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EN 103 COURSE PROPOSAL

Course Title

"EN 103: Critical Thinking and Conspiracy Theory"

Blurb

This course introduces students to the fundamentals of university-level writing and research, with an emphasis on critical thinking skills. Using the resources of UA Libraries, students will investigate various "conspiracy theories" that have arisen throughout history, assess the claims, and evaluate the evidence in a semester-long quest to define terms such as "fact," "evidence," "truth," "theory," and "opinion." *It is not be within this course's purview to debate, prove, or disprove any particular conspiracy theory, rather, discussion of these subjects will focus entirely on how we, as critical thinkers, should best approach such unique and often contentious research/writing topics.

Course Objectives

This course seeks to...

- Teach students the fundamentals of university-level writing—especially the argumentative, thesis-based research paper.
- Teach students to make an effective claim and support that claim with sound evidence culled from responsible research.
- Allow students to gain experience evaluating/interrogating various kinds of sources, noting the differences among reportage, analysis, and opinion.
- Familiarize students with UA Libraries, library research skills, and other methods of research integral to excelling as a university student.
- Introduce students to the precepts and practice of critical thinking.

Textbooks

A Writer's Reference (UA Custom Edition) by Diana Hacker
A Brief Guide to Writing Academic Arguments by Steven Wilhoit

Units of Study

Unit 1: Research Methods & the Mores of Academic Writing

This unit will introduce students to UA Libraries; define a thesis; allow students to gain experience making a claim and proffering supporting evidence; define "academic writing"; instruct students on how to create an annotated bibliography; give students a working definition of "critical thinking."

Unit 2: Evaluating Sources & Asking the Right Questions

This unit will allow students to begin thinking critically about sources by researching specific claims; defining "conventional/received wisdom"; defining what constitutes a "reputable"

source; defining what constitutes an “objective” source rather than a “non-objective” source; engage students in “devil’s advocate” group work; encourage students to objectively evaluate both sides of a debate, gaining experience in weighing opposing evidence (as “when experts disagree,” etc.).

Unit 3: Evaluating Evidence & Counter-arguments

This unit will instruct students in making an effective counter-claim; engage students in weekly group work/peer review as they move toward completion of the Final Paper; allow students to make short, semi-formal presentations of their final paper to the class.

Major Writing Assignments (* = includes research)

Paper 1: Investigating a Claim*

In this paper students will be asked to “fact-check” a specific claim using UA Libraries resources and write a 500-word essay reporting their findings.

Paper 2: Annotated Bibliography*

Students will survey various sources related to a particular conspiracy theory or controversy and compose an annotated bibliography.

Paper 3: Debunking a Claim with Counter-evidence

Using some of the sources compiled on their annotated bibliography, students will write an essay in which they cite evidence that debunks a particular claim or set of claims.

Paper 4: Judging Two Sides of a Debate

In this paper students will be asked to evaluate both sides of a particular debate or controversy and arrive at a “verdict” that explains which side better withstood the scrutiny of a critical thinker.

Paper 5: Composing an Effective Rebuttal

In this shorter paper, students will compose a rebuttal essay to a particular claim or set of claims; the focus will be on rebutting the particular *argument*—the logic, the line of thinking, the rationales—rather than proffering any counter-evidence or research.

Paper 6: Final Paper: Report on A Conspiracy Theory from a Critical Thinker*

In this thesis-based longer paper, students will be asked to compose a “report” on a particular conspiracy theory of their choosing. The objective will be to offer the reader an overview of a particular conspiracy theory that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, ultimately arriving at a conclusion that the theory is either “sound” or “unsound.”

(* = includes research)

Technology & Miscellany

I would hope to show short clips from movies relevant to the course’s theme. The films would likely be things like Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, *Loose Change* (a notorious conspiracy theory film about 9/11), or a short YouTube video alleging that NASA’s Apollo Lunar Landings were a hoax: a Smart classroom would be helpful in screening such material.