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ENG 1091G-096: Honors Composition: Your Brain

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Before long, you will begin your career as a professional writer.

I don't mean that you're necessarily going to make a living writing novels, poems, or essays, though you may. I certainly don't mean that you're going to make a living writing essays *about* novels, poems, or essays (though if you follow a path like mine, you may do that as well). What I mean is that each of you is going to conduct your day-to-day life through various modes of written expression, and in many cases you'll do this more than you'll do anything else. You're going to write e-mails, Facebook updates, tweets, memoranda, progress reports, grants, press releases, proposals, affidavits, web sites, notes to the principle, letters to parents, letters to the editor, letters to your boss. And since you'll do this so much, the esteem with which others regard you, as well as the level of professional success you enjoy, will have much to do with your powers of written expression.

And so this is a course intended to help you grow as a writer and a thinker. We're going to do a lot of writing together, and in order to keep us all on the same approximate page, we will situate our writing around a topic that has sold a lot of books over the past few years. That topic is the topic of cognition: your brain and how it works. We'll be reading a host of recent writers whose work on the subject has appeared on the best sellers lists of *The New York Times*: laypersons' texts, in other words, written for consumption by a mass audience of smart people rather than specialists. But though presented in a form accessible to people who have not earned doctorates in evolutionary psychology, information systems, or neurobiology, these texts present some of the most current theories of the nature of human thought, cognition, and consciousness. Delving into these theories, learning something about what today's most outspoken researchers have to say about the human mind, will help us to take a new perspective upon our own decision-making processes, our own experiences, our own desires, ourselves. And that, repeatedly, is what we will write about this semester.

Course Requirements & Policies

Grading Formula

Essay 1.....	20%
Essay 2.....	20%
Essay 3.....	25%
Pecha Kucha.....	15%
Blog.....	10%
Class Citizenship.....	10%

Assignments

Three major writing and research assignments will determine the bulk of your grade this semester. The due dates for the final drafts of these three assignments appear on the course schedule, as do the due dates for two preliminary drafts you will make available for your peers to review in class.

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In addition to these written assignments, each member of this class will complete a presentation which will integrate a news item (discovered by the presenter) with some aspect or facet of the text we are reading together as a class. These presentations will follow the pecha kucha format of presentation, which means that as the presenter speaks to his or her audience, their words will be accompanied by a visual presentation consisting of 20 slides shown for exactly 20 seconds each (this means that every pecha kucha presentation is exactly 6 minutes and 40 seconds long). We will be using this format as a way of re-educating you in the use of PowerPoint; the pecha kucha format simply will not allow you to make common errors such as reading to your audience text you have typed onto a slide, going on too long, not having mastered your material well enough to speak extemporaneously, or not having a key point to make. These will be quick presentations that will also require a lot of preparation on your part.

You'll also do some writing on our class bog this semester. You'll use this space to record your thoughts about the reading, about how you think it relates to your own experience and interests, and you'll also use it to respond to the work of other writers and to garner their perceptions on your own work. Sometimes I'll ask you to take on specific tasks on the blog, and at other times, you'll direct yourself. Ultimately, I hope that much of the work you'll submit to the blog will help you winnow your own ideas, deciding which of them is essay-worthy. But whatever kind of writing you use the blog for, this part of your grade entails two requirements (1) you must submit to the blog (at least a well-developed paragraph) at least one hour before every class meeting; (2) one hour prior to the *next* class meeting--at the latest--you must not only submit your next blog entry, but you must also respond to one of the entries submitted by a classmate of yours for the prior class. So once we get going, you'll be writing two well-developed paragraphs before each and every class. And these paragraphs should read like they were written by Honors students: they should provide the evidence of a mind in the process of challenging itself and others; it should be carefully-written, revised prose; and it should be absolutely free of grammatical and spelling errors.

Class Citizenship

I expect students to model strong class citizenship in this course. Among other things, this means working hard to make our discussion run well. To make the discussion run well: (1) you should read, and as you read you should form ideas, draw connections, raise problems, and take notes; (2) you should plan on participating—at least making a comment or asking a question of me or your classmates—every day; (3) you should be careful not to dominate discussion (i.e., those of you who are not shy should give other students an opening to participate), and (4) you should participate with tact and civility (take other people's remarks and questions seriously, don't interrupt, respond courteously, etc.). The grade for class citizenship will depend upon meeting all these criteria. I will tend to lavish encouragement on students who engage as strong class citizens. I will tend to become irritated with students who never have anything to say or who seem otherwise feckless, vacant, or useless.

One last note on participation: Participating well doesn't simply mean talking a lot—it also means frequently responding to the comments of others, all the while showing that you are engaged in a process of careful and close reading and thinking. So in light of that, here are two additional practices that will help you find more to say about our subject: (1) subscribing to either a print or electronic version of a reputable newspaper, like the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Chicago Tribune*, and reading liberally from it every single day, and (2) keeping a daily journal of your thoughts about our subject matter, about your own brain and how it seems to work.

When we workshop essay drafts together, obviously, I expect you to be doing *that*. One way to convince me that you are a *terrible* class citizen is to be checking your e-mail, surfing the web, texting someone, or otherwise clicking away on a keyboard while discussion is underway. If I see you paying attention to a computer screen or wireless device while you should be paying attention to one of your fellow students (or to me), expect a sharp and public rebuke.

Attendance and Deadlines

With two absences, students will be considered overcut. Overcutting may result in the reduction of the final course grade by a grade or more, depending upon frequency. In the case of an excused absence (as defined by EIU university-wide policy), your excuse must be made in writing, accompanied by the appropriate documentation, and given to me no later than the first class meeting following the absence. In no case may a student accumulate more than three absences, either excused or unexcused, and still pass the course—if illness or other extenuating circumstances cause you to miss more than three classes, you should petition for a withdrawal.

One last word related to attendance: I ask that students who have not read the assigned text on the day it is to be discussed not bother coming. Such students cannot contribute anything valuable to the discussion, and in any case it is dishonest for them to crib from the efforts of others by listening in on their conversations. Always read the assigned materials carefully, but if for some reason you have not, don't bother showing up.

Students who habitually show up for class a few minutes after it's started should find a professor who's into that and take their course instead. This professor is annoyed by it and reacts badly.

Late assignments will be penalized for their lateness. If they are very late, they may not be accepted at all. I am not unbending in this policy in the case of extreme circumstances, but in order to be granted an extension, students must contact me, with a compelling case to make, at least two days before the paper's due date.

Etc.

Students are of course responsible for knowing Eastern Illinois University regulations and policies regarding academic honesty. Plagiarism, even if unknowing or accidental, can result in your failing the course and in further action by the university. Please note the English Department's statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's own original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignments, of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, feel free to ask me to clarify. Also, please make a point of noting the following: I will not tolerate any form of academic dishonesty in this course. If I come to suspect misconduct of any kind, I will become dogged about rooting it out, and if my suspicions are confirmed, I will dispense appropriate penalties.

Lastly, you are not welcome to e-mail me while you are a student in this course. When you have a question, problem, or concern, I want to sit down with you and discuss the issue for as long as you need. That's why I keep office hours. I also want to talk with you about interesting ideas you have this semester, just as I want to talk with you—personally—about the readings we take on. But higher education is made, shall we say, less probable when too many interactions between student and professor happen at a remove; and in any case too many students now use e-mail as a way to avoid their professors. When you need to communicate with me, attend my office hours, make an appointment for an alternative time, call me at my office (581.6302), or if it's very important and the other avenues have not worked, call me at home (348.6144). We'll talk.

Required Texts

Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (2000)

Paul Bloom, *How Pleasure Works* (2010)

Joseph Gibaldi, ed., *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th Edition* (2005)

Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2007)

Jonah Lehrer, *How We Decide* (2009)

Leher, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2008)

Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (1997)

Schedule

i. Deciding

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 8/24 Introductions, course outline
Thurs 8/26 Gladwell, *Blink*, pp. 3-47

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 8/31 *Blink*, pp. 48-98
Thurs 9/2 *Blink*, pp. 99-188

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 9/7 *Blink*, pp. 189-254
Thurs 9/9 Lehrer, *How We Decide*, pp. xi-56

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 9/14 *How We Decide*, pp. 57-92
Thurs 9/16 *How We Decide*, pp. 93-132

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 9/21 *How We Decide*, pp. 133-95
Thurs 9/23 *How We Decide*, pp. 196-259
First draft of Essay 1 due, in-class workshop

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 9/28 Conferences in my office, Essay #1
Thurs 9/30 Conferences in my office, Essay #1

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 10/5 In-class revision workshop
Thurs 10/7 Final draft of Essay #1 due, beginning of class

ii. Enjoying

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 10/12 Bloom, *How Pleasure Works*, pp. xi-53
Thurs 10/14 *How Pleasure Works*, pp. 55-115

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 10/19 *How Pleasure Works*, pp.117-221
Thurs 10/21 In-class writing workshop

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 10/26 First draft of Essay #2 due, beginning of class
In-class response workshop
Thurs 10/28 Final draft of Essay #2 due, beginning of class

iii. Being

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 11/2 Pinker, *How The Mind Works*, pp. ix-58
Thurs 11/4 *How The Mind Works*, pp. 59-148

class meets in Coleman 3120

Tues 11/9 Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, pp. 1-66
Thurs 11/11 *The Meme Machine*, pp. 147-203

class meets in Coleman 3130

Tues 11/16 In-class writing workshop
Thurs 11/18 In-class writing workshop

Tues 11/23, Thanksgiving break
Thurs 11/25

Tues 11/30 Conference in my office
Thurs 12/2 Conference in my office

Tues 12/7 Conference in my office
Thurs 12/9 Final draft of Essay 3 due beginning of class
Discussion: This Is Your Brain At The University