Department of English

Summer 2016

Undergraduate Course Descriptions

Updated: February 11, 2016

Information is subject to change
In the late 1700s moral crusaders were worried about the latest media scandal: the surge in women reading novels. As one observer complained, “Women, of every age, of every condition...retain a taste for novels. I find [novels]...in the work-bag of the seamstress, in the hands of the lady who lounges on the sofa, the mistresses of nobles, the mistresses of snuff-shops, the belles who read them in town, and the chits who spell them in the country.” While today we might be genuinely concerned about texting while driving, or the depression associated with high levels of Facebook use, in this class we won’t judge so much as we will analyze. We will look at what historical media trends have in common, and how they are different from, the media trends of today. We will read about the print revolution, the electronic media revolution, the current digital revolution, and we will also try to peer into the future. Importantly, we will take a literary and cultural studies approach to this material. We will ask, specifically, what can the Humanities teach us about media revolutions over time? How is narrative, or storytelling, central to each media revolution? We will watch movies based on some of the best Digital Dystopias, including War Games, Strange Days, The Hunger Games, and the HBO show Silicon Valley. Texts for the class will also include: Tai Pei, Digital Dead End, Orality and Literacy, and How Music Got Free.

76-270 Writing for the Professions
Instructor: Kristin Shimmin
Meetings: MTWR 1:30 p.m. – 2:50 p.m.

Writing in the Professions is a writing course specifically designed for juniors and seniors in all majors other than English. The course is appropriate for upper-level students in all CMU colleges, has no writing prerequisites, and assumes that you may not have had much college-level writing instruction past your freshman year. The basic idea of the course is to give you experience in developing the writing skills you will be expected to have as you make the transition from student to professional. The course will cover resume writing, proposal writing, writing instructions, the difference between writing for general and specific audiences, and analysis of visual aids in various texts. The course requires that students work both independently and in groups.

76-390 Style
Instructor: Carolyn Commer
Meetings: MTWR 12:00 – 1:20 p.m.

In classical rhetoric, “style” is a term that refers not to what we write but how we write. Yet considerations about how we write—coherence, emphasis, concision, shape, diction, and elegance—can never be fully separated from an understanding of what, why, and for whom we are writing. Ideally, style means understanding a set of strategic choices and always weighing these choices in relation to questions such as, “Who is my audience?” and “What is my purpose?” This course will have two main objectives: (1) to help you develop a repertoire of stylistic options and a critical vocabulary for discussing those options, and (2) to give you the opportunity to put this knowledge into practice when revising writing. Two recurring questions for us will be the following: if style depends on both the rhetorical situation of a text and knowledge of specific guidelines, how can we ever say that we have achieved “good” style? Should stylistic rules or practical experience carry more weight in the decisions we make as writers?
Summer Two (June 27th to August 4th)

76-226  Film and Literature: Mystery, Sexuality, and Culture in American Film  
Instructor: Jon Klancher  
Meetings: TR 6:30 p.m. to 9:20 p.m.

The films in this course were made from the 1940s to the early 2000s—all in some way explore the interrelations of crime, mystery, and gender as they index some key changes in American culture of the times. Some are classics in this category—Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard, or Chinatown. Others have been regarded as “minor” but exceptional films with growing reputations—Gun Crazy, Kiss me Deadly. Two are very recent and introduce different dimensions into this tradition of American film (LA Confidential, Mulholland Drive). Several films belong clearly to the genre of “film noir” (those of 1944-58); others transform the styles and obsessions of noir into far broader scenarios of American cultural exploration.  Some involve the medium of film itself, either in terms of the cultural hotspot called Hollywood (Sunset Boulevard, Mulholland Drive), the cultural milieu of Los Angeles as a microcosm of American cultural change (as in Chinatown, Double Indemnity, or L.A. Confidential), or in terms of self-conscious play with the possibilities and audience response to the visual power of film (as in Kiss Me Deadly, or again Mulholland Drive). Several films use the genre of mystery to explore mental or sexual pathology (Gun Crazy); dream-like obsessive states (Mulholland Drive). Others are more decidedly social and political, examining the incestuous character of political power (Chinatown, LA Confidential). Thus there is a cluster of intriguingly related energies and preoccupations in these films we will explore in various ways. One aim is to see how American film links the most private matters of psyche and sexuality to public arenas of power, crime, class, and culture.

76-270  Writing for the Professions  
Instructor: Justin Mando  
Meetings: MTWRF 10:30 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.

Professional and technical documents structure the workplace activities that they support. People use these documents for diverse reasons: to communicate with colleagues and supervisors, to gain support for projects, to learn a procedure, and to hire employees. They use these documents in diverse contexts, too: in a quiet office without time constraints, on a crowded plane under a severe deadline, or at a noisy coffee shop while multitasking. The main communication challenge for any professional is to create documents that the intended audience can read and use easily.

In this class, students will develop a rhetorical approach to planning and producing professional documents. This means that students will learn to analyze an audience, the purpose of the document, and the context of the document and to use that analysis to plan, create, and revise a usable document that communicates your message effectively.

For each course project, students will produce a set of documents that can be used in a real-life situation: a set of application materials, a proposal, a set of written instructions, and an oral presentation. We will focus primarily on print documents, but we will also extend the principles we learn to include common types of electronic and oral communication in the workplace.