Communication Studies Research: Rhetorical Criticism (CMST 6150)

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Office hours:  
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Course Description:

The aim of this course is to provide students with the critical thinking and analytical skills necessary to become engaged citizens through the critique of public discourse. Secondarily, the course will introduce the practice of rhetorical criticism, one of the primary methodologies used in the field of Communication Studies.

Rhetorical criticism has as one of its primary assumption that “reality” is socially constructed, meaning people’s understanding of the world they exist in is created through symbols (words, colors, nonverbal cues, etc.). In this method, the critic (you, in this case) examines artifacts or texts (speeches, advertisements, blogs, websites, YouTube videos, tweets, books, interviews, observations, etc. etc., etc.) in order to understand what the object is saying, but also what it reveals about strategies, interests and power dynamics at work in public culture.

There is no one way to do rhetorical criticism. In addition to a number of traditional approaches (neo-Aristotelian; narrative; metaphor; genre; etc.) a wide variety of broad theories can inform the process of rhetorical criticism (feminist or queer theory; postcolonial theory) as well as rhetorical concepts (framing, persona, identification, ideographs, etc.). Instead of the method dictating the process (e.g. “I want to do a narrative analysis. Now I will choose a text”), it is the text that informs the analysis (e.g. “This advertisement seems to be telling two stories: one explicit—buy the product--and the other implicit about American families. A narrative analysis might reveal something interesting”).

Different rhetorical lenses (approaches, theories, concepts) reveal different aspects of the rhetoric, allowing the critic to ask and answer a multiplicity of questions concerning the purposes and meanings of their text or artifact and, in turn, public discourse.
By the end of the course, you will:

- **Gain *factual knowledge***
  - Understand the workings and intents of rhetorical criticism orientations used to analyze communication.
  - Distinguish instrumental from constitutive approaches to understanding rhetoric.
  - Understand key debates within the practice of rhetorical criticism.

- **Learn to *apply the methods of criticism* to texts and artifacts.**
  - Unpack texts/artifacts to reveal their symbolic construction and underlying meaning.
  - Engage in critical thinking about discourse.
  - Improve analytical skills.

- **Develop skills**
  - Graduate-student level writing
  - Coherent expression of complex concepts and ideas
  - Translating academic ideas to public audiences.
  - Thoughtful engagement with controversial topics

**Readings:** All readings are on Canvas.

**Other useful sources:**

Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods found online via USU Library.


**Assignments:**

**Weekly reading summaries (15%)**

For each assigned reading, bring to class a printed response to the reading that briefly answers each of the following questions (multiple readings per sheet is fine):

- Full citation (APA)
- Central claim/assertion/thesis of the essay
- Key terms and their definitions (include for this assignment and add to your master list)
• What is being analyzed?
• What principles guide the analysis?
• What are the conclusions made by the authors (summarize the findings of the analysis)?
• In what way(s) do the authors see their work improving rhetorical research/theory, other aspects communication, US culture, or something else?

It will be expected that participants will bring hard copies of their abstracts to each class session. Abstracts will be collected and periodically graded.

**Leading class discussion (10%)**

✓ Present summaries
✓ Explain how this week’s reading expands, contradicts, questions, critiques, etc. the previous readings and discussions of rhetorical criticism
✓ Lead the class in discussion questions (see handout)

**Text and orientation discussion** (no grade; required)

Make an appointment to come talk to me about your text and orientation during the week of October 28 and November 1.

**Paper draft and peer critique (5%). Due November 21st.**

Paper drafts will be distributed to provide an opportunity to critique a classmate’s paper and provide useful feedback, as well as gaining insight into your work through comparison and receiving feedback from a fellow student.

**Final paper & presentation (45% & 5%). Due December 5th**

• Conference panel presentation: three people on the panel. 12-15 minutes each. Questions from the audience.

**Alternative audience paper and presentation (15% & 5%). Due December 10th**

• 2-3 page paper translating/summarizing the importance of your findings for a non-academic audience of your choice.
• 5-minute presentation to a non-academic audience. Visual aids required.

**Grade distribution:**

100-93% = A  
92-90% = A-  
89-87% = B+  
86-83% = B
82-80% = B-
79-77% = C+
76-73% = C
72-70% = C-
69-67% = D+
66-63% = D
62-60% = D-
59-0% = F
**READING THE SCHEDULE**

1. This schedule is subject to change if the demands of the course, students or professor require it.
2. The reading assignment will be discussed the day it is listed.
3. Reading summaries are due at the beginning of class the day the readings will be discussed.

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Discussion leader: ______________________ |
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Discussion leader: ______________________ |
Meet with Jen this week to finalize text and orientation. Continue drafting paper. |
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Please keep in mind the following

- In this course we will engage in discussions about many current political and public issues. I guarantee you will not agree with some of the methods, ideologies, applications, readings, or comments made during this course. While I do not expect, or even want you to agree with everything read or said, I will expect a level of civility, openness, and respect for all sides of the subject matter and especially for the speaker.

- All assignments must be turned in at the beginning of the class period in which they are due. Late work (without an agreement with me ahead of time) will not be accepted.

- Extensions and in completes will be given on rare occasions in consultation between professor and student before the assignment is due.

- Students may not use a paper written in another class in this one, or vice versa, without instructor consent. It is expected you will continue to work on your research and content areas throughout your Master’s program, but cutting and pasting sections of one paper into another for a different assignment/class/grade is not acceptable without consulting with me first. Yes, self-plagiarism is a thing.

- Technology both aids learning and distracts from it. Any uses of technology not directly related to the class (note taking; part of an instructor-directed activity; etc.) will first be noted and then you will be asked to leave your technology outside the classroom. Please note: checking your messages while another student is speaking will bring down the unfathomable and horrible wrath of Jen in the exact moment you are disrespecting your classmate. Trust me, it’s ugly. No one wants to see it.

From the university:

- Disabilities: USU welcomes students with disabilities. If you have, or suspect you may have, a physical, mental health, or learning disability that may require accommodations in this course, please contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) as early in the semester as possible (University Inn # 101, 435-797-2444, drc@usu.edu). All disability related accommodations must be approved by the DRC. Once approved, the DRC will coordinate with faculty to provide accommodations.

- USU Plagiarism Policy: Plagiarism includes knowingly "representing, by paraphrase or direct quotation, the published or unpublished work of another person as one's own in any academic exercise or activity without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes the unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic materials." The penalties for plagiarism are severe. They include warning or
reprimand, grade adjustment, probation, suspension, expulsion, withholding of transcripts, denial or revocation of degrees, and referral to psychological counseling. Please refer to The Code of Policies and Procedures for Students at Utah State University, Article VI., https://studentconduct.usu.edu/studentcode/.

- **Sexual Harassment:** Sexual harassment is defined by the Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as any “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.” If you feel you are a victim of sexual harassment, you may talk to or file a complaint with the Office of Equity, located in Old Main, Room 161, email (titleix@usu.edu) or call the office at 797-1266.

- **Withdrawal Policy and "I" Grade Policy:** Students are required to complete all courses for which they are registered by the end of the semester. In some cases, a student may be unable to complete all of the coursework because of extenuating circumstances not due to poor performance or to retain financial aid. The term 'extenuating' circumstances includes: (1) incapacitating illness which prevents a student from attending classes for a minimum period of two weeks, (2) a death in the immediate family, (3) financial responsibilities requiring a student to alter a work schedule to secure employment, (4) change in work schedule as required by an employer, or (5) other emergencies deemed appropriate by the instructor.