quantitatively reasoned policy to one that's highly theoretical. What I'd like to challenge us to resist is the temptation of a too easy, pre-digested solution. The following are questions you might consider addressing:

- *What's been done?* What solutions have policymakers and others proposed? What's interesting or unimaginative about these? What's effective or ineffective?
- *Counter-argument:* Who will argue against your case? On what grounds? What's valid or invalid about their reasoning? How can you refute them?
- *Intra-group focus:* For those who share your goal or politics, what's missing from their solutions?
- *Evidence:* What precedence exists for your solution? What analogies are suggestive?

Odds and ends

- Cite your sources. APA or Chicago is fine—just be consistent.
- Late papers will be docked one-third a letter grade per day.
- On the day papers are due, you need to bring a hard copy to class as well as upload it to Canvas.
- If you choose to use a computer in class—and you might if you don't want to print the readings—please confine your usage to class-related material. Don't check email, Facebook, or other things people do on computers nowadays. Also, no texting in class.
- I will be available for questions and feedback during office hours. While I can't work with you on any papers for this class during my posted writing center hours, you are free to meet with the estimable David Morse.

As always, be in touch if you have questions or if I can be of further help. I look forward to reading your work. Be bold.

