The Craft of the Sentence

In this course, you’ll learn what makes great sentences and practice how to write them. The course will teach you some of the concepts and terms used to analyze how a sentence is put together. Most of your learning will be through examples—real sentences by real writers—that we will break down together to see principles in action. You will also get to practice these ideas yourself through a variety of exercises. Our goal is less to learn writing as a set of rules—do’s and don’t’s to be memorized—but more like learning a musical instrument, a craft where the more you practice, the better you’ll become.

Required Materials

There are no books required for this course. All readings are available through Canvas. You are required to bring to each class: a pen and paper, a laptop or smartphone, the week’s readings printed or downloaded, and on Thursdays a selected piece of writing.
Calendar

Most weeks, the class will proceed as follows—

Tuesdays are lessons: we will go over the readings, learn some important terms and concepts, then practice those concepts through some exercises. Before class, make sure to print or download the readings and bring them to class. After class, review your notes and take the quiz.

Thursdays are workshops: students will bring to class a self-chosen piece of writing by another author, then complete a set of assignments analyzing, imitating, and rewriting the piece, then share with a peer. Before class, be sure to download or print whatever writing you would like to workshop.

Week 1: Introduction
Don and Jenny Killgallon, “Barry’s Story” (online)
Stanley Fish, “Why Sentences?”

Week 2: Words I—History of English, Why Word Choice Matters
John McWhorter, introduction to Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue
George Orwell, “Politics of the English Language”

Week 3: Words II—Language Communities, How to Make Up Words
Roy Peter Clark, “Words,” “Words I Have Confused”

Week 4: Syntax I—Parts of Speech, Why Syntax Matters
Cindy L. Vitto, “The Eight Parts of Speech”
Garielle Lutz, “The Sentence is a Lonely Place” (online)

Week 5: Syntax II—Types of Sentences, How to Write a Long Sentence
Priscilla Long, “Simple, Compound, and Complex Sentences”
Stanley Fish, “The Subordinating Style”

Week 6: Rhetoric I—Artistic Structures of Words
Gideon Burton, Silvae Rhetoricae: “anaphora,” “antithesis,” “chiasmus,” “parenthesis,” “zeugma” (online)
Virginia Tufte, “Parallelism”

Week 7: Rhetoric II—Word-Images
Steven Pinker, “A Window onto the World”
Priscilla Long, “Metaphor and Simile”

Week 8: Rhetoric III—Word-Sounds
Priscilla Long, “Sound Effects”
Roy Blount, from Alphabet Juice

Week 9: Final Projects—Conferences and Peer Review
William Zinnser, “The Sound of Your Voice”

Week 10: Final Projects—Conferences and Peer Review
Assignments

Attendance (15%): Attending all class sessions, prepared and having done the reading, is important and counts toward your grade. Showing up to class over ten minutes late will count as an absence.

However, there are ways to make up any absences. See the Policies section below for details and contact me if you’re unsure about anything. Don’t come to class if you’re sick—even just a little. Follow all university guidelines about when you should isolate.

Note-Taking (5%): One Tuesday per term, you will take detailed notes on the lecture portion of the class. These notes will be used by other students to review and by any students who miss class. You should edit your notes after class and post them to Canvas before midnight. Notes will be graded satisfactory or unsatisfactory based on accuracy and clarity. See the policies section for what to do if you need to miss the day you are scheduled to take notes.

Quizzes (7 quizzes, lowest two scores dropped, 25% total): Between the end of each Tuesday’s class and the start of Thursday’s, a quiz will be available on Canvas. The quiz will review concepts and terms gone over in Tuesday’s class.

Workshop Entries (7 entries, 25% total): Each Thursday, you will bring to class a piece of writing you find interesting or admirable. Any type of writing is acceptable as long as it is not your own; it can be a newspaper article, novel chapter, a transcribed political speech, a set of lyrics, even a tweet thread. During class, you will analyze, imitate, and re-write the author’s style according to specific instructions given that week. Submit the completed entry on Canvas at the end of class.

Final Project (30% total): The final project for this course will be to complete a 4-5 page analysis of yourself as a writer. You will choose one piece of writing you completed before the start of the term. First, you will analyze the writing in terms of word choice, syntax, and rhetoric. You should show your understanding of at least two concepts from each unit of the course and apply them to your own writing. Then, provide an overall sense of the writer’s strengths and weaknesses and how the writing could be improved. Finally, include one revised paragraph following the guidelines you have given yourself.

The final project will be completed in stages and workshopped during the final two weeks of the term. A draft of the first two sections will be due in week 10.
Policies

Absences and Make-Up: No one is completely sure what this term will be like. I’ve designed the course so that you can make up any attendance or assignment you have to miss. If anything I haven’t thought of comes up, contact me and we’ll come up with a plan.

If you miss a lesson day (Tuesday), you should carefully read the notes once they are available. Then, fill in the missing parts of the lesson outline and complete the in-class exercises. The notes, outline, and exercises will all be available on Canvas. Don’t take the quiz until you’ve completed the make-up work—you won’t be penalized. Email me the completed work.

If you miss a workshop day (Thursday), you should complete the workshop assignment. In addition, choose one page of your own writing, then write a paragraph analyzing it in terms of the week’s lesson. It can be anything you’ve written as long as it’s different from the piece you choose for your final project. Email me the completed work.

If you have to miss class the day you are scheduled to take notes, you can request a different day by emailing me. If that’s not possible, or if you’re unable to be a note-taker for accessibility reasons, you can choose one concept from a previous lesson and make a short creative explanation of it, such as a nursery rhyme, illustration, or meme. Creative explanations will be graded satisfactory or unsatisfactory based on clarity and accuracy. Email me the completed work.

English Language Learners: Anyone can succeed in this class whether or not English is their primary language. You will likely have some additional challenges: readings and exercises will take longer to complete, and participating in class discussion may be more intimidating. If you’re having difficulty with readings or papers, come to office hours and we can discuss.

Late Assignments: I give out extensions readily, but you need to ask in advance. Exceptions may be given for emergencies, illness, and other unforeseeable situations.

Masks: Everyone is expected to wear a mask properly (covering nose and mouth) during class. This is for the safety of you and your classmates, myself, and all the people we come into contact with, too. If you ever aren’t wearing a mask correctly, I will remind you and provide you with a mask if you don’t have one. If you still are unable to, you’ll have to leave class. If that’s not possible, I will cancel our session.

Plagiarism: All work must be your own and written solely for this class. Plagiarism can be unintentional, so be careful and make sure you understand the rules. If you’re not certain, ask me. I encourage you to look at the library's guides for citing sources and avoiding plagiarism (https://library.uoregon.edu/citing). The same link will also allow you to access the university's official policy toward academic misconduct; you should read over the policy if you’re unclear on what counts as cheating or plagiarism. If you’re struggling with an assignment, I encourage you to contact me. It’s better to submit an assignment late, unfinished, or in poor quality than risk the penalties for plagiarizing.