RHETORICS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

WRTG 3020, Section 042
Spring Semester 2006

Dr. Rolf Norgaard

TR 8:00-9:15 a.m.  
HUMN 160

Course Office Hours and Contact Information:

T R 9:30-11:00 a.m. and by appointment  
Environmental Design Building (ENVD), lower level, enter at NW corner, Room 1B64

Mailbox in ENVD, lobby area  
Office phone / voice mail: 303-492-3605  
E-mail: rolf.norgaard@colorado.edu (M-F)

Home phone: 303-447-9521 (only if pressing)

Course Overview and Objectives

Welcome to “Rhetorics of Civic Engagement.” In my experience, the best courses present not just a topic but respond to a need. The need for this course stems from the ways in which nearly all of us (college students and faculty alike) view civic engagement. It is all too easy to presume a disconnect, if not a binary opposition, between how we think of the language of the academy and the language of civic action and engagement. In the classroom, words might choke on chalk dust, but at the Dalton Trumbo Fountain near the UMC, words become passionate. Even when courses try to draw connections between the academic and the civic, they often do so in rather simplistic ways. Writing courses, for example, may ask students to write about community issues, but often in the language of the traditional classroom essay. Even when such courses call for letters to the editor, or an op-ed piece, there remains an all too facile distinction between so-called “school” genres and “real” genres.

Challenging such received dichotomies, this course seeks to explore the complexities of how we manage our academic and civic selves, and encourages you to be self-reflective about the role of rhetoric and discourse in our civic engagements. “Rhetorics of Civic Engagement” offers the argument that our academic and civic lives are highly laminated and intertwined, and that we can learn much from each dimension as we explore their mutual and interconnected rhetorics.

“Rhetorics of Civic Engagement” explores the role of language and persuasion as we engage in civic activity. Civic engagement is only possible through language and rhetoric. Moreover, because such engagement often brings with it ethical issues and dilemmas, the course invites the sustained self-reflection that is possible through writing. The general topics that the course addresses include questions of agency and power; community action and community building; dissent, resistance, and silence; dialogue and rhetorical listening; and the technologies of civic engagement (citizen voices in cyberspace). Yet while these topics will surface, to be sure, they are not the means by which the course is structured. The course structure derives from actual close scrutiny of unfolding discursive acts that occur in the course of civic engagement. The course will make innovative use of ethnographically oriented projects that have you explore and reflect on the rhetorics of civic engagement, both on campus and at the interface between campus and the Boulder community.

This course serves as an opportunity to think of yourself as an active and engaged writer. In this classroom, you are an involved citizen and a producer of knowledge, even if for much of your college career your other courses often positioned you as a consumer of what other people already know. We’ll discuss—and more importantly, enact—what it means to be a “citizen writer,” be it on campus or in the community.
This course will hone your capacities for critical and analytical thinking and creative expression by engaging you directly and reflectively in acts of reading and writing. Our work together is based on the principle that the best way to learn to write is by writing—by engaging frequently and intensively in the arts of composition. My goal in this course is to provide you with ways of composing, and ways of interacting with texts and contexts, that will enable you to become a more reflective, active, and effective participant in the civic life of our campus and community. Through your own acts of reading and writing, criticism and research, you will learn first hand the ways that knowledge is composed, beliefs are formed, and values are sustained and transformed—and you will learn that your own voice can make a difference.

You will begin by writing a civic autobiography that explores the distinctive ways that the academic and civic aspects of your lives have become laminated and layered. We will then turn to editorial cartoons as a vehicle for considering how global or national issues can have a local and personal dimension. Paul Loeb’s book *Soul of a Citizen* will then serve as an invitation to consider how language and rhetorical context play a role in civic engagement, despite our usual focus on actors and action. Extending this discussion, we will then equip your “rhetorical toolbox” with a set of analytic tools for considering language and rhetoric in the context of a specific campus or community ethnographic project that you will choose. These individual projects form the core of the course, and culminate in a written document and oral presentation that has you enter, reflect on, become engaged in a particular rhetorical site that bears on campus or civic issues. We’ll conclude the course by revisiting and updating your civic autobiography, as a way of appreciating how our academic and civic lives are not only intertwined but always under revision.

This course is taught as an intensive writing workshop, augmented as appropriate by technology. We draw on the latest educational technologies to support teaching and learning, and we will help you develop skills in critical information literacy so crucial for you as you search for, work with, and evaluate a variety of sources, both print and electronic. The course deals with issues of style, grammar, and organization, not in isolation, but in the context of larger rhetorical and argumentative concerns.

**Texts and Materials**

Working as a writer in college means working together. Writing is a social and collaborative act. To that end, the principal text in the course will be your own writing, and the principal activity will be sharing our work with each other and encouraging each other as we look forward to that next draft. Please have duplicated drafts ready when due. Drafts are required, but not graded. Please date all drafts. Your participation grade in the course (not to mention the quality of your work) will take a nose dive if you don’t submit and circulate your work on time. If you miss classroom discussion of your work because you do not turn in drafts in advance of class, the quality of your papers will almost certainly suffer. I will not accept final papers that have not been reviewed on a regular basis over the course of the assignment. “First draft” final versions are unacceptable and will receive an F. Late papers will not be accepted (except under extraordinary circumstances).

**Required Texts**


A college-level handbook of your choice. The handbook will be very useful to you as a writer throughout your college career and beyond, but it is not something we will “cover” in class in any systematic way.

A college-level dictionary of your choice.

Other readings and course materials will be provided in the form of handouts or by electronic means.

**Attendance and Participation**

As writers, we rely on each other as fellow writers and as readers. For this reason, regular attendance and active participation throughout the semester are crucial to this seminar/writing workshop. Students who
miss class will be expected to ask classmates for the information and assignments they missed. Students who miss more than four classes can expect their final grade to be lowered by one fraction of a letter (i.e. A to A-) for each absence after the fourth. Even when excused, more than seven absences can result in an "W", "IF", or "F" for the course. Please note this attendance policy. You have, in essence, four "freebies." Horde them and use them wisely: anticipate that you may feel under the weather one day, or that you may fall madly in love, or that you may need to recover from falling out of love. Class starts at the announced time; tardiness is not acceptable (two late arrivals count as one absence).

Assignments

Ours is a collaborative classroom. A regular and required assignment is that you pick up (or electronically download) and read papers to be discussed in advance of the class. You must come to class ready to comment on the work of your colleagues and to share in their inquiry. Student presentations on drafts submitted by classmates will be a regular feature of the workshop. These presentations should be prepared in advance of class and should be well organized, cogent, and to the point. In our "workshops" (as elsewhere in life), the Golden Rule applies well. Do unto other writers as you would have them do unto you. Writers want and need more than empty praise. They want an attentive and discerning audience, one that is ready to help improve the writing and thinking.

In addition to a number of short assignments and activities, you will develop a major project for this class, one that ha you enter, reflect on, and participate in a rhetorical site that bears on current campus or civic issues. Frequent revisions will be necessary. You will be expected to work on these documents throughout the semester, even on days when your draft may not come up for discussion. You cannot pass this course without successfully completing the major project. Be sure to date and save all drafts, and to save your work (including various drafts) on computer files. Always retain a hardcopy of every assignment for your files.

This class will use e-mail communication for messages from me, for general discussion, and at times for the circulation of drafts. Please check your university e-mail account (colorado.edu) several times each week as well as on those days when drafts may be circulated. If you use a non-university e-mail account (e.g. hotmail.com, msn.com), be sure to link it to the university e-mail account. It is your responsibility to become familiar with sending and receiving attachments using commonly available software (e.g. Microsoft Word), and for pasting text into the body of an e-mail. For assistance on technical computing matters, contact 735-HELP or 5-4357 for the Information Technology Help-Line.

Special Notes

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities (303-492-8671, Willard Hall, room 322, www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices).

If you speak English as a second language, you should contact me before the third class meeting so that I can better assist you in the course, advise you about special ESL courses, and/or refer you (if needed or desired) to appropriate services on campus.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated; the paper will receive an automatic F, and your case reported, consistent with the procedures of the new Student Honor Code. We’ll discuss a good deal more about learning from and using the words of others during the course. This writing seminar provides an opportunity to understand issues of intellectual property and the appropriate use and citation of sources. For a general introduction, see the Student Honor Code at http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html.

A writing class offers a special opportunity to discuss work in progress in a supportive yet critically demanding "workshop" environment. As you develop drafts and other materials for this course, you should bear in mind that you are "going public" with your work. This act carries with it an obligation for civil discussion and for understanding the concerns of your audience and their interests in your point of view. For information about classroom conduct, see: http://www.colorado.edu/policies/index.html.
Overview of Assignments and Readings

A civic autobiography. A roughly 300-400 word statement about how your academic experience and your personal life and civic commitments converge or conflict. The autobiography should raise and provide context for a set of issues or questions that you might pursue in this course.

Editorial cartoon assignment. Draws on editorial cartoons and their use of popular culture as an introduction to the modes of academic writing and the dimensions of civic discussion and debate (600-1,200 words). Ideally, the cartoon would reflect concerns that you wish to pursue in the course.

Teaching presentation on Soul of a Citizen. A brief oral presentation that has you analyze facets of Loeb’s book, with an eye to your own potential project in civic engagement.

Project prospectus. A roughly 200 word prospectus that identifies the site of your civic engagement, articulates the issue or problem that you will pursue for the course project, and places your concerns in the context of an ongoing conversation.

Electronic journal. Over the space of three weeks, you will keep an electronic journal that will help you reflect on general rhetorical issues as they apply to the specifics of your project. That is, as we equip your rhetorical toolbox, you will reflect on how those tools might apply to the site of your investigation and engagement.

Exploratory full draft on semester project.

Oral presentation. A formal 6-8 minute oral presentation related to your course project.

Revised full draft of course project.

Revised and updated civic autobiography.

Final version of course project.

Calculation of Grades

Your final grade will be determined as follows (assignments worth less than 10% are graded on check/check plus/check minus basis):

5% Initial civic autobiography
15% Editorial cartoon assignment
5% Teaching presentation
10% Electronic journal (application of rhetorical toolkit to your project)
10% Oral presentation
30% Course project
10% Revised and extended civic autobiography
15% Rhetorical process/revision effort, timely submission of drafts, class participation, quality of discussion and referee comments in class, etc.
FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Academic inquiry has at its core a set of four key concepts. These concepts are *not* meant to suggest prescriptive forms of writing. The concepts operate as a dynamic web of relationships, and can be deployed rhetorically in a variety of ways.

**Occasion / Problem / Question at issue**
- Reflects and/or helps shape rhetorical context
- Establishes ongoing relevance (exigence, the so-what question)
- Advantages of speaking directly to the issue
- The conversational model: occasions prompt a reply—the claim

**Pitfalls:**
- “The Funnel” (plot summary, gratuitous background info, broad generalizations)
- “The Misfire” (the gratuitous interest-getter opening; the misdirected but engaging story)

**Claim / Thesis / Point**
- Topic vs. claim (predication, claim establishes relationships among ideas)
- Arguable claim (potential refutability, risk; argument as dialogue)
- Claim as hypothesis during the revision process (arguable claims invite tests)
- Looks back to and answers the occasion, looks forward to and requires support and development
- Claims as generative tools (engines, not a “point” but vector)
- Social/ethical dimension, claims not just an abstract proposition (not just “claim that,” but “claim on”)

**Pitfalls:**
- The self-evident claim
- The statement of personal taste (“it’s just my opinion”)
- Troubleshooting the thesis (go-nowhere claims, underpowered claims, multiple or rival claims, cryptic claims)

**Reasons / Support / Evidence / Line of Reasoning**
- Reasons as answers to questions
- Reasons and audience: understanding what counts as evidence for an audience
- Earning a conclusion or claim
- Reasons as tools or opportunities for eliciting belief
- A trajectory of thought: line of reasoning

**Pitfalls:**
- Disconnect between claim and reasons (loose topical association)
- Examples, not reasons
- “Three reasons” (5 para essay)
- Discrete, unconnected “things I have to say” (no line of reasoning)
- Questionable assumptions

**Skeptical Questions / Counterarguments**
- Addressing counterarguments can carry positive persuasive force
- Skeptical questions and ethos (credibility, character)
- Counterarguments as tools for invention and revision
- The conversational model (good argument has all the virtues of good conversation)

**Pitfalls:**
- No reference to counterarguments
- The dismissive reference
- The late reference
- Missed opportunities for refining one’s own thinking and writing
GRADING POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

This class holds your writing to high standards. Because the grading is rigorous, we also want to be sure that it is fair, and that you have a rich set of opportunities to learn and excel in this course.

Working Drafts

Working drafts are not graded—all the more reason that you should welcome constructive comments for improving your paper. You can take advantage of workshop discussions by submitting thoughtful, substantive revisions on a regular basis, by keeping an open mind during discussions, and by asking for clarification from your instructor or classmates on any suggestions that remain confusing. You are always welcome to ask your instructor for additional help outside of class, or to visit the Writing Center of the Program for Writing and Rhetoric for additional consultations.

Improvement

We’re here to help you improve your writing. Although the course does not grade on improvement as such (we base grades on the evidence of the essay submitted, not on effort or time spent), we do weight your better papers more heavily when determining the final course grade. We want to give you a grade that reflects what you’ve learned in the course.

The Grading Process

The syllabus and schedule for your section of the course will specify when final drafts are due. As you revise your paper in preparation for its submission, your instructor will prod, coach, guide, advise, exhort, and encourage. Once you turn in your final draft, your instructor will judge the paper against the same standards that motivated the instructor’s comments during its preparation.

To ensure fairness and provide you with additional feedback, your papers also may be graded by another instructor in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric. Although the instructors will consult with each other about grades, your own instructor is responsible for determining your grade.

Appeals

Should you feel that the grade you have received is unfair, you are always welcome to submit an unmarked original copy of your paper to your instructor, with the request that it be graded by yet another reader. The grade for your paper may be adjusted in light of the comments given by the additional reader.

The Program for Writing and Rhetoric has an ombudsperson to help you resolve any concerns or conflicts you may have. Please contact the main office for more information.

Grading Guidelines

The Program assigns grades based on the evidence provided by the final version of the essay that you submitted. The classroom workshop in which your drafts are discussed encourages you to improve your work, and provides you with the tools to do so, but grades on the final papers are not assigned based on effort, progress, or time spent on the task. Pluses and minuses attached to grades reflect shades of difference, as do split grades (e.g. A-/B+).

A

A paper that is excellent in content, form, and style: original, substantive, insightful, persuasive, well-organized, and written in a clear, graceful, error-free style. Although not necessarily “perfect,” an “A” paper rewards its reader with genuine insight, gracefully expressed. Such a paper is an ambitious project that engages interesting, complex ideas in a perceptive manner. It offers a nuanced, specific claim that responds to a genuine question at issue, and it follows a compelling line of reasoning. It engages and responds to questions and counterarguments in a thoughtful manner, and explores well-chosen evidence in a detailed and revealing way. The paper does not repeat, but rather enhances, what writer and reader already know. Offering a context for its ideas, the essay could be read and appreciated by someone outside of the class. The style is clear, precise, and graceful, and the author’s voice engaging.
B  A clearly written, well-developed, interesting paper that shows above average thought and writing craft. The essay reaches high, and meets many, though not all, of its aims. The thinking and writing are generally very solid, but the paper may have some unresolved problems in argument and style, some thin patches in content, or some tangents that don’t fit in. Despite these problems, the paper does not have major flaws that compromise the general effectiveness of the case it presents or the overall readability of its prose. **OR** A paper that is far less ambitious than an “A” paper, but reaches all of its aims. This is an essay that may be well organized and cleanly, even elegantly written, but whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be somewhat routine or self-evident.

C  A paper that represents a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. The paper may be somewhat readable, organized at the surface level, and have a claim, but it will have real unresolved problems in one or more key areas: conception, quality of the claim, line of reasoning, use of evidence, and language, style, or grammar. The paper may fulfill the basic requirements of the assignment, but, finally, say little of genuine importance or significance. **OR** A competently written essay that is largely descriptive. **OR** An essay that offers scant intellectual content and little more than personal opinion, even when well written.

D  A paper that is seriously underdeveloped or seriously deficient in content, form, style, or mechanics. It may be disorganized, illogical, confusing, unfocused, or contain pervasive errors that impair readability. A paper that does not come close to meeting the basic expectations of the assignment.

F  A paper that is incoherent, disastrously flawed, unacceptably late, plagiarized, or non-existent.
Rhetorics of Civic Engagement (WRTG 3020-042)

Tentative Course Schedule

**Week One**
*Rhetorical Focus: Rhetorical Situation and Problem Formulation*

T 1/17 Course overview and introduction. Getting to know each other: what's in a name. Harper’s Index: making and defending inferences. Introduction to civic autobiography assignment and editorial cartoon assignment.

R 1/19 In-class activity on rhetorical context. Foundational concepts for the course.

Readings for this week:
- Norgaard, chapter 2 (Writing to Form Ideas)
- Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen* (finish book by Feb 9)

**Week Two**
*Rhetorical Focus: Convergences and Dissonances: Personal, Academic, and Civic*

T 1/24 Reading civic autobiographies.

R 1/26 Reading civic autobiographies. Circulate drafts of editorial cartoon assignment. Discuss how to write a project prospectus.

Readings for this week:
- Norgaard, chapter 3 (Inferring, Analyzing, Arguing. Note reference to editorial cartoons)
- Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen* (continue reading)

**Week Three**
*Rhetorical Focus: Foregrounding hidden issues of language and rhetoric*

T 1/31 Discussion of early chapters of Loeb’s *Soul of a Citizen*. Discussion and scheduling of teaching presentation on Loeb. Discussion of course project. **Due:** initial civic autobiography. Circulate drafts of editorial cartoon assignment.

R 2/2 Workshop editorial cartoon drafts

Readings for this week:
- Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen* (continue reading)

**Week Four**
*Rhetorical Focus: Modes of Academic Discourse, Opportunities for Civic Engagement*

T 2/7 Workshop editorial cartoon drafts

R 2/9 Workshop editorial cartoon drafts

Readings for this week:
- Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen* (finish reading)
Week Five
*Rhetorical Focus: Locating rhetorical concerns in traditional civic engagement narratives*

T 2/14  Teaching presentations on Loeb

R 2/16  Teaching presentations on Loeb. **Due:** Final version of editorial cartoon assignment. Circulate project prospectus on email by Sunday 2/19.

Readings for this week:
Close rereading of selected sections of Loeb

---

Week Six
*Rhetorical Focus: Invention—Rhetorical Strategies for Initiating and Planning a Project*

T 2/21  Workshop project prospectus. Form writing and editing groups.

R 2/23  Workshop project prospectus

Readings for this week:
Norgaard, chapter 4 ("Points of Departure")
Handout on writing a prospectus

---

Week Seven
*Rhetorical Focus: Kairos and Ethos*


Readings for this week:
Handouts on rhetorical issues and resources.

---

Week Eight
*Rhetorical Focus: Activity in Context; Language in Action*


Readings for this week:
Handouts on rhetorical issues and resources.

---

Week Nine
*Rhetorical Focus: Making, Testing, and Revising Claims*


R 3/16  Writing group A: Workshop rough full draft of project document.
Readings for this week:
  Norgaard, chapter 5 ("Troubleshooting your thesis")

**Week Ten**
*Rhetorical Focus: Claims, Lines of Reasoning, and Organizational Strategies*

T 3/21  Writing group B: Workshop rough full draft of project document. Discuss pastiche assignment. **Due:** electronic journal exploring how rhetorical issues apply to your project.

R 3/23  Writing group C: Workshop rough full draft of project document.

Readings for this week:
  Review Norgaard, chapter 6 ("Sustaining your Discussion")

**Week Eleven – SPRING BREAK**

**Week Twelve**
*Rhetorical Focus: Experimenting with and Revising for Style*

T 4/4  Share pastiche assignment

R 4/6  Writing Group A: Oral presentations

Readings for this week:
  Norgaard, skim chapter 8 ("Shaping Ideas with Style")

**Week Thirteen**
*Rhetorical Focus: Making the Case before a Live Audience*

T 4/11  Writing group A/B: Oral presentations.

R 4/13  Writing group B/C: Oral presentations.

Reading for this week:
  Norgaard, skim chapter 9 ("Ideas in Assignments," note section on oral presentations)

**Week Fourteen**
*Rhetorical Focus: Counterarguments and Skeptical Questions*

T 4/18  Writing Group C: Oral presentations.

R 4/20  Writing Group A: Workshop revised full draft of project document.

Readings for this week:
  Norgaard, chapter 7 ("Revising by Argument")
Week Fifteen
*Rhetorical Focus: Relevance, or... “So What?”*

T 4/25 Writing Group B: Workshop revised full draft of project document.

R 4/27 Writing Group C: Workshop revised full draft of project document.

Week Sixteen
*Rhetorical Focus: Revising Ourselves as Civic Writers, Writing Beyond this Course*

T 5/2 Sharing revised and extended civic autobiographies

R 5/4 Sharing revised and extended civic autobiographies. Last class: final remarks.

**Due: Civic Autobiography and Final Project** as early as Friday 5/5 but no later than Monday 5/8 at noon (see me about any possible conflicts with final exams; I am very willing to work with you).
Want to Buff up your writing?

The Writing Center can help.

Our consultants are writing experts who can provide sound advice at all stages of the writing process. Best of all, our services are FREE to all CU Boulder students and faculty.

Location and Hours
Norlin Library E-156

Mon-Thurs 9am-8pm
Fri 9am-12 noon
Sun 4pm-7pm

Schedule an appointment
http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/writingcenter.html

Sponsored by the Program for Writing and Rhetoric
You've got the PWR!