Environmental Writing: Words, Ethics, Action

Instructor: Stephen Siperstein

Prerequisite Skills:
This course assumes no prior knowledge in environmental issues. However, succeeding in the course will require an open mind and a willingness to acknowledge alternative perspectives and ideas that you might not agree with. Furthermore, this course will be reading and writing intensive and thus requires at least a rudimentary knowledge of English grammar and writing skills.

Course Description:
Our work in this course will begin with the premise that environmental writing can be a form of environmental action, and that how we communicate our environmental values may be as, if not more important than what values we hold. More precisely, finding solutions to the problems posed by our current global environmental crises requires cultivating different writing and critical thinking skills appropriate to particular aims, desires, contexts, and issues. Writing a persuasive essay, composing a speech that rouses people to protest, even crafting first-person place narratives: these are all forms of writing that intervene in the world in particular ways, ways that might be useful for addressing environmental problems.

Based on this overarching premise about the connections between writing and action this course is designed to develop a range of critical reading, critical thinking, and writing practices that revolve around current topical environmental concerns. By focusing on developing a skill set of diverse writing practices, you will develop a strong sense of the importance of writing as a possible form of environmental action. In general, the course will emphasize three related activities throughout: (1) reading and analyzing environmental texts across a range of forms and genres; (2) practicing writing environmentally by experimenting with different styles, techniques, genres, voices, audiences, etc; and (3) reflecting on the writing process in relation to other modes of environmental action and to the history of the environmental movement.

The goal of this course will be to allow you to think about writing, to read good writing and, most importantly, to write—all within an environmental framework. Our readings and assignments will explore a range of environmental issues including global climate change, local toxicity issues, and the environmental effects of the food industry. Nevertheless, the course will cast a large net in its definition of “environmental,” and you should be prepared to challenge your preconceptions about what the environment and what environmentalism means in the world today.

Required Texts
Carson, Rachel, Silent Spring (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)
Harr, Jonathan, A Civil Action (Vintage, 1996)
Kolbert, Elizabeth, Field Notes from a Catastrophe (Bloomsbury, 2006)
McKibben, Bill, ed. American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau (Library of America, 2008)
Pollan, Michael, Omnivore’s Dilemma (Penguin, 2006)

*Additional required readings will be posted on our course Blackboard site

Recommended texts:
Access to a good directory, e.g. Oxford English Dictionary, for readings and assignments

Required Assignments and Grading Percentages
Reading Quizzes 10%: Over the course of the term I will give a series of quizzes based on important details from assigned readings. Quizzes are a way for me to check that you are reading and understanding the material. There will be approximately one quiz for every week during the term. At the end of the term I will drop your lowest quiz score.
Blackboard posts, worksheets, reading responses, and other low stakes assignments 5%: Throughout the term I will ask you to complete other low-stakes writing, possibly including reading responses, free writes, revision exercises, or assignment proposals. These will also only be graded check plus, check, check minus, or zero, and will be announced on our blackboard site and via email on an as-needed basis.

Workshops/Peer Review Conferences (5%): As part of every creative assignment cycle you will be reading and responding to the work of your peers. Your response will take the form of a letter addressed to the writer as well as significant margin notes made (using Microsoft word) on a copy of their essay. We will then be meeting during online conferences to discuss your feedback. These group meetings are mandatory.

Course Blog 20%: Over the course of the term you will contribute original and thoughtful posts to our course blog website, as well as respond to your classmates’ posts. The course blog will be a place for us to test out ideas for final papers, engage in discussion with each other outside of class, and share ideas and texts from outside the course syllabus. Each post should be approximately 300-500 words; length of responses to classmates’ posts can vary.

Analysis Paper #1 and #2, 20%: These papers will be 3-4 pages in length and will require a “close reading analysis” of a specific assigned text. These papers will ask you to analyze how a given text is making its arguments, evaluate how effective you think the text is at addressing environmental issues, and explain how you might incorporate similar strategies into your own writing. All papers must have a work cited page and a title, include correct citations in MLA format, and be typed, double-spaced, in Times New Roman 12 pt. font, with standard margins. More detailed assignment guidelines will be distributed as the due date approaches.

Creative Assignments 40%: These writing assignments will ask you to take the writing strategies and approaches to environmental writing that we encounter in our assigned readers and incorporate them into your own creative environmental writing. More detailed assignment guidelines will be distributed as the due date approaches. However, note that these assignments will be written in cycles; you will write two versions of each assignment, a first version and a second version after receiving comments on your first version from me and from your peer review group mates.

Some grading principles: Grades in this course are based on a norm of “C.” Work done competently and adequately is “C” work. A “B” represents work that goes beyond the requirements of the assigned task and an “A” represents superior achievement well above the norm. In grading, a teacher has several obligations: 1) To the individual student – to assess the student’s work fairly and accurately. 2) To other students in the class – to maintain standards so that excellence is properly recognized. 3) To the school – to maintain standards of excellence that reflect the school’s credibility, which ultimately reflects the student’s credibility. 4) To potential employers or graduate schools – to indicate accurately the student’s abilities and achievements. In grading your work, I will strive for fairness and clarity and will attempt to meet the obligations outlined above.

Course Expectations and Policies

Late Work: You must submit an electronic copy of all essays or other written work by the specific date and time indicated on the attached schedule, unless otherwise changed. Not turning in an assignment during class means that the assignment is late unless you have made prior arrangements with me. Every day an assignment is late (including weekend days), it will be marked down one half-letter grade (A to A- to B+, etc.)

Communication: One of the goals of our writing and class discussions is to communicate with each other and within the discourse communities of this class and this University more effectively. Along those lines, I strongly encourage you to communicate with me so that I can be in a position to understand your goals, questions, frustrations, and successes. If you are feeling particularly unsure of your work, I want to know about it. And if you ever find my comments on your papers confusing or inconsistent, I want to know about it. If you are having difficulties (either in this class or outside it) that affect your work, confidence, or concentration, I want to know about that too. Please feel free to stop by our blackboard site during my office hours or contact me via email.
Schedule of Readings and Assignments

*All assignments and readings due the day listed. Dates and assignments subject to change with notification.*

*AE = American Earth volume, page numbers as given*

I. What is Environmental Writing

Week 1
Readings: John Burroughs, “The Art of Seeing Things” (AE pp. 146-158); David Abram *from The Ecology of Magic* (AE pp. 815-834); Annie Dillard, “Fecundity” (AE, pp. 531-549)
Assignment(s):

Week 2
Readings: William Cronon, “Seasons of Want and Plenty” (AE pp. 632-658); Edward Abbey “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” (413-433)
Assignment(s): Blog post #1 and responses

Week 3
Readings: David R. Brower, “The Third Planet: Operating Instructions” (AE pp. 555-558); Joni Mitchell & Marvin Gaye, “Big Yellow Taxi” and “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” (AE pp. 490-492); Friends of the Earth *from Only One Earth* (AE, pp. 500-504);
Assignment(s): Analysis paper #1

II. The Tradition(s) of U.S. Environmental Writing

Week 4
Assignment(s): Blog post #2 and responses

Week 5
Readings: Rebecca Solnit, “The Thoreau Problem” (AE, pp. 971-974); Aldo Leopold *from Sand County Almanac* (AE, pp. 266-294)
Assignment(s): Creative assignment #1: Exploring a Place, version 2

Week 6
Readings: selections from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*
Assignment(s): Blog post #3 and responses

III. Writing Climate Change

Week 7
Readings: Kolbert, Elizabeth, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*
Assignment(s): Blog post #4 and responses

Week 8
Readings: watch Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth;* Al Gore, “Speech at the Kyoto Climate Change Conference” (AE, pp. 855-859)
Assignment(s): Creative assignment #2: An Argument for Action, version 1

Week 9
Readings: Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”; Jamieson, “The Moral and Political Challenges of Climate Change” (essays available on blackboard site); explore a carbon counting website online
Assignment(s): Blog post #5 and responses
          Creative assignment #2: An Argument for Action, version 2

IV. Writing Toxicity

Week 10
Readings: Jonathan Harr’s A Civil Action
Assignment(s): Blog post #6 and responses
          Analysis paper #2

Week 11
Readings: Jonathan Harr’s A Civil Action, cont… ; Cesar Chavez “Wrath of Grapes Boycott Speech” (AE, pp. 690-695)
Assignment(s): Creative assignment #3: Letter to the Editor, version 1

Week 12
Readings: Terry Tempest Williams from Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place (AE, pp. 739-759); Robert D. Bullard from Dumping in Dixie (AE, pp. 725-737)
Assignment(s): Creative assignment #3: Letter to the Editor, version 2

V. Writing Food

Week 13
Assignment(s): Blog post #7 and responses

Week 14
Readings: Michael Pollan’s Omnivore’s Dilemma
Assignment(s): Blog post #8 and responses

Week 15
Readings: Michael Pollan’s Omnivore’s Dilemma, cont… ; Explore Vandana Shiva’s Navdanya organization at http://www.navdanya.org/
Assignment(s): Final blog responses
          Creative assignment #4: Multi-genre investigation of a single environmental issue, version 1

Week 16
Assignment(s): Creative assignment #4: Multi-genre investigation of a single environmental issue, version 2