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COMX 240H.50: Introduction to Rhetorical Theory - Online

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Introduction to Rhetorical Theory

COMX 240H, Fall 2020

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Course Description and Objectives

Rhetoric is a much maligned word. It is commonly thought of as “hot air,” propaganda, manipulative speech, lies and bullshit. And to be sure, there is plenty of that in the world today! However, the purpose of this course is to help you understand how rhetoric is much more complicated—and more significant—than those one-sided perspectives suggest. Instead of just a label for speech one finds deceptive, rhetoric refers to any discourse that contributes to the exercise of power. And rhetorical *theory* attempts to account for this relationship between public discourses and power. Learning about rhetorical theory will help you see how your own beliefs and attitudes have been influenced through persuasive discourse, and in turn help you become a more effective and ethical producer and consumer of persuasive discourse.

The course will proceed historically, from the Sophists to Social Media. We will examine theories beginning with the classical Greek period that concentrate on the relationship between *persuasion*, *belief*, *truth*, and *power*. The fundamental issues of rhetoric raised during that period will take on new significance as we explore contemporary rhetorical theory and address concepts such as *identification*, *argument*, *narrative*, *ideology*, *the public sphere*, *visual rhetoric*, and *circulation*.

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- define and explain fundamental concepts in rhetorical theory
- use those concepts to analyze actual instances of rhetorical practice
- address how rhetorical theories emerged from specific historical, cultural, and political concerns
- assess the implications of specific rhetorical theories for democratic politics and culture

Texts

There is only one book that you “need” to buy, which we’ll read in October: Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy*, 2017. It’s a short book and cheap, from \$1.99 on Kindle up to \$9.95 for a new hardback. Available here: <https://theexperimentpublishing.com/catalogs/spring-2020/demagoguery-and-democracy/>

Other materials will be posted on Moodle. Some of the readings are from a textbook, but because it is expensive and we're not using the entire book, I will post PDFs of the relevant stuff. If you want to find a used copy, the book is Palczewski, Ice, and Fritsch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 2nd ed. (Strata, 2016).

Course Structure

This is an *asynchronous online course*. That means we do not have fixed, required meeting times, and internet access is necessary to complete the course.

The general structure for most weeks in the course will be as follows:

- **Mondays:** by the end of the day Monday, you should plan on having read the primary materials listed on the schedule below. The readings will be available well ahead of time, and I will make lectures available as soon as I possibly can.
- **Tuesdays:** *by midnight Tuesday*, you should complete the "Quiz" for the week. These will be short and are less about "testing" you than helping you stay engaged and understand the most important ideas. Sometimes these quizzes will be the usual multi-choice quiz; other times they will ask you to respond to a question or prompt. I will randomly assign you to group discussion forums where you can talk about these materials with your colleagues.
- **Wednesdays:** I will hold "Office Hours for All" on Wednesdays from 11:00-Noon, via Zoom. I will be happy to answer questions then, but I will not prepare new/extra material for these sessions and your participation is not required. I will record these sessions and post later on Moodle if you are interested but unable to meet at the designated time.
- **Thursdays:** at some point in the middle of the week I may add some current examples of rhetoric or additional materials that connect our course topics to daily life. These are intended to push your thinking and help you with some of the other assignments in the course.
- **Fridays:** due dates for the "Homework Assignments" will generally fall on Fridays at 3:00 pm. These will occur once every 2-3 weeks. Assignment descriptions and due dates will be shared/announced on Moodle.

Requirements and Grading

Since the emergence of COVID-19, many educators have been talking about "trauma-informed pedagogy"—a shorthand for making adjustments to teaching in order to accommodate the challenges of everyday life in a pandemic. For this course, I have made two big adjustments. First, I am getting rid of the "three big exams" model in favor of Weekly Quizzes and a few Homework Assignments. Second, I am using contract grading to ease anxiety and give you a greater sense of control over your workload.

In this course, contract grading means that you will choose the letter grade that you seek for the course. Each grade comes with a series of requirements/expectations in order to achieve that grade for the course. Should you not meet the requirements for the grade you select, I will apply the criteria for the other grade brackets in order to assign your final grade. *I will ask you to make this choice around Labor Day*, after we have had time to settle into the semester.

To earn a final grade of A:

- Complete all weekly quizzes with 100% grade
- Complete four homework assignments, with at least two at the A (“Distinction”) level
- Complete a final project, at least at B (Merit) level, in consultation with the instructor.

To earn a final grade of B:

- Complete all but one weekly quiz, at least 80% grade.
- Complete four homework assignments, at least two at a B (“Merit”) level

To earn a final grade of C:

- Complete all but two weekly quizzes, at least 70% grade.
- Complete three homework assignments at a C (“Pass”) level

D and F grades will be assigned at the discretion of the instructor. At UM, D grades earn credits but cannot be used to fulfill General Education or major requirements. Practically speaking, this means COMX students have to get a C- to count the course for the major.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability that may require modification of some element of the course, you should 1) register with Disability Student Services, 2) send me the DSS documentation, and 3) discuss with me the arrangements that fit your situation.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct includes cheating, plagiarism, and representing someone else’s work as your own. Penalties range from an ‘F’ on the particular piece of work to the denial or revocation of a degree. Bottom line: don’t do it. There are plenty of other rule-breaking activities you can engage while at college which have less serious consequences and are a lot more fun.

Tentative Schedule

WEEK	TOPIC	MAIN MATERIALS
August 19	What is Rhetoric	RCL, ch. 1
August 24	The Sophists: Protagoras, Gorgias	Poulakos, Protagoras fragments, <i>Encomium of Helen</i>

August 31	Plato Vs. Rhetoric	<i>Gorgias</i> dialogue
September 7	Plato's Change	<i>Phaedrus</i> dialogue
		*HOMEWORK 1 due Sept. 11
September 14	Civic rhetoric: Isocrates and Aristotle	<i>Against the Sophists</i> , <i>Rhetoric</i> excerpts
September 21	Publics & Counterpublics	RCL, ch. 9
		*HOMEWORK 2 due Sept. 25
September 28	Circulation & Amplification	<i>You Are Here</i> excerpts
October 5	Situations & Audiences	RCL, ch. 8
October 12	Language	RCL, ch. 2 + Burke fragments
		*HOMEWORK 3 due Oct. 16
October 19	Ideology	Cloud, Smucker
October 26	Demagoguery	<i>Demagoguery and Democracy</i> , Mercieca
		*HOMEWORK 4 due Oct. 30
November 2	TBD	
November 9	Argument & Fallacies	RCL, ch. 4
November 16	Project work, Course wrap-up	*FINAL PROJECT due Nov. 20
November 25	End of Fall Semester	