**Prof. Johnston Gordon**

**English 121b**

**Spring 2017**

**Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1pm–2.15pm**

**rona.johnstongordon@yale.edu**

**office: Pierson 051**

**office hours: Wednesdays, 1–2pm, and by appointment via email**

**WRITING about HISTORY**

The absence of the first person was a convention of historical writing for generations; terms such as “I think …” and “I argue …” were banished. Yet as a historian you are always present in the history that you write, as the essential connection between source and audience.

In this course we will investigate not history itself, but how you bring the past to your audience. You are the focus of the course as you consider who you are as you write, how you express yourself, and how you ensure your message is received.

Preparation for most classes involves both reading and writing: reading allows you to experience and analyze other scholars in action; required but ungraded writing allows you to hone your thoughts and experiment with style.

The grade for this class is generated by four written exercises of varying lengths and varying character that grow out of in-class discussion and projects, combined with a score given for your preparation and participation.

**Course Objectives**

The goal of this course is to help students become more reflective and more effective writers of history.

Specifically, students will advance their skills in

* writing engaging, informative, and persuasive history in a variety of modes
* reflecting on the processes, personal and professional, that feed historical writing
* getting the most from classroom discussion, including presentations and small group projects
* giving and receiving guidance from their peers and responding to feedback from their professor.

*Above all, students in this class will discover the pleasure of crafting a stimulating, personally meaningful, and eloquent historical text.*

**Readings**

All class readings will be available electronically via Classes\*v2.

**Schedule**

**Week One**

Tuesday, January 17

*Introduction to Course*

PART ONE

Being a Historian

“Confess: it’s my profession

that alarms you.

This is why few people ask me to dinner,

though Lord knows I don’t go out of my way to be scary.”

—from Margaret Attwood, “The Loneliness of the Military Historian”

Thursday, January 19

*Why We Write*

**Week Two**

Tuesday, January 24

*Why We Write History*

Thursday, January 26

*How History(writing) Changes*

**Week Three:**

Tuesday, January 31

*Silent/Silenced Voices*

PART TWO

Forms of Telling

“But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. … I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me.” —Catherine Morland, in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*

Thursday, February 2

*Beguiling Facts: Description and Narrative*

**Week Four**

Tuesday, February 7

*Persuasive Facts: Exposition and Argument*

Thursday, February 9

*Facts in Action*

PART THREE

Writing Well

“That’s what careless words do. They make people love you a little less.” —Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

**Week Five**

Tuesday, February 14

*Writing Well: Eloquence as Simplicity*

*First Paper Due, Wednesday, February 15, 5pm*

Thursday, February 16

*Writing Well: Eloquence as Majesty*

**Week Six**

Tuesday, February 21

*A Single Word Can Make All the Difference*

Thursday, February 23

*Learning to Love Punctuation*

**Week Seven**

Tuesday, February 28

*Writing to Order*

PART FOUR

Spreading Knowledge

“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” —Cicero

Thursday, March 2

*Scholarly Pursuits: Writing for the Academy*

**Week Eight**

Tuesday, March 7

*Writing for Everyone: Wikipedia*

*Second Paper Due: Wednesday, March 8, 5pm*

Thursday, March 9

*Writing for the Living: Obituaries*

SPRING BREAK

**Week Nine**

Tuesday, March 28

*Writing for the Young Mind*

Thursday, March 30

*Writing for the Museum Visitor*

**Week Ten**

Tuesday, April 4

*Forms of Narrative – The Biography*

Thursday, April 6

*Forms of Narrative – Historical Fiction*

**Week Eleven**

Tuesday, April 11

*Presentations*

Thursday, April 13

*Presentations*

**Week Twelve**

Tuesday, April 18

*Beyond the Word – The Historical Experience*

Thursday, April 20

*Beyond the Word – Oral Tradition*

*Third (Major) Paper Due: Friday, April 21, 5pm*

PART FIVE

Responsibility

“To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.” —Elie Wiesel, *Night*

**Week Thirteen**

Tuesday, April 25

*The Responsible Historian*

Thursday, April 27

*Course Review*

*Fourth Paper Due: Wednesday, May 3, 5pm*

**Attendance**

Attendance at every class is required. Assignments are integral to each class and must therefore be completed on time and brought to each class when required. Students who do not attend class or come to class unprepared will be considered absent. Students missing more than one class will drop one complete letter grade for each additional unexcused absence. An absence will be considered excused in documented cases of illness, family emergency, or observance of a religious holiday. For religious holidays, please provide advance notice to me by email. Whenever possible, notification of absence should be sent in advance of the missed class.

**Participation**

Being physically present is not the same as participating. Students are expected to bring ideas to each class, to listen and respond to each other, and to be ready to contribute constructive comment. The key to successful in-class contribution will often lie in out-of-class preparation. Participation also includes thoughtful and helpful comments on the work of fellow students. Students who find in-class participation challenging, for any reason, are encouraged to meet with me.

**Deadlines**

Students are expected to submit all assignments by the stated deadlines. This rule will only be set aside in exceptional circumstances and when you have received my permission by email (in other words, a decision made in informal discussion must be confirmed in an email from me before it is valid). In cases of illness or family emergency, the request for an extension must be supported by a Dean’s Excuse.

**Academic Honesty**

Guard against all forms of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, which can result in the assignment of reduced or failing grades or even expulsion. Students should consult Yale’s policies on academic honesty at http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/undergraduate-regulations as well as the advice from the Writing Center on using sources at http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources. If you have any questions about the boundaries between academic honesty and academic dishonesty, you should not hesitate to speak to me.

**Conferences and Support**

I will meet formally at least once with each student individually to discuss your writing and any other aspect of the course. I am also happy to meet with you on other occasions, either during my office hours or at a time arranged by email.

Do also make use of the very great support Yale provides for your writing. I strongly recommend that you meet with your residential college writing tutor during the semester and/or one of the tutors in the Writing Center.

Ask for help while a problem is still manageable, rather than wait until it has grown and a deadline looms.

**Comments on Drafts**

Students will receive feedback on full drafts of the second and third assignments in this course.

**Class Preparation**

The preparation for most classes involves both reading and writing. Instructions for preparation for the next class will be posted on the Classes\*v2 site, usually within an hour of the end of that class (which allows me to adjust the homework in light of the previous class). If you wish to have the preparation further in advance of a specific class, please let me know.

All written exercises, like assessed work, will be submitted via the Drop Box in Classes\*v2; you may also be required to bring a clean copy of the exercise to class.

**Formatting of Papers and Writing Assignments**

All papers should be word-processed, double-spaced, and formatted in a 12-point font, preferably Times New Roman. The pages should be numbered and margins set at 1 inch. Include at the start, but not on a separate page, your name, the course details, the date, and a title. Papers submitted via the Drop Box should be saved in Word.

**Submission of Work**

All papers (drafts and final versions) should be submitted electronically to the Drop Box on the Classes\*v2 site.

**Grading**

15% Paper 1 (biographical study)

25% Paper 2 (book analysis)

35% Paper 3 (object lessons)

15% Paper 4 (reflective review)

10% Preparation and participation (regular written submissions; ability to participate, class discussion)

Late submissions will be marked down by 1/3 grade per day late (e.g., B to B-).

**Computers and Cell Phones in the Classroom**

Please be respectful of your peers and your professor and focus all your attention during the class on the subject in hand. This discussion-based course requires your full engagement and participation. Electronic devices may be used only for the limited purposes of in-class writing assignments, referring to readings, and on-line exploration of a topic relevant to that class.