COURSE DESIGN

English 109.02: Intensive Reading and Writing II, “Reading, Writing, Blogging”

Ben McCorkle

1. Course Description

English 109.02 is the second of a three-course basic writing track available to all students at The Ohio State University, Ohio’s largest public university and flagship institution, which in total serves approximately 45,000 undergraduate students across all campuses. While the Columbus campus places students into the course based on a preliminary essay assessment, the Marion regional campus works according to a model of self-placement, where students decide whether or not to take the course based on an informed self-assessment of their individual skills and needs. The course description on the departmental website says that the course “provides intensive practice in integrating academic reading and writing.” Within certain curricular guidelines, there is a good deal of freedom in terms of individual course design. The theme of my particular course is blogging and the citizen-journalist movement.

2. Institutional Context

As a land grant institution, The Ohio State University is open admissions, a status that is bestowed exclusively on the regional campuses while Columbus has tightened admissions standards over the past decade. Consequently, we at the Marion campus often get a caliber of student that is not quite fully prepared for the workload and rigor of college-level study. Our campus population consists of approximately 1,500 undergraduate students, which includes a mixture of traditional students with insufficient GPAs and ACT scores to warrant acceptance to the Columbus campus (but who will eventually move to the Columbus campus if their performance after several quarters merits it); older, nontraditional students who work, have children, and have not entertained academic pursuits for some time; and students for whom English is neither their native spoken nor written language. For this mixed demographic, retention is a central concern, and our campus is committed to creating conditions to ensure retention from the very beginning of a student’s experience on the Marion campus. As we see it, this challenge involves balancing multiple factors—accommodating students’ skills-based...
needs, instilling in them an interest in college-level work, and helping them feel like an empowered, integral part of the university community—and thus requires that we address it in a variety of ways at the administrative level as well as in our individual classrooms.

Students on the Marion campus self-place into first-year writing (110) or basic writing courses (109.01 and 109.02), a policy the English faculty maintains because we believe it empowers students to become active, accountable participants in their own educational process. The system also minimizes the negative stigma so often associated with remedial or basic writing courses. Typically, incoming students attend a placement orientation session, during which they learn about the distinctions among the three classes from which they can select, ask the coordinators questions to help fully inform their decision, and conduct a self-diagnostic based upon their own assessment of their skills as student writers. Once that decision has been made, students that chose to take 109.01 will have a midterm conference with their instructors, where they will discuss whether 109.02 or 110 will be a more appropriate option for them. While the goal of this system is to provide students with the conditions necessary to make an honest, informed decision about the writing courses they should take, the ultimate decision lies with the individual student, and sometimes that decision is made based upon factors such as schedule, money (credit hours don’t “count” towards graduation for 109 courses), or peer pressure—in other words, what we might deem contaminating factors. Because of the tendency for underprepared writers to opt out of taking basic writing courses, the basic writing instructors collectively recognize that they have to do a good job of selling their courses to the students. For example, for my 109.02 course, I crafted a short video commercial (located at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhCmSDexH-s) that I distributed to 109.01 instructors to pass along to their students.

The rhetoric and composition faculty at Marion has been working to expand the conception of writing on the campus, both among the general faculty and the student body at large, to include more than just literary analysis, personal narratives, and traditional forms of creative writing such as poetry and short fiction. In one respect, we have become advocates of multimodal composing, purposeful and rhetorically aware combinations of alphabetic text with sound, still images, and video. This focus is present in many of our course offerings, from basic writing to upper-level classes. Additionally, we have been working to address the need for increased opportunities for our students to engage in more civic or public writing, seen most recently in our establishment of a writing minor (available for any major) accompanied by various internships with area nonprofit organizations, local newspapers, and the like. In addition to offering students professionalizing opportunities for the future (Marion is located in an economically distressed portion of the
state, a mix of rust-belt and rural areas), we feel such adjustments help our program as well. My particular basic writing course contains both the public writing and new media themes. By incorporating these themes in a lower-level writing course, my goal is to create continuity between basic writing and upper-level writing courses rather than have the course appear cordoned off from (and perhaps deemed inferior to) the “real” writing courses. As many of our basic writing students end up becoming English majors or declaring writing minors later on, this type of integration helps to create potential new recruits for our program by introducing them to our writing program’s broader culture and curricular objectives right from the start.

3. Theoretical Rationale

One of my main goals when designing my version of 109.02 was to create a course that had a relevant, timely topic and would allow students the chance to explore that topic in both analytic and productive capacities (i.e., as both readers and writers). The blog, approached in this course as an object of inquiry as well as a writing space, seemed like the ideal theme because of the genre’s inherent plasticity. As Michael Banks writes in his 2008 book *Blogging Heroes*, the blog has emerged as and matured into a viable online communications genre “[b]ecause blogging is dynamic and flexible, and at its core, blogging is a communications tool that encompasses all communication models: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many” (xx). Moreover, a central rhetorical lesson I try to impart to basic writing students is an awareness of audience and how to write for a variety of them by developing a distinctive voice in their writing, a feature endemic to blogging; again, as Banks emphasizes, “Spreading their presence around the world is exactly what bloggers are doing. Whether the blogger is an individual or a corporation, government, or other institution, the idea is the same: establish and spread a presence” (xx).

“Reading, Writing, Blogging” therefore focuses on the citizen-journalist movement as it is realized in the blogosphere and approaches the topic using multiple lines of inquiry: What social/cultural factors have led to the emergence of this new genre of writing? How does the genre function formally? What common rhetorical traits appear in the writing across multiple examples? How does this new genre differ from earlier types of journalism, personal writing, memoir, log-keeping, etc.? What role does the changing face of technology play in shaping the citizen-journalist movement? To those ends, I included a variety of texts to foster thought and discussion on the topic, including selections from the online collection *Into the Blogosphere*, excerpts from Suzanne Stefanac’s *Dispatches from Blogistan*, Chuck Olsen’s documentary film *Blogumentary*, and Dan Gillmor’s *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People* (an excellent, thorough take on the
subject, and written clearly enough for an audience not accustomed to regular reading). I assigned the class two major formal writing assignments (each of them three to four pages in length) for the term. The first, a rhetorical analysis of a blog of their own choosing, asked them not only to describe the content of the selected blog, but also to identify its overall purpose (to inform, persuade, amuse, or perhaps a combination of purposes), characterize the blog’s audience (based not only on suppositions gleaned from the topic and writing style, but also on actual reader comments, outbound links, and other ancillary data), and describe the formal elements of the blog (font style, color scheme, graphics, and so on), addressing how well such elements coordinated with the blog’s content. The second assignment, a chance to expose students to an additional generic staple of academic discourse, asked them to write a critical review of Gillmor’s *We The Media*; more than a “thumbs up/thumbs down” opinion piece, the goal of this assignment was to compose a studied evaluation of the book that considered its strong points as well as weak points; assessed its main argument; and provided support for those claims by either specifically referencing details from the book itself or citing additional reviews, blog posts, or other external reactions to it.

Additionally, I assigned several informal writing tasks that students posted to our online discussion board on the university’s course-management system; these writing tasks offered students the opportunity to develop ideas, generate summaries of readings, ponder questions about the connections between rhetorical analysis and the rhetorical considerations they were making while building and writing for their own blogs, and broadly raise thematic questions on course content in a low-stakes writing venue. Time spent in class was divided between discussing assigned readings, often tying them to recent events or stories in the news, and studio sessions, where students would work on their own blogs. These blogs were set up using the free web service Vox (http://www.vox.com) because it is user-friendly and allows users to define different degrees of access to the blog (fully public, fully private, or open to a select “neighborhood” of readers). Students could either singly or collaboratively write the blogs, and they needed to be on a newsworthy topic that interests the student, preferably one that would sustain his or her interest for the duration of the course. Regular posting, the use of generic conventions such as hyperlinking or incorporating graphics/multimedia content, as well as commenting on their classmates’ blogs were all expectations of this course component.

In a recent article for *Computers & Composition Online* co-written with Catherine Braun and Amie Wolf, I made the call for bringing digital media into the basic writing curriculum and articulated my rationale for why I thought this would be an effective pedagogical move. In it, I identified two main tenets for doing so:
1. This approach advocates for the production of digital media texts for its own sake. By now it is a well-rehearsed argument that the material boundaries of those texts that we call “writing” are expanding, slipping, and metamorphosing into entirely different shapes. Students need to become familiar with those shapes as they may be expected to produce these new types of texts in real-world contexts.

2. Digital media production also helps enhance students’ conceptual understanding of the rhetorical process by rendering the familiar strange. The rhetorical dimensions of writing can often hide from students’ views precisely because they have been for so long immersed in the written word. Armed with a new perspective of how a text’s form or medium carries with it unique rhetorical considerations, students can employ this newly enhanced awareness within the conventional writing process. (Braun, McCorkle, and Wolf)

While I originally made those remarks within the context of the first basic writing course in the three-course sequence, the concept also informs how I think of 109.02, with some distinctions. In terms of quantity, students are expected to produce more alphabetic text than in 109.01; a course situated around blogging helps in this regard. In other words, even though blogging certainly invites the opportunity to engage with multimodal forms of communication, the genre as it exists today leans heavily towards the alphabetic text end of the continuum. Moreover, the blogging format, a curious hybrid of private, informal writing and public, formal writing, seemed to me to be especially accommodating to a variety of styles and skill levels, which makes it well suited as a writing environment in which basic writing students can grow comfortable, take chances, and develop as writers. Also, 109.02 aims to move students closer to producing academic discourse in particular, a focus of our first-year writing curriculum; my reading requirements, discussions, and assignment designs therefore reflect that emphasis. These components are not only quantitatively greater than the typical work a student might do in 109.01—longer reading assignments, longer page requirements for essays—they also challenge students to begin exercising the skills endemic to academic discourse, such as dense description and rhetorical analysis (as in the case of their first main essay) or summary and critical assessment (as in the case of their second main essay).

Two complementary ideas shape my pedagogical philosophy for every course I teach, and 109.02 is no exception. In one respect, I believe that learning best happens when we allow an element of play to infuse our classroom dynamic and assignments. Much like Albert Rouzie, I too feel that:

Despite the emergence of computer technology and its potential for enhancing the play element in literacy education, a normative ideology of
work, reality, seriousness, practicality, and adult behavior continues to rule postsecondary institutions, blinding most educators to the significance of the play that is already occurring in their classrooms, preventing them from addressing it as a productive force for change and learning and from perceiving it as an interesting phenomenon in its own right. (Rouzie 629)

Additionally, the work we ask of our students should to some extent overlap with their “real life” concerns and present them with the opportunity to think of how their ideas fit into the public discourse. As Rosa Eberly advocates in her article “The Anti-Logos Doughball: Teaching Deliberating Bodies the Practices of Participatory Democracy,” we must turn to more praxis-based ways of framing rhetorical instruction for our undergraduates in order to help them enter the world as engaged citizens. The classroom therefore becomes a safe space in which to practice the very kinds of discourse we hope our students will go on to produce later in their lives, and a climate of play encourages experimentation and chance-taking within that space. From the outset, I thought that a course thematically centered around blogging fit well with my pedagogy, for reasons I unpack in the following section.

It is my hope that this combination of principles would work well to target an at-risk population on our campus not only by enticing them to participate in the academic conversation because it could actually be fun (imagine!), but also by validating their voices as engaged citizens with real opinions on issues that matter to them. Consequently, when the course played out in real time, I made a concerted effort, and I believe to good effect, to regularly reinforce these ideas for the benefit of my students.

4. Critical Reflection

After a couple of weeks into the term, I discovered a bit more about the makeup of the students in my course. As is often the case with basic writing students, many of them expressed a dislike of writing, or at least indicated that it was an activity they didn’t regularly do. The reasons for this were several: because it was too hard or they felt they weren’t any good at it, because it was boring, or because past experiences with writing (and grading) had soured them on the entire enterprise. Additionally, many students admitted that they didn’t follow the news (print, television, or otherwise) because they felt as if the topics covered didn’t speak to their interests or their immediate social context enough. Finally, my students indicated that they had either marginal interest in technology, or a sporadic interest at best: while some students self-identified as outright technophobes who rarely interacted with the computer, others described a vigorous but compartmentalized interaction with computers that consisted predominantly
of interacting on social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, using instant messaging/chat applications, and watching videos on YouTube.

Given my students’ uneasiness with matters of writing, the news media, and technology in general (an uneasiness that I had anticipated to some extent), I accordingly crafted my curriculum to address those concerns. For one, I wanted to help them grow more comfortable as writers, and blogging offered that opportunity, as it allows students a less formal writing space than the academic paper in which to experiment with voice, citing outside sources, and crafting arguments. The world of blogs can easily accommodate tones ranging from the most conservative and staid to the avant garde to the downright snarky. Secondly, I wanted to give students the opportunity to make their own news, to empower them as citizens with something to say about a particular topic that matters to them and their community—topics that might get overlooked by more official journalism outlets. Finally, my goal was to expose them to technology as producers, more so than their current habits of use indicate. To give students access to technology is a good first step, but it must be followed with exposing them to the range of possibilities of digital literacy; otherwise, they may not recognize their own potential for becoming active participants within this still-evolving technological landscape.

As the course played out over the following weeks, I would generally characterize the outcome as a classic case of mixed results and, on the whole, a satisfying experience. Some students were genuinely enthusiastic about their blog projects. For example, the trio of students who were into comic books and graphic novels went above and beyond expectations by making special trips to local comics stores to talk to managers, other comics fans, and even a couple of local artist/writers. One student, because a young niece had gotten lead poisoning from playing with a lead-painted toy, vigorously read into news stories about calls to strengthen toy safety standards, import controls, and the like. One of the strongest blogs was themed around recasting national news stories about how families deal with having active-duty relatives in the military through her own experiences dealing with her son, who was stationed in Iraq at the time. And while some topics were decidedly uninspired (i.e., topics such as “country music artists that I like” or “general musings about sports”), and while a couple of students benefited from gentle prodding on my part to stick to task, and one student in particular needed a lot of attention because he had an especially hard time generating topics to write about, most of the students kept up the pace of regular posting, commenting, and researching for the term’s duration.

Keeping the motivation level high was an issue I worked on throughout the term, one that I addressed in a variety of ways. One technique involved embracing the concept of play. For example, I periodically asked student to craft their blog posts in keeping with popular (and fun) generic conventions:
drafting “ten best/worst” lists or picking a fight (respectably, of course) with a fellow blogger by writing a critical reply to a previous post, for instance. Additionally, I made sure to highlight the work of my students throughout the course, using particularly insightful blog posts, reading summaries, or essay paragraphs as models of good writing for the entire class to contemplate. I also exposed students to different forms and genres of texts in order to promote variety and sustain interest. In addition to Gillmor’s text, I showed them a documentary film (Olsen’s Blogumentary), paired conventional news coverage with blogosphere reactions on several recent topics (articles on the presidential primaries or local stories dealing with campus crime, for example), and even hosted an iChat webcam interview with a Missouri-based blogger who writes several blogs dealing with topics that range from educational technology to microbrewed beer reviews to the indie rock scene in Columbia, Missouri. For the most part, the students seemed to respond positively to these measures, a feeling which was confirmed by my end-of-term student evaluations. Students were particularly interested in getting to chat with a “real life” blogger, an experience which reinforced the public nature of their own writing. Despite its reliance on the “talking head” format, Olsen’s film was slickly produced, offered a variety of opinions from prominent bloggers, and was generally well paced. Students also seemed to appreciate having their own writing held up as models of good practice; in addition to allowing students to develop ways of differentiating between more and less effective rhetorical and stylistic strategies in their writing, the move also allowed me to help validate their work as bona fide writers—the empowering effects of which aid in dispelling their own feelings of inadequacy brought on by the well documented stigmas associated with basic writing.

Because of the high degree of variability among blogs in the “real life” blogosphere (in terms of style, level of formality, length of posts, frequency of linking, or inclusion of multimodal elements), grading my students’ blogs posed a challenge, one that I attempted to address by what I call a dense feedback loop between my students and me. In addition to paying attention to whether or not students met the quantifiable requirements—minimum number of posts, adequate length, adhering to specific requests to include graphics, link to an external source, and leaving comments on their classmates’ blogs, I also conversed with them face to face and in writing via email or their blogs’ comment sections. It was during such consultations that I pressed students to explain to me the rhetorical meta-concepts behind their blog’s perceived purpose, imagined audience, strategies they employed to reach that audience, blogs in the wild they considered modeling their own after, and so on. I also asked them to demonstrate to me what they deemed material areas of growth or improvement as their blogs progressed, such as longer posts, more use of external sources, or a stronger sense of voice.
with more complex sentences, diction, and the like. Among the highlights of these conversations: one student explained to me how she began crafting a "snarkier" persona on her blog after classmates remarked that they enjoyed that aspect of her personality in class and missed it in her otherwise straightforward blogging style; one student, whose blog dealt with having an active-duty relative in the military, said she felt more comfortable relating news stories to her own experience as the term progressed, and began to blog more from that context; perhaps the weakest writer in the course, one student began the term writing less than 100 words per post, but increased to regularly over 250 words because, he claimed, of the encouraging comments on his blog. My goal here was two-fold: not only did I rely on these self-assessments to help me arrive at a grade for the blog, I also saw them as a tool for reinforcing rhetorical self-awareness of their own writing processes, with respect to their own blogs, certainly, but all the other types of writing they did in the course as well.

One area that's particularly tricky to navigate with basic writing students is the question of homework (as in, "How can I get them to do their homework?"). Generally, basic writing students have a notoriously hard time completing homework assignments, symptomatic of a lack of preparedness for the amped-up rigors of college-level education (as a colleague of mine is fond of saying, writing instruction is only half of the curriculum in the basic writing classroom, we also teach them how to be college students). Consequently, I work to meet them half-way. Aside from the major essays for the term, I gave my students fairly light, manageable homework assignments: find a newsworthy story covered by both an "official" journalism source and a blog to discuss in class, or create a blogroll of sites with a similar focus to the student's own blog.

Central to these case studies were in-class discussions focused upon how a writer's style or voice would differ depending on the intended audience or purpose for the piece in question; how, for example, an AP wire report might sound more generic and "facts first" in its tone because of its potential national readership in papers across the country, while a small-scale blogger's take on the same topic might be more personalized and opinionated because of a more intimate readership or a more explicit editorial purpose. Also, I structured class in such a way that the bulk of work could be started in the classroom. The last half of each class was designated "studio time," and during this hour, students could brainstorm ideas for topics to write about, work on blog posts and formal writing, and consult with me and fellow students about their writing (sustained conversation about writing, to my mind, is an effective way of fostering that crucial sense of rhetorical awareness in our students). While a few students certainly had problems with motivation even with these accommodations (as well as a couple of
pointed after-class consultations), the vast majority of students responded well to this structure.

In-class discussion comprised a central component of the course, as is the case for most of my courses. Sure, students were engaged and on-point with many of the readings and topics that I anticipated—the Olsen film, excerpts from Stefanac's book, and the occasional snarky blog example such as Wonkette or Gawker—but there were some happily unanticipated hotspots as well, the biggest one being Miller and Shepherd's article “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog” from Into the Blogosphere, a piece I was sure would alienate them because of its relative density and the fact that it was written primarily for an audience of academics. Instead, the majority of the class really seemed captivated by the idea that genres emerge because of various cultural, political, and technological factors, and that we can talk about the development of the blog in terms of those social elements in addition to the formal qualities that characterize it (i.e., reverse chronology, text-heavy, two- or three-column layout, etc.). To say the least, I was proud that they had eagerly tackled such a sophisticated academic article so early in the term. In some instances, the discussions lagged, and this was often surrounding the reading selections from Gillmor's book, another unexpected result because I thought the book was so readable. In fact, I discovered early on that the students weren't relating to the specific examples Gillmor draws upon because they were either outdated or too specialized, such as the business blogger backlash against Qwest CEO Joe Nacchio, the grassroots uprising under Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid, or the Jayson Blair New York Times story fabrication fiasco. Consequently, I made the adjustment to supplement Gillmor's examples with more up-to-date ones rather easily: given that the 2008 presidential primary season was in full swing at the time I taught the class and that there was a wide range of vigorously held opinions about the candidates among my students, this was a fairly easy course correction to implement.

I made conscious efforts to connect my students' blogging to their formal writing assignments in order to reinforce the array of rhetorical considerations that, indeed, connect all types of communication. Partly, this was structural—studio sessions in class included not only work on blogging assignments, but also work on their essays. This included collective brainstorming sessions on topics, where students would display their chosen blogs to analyze on the computer lab projector, offer some preliminary remarks indicating how they were thinking of approaching the analysis, and discussing this with the rest of the class. Further along, I had students show drafts-in-progress on the projector, where I would prompt the class to react to the global (structure, organization, etc.), as well as the local (style, sentence variety, etc.), aspects of the essays. On several occasions, the class was especially good about suggesting stylistic revisions to the drafts,
indicating to me that they understood the differences in voice expected of academic writing and the oftentimes less formal style of blogging. I recall one student, in response to another’s analysis of what he deemed a poorly done sports blog, offering up a much better example of the genre that the student ended up using as a counter-example in his essay. I also drew upon early discussions about the rhetorical impact of a blog’s design—how audiences typically expect some degree of harmony between what a blog is about and its visual elements—to establish the context for talking about formal expectations of document design in traditional academic writing; I argued that just as certain negative examples of poorly designed blogs impacted our sense of the blogger’s credibility (one anonymous girl’s “indie rock” blog, for instance, featured the mainstream group Nickelback in its background graphic), sloppily formatted papers that didn’t adhere to MLA specifications likewise affected how the content was likely to be received.

The main conceptual point I attempted to drive home throughout our studio sessions is that the way one writes, the audience one is trying to address, and the physical shape of that writing all need to be considered anew with each new act of writing.

Finally, one aspect of the course I found to be immensely helpful was having an embedded teaching assistant/tutor (and for your tireless service in this capacity, I would be remiss if I did not publicly thank you by name, Tabitha Clark). This embedded T.A. component was essentially a pilot program for our basic writing sequence, where advanced undergraduates concurrently take a course on writing center tutoring method and theory. Because of the course’s studio structure, the T.A. would regularly work with students either individually or in small groups, helping them with developing topics, working on style or surface-level issues, addressing technical problems, and generally raising rhetorical awareness for the class (to this last point, “choice” became our mantra for the term, the heuristic lens through which students’ decisions were regularly examined when we asked them to reflect on their progress). Some of the more reticent students around me, I noticed, tended to respond to the T.A. more readily. This was not an entirely unexpected reaction, as some students are more comfortable opening up to tutors precisely because they straddle the line of demarcation separating teacher and student (they impart their expertise without the added pressure associated with evaluation or related exercises of power). In a post-mortem conversation with the T.A., I was struck by an observation she made connecting her own presence in the classroom with the course’s central topic. She, like the citizen journalist who brings a new perspective, ethics, and politics to the practice of traditional journalism, was likewise a liminal figure, capable of operating within both spheres of the power dynamic, unsettling the status quo and empowering the students in the process. I recall being impressed by the parallel, especially since I hadn’t explicitly picked up on it myself.
On balance, I would say that “Reading, Writing, Blogging” was a successful course (perhaps an obvious conclusion, otherwise I would not have necessarily felt compelled to write about it). I found the blogging format to be malleable enough to accommodate a variety of different topics, writing styles, and degrees of skill. While it scratched my itch for wanting a central multimodal component in the course, it was still sufficiently writerly so that I didn’t feel like I was depriving my students of the skill development needed for future courses, both in English and beyond. Among the things I need to figure out as I refine the course design is making note of the idiosyncrasies of the VOX platform up front (although it is user-friendly as I noted earlier, there are some issues with how they name/categorize things and group blogs together within the platform that caused some initial confusion). I would also like to assign a bit more multimodal work than I did; whereas I only had them do two posts that incorporated a self-produced video, digital image, or sound file of their choosing, I would probably make that assignment more directed to ensure that students play around with the available technology a bit more than this class did. I’d also like to incorporate newer trends into the blog project as well, such as micro-blogging or photostream accompaniments (for instance, Twitter or Flickr). Still, I love the idea of teaching this course again soon. So much of its design is in concert with our mission: not only helping our campus’s basic writers succeed within the classroom, but also to thrive as writers and thinkers once they move beyond it.

Works Cited

SYLLABUS

English 109.02C | Intensive Reading & Writing II | Winter 2008 Syllabus

PROVOCATIONS:

*ON THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF BLOGS:* “What happens when you start seeing the web as a matrix of minds, not documents? Networks based on trust become an essential tool. You start evaluating the relevance of data based not on search query results but on personal testimony.”


“Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.”

—A.J. Liebling (in *We The Media*)

“If you don’t like the news . . . go out and make some of your own.”

—Wes Nisker (in *We The Media*)

Course Description:

English 109.02, like 109.01, is designed to prepare students for success in English 110: First-Year Composition. In this course, students will practice reading verbal texts, images, and other media forms analytically. Through a variety of formal and informal writing assignments, we will approach issues of grammar and correctness from a rhetorical perspective—that is, instead of focusing on “right” and “wrong” notions of grammar, we will develop an understanding of these conventions within the context of academic discourse. Additionally, students will gain some experience producing new media texts that combine visual, verbal, and aural elements.

English 109.01 requires a substantial amount of reading, writing, and analysis. Readings from our main text (*We The Media*) and other sources will establish a context for our discussions and a variety of formal and informal written assignments: What is the social significance of the blog (or “weblog,” that ever-evolving genre of web-based writing that is part diary, part scrapbook, part newspaper, etc.)? How are news-related blogs helping to reshape the role of journalists and news media in our society? How do blogs unsettle the traditional roles of writer and reader? What signs can we see in the blogosphere that hint at or indicate new uses and forms of this technology in the future?
Course Objectives:

Students enrolled in English 109 at Marion should meet the following objectives:

- Engage in reading, analyzing, and composing a wide range of texts, including both formal academic texts and also informal “nonacademic” texts (audio files, web sites, comics, children’s/young adult literature, oral histories, etc.)
- Engage in the full writing process, including textual invention, drafting, revising, and editing
- Discuss and share writing and reading with others and develop a rhetorical vocabulary for talking about writing
- Produce coherent, unified, and fully supported written texts that demonstrate primary research and original analysis
- Gain knowledge of academic conventions of usage and grammar
- Interact with digital media, including work with word processing; Internet-based research and communication; and the production of texts such as web pages, images, and sound files

Texts:
[Additionally, there will be a few short readings from various print and online sources, as well as a viewing of the documentary film Blogumentary.]


Class Requirements:

**Formal Writing Assignments.** The main component of our coursework is made up of two formal writing assignments, essays designed to strengthen your writing and analytical thinking. One essay will be a book review of our main text for the course, while the other will be a rhetorical analysis of a blog that you select. We will discuss these assignments in further detail later in the quarter.

**Blog.** You will keep your own blog based on a focused news topic that you will select. You will post two entries per week, at least 250 words in length, and we will devote some class time to this activity. Your entries will
NOT SIMPLY BE STATIC WRITTEN RESPONSES—YOU WILL ACTUALLY USE THE GENERIC CONVENTIONS OF BLOG WRITING IN YOUR OWN BLOG, WHICH MEANS THAT YOU WILL SOMETIMES HYPERLINK TO OUTSIDE SOURCES, INCLUDE GRAPHICS OR OTHER MULTIMEDIA CONTENT, AND EVEN COMMENT ON YOUR COLLEAGUES’ WRITINGS.

Readings. Several readings are assigned throughout the quarter. We’ll be discussing and writing about these at length, so actually reading them is essential to the functionality of our class. If it seems that we are having trouble completing the readings for class, I will begin assigning impromptu quizzes that will figure into the final participation grade.

Online Discussion Forum. Using OSU’s Carmen course management system software (located at: HTTP://CARMEN.OSU.EDU/) I’VE SET UP AN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM TO BE USED OUTSIDE OF CLASS PROPER. DURING THE COURSE OF THE QUARTER, YOU WILL POST AT LEAST ONCE PER WEEK ON THE ASSIGNED READINGS OR VIEWINGS. THESE POSTS SHOULD ACCOMPLISH TWO GOALS: 1) THEY SHOULD PROVIDE A SYNOPSIS OR SUMMARY OF THE READING SELECTION; 2) THEY SHOULD ALSO OFFER SOME SORT OF COMMENTARY ON THE READING SELECTION (EX: DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE AUTHOR’S MAIN ARGUMENT? CAN YOU POINT OUT EXAMPLES THAT SUPPORT OR REFUTE THE READING? CAN YOU DRAW CONNECTIONS TO PREVIOUS READINGS?). EACH POST SHOULD BE THE EQUIVALENT OF 1–2 DOUBLE-SPACED PAGES (250–500 WORDS).

Evaluation:

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<th>Personal Blog: 20%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book Review: 30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog Analysis: 30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Disc./Part.: 20%</td>
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<td><strong>Total: 100%</strong></td>
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[Institutional/Class Policies Omitted]

Daily Schedule:
It is your responsibility to keep current with this schedule, but remember also that the schedule may change. Readings listed for any particular day are to be completed in advance of that day; you need to be prepared to discuss them in class.

Abbreviation Key:

WTM = We The Media
QA = Quick Access Reference for Writers
## MONTH ONE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>[Class 1] Class introductions &amp; review of syllabus; Diagnostic essay</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Class 2] So what is a blog, anyway? (Read Miller and Shepherd, “Blogging as Social Action” from <em>Into the Blogosphere</em>) <a href="http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging_as_social_action_a_genre_analysis_of_the_weblog.html">http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging_as_social_action_a_genre_analysis_of_the_weblog.html</a></td>
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<td>INTRODUCTION TO CARMEN (OSU’S CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SOFTWARE)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Week 2 | [Class 3] STARTING OUR OWN BLOGS: TOPIC-DEVELOPMENT AND TECHNICAL WORKSHOP ON VOX BLOGGING PLATFORM |
|        | [Class 4] WTM: (INTRODUCTION); BLOG ANALYSIS PROMPT Assigned |

| Week 3 | [Class 5] WTM: (CHAPTER 1); DISCUSSION AND WORKSHOPPING OF BLOG ANALYSIS ESSAY; BLOGGING STUDIO |
|        | [Class 6] WTM: (CHAPTER 2); BLOGGING STUDIO; ALSO READ GALLO, “WEBLOG JOURNALISM” FROM *INTO THE BLOGOSPHERE* HTTP://BLOG.LIB.UMN.EDU/BLOGOSPHERE/WEBLOG_JOURNALISM.HTML |

| Week 4 | [Class 7] WTM: (Chapters 3 & 4); blogging studio |
|        | [Class 8] BLOG ANALYSIS ESSAY DUE; BLOGGING STUDIO |
| Week 5 | **[Class 9]** WTM: (Chapters 5 & 6); blogging studio  
**[Class 10]** Midterm evaluations; read Stefanac, *Dispatches from Blogistan* (excerpt TBD) |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Week 6 | **[Class 11]** WTM: (Chapters 7 & 8); blogging studio  
**[Class 12]** Book Review Prompt assigned; brainstorming/drafting session for book reviews |
| Week 7 | **[Class 13]** WTM: (Chapters 9 & 10); blogging studio  
**[Class 14]** Anatomy of a Book Review (Read McCorkle, “So Be the News, Already!”)  
http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/currents/fall05/mccorkle.html |
| Week 8 | **[Class 15]** WTM: (Chapters 11 & 12); teleconference with Name Redacted, semi-professional Über-blogger; blogging to be done outside of class  
**[Class 16]** Book Review due; viewing: *Blogumentary*. Comment on documentary in Carmen Discussion Forum (possible prompts included in thread) |
MONTH THREE:

| Week 9 | (Class 17) Follow-up discussion on Blogumentary. In-class studio time  
|        | (Class 18) In-class studio time; individual conferences on revisions to portfolio; course evaluations |

| Week 10 | (Class 19) In-class studio time; individual conferences on revisions to portfolio; course evaluations  
|         | (Class 20) In-class studio time; wrap-up discussion; individual conferences on revisions to portfolio |

| Finals Week | Final portfolios due no later than 5 P.M. |