

EXPOSITORY WRITING

Consumer Culture*

21W.730 - Section 3

Fall 2002

“The world is too much with us. Late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.
Nothing we see in Nature that is ours.
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.”

--William Wordsworth 1802-03

“When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.”

--T-shirt saying, 1980s

Introduction

What is the good life, and can you shop there? Would you want that life if you couldn't? Has shopping replaced working as the activity that gives the most meaning to our lives? The theme for this Expository Writing class is Consumer Culture. The class will explore what it means to belong to a consumer society—to think of ourselves, as Douglas Rushkoff puts it, less as citizens than as consumers. Readings will serve both as examples of effective writing techniques and as springboards for discussion. We'll read essays that explore a variety of cultural meanings of shopping and that analyze the way advertising works. We will also read essays that critique consumer culture from several perspectives, including those of psychology, gender, art, environmentalism and ethics. Readings and essay assignments will invite you to reflect on personal, familial and cultural meanings of shopping; to analyze advertisements; and to join in conversation with critics of consumer culture and offer your own critiques.

The primary work of this class is to develop your skills in writing and speaking clearly and effectively, and to help you become aware of your own purposes as writers and aware of the audience(s) you are writing for. You will write four essays on themes relating to consumer culture for a minimum total of 20-22 pages, and give considerable attention to revision. In homework and class discussions, you'll look at the way accomplished writers engage readers and shape the parts of their essays into a satisfying whole; you'll also enter into conversation with the writers about their ideas. To help you become better readers—not only of others students' writing, but also of your own—you'll review peers' writing in workshops. A brief (8 p.) investigative essay will give you the opportunity to research an aspect of consumer culture that especially interests you. You'll also give a brief oral presentation on the topic you investigate.

This class may include a service learning component, in conjunction with Essay II. (See handout.)

Texts

Required: Course packet, available at the MIT Copy Center
A Pocket Style Manual. Edited by Diana Hacker, Bedford/St. Martin's
A good college dictionary (not a pocket dictionary!)

Supplemental readings may be provided as handouts and via Reserved Readings. A \$5 fee will be charged to cover photocopying of course materials.

Course policies

Attendance: This class is structured as a seminar/workshop. Therefore, attendance is important. Your responsibility in the class is not only to be a writer, but also to read and respond to classmates' work and to participate in discussions. If you miss more than two classes for any reason, you risk getting a lower grade. With five unexcused absences you will be withdrawn from the class. It is your responsibility to let me know why you are

absent and to keep up with assignments when you do miss class. Lateness is discourteous to your classmates and to your professor. Your grade for class participation will suffer if you are habitually late.

Deadlines: To participate in class discussions, you must read assignments on time. It is also imperative that you bring a draft to class on workshop days and be prepared for oral presentations. Deadlines for revisions will be more flexible; I'll announce them as we go. *All work must be handed in before Class #19.*

Conferences: You are required to have one conference with me, but I encourage more. Bring specific questions about your writing, such as how to make an introduction more vivid or how to enrich the ideas in your essay. You are also welcome to use conference time to continue discussions begun in class or try out ideas sparked by your reading.

Evaluation: I'll give you evaluative comments on all essay drafts, and \checkmark , $\checkmark+$ or $\checkmark-$ for homework and oral presentations. You will receive a grade at the end of the term for all of your work, which is to be handed in to me in a portfolio. The quality of your writing will be the primary criterion for your semester grade. I'll also take into consideration effort and improvement, especially as demonstrated by revision; homework, and class participation, including your participation in workshops. **Receiving a grade of B or better in 21 W. 730 (or in 731 or 732) means that you pass Phase I of the Writing Requirement.** (Note: Phase I and Phase II requirements apply only to students who matriculated before Summer 2001.) **A grade of C or better satisfies the Communication intensive requirement for students who have matriculated since the summer of 2001.** If your work appears to be below a B-, I will let you know, and we will discuss strategies for improvement: for example, I may ask you to visit the Writing Center. All required work must be completed satisfactorily for you to receive a passing grade for the course.

Plagiarism: MIT's academic honesty policy can be found at the following link:
<http://web.mit.edu/policies/10.0.html>

Note: There are no tests in this class. Instructions re: the portfolio will come later, but remember to keep all your work—don't throw anything away!

MIT's libraries can be accessed via <http://libraries.mit.edu>.
Reference help, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is available at <http://libraries.mit.edu/research/virtualref.html#DT>

The *Mayfield Handbook for Technical Writing*, the preferred style guide for MIT students, is available on-line at <https://mit.imoat.net/handbook>.

The web address of MIT's Writing Center is <http://web.mit.edu/writing>. The site gives you info on how to make an appointment for a session with a writing tutor, as well as links to help regarding grammar and research paper format. You will also find a definition of plagiarism at this site.

SYLLABUS

Expository Writing: Consumer Culture

21W.730 sec. 5–Fall 2002

“[W]e should write out of what we know, but in the expectation that we can be changed at any moment by something we have yet to discover.”

– Margo Jefferson

Note: This syllabus is intended to give you an overview of our semester, particularly when papers are due, so that you may plan your time accordingly. *Homework assignments will be detailed as we go.* Assignments are due next class unless otherwise noted.

I THEME: Shopping WRITING SKILLS: Finding a voice; developing a narrative

- Class #1 Introductions
 You and writing
 Overview of class
Homework Assignment #1:
 Letter to me
 Rose, “Shopping as a Spiritual Adventure”; Johnson, “Rolex” (handouts)
- Class #2 Syllabus
 Elements of the essay: Voice and sensibility
 Shopping as part of our lives
Homework Assignment #2:
 Gopnik, “The Winter Circus . . .”
 Begin Journals
- Class #3 Service Learning
 What makes an essay?
Homework Assignment #3:
 Essay I – 1st Draft
- Class #4 WORKSHOP Essay I
 Introduce Research Project
Homework Assignment #4:
 Brubach, “Mail-Order America”;

II THEME: Advertising WRITING SKILLS: Analysis; Forming a thesis

- Class #5 Return drafts and discuss
 The secret life of words (word power)
 Discuss “Mail-Order America”
 Advertising and manipulation
Homework Assignment #5:
 Revise Essay I
 Gladwell, “The Science of Shopping” (on line)
- Class #6 Techniques of persuasion: Reading values in texts and pictures
Homework Assignment #6:
 Rushkoff, “They Say”; Gladwell, “Listening to Khakis” (on line)
 Bring ads to class for Essay II

Class #7 "They Say" and "Listening to Khakis"; Evidence and argument
Work with ads
Homework Assignment #7:
Essay II – 1st Draft due in Class #8

Class #8 WORKSHOP Essay II
Homework Assignment #8:
Jarrell, "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket"
* Proposal for Research Project due by e-mail, a day after Class #9

III THEME: Critiquing Consumer Culture

WRITING SKILLS: Engaging in conversation with other writers—representing their ideas accurately; connecting writers' ideas; critiquing writers' ideas

Class #9 Return Drafts and discuss; Work on Essay II
Discuss "Sad Heart"
Homework Assignment #9:
Revise Essay II; Catch up with journals

Class #10 Video: *Merchants of Cool*
Homework Assignment #10:
Annotated Bibliography for Research Project

Class #11 Discuss Research Essay topics & sources
Thesis clinic
Homework Assignment #11:
Schor, Intro. to *The Overspent American*

Class #12 Critiquing Consumer Culture: *The Overspent American*
Homework Assignment #12:
Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism"; Cross, "Irony of the Century"

Class #13 Discuss "Two Cheers" and "Irony"
Homework Assignment #13:
Research; Singer, "The Singer Solution"

Class #14 Critiquing consumer culture: the claims of the poor
Paragraph clinic
Homework Assignment #14:
Berry, "Getting along with Nature" and "Back to the Land"
Research

Class #15 Critiquing consumer culture: the claims of the environment
Defining terms
Homework Assignment #15:
Bring notes for Essay III to class

Class #16 Discuss Singer's Solution
Pre-Writing for Research Essays
Homework Assignment #16:
Essay III due to your group by Class #15.
Bring sentences to work on to class

- Class #17 Introduce Essay IV
 Clinic: polishing sentences
 Homework Assignment #17:
 Respond to your group's Research Essays
 Klein, excerpt from *No Logo*
- Class #18 WORKSHOP ESSAY III
 Homework Assignment #18:
 Re-revision of Essay II due, a day after Class # 20 by e-mail.
- Class #19 Return drafts of Essay III and discuss
 Klein: Consumer activism
 Homework Assignment #19:
 Begin Essay IV
- Class #20 Work on Essay IV
 Homework Assignment #20:
 Continue w/Essay IV
- Class #21 WORKSHOP first part of Essay IV
 Homework Assignment #21:
 Write last 2 letters for Essay IV
- Class #22 Revision concerns?
 WORKSHOP Essay IV and hand in to me
 Homework Assignment #22:
 Prepare Oral Presentation
- Class #23 Pointers for Oral Presentations
 Homework Assignment #23:
 Revise Essay III
- Class #24 ORAL PRESENTATIONS
 Homework Assignment #24:
 Revision as needed
- Class #25 ORAL PRESENTATIONS
 Homework Assignment #25:
 Revise Essay IV; Prepare Portfolios
- Class #26 ORAL PRESENTATIONS
 Evaluations; Summing up

Portfolios, including Cover Letter and final revisions of Essays III and IV, due a day after Class # 26 my office. No extensions.