

# CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

Dr. Sarah  
Higinbotham

Clemente Course  
in the Humanities

THIS IS HOW YOU DO IT:

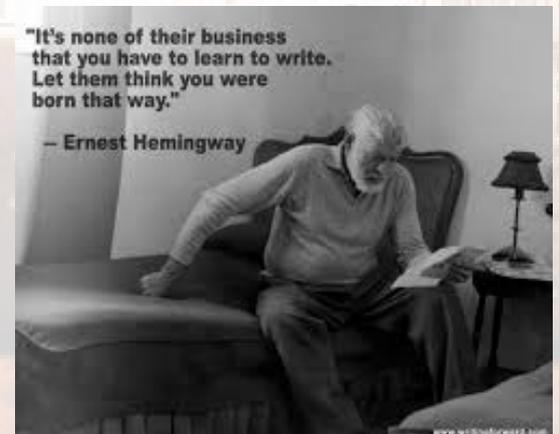
you sit down and put one  
word after another until it's  
done. It's that easy, and that  
hard.

Neil Gaiman

In a sense, this entire course is about learning how to pay attention. The most important skills that colleges seek to develop in their students -- the ability to assess the soundness of an argument, to accept and act on criticism, to express ideas clearly, to imagine alternatives to existing approaches, and to formulate and defend a point of view -- all begin with close listening. So this semester we will foreground what it means to be attuned to texts, people, voices, and ideas and how to write and speak in a way that makes other people actually want to listen.

We will read texts and speeches that will prepare you for your upcoming courses in US History, Philosophy, Literature, and Art History. You will learn write in both highly structured ways (a "rhetorical précis) that blends summary and analysis, as well as more personal ways (reading reflections). You will also learn to give and receive "peer review" and to revise your work based on feedback.

Classes meet weekly  
January 15 -  
March 19, 2021



# Assignments

## to develop critical thinking and writing

### Reading Reflections

For five of our readings, you will complete a "reading reflection," which is a blend of summary and personal response to the reading. I will give you specific guidelines on the reflections and a sample in your course pack.

### Rhetorical Précis

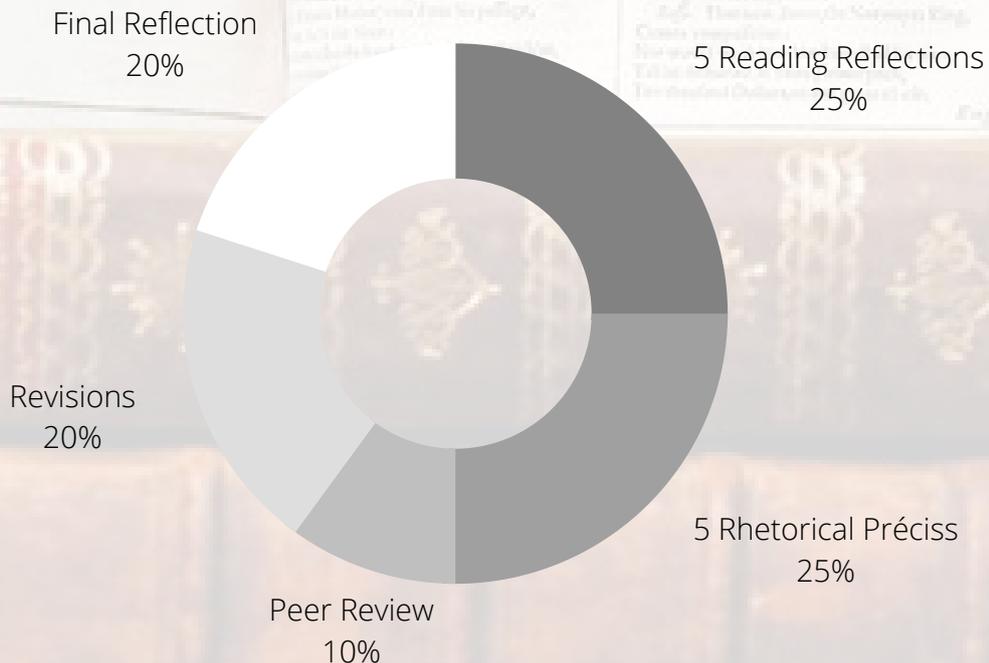
For the other five readings, you will complete a "rhetorical précis," which is a highly-structured, four-sentence paragraph that blends both the content of the reading (the "what") with the delivery of the content (the "how").

### Peer Review

Gaining another perspective on your writing is an essential part of learning how to communicate clearly and envision your audience. You will both review your peers' work and receive their feedback, then revise. The peer review will consist of completing four sentences, in a peer review format designed by Dr. Peter Elbow: "The author's main point is..." "I like..." "I wonder..." "I suggest..."

### Final Course Reflection

Your final writing assignment will be to look back over the ten weeks of classes and write about your own learning process.



# We Should Disagree

I think most of what I have learned that is of any consequence has come through disagreement and further exploration. I welcome your respectful disagreements with me. If we all interpret the articles we are reading in the same way, we have a problem, because no true thinking will be occurring.

Learn to relish when someone disagrees with you!

Disagreements make the classroom environment more interesting, productive, generative, and challenging.

**Our classroom is not Plato's Cave.**

Please note, though, that the college classroom is a place where ideas are exchanged respectfully. I look forward to an environment where this will occur, but I don't have much tolerance for distracting behavior, such as rudeness, eye-rolling, sleeping, or side communications during class. If your participation is disruptive to the classroom discussion, if it creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment, you are subject to removal from the classroom at my discretion.

**The idea that what you write has to be "perfect" the first time is a myth, and it will hinder your writing.**

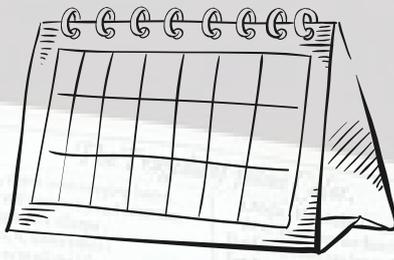
**Learn to love revising! You may revise *any* of your projects in this course, and will be required to revise three.**

The ability to **accept and act on criticism** is one of the most valuable abilities you can develop. Can you hear constructive criticism with an open mind, build on lessons learned, and make revisions in response to suggestions? Can you give and receive constructive criticism in writing?

A revision isn't just a quick fix of the obvious errors, but a **"re-vision,"** or **another look** at your project, in which you address feedback. Each revision must include a cover letter, in which you explain what and why you revised what you did.

YOU CAN  
ALWAYS  
*Revise*

REVISING IS HOW YOU  
LEARN



# Weekly Schedule

COMPLETE READING BEFORE  
YOU COME TO CLASS

Please title your paper with your name, the date, and the assignment ("Plato Reflection"). It is not necessary to include your GDC number

All readings are in your course pack and are yours to keep. Many of these texts are long, often more than 30 pages. You will need to read each text twice: first read it through, underlining key points and what stand out. Then read again, this time making marginal notes to help you write your reflections or Précis.

## Introduction

January 15 William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

January 22 Wayne C. Booth, "Boring from Within: The Art of the Freshman Essay"

## Philosophy

January 29 Plato, "Allegory of the Cave" + Reflection

David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" + Précis

February 5 Hannah Arendt, "The Banality of Evil" + Précis

Soren Kierkegaard, "Fear and Trembling" + Reflection

*Peer Review, One Revision and cover letter due*

## Art History

February 12 Vasily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* + Précis

February 19 Kandinsky and Franz Marc, *Blue Rider Almanac* + Reflection

*Peer Review, One Revision and cover letter due*

## US History

February 26 Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address + Précis

March 5 Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" + Précis

*Peer Review, One Revision and cover letter due*

## Literature

March 12 Emily Dickinson "After Great Pain,"

John Donne, "No Man Is an Island," + Reflection

Final Reflection due

March 19 Helen Macdonald, "Vesper Flights" + Discussion

Transition to Dr. Corrie Claiborne for Literature