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ENG 1091G-097: Composition and Language: Honors

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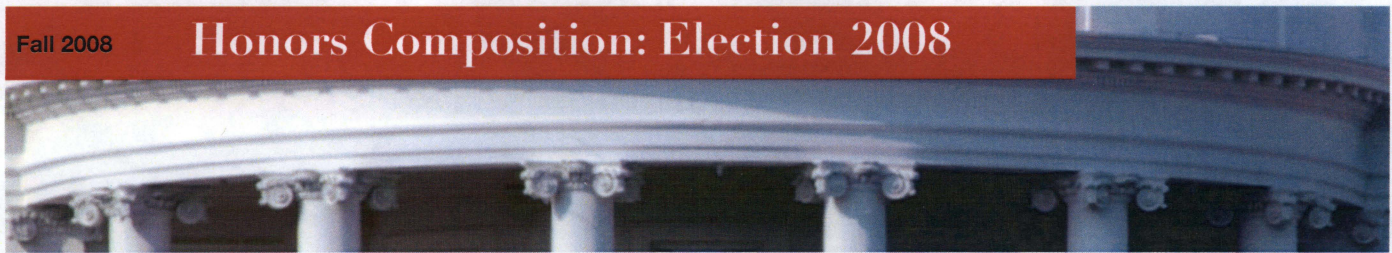
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Fall 2008

Honors Composition: Election 2008



Professor Christopher Hanlon
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Department of English
Office Hours: T, R 8-9 am, W 6-7 pm

Before long, each of you will embark on 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, memoranda, progress reports, grants, press releases, proposals, affidavits, web sites, op/eds, 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 view 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 at first situate our writing around a common topic of vital importance to each of us: the question of who should be our next president.

Our semester together coincides with the zenith of the 2008 presidential election season. This week the Democratic Party holds its convention in Denver, followed by the Republicans in Saint Paul. Both of these events will be studies in rhetoric and showmanship, the manipulation of public perception. And many of our most venerable news outlets will choose to cover rhetoric and showmanship, to treat spin as a "story" at least as important as other stories. And while I think there's a value to conversations about politics—meaning, in other words, conversations about showmanship and spin—that's not the kind of conversation I want for us to have over the next four months. Instead, I want to have a conversation about *policy*, a conversation—always with an eye toward producing compelling writing—about which of the two viable candidates has the most sensible plan to move our country forward on a host of issues. What would a U.S. commencement of troop withdrawal from Iraq entail? Is the surge working? How do we measure military success in Iraq? Are current levels of federal spending sustainable? Which candidate's perception of the impending ecological disaster is the most compelling? With last week's invasion of the Republic of Georgia by Russia, is the United States about to enter another cold war? Which candidate understands this situation most fully and tells the most compelling story about how the Nation should navigate this potentially disastrous quandary?

In order to help us to have a conversation about such issues, even if the rest of the country wants to talk about who went negative first and so on, we're going to read some recent books that address three of the most pressing issues we face as a country: Health Care (or rather, our country's lack of a system for delivering it to all citizens), Social Security (which will ei-

ther disappear or bankrupt us in the next twenty years, if you take the experts seriously), and Iraq (where we have now lost more lives than on September 11—not counting the Iraqis we’ve killed—and where Congress has now appropriated over \$300 billion). We’re going to read other current pieces of writing on these issues too, all in an effort to shape ourselves into savvy evaluators of John McCain’s and Barack Obama’s stated positions. As an added bonus, this will prepare you to cast the most informed, intelligent vote of your life in November. And repeatedly, it is to this subject that will devote ourselves as writers.

Course Requirements & Policies

Grading Formula	Essay 1	25%
	Essay 2	25%
	Essay 3	25%
	Oral Report	15%
	Participation	10%

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 preliminary drafts you will make available for your peers to review in class. These essays will all be written as guest editorials in which you will make an informed stand on a presidential candidate’s stated position on either social security, health care, or the war in Iraq. And, since real writers write for real audiences, and since I have no interest in helping you become anything other than a real writer, we will in fact submit these essays for publication in a newspaper that accepts the work of guest editorialists.

In addition to these written assignments, each member of this class will complete an oral report related to the election and either social security/Medicare, Health Care, or Iraq. During most of these brief (10-15 minute) presentations, students will provide the rest of the class with information on a candidates’ position relating to the topic we have been studying, and they will also provide documentation for the information, they share. These reports will help us as we compose our own guest columns, and especially as we pick up on some of the rhetorical tricks of the trade other op-ed writers deploy.

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 participation 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, 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 thought about the election.

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, IMing someone, or otherwise clicking away on a keyboard while class is underway. If I see you paying attention to a computer 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 benefit 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 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 endangered when too many interactions between student and professor do not happen in person, and in any case too many students 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

Jonathan Cohn, *Sick: The Untold Story of America's Health Care Crisis*. 2007

Joseph Gibaldi, ed., *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 2005

Laurence Kotlikoff and Scott Burns, *The Coming Generational Storm: What You Need to Know About America's Economic Future*. 2005

Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. 2007

Schedule

i. Social Security & Medicare

Tues 8/26	Introductions, course outline
Thurs 8/28	Kotlikoff and Burns, <i>The Coming Generational Storm</i> , pp. xi-39
Tues 9/2	<i>The Coming Generational Storm</i> , pp. 41-86
Thurs 9/4	<i>The Coming Generational Storm</i> , pp. 121-171 Report: Two op-eds on Social Security and Medicare
Tues 9/11	Report: John McCain and Social Security/Medicare
Thurs 9/13	Report: Barack Obama and Social Security/Medicare Report: Two more op/eds on Social Security/Medicare
Tues 9/16	Meet in Booth Library for tour
Thurs 9/18	Draft #1, Essay 1 due, in-class workshop
Tues 9/23	Continue workshopping of Essay 1, midprocess drafts
Thurs 9/25	Final drafts of Essay 1 due beginning of class

ii. Health Care

Tues 9/30	Cohn, <i>Sick</i> , pp. ix-85
Thurs 10/2	<i>Sick</i> , pp. 87-140
Tues 10/7	In-class screening, <i>Sicko</i> (Michael Moore)
Thurs 10/9	<i>Sick</i> , pp. 141-23 Finish <i>Sicko</i> Report: Two op/eds on health care
Tues 10/14	<i>Sick</i> , pp. 215-31 In-class writing
Thurs 10/16	Report: Barack Obama and health care

		Report: John McCain and health care In-class writing
	Tues 10/21	First drafts of Essay 2 due in class, in-class workshop
	Thurs 10/23	Final drafts of essay 2 due beginning of class
	Tues 10/28	Conferences in my office
	Thurs 10/30	Conferences in my office
	Tues 11/4	Conferences in my office
	Thurs 11/6	Conferences in my office
iii. The War in Iraq	Tues 11/11	Ricks, <i>Fiasco</i> , pp. 3-111
	Thurs 11/13	<i>Fiasco</i> , pp. 115-88
	Tues 11/18	<i>Fiasco</i> , pp. 311-429
		In-class screening, <i>Bush's War</i> (Frontline, 2008)
	Thurs 11/20	Report: The President-elect's plan for Iraq Continue <i>Bush's War</i>
	Tues 11/25, Thurs 11/27	Thanksgiving break
	Tues 12/2	First drafts of Essay 3 due in-class, in-class workshop Report: Two op-eds on Iraq
	Thurs 12/4	Continue to workshop Essay 3 Report: Two more op-eds on Iraq
	Tues 12/9	no class meeting
	Thurs 12/11	Final drafts of Essay 3 due beginning of class Discussion: The next four years