

WRT 105: Web-Wide World: The Ethics of Virtual Connection

University of Rochester

MW 2:00-3:15

Meliora 210

Professor Andrew Crakes

Office Hours: Rush Rhees G-138: Mon., 3:15-4:15; Thurs., 1:30-2:30

Course Description

The 21st century has seen a dramatic shift in borders between public and private, local and global, and even simulated and real. We can tweet at hundreds of followers, Skype to another continent, and hold a conversation with Siri, but it's also possible to hack private photos of celebrities, conduct a drone strike from a desk chair, or lose oneself in artificial worlds. How can we orient ourselves ethically, interpersonally, and politically to capabilities that seem so new? We'll read thinkers like Sherry Turkle, Marshall McLuhan and Evgeny Morozov, and you'll write, revise, and carry out research to join academic conversation about privacy, self, and community, with a focus on social media and politics; we'll also consider how writing has been impacted by new communication technologies. Your work will culminate in an 8-10 page argumentative research paper, but informal assignments, in-class writing, peer review, revision and self-assessment will help us get to that point.

FORMAL ASSIGNMENT 1: I Can Haz Essay – Exploring the Internet’s Impact on Language Use

Media for non-oral communication have evolved through history, from hand-made illuminated manuscripts to printed books, telegrams and newspapers, forms sent by fax machine and documents printed from early word processing computers. Now “online” media are ubiquitous, with information instantaneously transmitted and consistently available: text messages, Facebook statuses, Tumblr posts, webpage comments, e-mails, tweets, yaks, discussion boards, and other formats host thoughts, jokes, arguments, gut reactions, and stray opinions that now last indefinitely.

Alongside these new media, we’ve developed new styles, habits, and tics in our reading and writing, and a vocabulary to categorize online dynamics has emerged. We devour (or complain about) “listicles” and “clickbait” (The Ten Things You Must Do To Succeed In WRT 105”; “I Took WRT 105 with Professor Crakes and What Happened Next Is Amazing”), or “hot takes” (quick, unreflective opinion pieces immediately after news events). Online discussion groups and frequent website visitors fend off “trolls”, while written content comes with various warnings and disclaimers, whether a “trigger warning”, a “NSFW” tag, or a “tl;dr” summary. “Hash tags” and emoji pepper posts and texts.

Clearly Internet culture has developed new ways to exchange information. This assignment asks you to address a larger question: do these changes matter? Have phenomena like blogs, tweets and hash-tags altered the use and impact of language in a significant way, or are we witnessing faddish innovations (“zines”- homemade photocopied magazines- were trendy in the 1990’s, for example) and superficial changes to the ways information is packaged? You don’t need to provide an either/or response, and our readings will help you to see how different writers have approached this set of issues. You might think about how language can convey emotion (with emoji? :P), how grammar might change or bend (because the Internet), how language and images interact, or whether the pace of online communication changes how we write (Twitter happens much “faster” than e-mail).

You may use texts from the syllabus as evidence to support and develop your argument: we’ll have read about Andrea Lunsford’s optimistic account of a literacy revolution based on “kairos”, the New York Times on the emotional inflections of emojis, a scholarly work observing difficulties with tone in e-mail communication, and a linguist’s account of how we convey sarcasm in writing. **However, you will also be expected to make use of at least one academic, peer-reviewed article or book from your own independent research.** You don’t need to agree with these writers, but you should engage them as substantially as possible. You can quote these writers to strengthen your position, to provide support for your reasoning, to furnish examples or ideas you can examine in more detail, or to represent perspectives with which you want to disagree.

Focus on making a thoughtful, well-constructed argument that takes a position on its topic (with a thesis) and uses examples and textual excerpts (“quotes”) as evidence. Your thesis should make a strong claim about the impact of new media on language, but one with more precision, detail and nuance than “Everything’s better”, “Everything’s worse” or “Everything’s the same.” Specificity and precision are important, both for your language and your thinking—the two are inseparable-- and every claim should be supported as substantially as possible.

Length: 4-5 pages

Grading Criteria

A strong essay will:

1. Offer a clear, developed thesis (a strong, debatable claim) about the impact of new media and technology on language use.
2. Support its thesis with specific evidence
3. Draw on at least two texts- **one academic**- as evidence, quoting and citing them appropriately (in MLA format)
4. Present its argument in clear, correct academic prose
5. Demonstrate intelligent organization at the paragraph level (each paragraph organized around a claim and supporting evidence) and the essay level (engaging introduction, clear transitions and flow, effective conclusion)
6. Follow MLA formatting conventions (double-spaced 12 pt. font, 1 inch margins) – **guidelines forthcoming**

As stated on the syllabus, you will complete a first draft in order to receive peer and instructor feedback. A copy or copies of that first draft, with peer and instructor comments, should ultimately be submitted in the same electronic file as your final draft of the essay. **In addition, both the first and final draft should be turned in with one or two paragraphs of self-assessment at the bottom- guidelines forthcoming.**

FIRST DRAFT DUE WEDNESDAY, 9/14, BROUGHT TO CLASS FOR PEER REVIEW AND SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY BY THE END OF THE CLASS PERIOD.

INSTRUCTOR COMMENTS ON FIRST DRAFT WILL BE RETURNED ELECTRONICALLY BY MONDAY, 9/19.

FINAL DRAFT DUE MONDAY, 9/26, SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY BY THE START OF CLASS.

Perceiving Audience, Ethos, & Personality

For each of the three texts you read for today (the Wired article, “How To Hack OKCupid”, The New York Magazine piece, “All My Exes Live In Texts”, and the excerpt from Jean Baudrillard’s Simulacra and Simulation), identify as many **indicators** (or “clues”) as you can find about what kind of **audience** each writer is appealing to (examples of **tone**, **word choice**, **subject matter**, **sense of humor**, **style**, and anything else you notice- visual and contextual clues are equally valid- if I publish a poem at brobible.com, neither I nor my parents may be proud) and be able to explain how those indicators point toward a specific audience** or audiences.

**If we took They Say/I Say as an example, I might say it’s “aimed at college students” or “aimed at college students who are anxious about entering academic discourse and appreciate down to earth advice.” There can be multiple audiences for any text- you could also argue that They Say/I Say is “aimed at composition instructors who are anxious to provide their students with down to earth advice about entering academic discourse”. You couldn’t say it’s “aimed at college students who are anxious...and appreciate advice filtered through pop cultural references to ke\$ha, the Vampire Diaries, and House of Cards.” (although I may write that book if teaching doesn’t pan out- and you can find things in bookstores like “South Park and Philosophy” or “The Simpsons and Philosophy”- so we can sometimes create or discover very small but enthusiastic audiences for our work).

Finally, see if you can make any inferences about the **personality** of each writer (Jean Baudrillard, Maureen O’Connor, Kevin Paulson), or, to use a broad rhetorical term, his or her **ethos**. Is that ethos scholarly, serious, relaxed, hip, angry, provocative (polemical?), urban, blue collar, skeptical, something else?

Kevin Paulson,
“How To Hack OKCupid”

Maureen O’Connor
“All My Exes...”

Jean Baudrillard

Target Audience(s),
Indicators

Personality, Ethos

Some Common Issues With Your English 112 Papers

1. **Use, over-use of "I feel"-type sentences:** "I feel that," "I believe that," "I think that"

- as in: "I feel that I write well" v. "I write well."

- "I think that over time, I have grown as a writer" v. "Over time, I have grown as a writer."

To persuade your reader, state your claims with confidence. "I feel.." and "I believe..." disclaimers occur in conversation as a form of politeness, a non-confrontational way to express an opinion ("Personally, I believe that [religious/political/personal belief].") In conversation and speech, those phrases are ok, but in writing they just take up space, make your sentences wordy, and imply that you lack confidence in your own judgment. **DELETE THESE** whenever you find them in your work.

2. **Wordiness and/or passive-voice** - Ex.: "Research papers have been a struggle for me" v. "I have struggled with research papers" or "I struggled with research papers."

The "I [verb]" examples are in the active voice, which is usually the voice you should employ. Passive (and/or wordy) sentences drain your writing of its force and energy. Strive to be concise and direct. To write sophisticated sentences, you have to first push yourself toward sophisticated thoughts. An experienced reader can tell when a writer has inflated, stretched or strained average thoughts to fill up fancy sentences.

3. **Redundancy** - the repetition of a word or idea (most often, a word) within one or two sentences, where repetition is not necessary - Ex.: "Don't repeat yourself excessively, repeating yourself is bad, it's bad to repeat yourself, and you shouldn't do it because it's bad to repeat yourself."

4. **"Surface" errors** - missing commas, noun/verb disagreement, misspelled words, typos - these are superficial mistakes which distract (and sometimes annoy) most readers from your message. Think of them as smudges or fingerprints on a window which prevent you from seeing clearly through to the objects or ideas on the other side.

5. **Pronouns without referents** - you should only use a pronoun when it clearly refers back to a specific noun in the sentence or paragraph.

Examples of errors: "Doug went to the store and bought it." "Doug and Mike played poker. He won." The pronouns here don't tell you WHAT Doug purchased or which person won the hand or game.

Correct usage: "Doug wanted a new iPhone, so he went to the store and bought it."

6. **Clarity and precision of vocabulary** - Writing at every level challenges you to find words to express your meaning as precisely and clearly as possible. You don't want to use overly simplistic language (Don't just use small words) or overly fancy language (Don't confuse your reader and obfuscate your meaning with needlessly pretentious diction). You can usually tell when you've hit on just the right word to express something, and you can usually also tell when you haven't.

6b. Even though a dozen ways might be found to word a single idea, you want to give your reader the feeling that you have selected the best words for your thoughts and put them in the best possible order. VERBS especially benefit from extra thought. "is", "are", "am", "was" and other basic verbs carry the least meaning (ex.: "One of the problems I had in English 111 was with my grammar" v. "In English 111, I struggled with my grammar" or "My grammar posed a problem in English 111.").

7. **Informality** - It's ok to use informal language sometimes, but you will want to be aware of the effect that choice has on a reader. If you want to convey that you have put serious thought into an issue and take your reader seriously (9 times out of 10 in an academic setting), you'll generally want to avoid conversational, slang, and informal words.

8. **Vague or absent theses, topic sentences, transitions** - Often, a paper or draft will have solid ideas in place but lack guideposts for a reader to follow. A clear thesis establishes both a topic and your perspective on it, and clear topic sentences for every paragraph, with transitions, show your reader how to follow your argument from point to point. (Additional handout on this issue may come later.)