

Lucy Graca
Arapahoe Community College
Lucy.Graca@arapahoe.edu

English Composition 1: Pursuit of Happiness

This course emphasizes the planning, writing, and revising of compositions, and the development of critical and logical thinking skills. Reading, thinking, and writing are inextricably entwined. One reads to discover the thoughts of others; one writes to discover one's own thoughts. Careless thinking produces careless writing; careless writing produces no thought at all. In this course we'll read examples of excellent essays, respond to them in class and in writing, and practice the arts of exposition, definition, research, analysis, and persuasion. The course includes a minimum of five compositions that stress the use and development of these skills in analytical, evaluative, and persuasive/argumentative writing.

The course is divided into three types of writing that students are likely to encounter most often in college and work, in ascending order of complexity: exposition (explaining something); analysis; and persuasion. Between these, I insert short segments on definition (which students are, in my experience, unfamiliar with) and research and documentation. Each part is supported by four activities: (1) introductory lecture, (2) reading model essays, (3) practicing through exercises, and (4) production of a three- to five-page paper. I have chosen the essays based on the clarity with which they model the type of writing and their compatibility with the theme of "the pursuit of happiness."

Table of Contents

The contents of this module are as follows:

- Required texts
- Course requirements
- Syllabus
- Notes on curriculum choices

Required Texts

Robert DiYanni, *Fifty Great Essays*, 2nd ed.

Diane Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 8th ed.

Stephen King, *On Writing*.

A good, hardbound desk dictionary of English, such as the *American Heritage Dictionary*. You may also want a paperback dictionary-type thesaurus to carry around.

Course Requirements

Student Performance Objectives

Composition. The chief objective is to plan, write, and revise five essays of 500 words or more which generate and explore ideas; address a variety of audiences; use a variety of organizational structures to focus and develop a thesis; use accurate grammar, mechanics, and spelling; and use diction that is appropriate to subject and audience. These five compositions stress analytical, evaluative, and persuasive/argumentative writing

Critical reading and logical thinking. Students will practice critical and logical thinking and apply them to reading and human issues.

Research. Students will learn to use the library and other resources.

Reading. Aside from these official objectives, my personal objectives for the students are led by a wish for them to *read*. Heretical as it sounds, I believe that reading is the most important activity for writers—there is some research that bears this out.

Writing Help

Individual assistance. If you have problems or questions at any time, please call, e-mail, or arrange to meet with me.

Correction Guide. I have prepared a “Correction Guide” which lists the editorial codes I use to grade your paper, and also contains suggestions for correction and references to the relevant part of your *Writer’s Reference*. As each paper is returned to you, please note the corrected errors so that you can avoid them in the future. If you still don’t understand the error after consulting the “Correction Guide” I will hand out in class, or if you find the guide itself unclear or in error, please *do* ask me about it in class. You won’t be the only one puzzled.

Draft conferences. Draft conferences will be held during the class before some papers are due. These conferences are optional, and will be explained more fully in class.

Check-off exercises. Throughout the semester, I will assign short homework exercises having to do either with the assigned reading or with a writing exercise. These exercises are meant to help you develop skills required for successful completion of the course. Together, they are worth 100 points and are usually assigned in the class period before they are due. They cannot be “made up.”

Grading

How your grade is computed. Total points for the course will be 600: 500 points for the six prepared essays, and 100 points divided among check-off exercises. Final grades will be computed by dividing the total points you earn by 600, yielding a percentage: 90–100% = A; 80–89% = B; 70–79% = C; 60–69% = D; below 60% = F. You should keep a record of your earned points as a safety measure.

Always keep graded papers and check-off exercises as they are returned to you. There are no extra credit or other points for the course.

Preparation of written work. All writing assignments, other than check-off exercises, must be typed in standard MLA manuscript style (see *Writer’s Reference*). Formal outlines will be required for some assignments. Of course, you will proofread and correct writing prepared outside class using my “Correction Guide” and the *Writer’s Reference*. Other criteria for the assignments will be discussed in class and will include thoroughness in following instructions; quality of preparation, information and research; and appropriateness of organization and diction.

Problems

Late paper or extension. One assignment, other than the final paper, may be turned in up to one class period late, but will suffer a 10 percent grade reduction. Unless you arrange for an extension beforehand, assignments more than one class period late will receive a zero and you should withdraw from the course to avoid failing it. The withdrawal deadline is November. 20.

Revised paper. One of the first three writing assignments may be revised for a better grade. (The revision is due one week after the paper is returned.)

Absences. We'll need to discuss excessive absences privately (see "Attendance" below). You need not produce documentation, apologies, or excuses for absences, since I assume that if you're not in class, you had another responsibility that was more important. However, if you miss a class, you are still responsible for fulfilling the work of that class.

Law and Order

Attendance and class participation. Research shows that preparing for and attending class is the most important factor in student success. If your absences exceed 200 minutes (three classes), you should withdraw from the course, and if you miss two consecutive classes, I will assume you have withdrawn unless I hear from you otherwise. Absences will adversely affect your grade.

Plagiarism. The presentation of someone else's ideas as your own during this course will result in expulsion from, and failure in, the course. You may also be subject to disciplinary action by the college.

Syllabus

August 29 and 31

Class expectations, reading and writing essays, and writing sample (20 points).

Reading: An essay assigned in class.

Writing: A three-part response.

September 7–21

Exposition: Explain and interpret experience; A thesis creates readers' questions which the writer must answer.

Reading: *Writer's Reference*, C1, C2, C3 and C4; *Fifty Great Essays*, Frederick Douglass 100, Joan Didion 59, Benjamin Franklin 122, George Orwell 292; *On Writing*, chapter 4.

Writing: A personal experience analysis (guidelines handed out in class). 100 points. Workshop, September 19; paper due, September 21.

September 21–October 10

Definition: Content hangs from thesis.

Reading: *Fifty Great Essays*, Dave Barry 61, Michel de Montaigne 288. 80 points. Definition due, September 28.

October 10–26

Find and document information: Writing is a process of finding out what you think.

Reading: *Writer's Reference*, R, and MLA section.

Writing: “Search, Summarize and Document” exercise (my handout). 100 points. Due October 26.

October 26–November 16

Researched analysis: Paragraph and essay organization are congruent.

Reading: *Fifty Great Essays*, Ralph Ellison 122, Niccolo Machiavelli 257, Malcolm Gladwell 149.

Writing: An academic researched analysis of 800 to 1,200 words. 100 points. Workshop, November 14; due November 16.

November 16–December 14

The ethics and means of persuasion: Lead the reader by the hand.

Research and find out what you think about an issue of importance to you; understand and consider what others think; organize your thoughts; write a letter effectively arguing your point of view.

Reading: My handouts; *Writer’s Reference*, C5 and C6; *Fifty Great Essays*, Abraham Lincoln, 255, Martin Luther King Jr. 216, Jonathan Swift 344, Sojourner Truth 367.

Writing: A researched, persuasive letter of 600 to 800 words on an issue important to you. 100 points. Due December 14.

Notes on Curriculum Choices

Students

This is a first-semester composition course at an open enrollment community college. The range in student preparedness is extremely wide; however, student outcomes are the same for this course as for any first-semester composition course in any college in the North Central accreditation area. For this reason, the course must be pitched fairly high, and the retention rate is only about 60 percent by the end of the course.

At the top of the class are students from excellent high schools, or who have been home schooled by their predominantly affluent, well-educated, fundamentalist parents. These students are hungry for a challenge and for discussion with students different from themselves. At the middle of the class (the bottom usually drops out near midterm) are astonishingly poorly educated, poorly read students who have fifth-grade grammatical and vocabulary skills. In my experience, the motivated students snap to the task if challenges and expectations are set for the *top* of the class. By semester’s end, the grades are always nicely spread from A to C, always with a few surprises.

Theme

Students at this stage in their development are, in fact, deeply concerned about how to live life in such a way as to turn out well. In other words, how to live The Good Life. One reason I decided to teach this as a Great Books course is that our friend Aristotle has much to say on the matter, and I find that students are *highly* receptive to the idea that the goal of life is happiness, and that things we call good are those things that tend to produce happiness. In order to engage students in the quest, however, I conduct one class at the beginning of the semester in which I work through “what constitutes a good life” with them on the board. I then lead them, through discussion, to the same conclusions Aristotle reached. Needless to say, by the next class session, the skeptics in the class—these are nearly always the better students—come back with objections and quibbles. The class discusses these, and we reach some closure in which most of the students have *started* to construct their own set of “virtues.” The discussion can then be continued throughout the semester in the

context of the readings, each of which I have chosen because it can be tied to the question of the relationship between virtue and happiness.

I want to emphasize here that, first, I do not have any agenda other than to get students working on the question for themselves. Once I see that they are engaged in the quest, I leave the conclusions they reach in their own hands, and *do not* criticize or encourage those conclusions in any way. Secondly, I believe this to be part of my job. According to Quintilian (first century BC), who developed the rhetoric curriculum taught throughout the West until about 100 years ago, the master should have as much to do with his students' moral development as with their intellectual development.

We discuss the theme (as noted above) in class as it relates directly or indirectly to all the readings. For instance, in our discussion of Machiavelli's *The Prince* we discuss what the duties of a leader are to his society, and how Machiavelli's principles carry out those duties. We discuss the efficiency of his system vs. the messiness of democracy, and consider which might be better for the welfare (i.e., the *happiness*) of the citizens.

The first formal paper I ask the students to write is an expository essay asking them to explain what they think is the most important component of happiness and why. During the research segment, I require them to research a question that has some implications for them personally—that will help them to solve some problem. I have received papers about why girls mutilate themselves; about the possible treatments for a mother with multiple sclerosis; about appropriate methods of disciplining a child; about what to do if you find out your girlfriend has genital herpes; about how to live happily as a homosexual; about how to deal with an abusive parent or spouse; about how to seek a career as an artist. I like to think these projects bear directly on the students' ability to seek *happiness*. Finally, in the persuasion section, I ask the students to write a letter to someone who can do something to better the student's life.

So though the course does in fact revolve around the pursuit of happiness, it does not always approach the problem directly. The vast majority comes out in class discussion of the readings, and implicitly in all but one of the writing assignments.

Texts

In the seventeen years I've been teaching this course, I have experimented with a number of texts. My own experience and education make me dissatisfied with the rhetoric/readers, such as the *Allen and Bacon Guide to Writing*, favored by most of my colleagues at community colleges, and instead I prefer a high-quality essay reader and a simple grammar text. One semester several years ago, thinking a bit about a Great Books section of the course, I experimented with Jacobus's *World of Ideas*, but found the readings too long and complex for my students: retention sank below 50 percent. It should be noted, however, that those eleven students stayed with me for many semesters following, and often referred to the Jacobus readings in other classes. After reviewing many readers, including the *Rinehart Reader*, *Dolphin Reader*, *Best American Essays*, and a custom reader, I settled on Diyanni's *Fifty Great Essays* because of the collection and the intelligent questions at the ends of the essays.

Other required texts include Hacker's *Writer's Reference*, which is used by most of my colleagues, and is thus convenient; a hardbound dictionary, a paperback thesaurus; and Stephen King's *On Writing*, selections from which I assign during the exposition unit (unit 1).

I supplement the essays with my own handouts on definition (unit 2) adapted from Quintilian's *Aphorisms*, a "Search, Summarize, and Document" exercise of my own devising, and "Parts of the

Argument,” adapted from Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, from which I also draw for most of my lectures, although I do also incorporate Toulmen’s argument analysis in unit 4.

I also use selections from Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* on the relationship between happiness and the Good Life. I draw on Adler’s *Aristotle for Everybody* for my own lecture material.

Other Materials

I do not allow students to use Web resources in this class until the end because I find they are overly dependent on them coming in and need to learn how to interact with textual sources. However, I do provide some visuals for the Montaigne essay (women’s clothing and perfume of the period), the Swift essay (cartoons of the Irish from *Punch*), and as many pictures of the writers as I can find on Google Images.