

EN57201 - TECHNIQUES OF PRECISE EXPRESSION

Instructor: Don Aucoin, reporter for The Boston Globe whose work is included in the book "Best Newspaper Writing 2006-2007". A Nieman Fellow at Harvard University from 2000-2001. Previously covered politics and television, and wrote the "Literary Life" column for the Globe and the "Currents" column for the Boston Globe Magazine

Classroom: TBA.

Meeting time: Mondays and Wednesdays from 6:15 p.m. to 9:15 p.m.

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Office hours: By appointment

Textbook: "1000 Most Important Words" by Norman Schur. It is available at the BC bookstore under the listing for this course. In addition, each student is required to obtain the Coursepack for this course, titled "Techniques/Precise Expression: EN 572," also available at the BC bookstore.

There will be assigned readings that range from speeches to poems to essays to narrative nonfiction to advertising copy. Moreover, because a good newspaper is a kind of daily textbook of the living language, we will occasionally use The Boston Globe and The New York Times for the purposes of classroom discussion.

Since this course is designed to foster expressiveness, you are **strongly** encouraged to speak up in class. This is designed as an interactive course where every student provides input. It's equally important that you simply have fun with the new words you learn and that you flex the muscles of your growing vocabulary. Grades will be based on writing assignments, on vocabulary quizzes, on classroom exercises, and on your overall participation in class. **Nota bene:** The assigned reading must be completed by the date it appears on the syllabus.

Monday, June 29

LIGHTNING BUGS AND WORD DETECTIVES

Introductions all around, followed by an overview of the course. Lecture topics: How to build an educated and active vocabulary of both "written English" and "spoken English" that will engage and stimulate your audience. How to master the art of making the right word choice so your vocabulary will have precision, strength and versatility. How to discern the meaning of a word (like "discern," for instance) from the context in which it appears. Readings: "Otherwise," by Jane Kenyon; "The Red Wheelbarrow," by William Carlos Williams; "Hungry Heart," by Bruce Springsteen; "Hummingbird," by Jeff

Tweedy; “Now Ending: ‘Seinfeld,’ network TV dominance,” by Don Aucoin; “At Mardi Gras, a Catch and Fleeting Ecstasy,” by Rick Bragg; and “Macabre Reminder: The Corpse on Union Street,” by Dan Barry.

Wednesday, July 1

HOW MANY LEGS DOES A SESQUIPEDALIAN HAVE?

We will discuss how to express ourselves with variety and clarity by using such techniques as parallelism and the Rule of Three, and how to communicate effectively and descriptively with a vocabulary that is both classical and colloquial while understanding that BIG words are not always GOOD words. Also: How to create comic or dramatic effects when needed in writing or speaking, and how to construct an artful transition that will build suspense in your audience.

Readings: p. 1-25 in "1000 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, “Politics and the English Language,” by George Orwell.

Monday, July 6

ROOT CAUSES

The practical steps toward mastering and remembering word definitions. We can better understand a word's meaning if we know where it came from, so we will investigate the Latin and Greek roots of some challenging and familiar words. Speaking of which: Did you know that the word sentence derives from the Latin sentire, meaning "to feel"? We will learn why that is a logical derivation as we delve into sentence structure and hunt for expressive idioms that connect with the world we live in. In other words, we will discuss how to put your words into action. Also: We will study techniques of exposition that can build a structure around the messages we wish to communicate, whether it is an interoffice memo, an annual report, or a doctoral thesis. Readings: p. 25-50 in "1000 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, “The American Man at Age Ten,” by Susan Orlean, and “James Agee in 1936,” by Walker Evans.

Wednesday, July 8

JUST DO IT

Commercial speech, or how "Tivo" became a verb. Since the advertising industry is in the business of persuasion, we will explore what Madison Avenue and the marketing world have to teach us about techniques of precise expression. When, if ever, is slang appropriate in formal presentations? When does informal English go too far? Where

should we draw the line in the war against sloppy language and cliché? As we explore a few answers to these questions, we will learn how to blast through the clutter of useless verbiage to find the words that matter, and how to utilize the power of analogies, synonyms, and figures of speech to build both vocabularies and expressiveness. Readings: p. 50-83 in "1000 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech; "The War at Home," by Janet Wondra; and "Men Will Be Boys" and "He Talks a Good Game," by Don Aucoin.

Monday, July 13

A MATTER OF STYLE

E.B. White wrote that style is "an expression of self." We will explore how to develop your own style of expression, one that communicates your point of view and your identity, and how to find your own voice as a writer and speaker without shortchanging the substance of your subject. But every writer knows this bleak truth: All writing is *rewriting*. As we explore the need for revision of what we write and what we say, we will also learn ways to arrange your material so that you minimize the need for revision. Readings: p. 83-104 in "1000 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, "The Crack-Up," by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Wednesday, July 15

EAT YOUR SPINACH

We will take a look at the issues of strategic communications and crisis communications. How does a major institution (a university, a hospital, a corporation) craft a communication strategy that will get its message out in an environment that is teeming with competing voices? Also, because grammar is the building block of expression, we will briefly revisit crucial issues of syntax, punctuation, and usage, in the context of using our new vocabulary most effectively. Readings: p. 104-132 in "1000 Most Important Words."

Monday, July 20

SPEECH! SPEECH!

In a class on oral presentation, we will examine ways of directly connecting with your audience, and we will look at the pluses and minuses of working with and without a text. We will discover which words and phrases compel a listener's attention and which ones cause him or her to doze off. We will explore issues of articulation, volume, vocal

projection, phrasing, and rhythm. Also: When to quote and whom to quote. Readings: p. 132-154 in "1000 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, Horace Greeley's "The Prayer of the Twenty Millions" and "Lincoln's Reply to Greeley."

Wednesday, July 22

FIRESIDE CHATS

The techniques of political expression are many, varied, and fascinating. We will examine the strategic word choices, idioms and rhetorical devices that have made political speechmaking a vital communication tool, from the days of Julius Caesar to Thomas Paine to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan. Also: Words as weapons, or how op-ed columnists make their points forcefully and persuasively. Readings: From the Coursepack, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in 1863, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1963, and major speeches by Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and George H.W. Bush.

Monday, July 27

BIG IDEAS, LITTLE WORDS

When it comes to expression, sometimes less is more. There are things Hemingway and Mickey Spillane knew that Proust and Trollope did not know about the power of understatement. We will learn how to use narrative storytelling techniques to add power and expressiveness to your writing and speaking, and how to write profiles that capture the essence of your subject. Readings: p. 154-189 of "100 Most Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, "Blindness," by Jorge Luis Borges.

Wednesday, July 29

I THINK, THEREFORE I.M., OR: WHO ARE YOU CALLING A BLOGGER, BUSTER? A GUIDE TO SPECIALIZED VOCABULARIES

Where do new words come from? A primer on how to stay current when jargon and buzzwords from the New Economy and the Internet (and from the worlds of science, sports, entertainment, and youth culture) make their way into the lexicon. How do we apply our newly learned techniques of precise expression to, say, the writing of email, or to entries on our personal blogs? Also: The foreign words and phrases that are a vital addition to an educated vocabulary (that are *de rigueur*, we might say), and the ones that are just pretentious (like *de rigueur*, we might say). Also: p. 189-223 in "1000 Most

Important Words," and, from the Coursepack, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," by John Updike and "The Kid's Last At-Bat," by Ed Linn.

Monday, Aug. 3

EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC

How to write reviews of film, theater, television, music and art in a way that is both accessible and authoritative. Readings: "Hollywood's Information Man," by Amy Wallace, "Space Case: Star Wars: Episode III," by Anthony Lane; and "The Funniest Man on TV," by Don Aucoin. Also: reviews by James Agee, Pauline Kael, Ty Burr, Garrison Keillor, and others. Readings: p. 223-245 of "1000 Most Important Words."

Wednesday, Aug. 6

THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE

The personal essay or personal narrative, when done well, uses individual experience to illuminate not just the personal experiences and inner life of the writer but also the wider world in which he or she operates. This form has increasingly taken center stage as the number of memoirs climbing the best-seller lists has increased. We will discuss the controversies surrounding some of these memoirs (such as "A Million Little Pieces"), and ask: When is the first-person approach the best way to communicate your message? Finally, we will review the most salient points of the course to ensure that we all have a comprehensive understanding of the techniques of precise expression, in all their forms. Readings: from the Coursepack, "After Life," by Joan Didion, and "A Sudden Illness," by Laura Hillenbrand.