WRA 101: Writing as Inquiry

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Registrar's Official Course Description

“The study and practice of invention, arrangement, revision, style, and delivery to help students make successful transitions to writing, reading, and researching in higher education.”

(JD's Unofficial Course Description: “Human brains are wired to love stories much the same way a baby is wired to love milk—and for much the same reason. Therefore, let’s write good stories in engaging ways. Let’s write and re-write these stories, and learn more about the writing process, and revising and editing and thinking and reading and hearing and viewing/reviewing good things, and have some fun … and then let’s write about that.”)

About the Instructor

John Dowell (answers to “JD”)
Email: jdowell@msu.edu

Note: because we’re not using the email “feature” on most learning management systems (including D2L or Google Classroom), you must indicate which section you’re in on the Subject field when emailing me! Thus the Subject line will begin with one of the following: WRA101:028 or WRA101:035 or WRA101:043. After that, please “give me a clue” about the topic of your message. Example:

Subject: WRA101:035 Using block quotes from secondary sources

Office: 191 Bessey Hall (sometimes elsewhere, as indicated in class).
Office Hours: Typically 11AM-12:30 M/W and by appointment.
Sections (some classes will meet elsewhere, as noted in the Schedule and mentioned in class):
  028 | Mon & Wed | 12:40-2:30PM (334B Case Hall);
  035 | Mon & Wed | 3-4:50PM (138 Akers Hall);
  043 | Mon & Wed | 5-6:50PM (C4 Shaw Hall)
About the Five Major Projects

1. The (Un)Learning Narrative Project (150/1000 points) ...

   … invites students to consider their experiences with learning in and out of school to encourage them to reflect on the relationship between their learning histories and present lives. In this first experience with college writing, students learn that their experiences both in and out of school can be useful as resources for academic inquiry—even as the narrative itself will eventually become a useful resource for academic inquiry, especially as a resource for the final reflective narrative.

2. The Cultural Artifact Project (150/1000 points) ...

   … invites students to inquire into cultural values in which they are implicated as learners by choosing an everyday object as the focus of guided exploration. This experience gives them further practice in processes of inquiry (formulating questions and forming theories of cultural value). In this project, students explicitly extend their inquiries into the practices and values of learning revealed in the first project into wider cultural contexts. With this project, they begin to see that research is a process of discovery, for which strategies can be practiced and learned.

3. The Disciplinary Literacies Project (200/1000 points) ...

   … enables students to learn about the literacy practices of a discipline or profession of their choice by looking at textual products as cultural artifacts to understand the (con)textual products of disciplines as cultural and rhetorical. It combines the self-discovery piece of the Learning Memoir with the inquiry process of the Cultural Artifact Project. The Disciplinary Literacies project invites students to continue asking the questions implicit in the first project: (What am I doing here, and what resources do I bring to the project of my education? What do I need, and how do I achieve my goals?), and to put these in relation to discoveries about the literacies of disciplinary and professional cultures.

4. The Remix Project (250/1000 points) ...

   … builds on the learning of the first three projects by making rhetorical moves implicit in these projects the explicit focus of attention. It asks students to create a product that helps them be more aware of the purpose, audience, medium, mode, or genre they make. It invites students to experience and reflect further on processes of invention and arrangement, and further develops inquiries into relationships between
rhetorical purposes, audiences, and resources (material, conceptual, and ethical).

5. The Reflective Learning Narrative Project (50/1000 points) …

… takes students’ own learning as an object of inquiry. It invites students to reflect on the development and uses of their learning over the course of the semester: to make claims about what they have learned, to set goals for their ongoing learning, to propose the means for achieving those learning goals, and to use the evidence and examples they have created throughout the semester to support each of these types of claims. This assignment builds directly from all of the activities of the semester by inviting students to cite examples from early and final drafts of their assignments, their proposals, their peer-review sessions, their student/teacher conferences, etc. The Reflective Learning Narrative Project is designed to empower students to investigate and celebrate their successes and to make the most of their mistakes by setting goals that emerge from reflecting on their activities that went less well than they had hoped. For additional thoughts, see “Be Reflective” in the Classroom Expectations section, below.

So that’s only 800 points! Where are the other 200 points? Participation and Weekly Writing assignments—discussed in “Success Criteria” on another page.
Classroom Expectations

“Be Present” — Mentally Engaged

• Your participation in class discussions, group work, and activities will make this class richer and a better experience for everyone. In fact, it’s fun!
• We are all on screens nearly the whole day long, so during this class please refrain from computer/telephone/tablet usage unless it is required for a class activity, which is frequently the case. So while computer usage is restricted to our in-class work, unless otherwise indicated, you should always bring your laptop to this writing class.
• Last reminder: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, email, and all that can wait while you’re in class or having a meeting—you’re busy!
• Similarly, cell phone use should be avoided in class and during meetings unless you are expecting an emergency call. Even then it should be kept at a minimum and should never disrupt or distract from your classmates’ work … or mine.
• Growth only happens when we push beyond our current accomplishments, when we expand beyond “the comfortable.” Your concerted effort is expected in this class. Again: fun!

“Be Present” — Good Classroom Citizenship

• When someone is speaking to the group (whether another student or me), everyone else should be listening. Failure to comply with this basic classroom citizenship rule will not be tolerated. (If you’re accustomed to having your little “yabby group” of one or two friends from classes in high school, those days are over now. Unless you intend to leave the university and return to high school, you now have "grown-up stuff" to do.)
• Writing is a valuable, versatile, vulnerable act. Please never forget that private student content covered in class remains private. What happens in 101 stays in 101. (That said, please see the section below on Title IX and Mandatory Reporting.)
• Hearing different viewpoints in the classroom, in writing, in other media helps us grow as people and as writers. Remember that when two people agree on everything, only one is doing any thinking. If you have an opinion on some important topic—and you should have an opinion on important topics—it must be an informed opinion.
  Please also know that personal attacks on classmates are simply not permitted. Period. Having said that, whenever there’s something spoken or written or otherwise shared which you may consider of “dubious content,” please always first consider “best intentions” unless given reason to believe otherwise. Be honest, act nice, play fair.
• With that established, here are a few quick words on “language.” In an effort to avoid embarrassment or offense, we will want to establish “ground rules”
for the use of what some in class may consider “out of bounds.” This includes, but is not limited to, “swear words.” More on this topic—which may evolve throughout the semester—as our meetings continue (including when meeting out of the classroom). You may thus expect to see more specifics in this very paragraph over time.

“Be Reflective”

Reflection is an essential, not an “add on,” part of this course. You are likely not accustomed to such a required “buy in” (being instead accustomed to offering—and being offered—such insightful criticisms as “it’s fine”), but it is actually about truly offering help to your classmates’ writing processes, which in turn helps you and your own writing processes. (A perfect example of a "Win-Win Situation"!)

These are the four main questions for reflection to employ with all your writings:

1. What did you do?
2. How did you do it?
3. How well did you do it?
4. How would you do it differently next time?
Attendance Guidelines

This semester will move incredibly quickly and every meeting may be considered a workshop. For these reasons, only two absences are “allowed,” though all are discouraged—the both the department and I are very serious about this. Absences will impact your grade directly with lost points, but may also impact your progress through missed content and feedback.

• After the two "allowed" absences, each additional absence will deduct 50 points from your course total. (With 1000 points possible, the math for that is just as simple as the way to avoid losing those points.)
• There is no differentiation between excused and unexcused absences, so be smart and save your two “allowed absences” for illness, university-sanctioned events in which you are participating, and unforeseen circumstances. Besides, we truly need you in class for our workshops!
• While I am easily available, please first check the class site or contact a classmate for missed coursework before you contact me.
• Life happens, so please have your advisor or director communicate with me about absences beyond your control, including for university-sanctioned events in which you are participating.
• If you arrive late (after I've called roll), you need to see me after class to change your marked absence to a tardy. Three tardies equals one absence, five equals two absences, seven equals three absences, eight equals four absences.
Required Texts

We’re going to try to avoid physical textbooks (“treeware”) this semester. This may change, though I doubt it. If we do get some treeware, I promise it will be cheap—likely under $15, which is certainly not bad for a university class. (Just think how much that chemistry book set you back, right?)

Instead, we will use free online services, Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab, also known as “OWL,” now into its second decade of service for scholars!
  https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html

We’ll also use both LanguageTool …
  https://languagetool.org/
... and Grammarly ...
  https://grammarly.com
(which have a couple of premium versions, but stick with the free stuff).

LanguageTool and Grammarly are both amazing … and have limitations. Never blindly trust these or any other single source; be willing to double- (and triple-) check elsewhere if you have even a shadow of a doubt, but they're great at finding the “bits and pieces” you might otherwise miss. Needless to say, you should NEVER use them for early drafts!

While their use is reasonably intuitive, there are plenty of online videos to get you started. Here are just a couple:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmiuUdL9O3k&t=320s
  https://www.youtube.com/user/OWLPurdue
Mandatory Reporting / Title IX

Michigan State University is committed to fostering a culture of caring and respect that is free of relationship violence and sexual misconduct, and to ensuring that all affected individuals have access to services. For information on reporting options, confidential advocacy and support resources, university policies and procedures, or how to make a difference on campus, visit the Title IX website at www.titleix.msu.edu.

Limits to Confidentiality

Essays, journals, and other materials submitted for this class are generally considered confidential pursuant to the University’s student record policies. However, students should be aware that University employees, including instructors such as myself, may not be able to maintain confidentiality when it conflicts with their responsibility to report certain issues based on external legal obligations or that relate to the health and safety of MSU community members and others. As the instructor, I must—and will—report the following information to the appropriate University offices if you share it with me:

• Suspected child abuse/neglect, even if this maltreatment happened when you were a child;
• Allegations of sexual assault or sexual harassment when they involve MSU students, faculty, or staff; and
• Credible threats of harm to oneself or to others.

These reports may prompt contact from a campus official who will want to talk with you about the incident you have shared. In almost all cases, it will be your decision whether you wish to speak with that individual. If you would like to talk about these events in a more confidential setting you are encouraged to make an appointment with the MSU Counseling Center.