

HUMA 20904 – 94

What Is Truth?

Summer Session – Session I

Course Instructor: Michael Subialka (msubialka@uchicago.edu)

Writing Seminar Instructor: Cameron Powell (cgpowell@uchicago.edu)

Course Description:

Today more than ever we are confronted with the urgent question of what is true. From stories about supposedly stolen elections to conspiracy theories about vaccines and 5G, how we decide what counts as the truth is constantly up for debate – and these debates have potentially serious consequences. With politically polarized information in the news and new technologies like generative AI to circulate falsehoods on social media, it has never been more important to examine how we know what is true and to consider how we can argue and debate about our beliefs responsibly and effectively. This intensive course in analytical writing at the collegiate level will offer a chance to think through these issues and to develop the skills necessary to craft rhetorically effective argumentative essays examining the nature of truth. In our readings, we will tackle classic texts from authors like Plato and Machiavelli alongside feminist critiques by Donna Haraway. We will also examine different instances of cultural production that define or redefine what people think of as true, focusing especially on the power of art and satire to challenge our narratives and change our frame of thinking, from twentieth-century theatre like that of Dario Fo to twenty-first century comedy and documentaries. In our writing sessions, we will work closely to refine the techniques of writing and revision that will allow you to transform your ideas and insights into powerful essays using rhetorical instruction materials and small group workshops that replicate the intensive writing seminars taken by University of Chicago undergraduates in the Humanities Core.

Objectives:

My main goal is to help you craft more insightful, powerful academic essays. In order to do this, we will need to focus on at least three fundamental skills that go into academic writing:

1. Close, analytical reading
2. Engagement with alternative views (discussion/debate)
3. Thorough revision

All of these skills will be taught and practiced in our daily class meetings so that by the end of the course you will be comfortable: (1) analyzing a variety of texts (written, visual, and filmic) with a careful eye for *nuance*, (2) considering *alternative viewpoints* about those texts, and (3) *revising* your initial analysis to construct more persuasive essays that will communicate your nuanced argument to a reader.

We will practice writing in a two-step process. For each essay, you will write a draft that develops a close reading of the text in question and makes an argument about that text (or makes an argument through that text). We will then go through an intensive process of revision, using techniques developed during our morning sessions and in the writing seminars; these techniques will help you re-

frame your arguments to make them more persuasive and compelling for a reader who may be reluctant to agree with the points you want to make.

We will thus treat reading and writing as closely-integrated skills to be developed together. Writing is not just about putting words on the page – it is a way of seeing and knowing, a form of truth finding and truth telling in and of itself.

By the end of the course, you should come away with new habits of reading and revising that will help you to make more profound and compelling academic arguments in the future.

Required Course Texts (available to purchase from the University Bookstore):

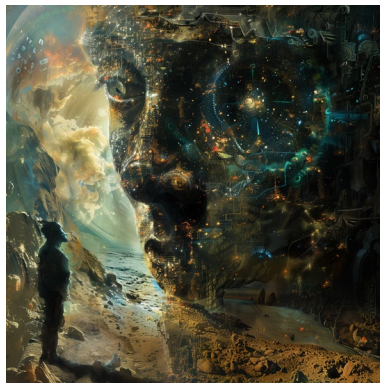
Fo, Dario. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Trans. Simon Nye. Ed. Joseph Farrell. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Third Norton Critical Edition. Ed. and Trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn. New York: Norton, 2019.
Plato. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. 2nd Edition. Trans. G.M.A. Grube and John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.

Short Text Selections (available to download on Canvas, marked in schedule with *):

Bail, Chris. *Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. [selections]
Caulfield, Mike and Sam Wineburg. *Verified: How to Think Straight, Get Duped Less, and Make Better Decisions about What to Believe Online*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. [selections]
Chalmers, David J. *Reality + Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Norton, 2022. [selections]
Fine, Gail. *Essays in Ancient Epistemology*. Ch. 3, “Knowledge and True Belief in the *Meno*.” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021: 63-93.
Haraway, Donna. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988): 575-599.
Hoffman, Donald. *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes*. New York: Norton, 2019. [selections]
Lee, Kai-Fu and Chen Qiufan. *AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2021. [selections]
Mollick, Ethan. *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*. New York: Penguin, 2024. [selections]
Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.” In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Ed. Raymond Geuss. Trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 141-153.
Vallor, Shannon. *The AI Mirror: How To Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. [selections]

Class Films:

After Truth: Disinformation and the Cost of Fake News. Dir. Andrew Rossi. HBO, 2020.
“Joan Is Awful.” *Black Mirror*, Season 6, Episode 1. Dir. Ally Pankiw. Netflix, 2023.



Schedule: (Summer Session I)

Date	Morning Session: Principles of Writing 9:00-10:30AM	Group Writing 10:30-11:30AM	Multimedia Session 1:00-1:30PM	Afternoon Seminar Meeting 1:30-3:00PM	Assignment Due
Week 1:	Argument			Objective Truth?	
	Argument I – Arguing for your Reader	Paper 1	Envisioning the Truth	Plato (70a-81e)	
Tue	Argument II – Nuanced Claims	Paper 1	Questioning the Truth	Plato (81e-100b)	
Wed	Argument III – Claims, Evidence, and Reasons AND Close Reading	Paper 1	Student Presentations	Plato + Hoffman* [+ Fine*]	
Thu/	NO CLASS - JUNETEENTH	NO CLASS	NO CLASS	NO CLASS	
Fri	Argument IV – Counterarguments	Writing Seminars	Writing Seminars	Haraway* [+ Nietzsche]	Writing Seminar 1
Week 2:	Discourse Structure			The Politics of Truth	
Mon	Discourse Structure I – Coherence and Index Positions	Paper 1	SMART MUSEUM	SMART MUSEUM	Paper 1 Due
Tue	Discourse Structure II – Argumentative Depth	Paper 2	Student Presentations	Machiavelli, Dedication-XIV	
Wed	Discourse Structure III – Macrostructure of Deep Arguments	Paper 2	Student Presentations	Machiavelli, XV-XXVI	
Thu	Discourse Structure IV – Information Flow	Paper 2	Student Presentations	Fo, Act I	
Fri	Discourse Structure V – Complex Index Positions	Writing Seminars	Writing Seminars	Fo, Act II	Writing Seminar 2
Week 3:	Setting up a Problem			Truth and Fake News in the Age of AI	
Mon	PROBLEM I – Textual Conflicts (Resolving a Problem)	Paper 2	Student Presentations	<i>After Truth</i> + Caulfield and Wineburg*	Paper 2 Due
Tue	PROBLEM II – Significance in Introductions, 1	Paper 3	Student Presentations	"Joan Is Awful" and Chalmers*	
Wed	PROBLEM III – Significance in Introductions, 2	Paper 3	Student Presentations	Lee and Qiufan, 2* [+ Mollick*]	
Thu	PROBLEM IV – Resolving Problems and Concluding	Writing Seminars	Writing Seminars	Vallor* [+ Bail*]	Writing Seminar 3
Fri	NO CLASS – FOURTH OF JULY	NO CLASS	NO CLASS	NO CLASS	

Paper 3 Due no later than end of Monday after the end of class

- Writing Seminars will be scheduled at the beginning of class (students will be assigned groups but will have the opportunity at the beginning of Week 1 to change groups if needed for schedule purposes. Plan on being in the same seminar group all three weeks, meeting in the same time slot each week.)
- Optional supplementary readings are suggested in brackets [] but are not required.

Grading:

Papers: 60% (Paper 1, 10%; Paper 2, 20%; Paper 3, 30%)

Participation: 20% (attendance of all meetings, preparation, discussion, and writing exercises)

Presentation: 10% (student presentation and discussion leader)

Writing Seminars: 10% (attendance of all meetings, timely posting of drafts, active seminar participation, comments on peer drafts)

Writing Seminars:

As a key component of our focus on developing strong, college-level academic writing techniques, you will have the opportunity to work in a **small, intensive writing seminar**. These seminars are led by a University of Chicago writing professional and are designed to put the skills we are studying into immediate practice. **These seminars will be scheduled during the first week of class, when you will join a seminar group.** You will have the same group for all three seminars, allowing you to build rapport with each other as you help each other to improve through peer review and feedback. If you have time constraints and need to sign up for a particular seminar meeting time, please let us know right away so we can accommodate you.

For each seminar, you will be expected to submit a complete draft of the essay assignment for that week; these drafts should be submitted online via the course Canvas site, and they are due by 7pm the day before your scheduled writing seminar, unless otherwise instructed by the Writing Seminar Instructor. This is a **strict deadline**, as your peers will need to have time to read and comment on each essay submitted. That means you will also be responsible for reading each of your colleague's draft submissions and preparing constructive criticism of those drafts. The Writing Seminar Instructor will provide detailed guidance for this process of peer review and constructive feedback each week.

Writing seminars will focus on using the skills we learn in class to help diagnose areas in need of revision and to come up with revision possibilities to make each essay's argument more compelling for its readers. You should focus on using the concepts/vocabulary from our writing lectures as you comment on your peers' drafts. This will also help you practice recognizing these same features in your own writing.

Attendance and active participation in all three writing seminars are required.

Student Presentations:

Each student will be responsible for leading the class discussion for a period of approximately 15 minutes. Presentations will be modeled on the instructor's multimedia sessions from the beginning of the course; they will aim to (a) introduce new material to enrich the class' perspective on the specific topic of the week and (b) encourage active discussion and debate among the whole class. These presentations should make use of techniques of argumentation discussed in class – make a claim, support it with reasoning and evidence, explore conceptual nuance in interpreting a visual or media object; they should likewise pose discussion questions designed to engage the class in active discussion and debate, which the presenter will lead as part of the presentation. This assignment will be an opportunity for students to develop skills in oral communication, argumentation, and peer leadership.

Students will sign up for presentations in the first week of class, and dates/times will be assigned for each.

Office Hours:

Course Instructor: Daily during class write-in session, or by appointment

Writing Seminar Instructor: Available by appointment

Class Write-Ins:

Writing is a skill that is developed through practice, and professional writers work on their writing every day. Research shows that the best way to write large amounts effectively is by writing regularly, bit-by-bit, rather than waiting until the last minute and doing it all at once. This is especially true in a class like ours, where we are writing and revising continuously to practice new skills and concepts.

For this reason, part of our daily schedule is a group writing session, a kind of “write-in,” in which we will work on our writing tasks each day. This is a part of the regular class meeting, and attendance is required. During this session, you are welcome to talk with one another – conversation is a good way of helping to work out your ideas, encounter alternative perspectives, and thus sharpen and deepen your own claims and analysis. Writing together will help us keep each other on track and productive – your instructors included.

Academic Honesty, Plagiarism, and Utilizing AI:

All students are expected to abide by the University’s academic code of conduct, meaning that all work you submit must be your own and any sources used must be properly cited. We will discuss how to cite as part of our writing lessons, but if you ever have any doubts, it is best to ask and be sure.

As we will discuss in the course, new AI/LLM technologies like ChatGPT raise fundamental questions about what it means to write in the modern age. We will discuss these and think about what constitutes ethical and unethical use of AI technology as part of the course. Likewise, we will discuss the ways in which AI tools can be helpful in the writing process and the ways in which is detrimental. **The general course policy is that you should only use any tool, including an online AI platform like ChatGPT, in a way that helps you to develop your own original thinking and expression – original thinking and original expression of your own ideas are the point of this course. Any use of AI to facilitate your writing must be explicitly cited, just as you would cite a source where you looked up information.**

Writing Tutor:

The summer session organizes a writing tutor who will be available for drop-in tutoring. She will also lead seminars on making the transition to doing college-level reading and writing. You should have received information from the summer session office about how to contact the writing tutor for an appointment if you want one. Please feel free to make use of these resources. She will be holding writing sessions to discuss (1) making the transition to college-level reading and (2) making the transition to

college-level writing, and you are welcome to attend either of these sessions if you would like additional support in these areas.

Tech Support:

UChicago's ITS has an in-person TechBar where they can offer you help with technical issues; it is located on the first floor of the Regenstein Library. There is also a virtual tech bar at bit.ly/virtualtechbar. The link above opens up an on-demand Zoom meeting. Like the phone help at 773-702-5800, it is available Monday - Friday 7:30am to 6:00pm Central US time. Phone or the tech bar are both better for urgent needs than emailing itservices@uchicago.edu

Disability Statement:

If you have any kind of disability, please talk to the Instructor or TA immediately. We are more than happy to provide any kind of accommodation that will help you succeed in this class. If you require any accommodations for this course, as soon as possible please provide us with a copy of your Accommodation Determination Letter (provided to you by the Student Disability Services office) so that you may discuss with us how your accommodations may be implemented in this course.

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. To receive reasonable accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Disability Services. Please contact the office at 773-702-6000 or email: disabilities@uchicago.edu or visit the website at disabilities.uchicago.edu.

