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UNDOING SILENCE: WRITING FOR CHANGE
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EFFECTIVE WRITING IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Persuasive, accurate, readable writing is crucial to Public Policy and Planning and to active citizenship. This course offers techniques for understanding the needs of multiple audiences, framing and organizing ideas, and developing a “voice” that will influence readers in the “real world.” We will work with tools for critical and creative thinking, supportive feedback, and audience awareness through short weekly writing assignments including at least three drafts of your chosen longer writing project in public communication and a short letter or blog post. Focus this term: speaking to the challenges of climate and other crises.

General Requirements (*for details on written assignments, see end of syllabus*):

- 1.) Attendance/timeliness, participation, drafts ON TIME, community-building. **First class meets 6 pm Wednesday May 22.**
- 2.) An informal writer’s journal: 2-3 pages daily; 4-7 days a week. (Your comments on it, not the journal itself, are turned in.)
- 3.) A public writing project in three drafts (including final version). This is a 750- to 3,000-word piece of writing you choose to fit in with your work, school, professional, or activist interests. The emphasis is on offering information & new perspectives to a real world audience (“the public”). The project could include a report, memo, letter, or proposal (for work); a thesis chapter or paper for another course (school) **; or an advocacy piece or magazine, newsletter, blog or newspaper article (your other interests). Choose something you WANT to write about and can realistically tackle in a 5-week period. (See below for more detail on projects.) **First draft (“mad draft”) is DUE June 5; 2nd draft, June 17; final draft, June 26.**
- 4.) Short writing assignments: **(a) DUE by email Sunday, May 26:** 3 pages of informal writing describing your personal goals for the course and three possible options for your main course project. **(b) DUE June 12:** Letter to the editor, blog post or response.
- 5.) A portfolio of your course work to date, containing all short assignments, drafts, and journal updates and turned in with drafts **DUE June 5, 17, and 26.**
- 6.) Final written comment on course experience. **DUE June 26 with portfolio.**

*This course emphasizes the process of writing, not evaluation of results. It is a **pass-fail course**, with the assumption that a good writing process will lead to excellent writing. A passing grade is based on fulfilling the above requirements, including bringing your writing project to completion.*

Readings:

Required texts: Dunlap, *Undoing the Silence, Six Tools for Social Change Writing* (available at discount from author). Wm. Strunk & E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*

There will be a few Xeroxed readings and one or two recommended additional books, depending on interest.

****Note:** Please don’t choose a thesis PROPOSAL. Past experience shows that ideas change too much in proposal-writing to focus on public communication. (Also your audience is limited to your advisor and committee—not really “public.”)

2011 COURSE SCHEDULE

Week # 1

May 22: Hands-on work with tools and dynamics of this course

- Introductions, aspirations, concerns. Syllabus, requirements, tools, dynamics, and focus.
- “Social change writing.” Private and public writing. FREEWRITING & PROCESS tools.

Week #2

May 26: DUE: Short writing assignment (options for your project) at noon by email to changewrite@earthlink.net AND

May 27 HOLIDAY

May 29: Think through which project you most want to work on and especially who you want it to influence. Short writing assignment will be returned with feedback.

- Reading for today: Dunlap, Chapter 3, The FREEWRITING Tool, Chapter 4, The PROCESS Tool. Please try out at least two exercises from each chapter and we will discuss.

Week #3

June 3: Quick-speak draft

- A 3-5 minute oral presentation on your project (an “instant version”)
- Reading: Chapter 5, The THINKING Tool. Try out at least two exercises.
- More on FREEWRITING & PROCESS tools as useful in your projects.

June 5: DUE: Mad draft (with portfolio, self-comment & journal update)

- Truth Mandala (Joanna Macy exercise)
- Journal review night plus “Show don’t tell.”

Week #4

June 10: Prepare audience analysis for your project on flip chart paper (to post)

- Reading: Dunlap, Ch. 6, The AUDIENCE Tool
- Small group review of audience analyses
- How to write to the editor and get published

June 12: DUE: letter to editor (or blog post or response)

- Small group feedback on short writing project

Week #5

June 17: DUE: Project 2nd draft (with self-comment, portfolio, journal update PLUS revised letter project).

- Reading: Dunlap, Ch. 7 The FEEDBACK Tool
- Small group feedback on course projects

June 19: More feedback

- More feedback in small groups
- Questions for next week’s WORDPOWER clinic

Week #6

June 24: Editing and fine-tuning: grammar/WORDPOWER clinic:

- Reading: Review Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*
- Reading: Dunlap, Ch. 8. The WORDPOWER Tool

June 26: DUE: Final draft--in portfolio (with all previous drafts; journal updates; letter plus revision [if needed]; and self-comments on project & course).

- Small groups & sharing. Pending questions. Next steps. Feedback on the course.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS (DETAILS)

Please type all writing (except your journal), DOUBLE SPACE, and hand in paper version (except for first assignment 1). Leave normal margins & lots of white space for feedback.

A. INFORMAL WRITER'S JOURNAL ***

(See end of handout, because this item is pretty lengthy.)

B. FIRST SHORT ASSIGNMENT: YOUR PROJECT OPTIONS

Three pages of informal writing briefly describing (1) your writing experience to date and your wishes and concerns for this course and (2) THREE options you are considering for your main course project. (See below for suggestions about projects.) For EACH option please think about:

- Your audience and your purposes in writing for this audience
- Information sources (what you already have and how you'll get the rest)
- Length of project and ideas for organizing it
- What are the challenges and benefits for you in undertaking this option?

If you wish, include your thoughts about which option you think you'll choose. I'll be giving you my feedback the next day, but the first ("mad") draft will be due the week after you turn this in so don't put off getting started. For this assignment, please use whatever "voice" or form of organization feels comfortable for you.

C. MAIN COURSE PROJECT—in three drafts

This is a 3 – 12 page piece of writing (double space) that you choose to fit in with your work, school, or other personal, professional, or political interests. The emphasis is on offering information & new perspectives to a public or policy-making audience (not merely an academic audience). In the past, people have done reports, memos, letters, brochures etc. (for work); thesis chapters or papers for another course (school); and advocacy pieces or magazine, newsletter, or newspaper articles (connected with other interests). Choose something you WANT to write about and can realistically tackle in a 6-week period. A project you've already researched is ideal. (*A thesis proposal is not a good choice because experience shows that ideas change too much while you're drafting to allow you to concentrate on the WRITING and on a public audience.*)

To avoid "the dangerous method" (trying to write something "right" the first time) we do this project in three stages—four if you count the "options" assignment as a stage. Shortly after getting feedback on your "options," a "mad draft" is due. For a mad draft, you try to get as much of the piece down on paper as you can. It's OK to leave it in rough form—you can leave blanks, include notes to yourself, invent information or whatever you need to do to get the whole thing OUT. You'll turn the mad draft in with your portfolio, including the options assignment. In class you'll write a self-comment on this draft before turning it in.

After the first or second draft, you'll have feedback both from us and from a small group of other students to help strengthen your thinking and your later drafts. You'll also do a formal audience analysis. The second version will probably be VERY different—ideas will shift, organizational strategy will change, new concepts will emerge. The growth of a writing project is a process of wrestling with ideas.

In a third (final) draft, you'll have a chance to edit for effective language (“wordpower”). At each stage, readings and discussion will support the process. For each draft, turn in your full portfolio (of previous drafts) and your own comments on the current draft.

D. LETTER TO THE EDITOR OR BLOG POST OR RESPONSE

We will discuss guidelines for this assignment in class, including options for new media. The idea is a brief (50-150 word), accessible letter for the public media where you BRIEFLY share information or opinions “hooked” to or built on what has already been said in the publication. Draw on your real-life experience (and actually send the letter after feedback.) See appendix A, p. 209 in *Undoing the Silence*

E. PORTFOLIO

The portfolio is your total course work to date. Whenever you turn in a draft, you include the whole portfolio—which means all previous drafts and assignments as well as past and current journal updates. Include a “self-comment,” i.e. your own comments on your current draft (we'll do this in class for the “mad draft”.) This gives us a chance to see your work in the context of how it is developing and how you are feeling about it. It gives you a chance to watch ideas grow.

F. FINAL COMMENT

When you turn in your final draft and portfolio, please look back over all the writing you've done, including your journal. Then comment in whatever way you wish on the changes or development you see in your own drafts, journal, and course experience. What changed for you? What challenges do you face now? What helped or didn't help? Specific suggestions and comments will be useful to me in planning future courses.

***** INFORMAL WRITER'S JOURNAL AND JOURNAL UPDATES**

The journal is the private place where you write regularly—daily or at least 4-5 times a week during the five weeks of this course. It is just for you, not to show to anyone unless you choose to. You will be writing 2-3 pages per day, mostly using “freewriting” rather than laboring over what to say. I hope it will be a liberating experience.

Goals of the journal:

- To become comfortable with freewriting and other personal techniques that nourish the roots of all communication, even public communication.
- To try out techniques like listing, matrices, and drawing for generating powerful ideas for your course project.
- To create raw material for this course or other writing projects

- To reflect on what you are learning in this course.
- To explore your natural creativity and your “voice” at a deeper level.
- To develop an ongoing “practice” that you can rely on after the course.

Handwriting or computer?

This depends on you, but it’s important to have all your journal-writing in one place so you can SEE it (i.e., not “virtual”). I suggest a notebook that feels good to you for writing by hand. If you much prefer to use a computer, please print out your journal entries and keep them in a three-hole binder, along with the other journal writing you’ll do in class (so you can review it physically all in one place). Each person will create a slightly different format for this journal. At some point in the course, you’ll be asked to bring the journal to class and show how you’re doing it (Although I hope you will want to, you will never be required to share what you write.)

Privacy and the “journal update”:

Because so many problems stem from others’ (or our own) judgments of our writing, this journal needs to be completely free from outside evaluation. If you ARE WILLING to share things from the journal, there will be opportunities, but nothing will be collected, evaluated, or “marked.” This six-week course offers a supportive nudge toward healthy habits that are hard to establish on one’s own. To help you stay faithful, please include a “journal update” every time you turn in your portfolio. This can take any form you want: you can report on subjects written about, insights or difficulties; you can include some bits of what you’ve written that you’re willing to share. You can record the highlights of your journal-writing experience. Any surprises? This is your record of progress (and struggle with what may be a new practice for you).

What to write about in the journal:

The main point is to DO the writing every day—no matter what it’s about. Because the emphasis is on freewriting, you have to stay free from the “assignment” mode and write on what has energy for you at that moment. (You don’t have to freewrite every entry.)

Undoing the Silence has many suggestions for informal writing but here are some more to stimulate your journal-writing:

1. Freewrite about whatever is on your mind when you sit down to write. Just getting used to processing your feelings and concerns (no matter how mundane) in written words is beneficial (and people find it helps them plan their day, make decisions, relieve stress, etc.) These days, I’m writing a lot about the world situation.
2. Explore questions about yourself as a writer. Tell stories about your successes—what made things work out?—and investigate your “demons” or obstacles as a writer. Julia Cameron says to acknowledge and grieve “creative injuries” (otherwise they “become creative scar tissue and block your growth.”) Have you experienced injuries to your creativity—like “friends” or teachers who put you down? Can you begin to explore them here?
3. Explore dimensions in your thinking: what visual, metaphoric, logical, or other kinds of thinking are you good at that usually don’t get expressed in words? Are

- you more comfortable with the left or the right side of the brain? (Why?) Draw pictures and write about them, tell stories, try informal poems or songs.
4. Explore the world of sensory phenomena around you this summer. Sit down in a pleasant outdoor place (or a busy café, T station, or jazz club) and write about what you see, hear, smell, taste. (There are lots of suggestions for this kind of exploration in Natalie Goldberg's book, *Writing Down the Bones*.)
 5. Write about dreams, memories, inspirational people, good conversations.
 6. Explore pain or trauma you've experienced. In a recent study, 40% of the people asked to write every day about "the most painful thing that has happened in your life" resolved serious health issues like asthma and arthritis (as compared to only 20% in a control group asked to write about the more trivial issues of daily life.)
 7. Write about your "generative themes," Paulo Freire's name for the serious issues that engage your deepest energy at the moment. Maybe for you it's family issues or your career or maybe it's something like racism or the nuclear fuel cycle. Maybe it's what you would like to say to your boss. What "pushes your buttons"? (Natalie Goldberg encourages us to write about our "obsessions".)
 8. Write about something useful: the ideas you hope to bring out in an interview or speech; the insights you draw from a meeting, conference, lecture, or reading; the problems you see with something you need to analyze. Freewriting is a powerful way to prepare for public communication and the best way to distill and reflect on what went on afterwards.
 9. Write about your project: What questions do you want it to answer? Who will actually read it and how do you want them to react? What's holding you back from writing at the moment? Or what's working well as you write?
 10. Keep your own list of things you want to write about and pull it out if something doesn't just float to the surface when you take out your journal.

In class, we will be trying out various processes and "prompts" to help us bypass the internal censors that make writing difficult for so many. Feel free to adapt any of these (or invent new ones) in your journal.