

WRA 491 Special Topics: Write On!--Writing Inside

Professor:

Email:

Class Time:

Office Hours:

Building & Room:

Final Exam:

Site Visit Schedule

Workshop Work Area and Resources

Course Description

This course introduces students to mass incarceration through brief writings by and about the (formerly) incarcerated. The course also introduces students to rhetorical concepts and practices essential for effective writing-centered interactions with incarcerated writers. Students will be introduced to the role of writing programs in amplifying the voices of incarcerated learners/writers and the complex ethical implications and rhetorical decisions thus entailed. Students will practice effective consulting moves to help writers achieve their writing goals. The course focuses extensively on community engagement with incarcerated college students whose writing is substantially tied to their pursuits of college degrees. We will travel once a week for 10 weeks to the Parnall Correctional Facility in Jackson Michigan.

Students will complete the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) criminal background check application (LIEN), and MSU's Acknowledgement of Risk to comply with MDOC security and safety protocols and MSU's legal requirements respectively. We will be trained on protocols and safety regulations by MDOC.

WRA 491 Writing Inside is one of two courses associated with the Write On! program. The other course is a one-credit introductory course, during which students will be introduced to systemic analyses of U.S. mass incarceration, writings by and about (formerly) incarcerated people, and writing consulting practices.

Course Learning Goals/Objectives:

In this course, students will:

- develop understanding of prison as a community by examining the rhetorics of prison writing;
- develop an inclusive understanding of community beyond legal frameworks ("rights") such that saying "we" insolubly implicate "us" in lives not our own;
- deepen and demonstrate understanding of rhetorical moves through community-focused and inclusive approaches to writing;
- hone active listening, collaborative writing, and problem-solving skills;

- demonstrate an understanding of how agency, writing, and critical engagement can forward social change, especially in the mass incarceration system
- explore and examine the role of writing programs in preparing incarcerated people for reintegration into society;
- deepen understandings of the complex rhetorical representations and cultural negotiations of and by prison populations, in the context of societal and institutional agendas;
- prepare and orient students to understand working in a prison context and fulfill MDOC requirements;
- learn effective ways of navigating potential sensitive issues associated with facilitating writing consultations in places of confinement.

As part of the Public and Professional Writing Program, the following Learning Outcomes guide our work:

1. Students will demonstrate attention to rhetorical contexts.
2. Students will identify their responsibility as communicators and community members.
3. Students will create with attention to their own positionality as well as the cultures and communities they create for and within.
4. Students will learn how to learn in professional and public writing contexts.

Course Activities and Projects

Readings:

The readings will include academic articles, journalistic writings, critical perspectives on carceral institutions, and creative writing by (formerly) incarcerated individuals. Readings will be free scanned PDFs or academic journal articles linked via MSU's library system.

Required Textbooks

- None

Course assignments:

- **A Pre-Flective Essay (1):** describe your expectations for the course; your current understanding of the prison system and incarcerated people; media representations of either; actual places of incarceration near one's geographic location; and your experiences assisting people with their writing.
- **Group Meeting Minutes (5):** Wednesdays, when you are not visiting Parnall, Weeks 6-15, each group will meet to discuss Student-Selected Readings and Reflect on the group's last site visit. These meetings will be recorded on the **Meeting Minutes Template**.
- **Reflective Journal (4 Entries):** To help prepare for the course's concluding Reflective Essay, students will keep a personal journal capturing their experiences and thoughts about those experiences, marking change or evolution in thinking and practices. The Reflective Journal will be due with the Reflective Essay and consist of 4

entries, due Wednesday nights when you are not at Parnall Correctional Facility.

- **A Reflective Essay (1):** Draw from your semester's work and apply your learning beyond the classroom. Students will theorize the rhetorical choices they have made (pre-flection, Readings, Consulting work) and will make, and reflect upon ways in which writing can work as an agent for social justice, equity, inclusion, and community building.
- **Final Exam (D2L Assignment) (1):** Short essay completed during the Final Exam time.

Course Policies¹

Contract Grading²

I am incorporating a contract for grading and evaluation in our class, which avoids the use of grades and numerical values on assignments, other than to indicate Completion or Lateness in D2L. Your final course grade will be determined by completed work and continual improvement in the **quality** of your writing, thinking, reading, completing assignments, and actively engaging in the learning and writing processes. This doesn't mean, however, that **quality** of work matters less; we will regularly address the **quality** of your thinking, writing, and learning. The difference is in this class we focus on improving our literacy (i.e. rhetorical awareness and skill), critical thinking through concerted, long-term work and collaborative efforts. Such an approach attempts to avoid comparing the quality of your work to your classmates' or to some abstract notion of standards. When it comes to evaluating writing and learning, my goal as your professor is to create opportunities for receiving and providing feedback helping us all evolve and grow as thinkers and writers. That is, we will try to create a *culture of supportive learning*. This is a culture where you, your colleagues, and I function as allies, fellow-travelers with various skills, experiences, and talents that we offer the group, rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or recognition or approval. In these ways, and in this context of experiences, we will come to know more immediately that **quality** is always known as both a contextual and rhetorical construction open to visions and re-visions. By virtue of remaining enrolled in the course you agree to enter into this contract.

Grade Breakdown

¹ The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the course schedule and assignment due dates to accommodate unpredictable exigencies or educational opportunities enhancing the learning (e.g. guest speaker). Any such modifications will be collaboratively made when possible and when not possible, changes will not adversely affect students.

² Adapted from the work and research of Susan D. Blum ([Ungrading](#), West Virginia University Press, 2020). See the work of Professors Dr. Peter Elbow, Dr. Asao Inoue, Missy Watson, Kate Navickas. For an overview of different configurations of grading contracts, see [Contract Grading Schemes](#). For an example of an argument against grading as such, see Madoré, Marianne, Anna Zeemont, Joaly Burgos, Jane Guskin, Hailey Lam, and Andréa Stella (2021). "[Resisting Surveillance. Practicing / Imagining the End of Grading.](#)" *The Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy* (20), n.p.

| Course Grade | # of Incomplete Meetings | # of Incomplete or Late Student-Selected Reading & Discussion Questions | Incomplete Site Visits: Writing Consultations or Presentations Inside | Quality Writing & Engagement: Depth of thought; Class contributions; Critical Analyses; Relating experience to course material & readings |
|---|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| 4.0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Exceptional |
| 3.5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | Superior |
| 3.0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | Superior |
| 2.5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | Clear Progression |
| 2.0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | Clear Progression |
| 1.5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | Struggling |
| 1.0-0.0 | 4 | 4 | 4 | Little or No Indication |
| Pre-Flection, Reflective Journal, Reflection Essay, and Final Exam are Required to Earn Credit for the Course. | | | | |
| D2L Gradebook Legend | | | | |
| No Submission | | | 0 | |
| Incomplete/Late | | | 1 | |
| Complete & On-Time | | | 2 | |

Community Agreements

We agree to uphold these agreements by virtue of enrollment in the course.

- *Never treat people as a means only, but rather as ends unto themselves.*
- *We encourage discussions that focus on the work, not the person.*
- *We practice active listening and engagement.*
- *We assume good intentions but take responsibility for negative effects.*
- *We give credit where credit is due.*
- *We value transparency.*
- *We support one another's work and welcome support for our own.*
- *We value fair and transparent labor relationships, and we work actively to counter exploitation.*
- *We encourage creativity and experimentation with our writing.*

Course Policies

In this class, we are committed to disability justice, racial justice, and inclusion of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. All individuals will be treated equitably and with respect regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, nationality, socioeconomic status, and those with accessibility limitations. There is zero-tolerance for harassment towards individuals under any circumstances. These same standards will be upheld in regards to discussing sensitive material in the course. Please consult Michigan State University's Inclusive Excellence and Impact Department. You can find it [here](#).

Absences

Come prepared to discuss the readings and engage the concepts by writing, composing, designing, and talking. Plan on expressing your ideas, frustrations, questions, or confusions, even if you're not able to articulate them without some hesitation—sometimes ambivalent or ambiguous remarks spark the liveliest discussions.

Two absences will not be penalized. More than two absences will result in a .25 reduction in your final grade (so, for instance, if you earn a 3.5 in class but miss five times, your final grade will be a 2.75). Please let me know in advance if you have to miss class and be sure to catch up on whatever we cover, do, read, etc. should you miss class.

Late Work

Late work will not be accepted, except under the below circumstances. Please, if you ever feel as though you are falling behind or cannot keep up, talk with me about your concerns. Together we will work toward a solution.

Do not cut corners or take matters into your own hands.

Involve me.

Exceptions: University, Family Misfortune, and Military Obligations

Any absence, and resulting late work, due to a university-sponsored group activity (e.g. sporting event or artistic performance like marching band) will not count against you, as stipulated by university policy, under the condition that written, verifiable, and substantiating documentation is provided before the event or absence. This same policy applies to military obligations.

The policy will allow us to determine in advance how best to meet course obligations and maintain your level of performance despite an absence. If an unfortunate event should occur in your immediate family, please ask your Academic Counselor about an excused Family Bereavement leave of absence. **We will work together to see you through any misfortunes.**

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

The use of generative AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT, Dall-e, etc.) is permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Brainstorming and refining your ideas;
- Fine tuning your research questions;

- Finding information on your topic;
- Drafting an outline to organize your thoughts; and
- Checking grammar and style.

The use of generative AI tools is NOT permitted in this course for the following activities:

- Impersonating you in classroom contexts, such as by using the tool to compose discussion board prompts assigned to you or content that you put into a Zoom chat.
- Completing group work that your group has assigned to you, unless it is mutually agreed within your group and in alignment with course policy that you may utilize the tool.
- Writing a draft of a writing assignment.
- Writing entire sentences, paragraphs or papers to complete class assignments.

You are responsible for the information you submit based on an AI query (for instance, that it does not violate intellectual property laws, or contain misinformation or unethical content). Your use of AI tools must be properly documented and cited in order to stay within university policies on academic integrity and the Spartan Code of Honor Academic Pledge. Any assignment that is found to have used generative AI tools in unauthorized ways will be treated as a violation of university policies on academic integrity. When in doubt about permitted usage, please ask for clarification.

Commercialization of Course Notes and Materials

The University prohibits students from commercializing students' notes of lectures and University-provided class materials, The University also prohibits students from recording course lectures or other proceedings without the prior written consent of the instructor. Do not reproduce, share with others, or upload to any web site or social media platform any course recordings, photos, messages, D2L posts, etc. Doing so will result in disciplinary action with the Dean's Office and/or legal action.

Resources:

| Academic Resources | |
|--|--|
| MSU Writing Center https://writing.msu.edu/ 517-432-3610 | MSU ESL Lab https://elc.msu.edu/esl-lab/ 517-353-0800 |
| Ombudsman Student Advocacy https://ombud.msu.edu/ (517) 353-8830 | Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative https://nssc.msu.edu/ (517) 355-3515 |

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| Individual Resources | MSU Center for Survivors |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|

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|---|---|
| | https://centerforsurvivors.msu.edu/sexual-assault-healthcare-program/ 517-353-2700 |
| MSU CAPS - Counseling and Psychiatric Services https://caps.msu.edu/ (517) 355-8270 | RCPD - Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities https://www.rcpd.msu.edu/ (517) 884-7273 |
| Prevention, Outreach, and Education https://poe.msu.edu/ 517-355-3865 | Office of Cultural & Academic Transitions https://ocat.msu.edu/ 517-353-7745 |
| Gender and Sexuality Campus Center https://gsccl.msu.edu/ 517-353-9520 | Food Bank https://foodbank.msu.edu/ (517) 432-5136 |
| MSU Safety App https://dpps.msu.edu/safety-tools/safemsu-app | Police and Public Safety https://dpps.msu.edu/ (517) 355-2221 |

Course Schedule

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment Due Dates Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|---|---|-----------------------------|
| Week 1: Introduction and Introspection | | |
| M 1.12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course Introduction Syllabus Review | |
| W 1.14 | <p>Review the below 5 Resources for Class Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 56 Fact About Mass Incarceration (As of March 2025) Prison Policy Initiative. Impact Language Glossary for Media and Public Communication. Michigan Collaborative to End Mass Incarceration. 2024. Reynolds, Tina. "Glossary of Terms." Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States. Eds. Rickie Solinger, et. al. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2010. Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner. Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2025. March 11, 2025. <p>Read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alexander, Buzz. "Introduction." Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?: Twenty Years of the Prison Creative Arts Project. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press. 2010. 1-18. <p>Forms and Supporting Materials > D2L Class > Course Forms</p> <p>–Forms and Copy of Driver’s License: Print, Complete, and Submit to Dr. Astle DUE: 1.21.25 Wednesday</p> <p>–Read Supporting Materials.</p> | |
| Week 2: | | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment Due Dates Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|----------------|---|-----------------------------|
| M 1.19 | No Classes: MLK Day | |
| W 1.21 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russell X. "Hope for Leaving a Legacy." in Critical Perspectives on Teaching in Prison: Students and Instructors on Pedagogy Behind the Wall. Ed. Rebecca Ginsburg. New York: Routledge. 2019. Malakki (Ralph Bolden). "An Open Letter to Prison Educators." in <i>Critical Perspectives on Teaching in Prison: Students and Instructors on Pedagogy Behind the Wall</i>. Ed. Rebecca Ginsburg. New York: Routledge. 2019. Benson, Sally F. "Getting Closer to Mass Incarceration: Proximate Listening as Community Activism." <i>Community Listening: Stories, Hauntings, Possibilities</i>. Ed. Jenn Fishman, Romeo García, and Lauren Rosenberg. Denver CO: University Press of Colorado, 2025. 29-46. DUE: Pre-Flective Writing DUE: MDOC & MSU Forms (In D2L Class) & Copy of Driver's License | |
| Week 3: | | |
| M 1.26 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MDOC Orientation <p>Supporting Materials: (Review; Don't Memorize)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MDOC: Parnall Correctional Facility Volunteer Orientation Handbook MDOC: Allowable Items and Dress Code | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment Due Dates Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|----------------|--|-----------------------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MDOC: MDOC Twelve Questions and Answers | |
| W 1.28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Betts, Reginald Dwayne, and Lori Gruen. "Are Prisons Permissible?: Increasing Social Visibility of the Experiences of Incarcerated People." Philosophical Topics, vol. 49, no. 1, spring 2021, pp. 81+. Gale Literature Resource Center. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A697969106/LitRC?u=msu_main&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=8db5487e. Accessed 25 Dec. 2024. True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality (2019): This link should get you to the Library's listing. Just select the electronic resource through which you'd like to view the documentary. This documentary follows Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and advocate for the incarcerated, as he works to challenge bias and injustice in the criminal justice system. "Stuck behind bars, a writer found a way to connect to the world." Directed by Anonymous, Produced by Public Broadcasting Service. NewsHour Productions, 2016. Alexander Street, https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/stuck-behind-bars-a-writer-found-a-way-to-connect-to-the-world. | |
| Week 4: | | |
| M 2.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abu-Jamal, Mumia. The Industry of Fear. Social Justice, Vol. 27, No. 3 (81), Critical Resistance to the Prison-Industrial Complex (Fall 2000), pp. 22-24. | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment Due Dates Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|----------------|--|-----------------------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bill Keller. <i>What's Prison For?: Punishment and Rehabilitation in the Age of Mass Incarceration</i>. "Restoring Our Fellow Creatures to Virtue and Happiness." New York: Columbia Global Reports. 2022. P. 15-35. | |
| W 2.4 | <p>Discussion about (brainstorming) and walking through Workshops</p> <p>Workshop Principles</p> <p>Workshop Work Area and Resources</p> | |
| Week 5: | | |
| M 2.9 | <p>Writing Center Presentation: Framing Feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DUE for Class: One of your current writing projects, or a past project, to practice consulting moves. Kirk Semple and Jonah M. Kessel, "Grab Your Calculators. We're Going to Jail." (You can create a free NY Times account through the MSU Library. If this link doesn't work, try Googling the title.) Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) Reflection Workshop: "Situated Spartan" (Complete and Discuss during class) Responding to Participant Writing Trauma, Fatigue, and Self-Care | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment Due Dates • Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|---|---|---|
| W 2.11 First Trip to Parnall: Group #1 Site Visit Schedule | First Trip to Parnall Meet at 169 Service Road, MSU. Departing No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #2 Meeting for Planning. Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Workshop Ideas: |
| Week 6: | | |
| M 2.16 | | |
| W 2.18 Travel to Parnall: Group 2 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 169 Service Road, MSU Departing No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #1: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) Workshop |
| Week 7: | | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignment Due Dates Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|---|---|--|
| M 2.23 | | |
| W 2.25 Travel to Parnall: Group #1 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 169 Service Road, MSU Departing No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #2: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) 2.25 notes: Workshop Workshop |
| Week 8: | | |
| M 3.2 | Spring Break | |
| W 3.4 | Spring Break | |
| Week 9: | | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment Due Dates • Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|--|---|--|
| M 3.9 | | |
| W 3.11 Travel to Parnall: Group #2 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 169 Service Road, ("Service Garage") Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #1: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Copy of WRA 491 Meeting Minutes Form 03/11 Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 10: | | |
| M 3.16 | | |
| W 3.18 Travel to Parnall: Group #1 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 169 Service Road, ("Service Garage") Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #2: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Workshop Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment Due Dates • Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|--|--|--|
| Week 11: | | |
| M 3.23 | | |
| W 3.25 Travel to Parnall: Group #2 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 325 West Shaw Lane, (“Service Garage”) Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #1: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Workshop Workshop 03.25 Poem Option for Annotated Bib. Workshop 4/1 Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 12: | | |
| M 3.30 | | |
| W 4.1 Travel to Parnall: Group #1 | Meet at 325 West Shaw Lane, (“Service Garage”) Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. Engaged Scholar Magazine | Group #2: For 4.1.26: Workshop 03.25 Poem |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment Due Dates • Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|--|---|---|
| Site Visit Schedule | | Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 13: | | |
| M 4.6 | Dr. Jon Ritz, Secondary Trauma | |
| W 4.8 Travel to Parnall: Group #2 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 325 West Shaw Lane, ("Service Garage") Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #1: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and select a Note-Taker to complete it. Workshop Workshop Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 14: | | |
| M 4.13 | | |

| Class Day/Date | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assignment Due Dates • Readings To Complete Before Class | (Post Links In This Column) |
|--|---|---|
| W 4.15 Travel to Parnall: Group #1 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 325 West Shaw Lane, ("Service Garage") Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #2: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Workshop Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 15: | | |
| M 4.20 | | |
| W 4.22 Travel to Parnall: Group #2 Site Visit Schedule | Meet at 325 West Shaw Lane, ("Service Garage") Departing MSU No Later Than 4:20pm. | Group #1: Meeting Notes: Use this Template and Select a Note-Taker to Complete it. Individual Journal Entry, 4 Total (D2L Assignment) |
| Week 16: Final Exam Week | | |
| W 4.29: 8-10pm | Due: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective Essay • Final Exam (See "Assignment" Section) | |

Additional Helpful Resources

- [Essay Fundamentals Guide](#)
- [Additional Readings](#): “This causal connection [between a lack of education and likelihood of incarceration], as suggested by both Graff and Alexander, is flawed due to its singular focus on literacy, narrowly conceived, without reference to the social and cultural forces at work” (12).
[Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison](#). Patrick W. Berry, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.