

English 460: The Scope of Rhetoric

Instructor: Dr. Mike Edwards **Department of English, Washington State University**

Catalog description: 460 The Scope of Rhetoric (3). Major themes in contemporary rhetoric.

Course Overview

Our popular culture is riven by deception. Fake news, propaganda, alternative facts: these days, it seems like everyone's a liar or being accused of lying. The term "rhetoric," historically associated with what Aristotle called "the available means of persuasion," is today regarded with suspicion. In this course, we'll investigate various forms of deception and how they function rhetorically. Our vulgar word for some of those forms is "bullshit," which is a useful term to start from: what's the difference between bullshit and a lie? Do we believe in Plato's concept of a "noble lie"? How do we feel about unreliable narrators? And perhaps most importantly: how can thinking about deception help us understand what constitutes truth, honesty, and forthrightness?

Student Learning Outcomes

- Define and understand rhetorical aspects and characteristics of lies, deceit, deception, propaganda, and disinformation.
- Understand and apply rhetorical concepts to theories and practices of deception.
- Read and investigate complex texts using critical concepts and terminology.
- Express ideas effectively using appropriate writing conventions.
- Organize and present information clearly and coherently.
- Collaborate and develop and revise ideas with classmates and instructor.

Required Texts

- Almossawi, Ali. *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*. ISBN 9780989931205
- Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*. ISBN 9781400826537
- McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. ISBN 9780262535045
- Merlan, Anna. *Republic of Lies*. ISBN 9781250231277
- O'Connor, Cailin, and James Weatherall. *The Misinformation Age*. ISBN 9780300251852

Course Work

Almost all of our work will rely on some sort of writing. Furthermore, the course is set up to offer you multiple opportunities to seek feedback upon and revise and improve your writing: you are strongly encouraged to reuse, recycle, re-see, revise, and adapt your own writing from the shorter assignments into the larger assignments.

Assignments

Assignment	Scope	Points
Project 1	800--1200 words, on Modules 1 and 2	150
Project 2	1000--1600 words, on Modules 3 and 4	150
Midterm Proposal and Annotated Bibliography	600--1000 words, due before midterm conferences	80
Final Presentation	4--6 minute video	80
Final Project	3000--4000 words, due during exam week	240
Discussion Forums	12 assignments at 30 points, lowest two dropped	300

Assessments

No quizzes, tests, or exams.

Grading

Assignment	Points	Percent of Overall Grade
Projects 1 and 2	300	30%
Midterm	80	8%
Presentation	80	8%
Final Project	240	24%
Discussions	300	30%

Grade	Percent	Grade	Percent
A	95%	C	75%
A-	92%	C-	72%
B+	87%	D+	67%
B	85%	D	65%
B-	82%	F	60%
C+	77%		

Instructor Interaction

I hold open office hours on Zoom every Wednesday from 1 to 3 PM. I try to respond to WSU emails during work hours within one to two days; please write to me at mike.edwards@wsu.edu from your WSU email address.

Late Work

Because the Discussion Forums are a place for conversation aimed at helping you and your classmates with that week's readings and concepts, late work is not helpful: it doesn't benefit anyone to add a perspective weeks after everybody else has moved on. Most of us---me the professor included---will be thinking about the stuff we're talking about now, not the stuff we were talking about last week or three weeks ago.

- Posts and comments up to 24 hours late lose 5 points.
- Posts and comments up to 48 hours late lose 10 points.
- Posts and comments more than 48 hours late receive no credit.

Essays and the midterm proposal take a **20%** grade hit if they are **less than two weeks late**. (I'm encouraging you to stay caught up.) If they are **more than two weeks late**, they take a **50%** grade hit. (No, seriously: *stay caught up*.) Because of our pace and workload, I will have less time to devote to feedback on essays that are more than a week late.

Because of required WSU grade submission dates, I cannot give points for a late final project or for late final presentations.

Doing the easy, small-scale work and **staying caught up** with the Discussion Forums is the simplest way to do well in this class.

Assignments

Discussion Forums

400--600 word initial posts due midweek, comments due at the end of the week; 12 forums at 30 points each, lowest two dropped.

Most weeks, you will be required to make one post and responses (comments) to at least two other people's posts on the Discussion Forums. Your posts should demonstrate your engagement with the readings and course topics and offer insightful questions and comments. Your comments should respectfully engage your classmates' posts in the ways they respond to those same topics and subjects, and should direct your classmates to the ideas of theirs that most merit development and exploration, and help them do so.

Initial posts should be at least 400 words long, and should aim---for the sake of your classmates' reading time---to be not much longer than 600 words. Comments will be considerably shorter, but should be specific enough to extend the discussion in productive ways and to help the recipient focus, revise, and extend their ideas. Posts and comments are considered to be informal first-draft thoughts, not polished prose, but style and rhetorical awareness and mutual respect are important.

Rubric

- *Exceptional (A)*. The post is focused and coherently integrates examples with explanations or analysis. The post demonstrates awareness of its own limitations or implications, and considers multiple perspectives when appropriate. The entry reflects in-depth engagement with the topic.
- *Good (B)*. The post is reasonably focused, and explanations or analysis are mostly based on examples or other evidence. Fewer connections are made between ideas, and though new insights are offered, they are not fully developed. The post reflects moderate engagement with the topic.
- *Acceptable (C)*. The post is mostly description or summary, without consideration of alternative perspectives, and few connections are made between ideas. The post reflects passing engagement with the topic.
- *Unsatisfactory (D)*. The post is unfocused, or simply rehashes previous comments, and displays no evidence of engagement with the topic.
- *Unacceptable (F)*. The post consists of a few disconnected sentences.

In addition to the criteria above, a particularly good discussion forum post can distinguish itself by quoting or referencing other class posts and comments, by setting the agenda for discussion by posting early, by connecting to other courses or other readings not assigned in the course, by incorporating or linking to relevant multi-modal content (visuals, audio, video, animation) appropriate to the discussion, or by helpfully and respectfully clarifying or responding to points other students have made in their own posts.

Creative Posts

In order to encourage creative and unconventional thinking, and to give you the chance to experiment and play to your strengths, I offer you the opportunity to post ***something other than conventional academic prose*** three times during the semester. I'm hoping that you will have fun and take risks with these posts, so I will be generous in grading them, as long as you show you're putting in about the same effort as you would for a more conventionally academic Discussion Forum post. Creative post formats can include, but are not limited to:

- an advertisement
- a cartoon, comic strip, or piece of sequential art
- an educational or "how-to" set of instructions
- a flow chart or organizational chart or Gantt chart

- an infographic
- an invented court decision, Senate or House Resolution, or executive order
- a letter to the editor (to consider: which publication?)
- a listicle
- a manifesto
- a map
- memes or creepypasta
- a memorandum or administrative document
- a (*fake?*) (how fake?) news article
- a parody or satire
- a piece of "flash fiction," "sudden fiction," or short story
- a piece of propaganda
- a piece of visual rhetoric or art
- a poem or group of poems
- shooped images
- a short video
- a social media feed or feud
- a song or mashup
- a very short one-act play or film script
- a white paper or impact statement or position statement

What you post should be **original**, in the same way your other Discussion Forum posts are original: it's fine, *and expected*, to build upon and incorporate other people's ideas. If you feel the need, it's perfectly fine to include a sentence or two at the end explaining what you were trying to do and why, and how it connects to that week's readings.

Projects 1 and 2

Context

The two more formal writing projects offer you a way to revise and develop your insights from the discussion forums into more polished prose, which you can then expand and incorporate into your midterm and final project. The goal is to help you refine and express your thinking in modes appropriate to your own rhetorical goals, and to give you the chance to demonstrate your careful and nuanced engagement with the rhetorics we examine in the course. So there are two implicit tasks here:

first, show that you're connecting and responding to the course materials, and second, use the connections you're making in ways that reflect your own priorities and interests.

Guidance

Your projects should attempt to revise, synthesize, and expand upon insights from the discussion forums. Part of your analysis will necessarily involve both summary and evaluation, but the assignment is neither a report on the rhetorical phenomena we've been investigating nor a review of the books we've been reading: instead, you're examining how their arguments are put together, how their themes are expressed, what the social contexts are and how they play out in our lives and the debates associated with them, and---most importantly---what your insights are.

These two projects are your opportunities to synthesize your discussion forum posts into written examinations of course topics that interest you. They should use our readings and other materials as points from which to investigate particular aspects of rhetorics associated with specific cultural practices and contexts, and to examine them in relation to other rhetorical and cultural practices and arguments. Additionally, the analyses may trace the precedents and effects of those rhetorics: what contributed to or enabled them, as their contributing causes and rhetorical situations. Your analyses should incorporate your own perspectives and voice in making some sort of argument that goes beyond simply summarizing your sources, and should be written for an audience of interested, intelligent, and curious university peers, faculty and students alike.

Projects that are more compelling and persuasive will make an argumentative claim that goes beyond a summary of other texts or a reliance on generalizations. In expressing your insights, you should make use of the vocabulary of rhetorical criticism, including terms like exigence, audience, author or rhetor, argument, claim, evidence, warrant, appeal, and so on. You should incorporate quotations from the readings into your project as support for your analysis, and you should seek out and cite at least two additional sources per essay, beyond the assigned readings, to help develop your analysis. I encourage use of multiple media---images, video clips, audio, links---in your projects.

Your additional sources and your findings should lead you to questions for further research that you are willing to pursue and make more specific in your midterm proposal and final project.

Standards

Citations or references should be documented according to MLA conventions, whether through direct quotation or indirect reference. See the Purdue OWL's [MLA Formatting and Style Guide](#).

I grade the essay projects on a five-part rubric, with 30 points possible in each of the following categories, for a total of 150 points:

- **Substance.** The project is focused, complex, and well-developed.
- **Research.** The project integrates appropriate textual evidence to support its claims and fulfill the requirements of the rhetorical task. The author selects, evaluates, and cites relevant sources.
- **Argument.** The project offers thoughtful and original insights and claims, and develops those claims with evidence and connections to appropriate course materials, discussions, and themes.
- **Style.** The author works toward clarity and grace. The project's style and tone are appropriate to the genre, context, and purpose. Prose avoids error.
- **Creativity.** The project demonstrates originality, daring, and innovation in its substance or form, to possibly include creative use of media and genre.

Project 1

Compose an 800- to 1200-word essay that uses quotations from the recent readings as well as research that you've done on your own to respond to the themes we've been engaging.

For this project I'm being fairly explicit about the sources requirement: a minimum of **four** sources, to include

- Frankfurt and/or Almossawi,
- two sources you find on your own, and
- any of the previous readings.

The requirement to engage two sources that you find on your own is intended to offer you some options, such as

- citing scholarly sources on course topics of interest,
- citing news or opinion pieces from popular media that connect current events to course topics,
- citing literary examples of some of the complex issues we've discussed, or
- citing popular culture examples---film, TV, comics, music---of some of the complex issues we've discussed.

Optional Peer Review for Project 1

If you'd like feedback on a draft of Project 1 before turning in your submission draft, upload your draft and I'll put you in peer review groups with others who've done the same. Complete reviews of your peers' submissions early enough that they have time to use your feedback before turning in their own drafts.

Project 2

Compose a 1000- to 1600-word essay that uses quotations from at least two of the recent readings as well as research that you've done on your own to respond to the themes we've been engaging. As with Project 1, seek out and cite at least two reputable critical sources beyond the assigned readings.

Midterm Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

Your midterm proposal and annotated bibliography should give an initial rough-draft idea of the topic or topics that interest you so far in the course, and should also offer a plan for how you intend to develop that interest into your final project.

It should have four components:

1. A paragraph or two describing your **topic of interest** in your own words, explaining why it's interesting to you, why it matters or should matter to other people, and why it's a complicated or difficult or complex or challenging rhetorical problem.
2. A list of three to five key critical, theoretical, technical, or rhetorical **terms** or **concepts** we've encountered in this course, with definitions and implications for

those terms, in your own words and/or using quotations from the readings and discussion forums.

3. An annotated list of five to seven **sources**---at least two from assigned course readings, and at least two you've found on your own---that you think will help you make and support an argument about your topic. Each item in the list should begin with a complete citation in MLA format, followed by two or three sentences about why you think it's important and what questions it raises.
4. A paragraph or two describing what **directions** you think you'll go with developing the topic between now and the end of the semester, and describing as well what **questions** you have about the topic or possible directions: where will you go with it, and what more do you need to know?

Length: 600--1000 words

Due: Before the start of your one-on-one conference with me during Week 7.

Final Project

Write a 3000--4000 word inquiry into an interesting topic related to the work of the class. You must engage at least two of the class readings in a substantial way, and you must discuss and cite at least four secondary sources relating to your topic. You are welcome to revise, adapt, and incorporate writing from your discussion forum posts and essay assignments, and to quote and cite your classmates. Your final project should both *revise* and *extend* the topic you proposed for your midterm: "revise" because plans change en route to completion, and "extend" because you should build on at least some of the work you do in the first half of the semester.

You must use in-text citations and include a list of Works Cited in MLA format, but the project you submit does not need to be formatted like a conventional academic essay, if there are other forms that you feel would communicate your argument more effectively, or if you've got a more interesting idea: as always, I encourage the creative use of media and experimentation with genre. You should, however, incorporate the insights about rhetorical style in polishing and editing your submission, and you should proofread carefully before submitting.

Beyond that guidance, I encourage you to make this project your own: do something that interests you, that you care about, that you'd want other people to read. If it's something you're interested in and passionate about, that will show and be reflected in the quality of the work you submit. For those reasons, I prefer to leave this assignment fairly open-ended: submit the project you want to pursue, not the one you imagine I want to see.

Length: 3000--4000 words

Value: 240 points

Final Presentation

Record and edit a polished 4--6 minute video that summarizes and presents to the class what you've learned in conducting your final project research. Your presentation should make a case for your project's exigency: why does what you're investigating matter to us? It should offer background on the question or problem you're investigating and connect it to the themes of the class, including some sense of how the question evolved and where it's going, and what the various positions and considerations are. It must make use of the terms and vocabulary we've developed this semester, and must briefly summarize the most important external sources you found, connecting them to the course readings and themes in the context of your project. Your video must incorporate additional media beyond just you as a talking head, in order both to engage our attention and to adequately represent the rich complexity of the work you've done. Finally, since this is a final presentation, try to make it as polished and interesting as possible, and play to what you know are your strengths.