

A RHETORIC OF ORDINARY OBJECTS

SPRING 2021



A background image showing a person's hands holding coconuts on a grey floor. Another person's arm in a yellow shirt is visible on the right. A coconut hangs from a string in the top left corner.

PREAMBLE

This is a course about ordinary objects, the medium-sized stuff of everyday life, things like ping-pong balls and mason jars and bras and pencils and crosswalks and pockets and carabiners. Ordinary objects often go unnoticed; they fade into the background and become part of the landscape. The purpose of this course is to see what happens when we bring these objects back out of the background, to see what we can learn when we listen to objects as though they could speak.

Scot Barnett and Casey Boyle write that "Things provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects, and arouse in us a sense of wonder. But things are more than what they mean or do for us. They are also vibrant actors, enacting effects that exceed (and are sometimes in direct conflict with) human agency and intentionality. Things are rhetorical in other words."

To say that things are rhetorical is to say that objects make arguments. Walls and sidewalks and chairs-arranged-just-so tell us where to go, how to move, how to be. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it this way: "Whenever I see the word object I think about where the word comes from: a verb [ob + jacare] that means to throw in the way of. So an object is both a thing in motion (it's in the state of being thrown, it's tumbling) and a stumbling block that can hit you with its force. An object interposes itself. An object gets in the way."

At the same time, if objects can be arguments, maybe arguments can be objects. Words and sentences and paragraphs are things, after all. They're made out of stuff: ink on paper, electrons on screens, soundwaves on air. What happens when we mess with the materiality of texts? What happens when we rearrange the stuff a text is made of, or make it out of different stuff? When the words are the same but the material is different, are these different versions of the same text, or different texts altogether?

In a word, this is a course about things, and about making things, mostly out of words. Students conduct semester-long research projects on an ordinary object of their choosing, using a deep investigation of that object to shed light on the current (historical, political, economic, environmental, or social) moment.

LOGISTICS

A RHETORIC OF ORDINARY OBJECTS.* ENGL 1410. Rhetoric and Writing II

HUMAN. Nate Siebert. msiebert@uccs.edu

OFFICE HOURS. Wednesdays/Thursdays. 1 – 3. Microsoft Teams.

CLASS MEETINGS. This course will meet in real time via video calls in Microsoft Teams. Meeting links available via Canvas.

- Section 010. Tuesdays. 1:40 – 2:55
- Section 022. Tuesdays. 3:05 – 4:20
- Section 013. Wednesdays. 10:50 – 12:05
- Section 046. Thursdays. 10:50 – 12:05

TEXTS.

- Any book in the Object Lessons series (objectsofobjects.com/books).
- *Stasis Theory and Research Practices* (available via the UCCS bookstore).
- Additional texts (essays, poems, films, etc.) will be made available via Canvas.

OTHER THINGS YOU'LL NEED.

- UCCS email account (for between-class communication). For email help, see <https://oit.uccs.edu/services/messaging-and-collaboration/365email>
- Canvas account (for accessing course content). For Canvas help, see <https://oit.uccs.edu/services/teaching-and-learning-management/canvas>
- Microsoft teams account (for class meetings). For MS Teams help, see <https://oit.uccs.edu/services/messaging-and-collaboration/Teams>

COMMUNITY.

I consider this class to be ours. If there's anything I can do to help make our class more accessible or welcoming for you or a classmate, please feel free to let me know.

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COURSEWORK

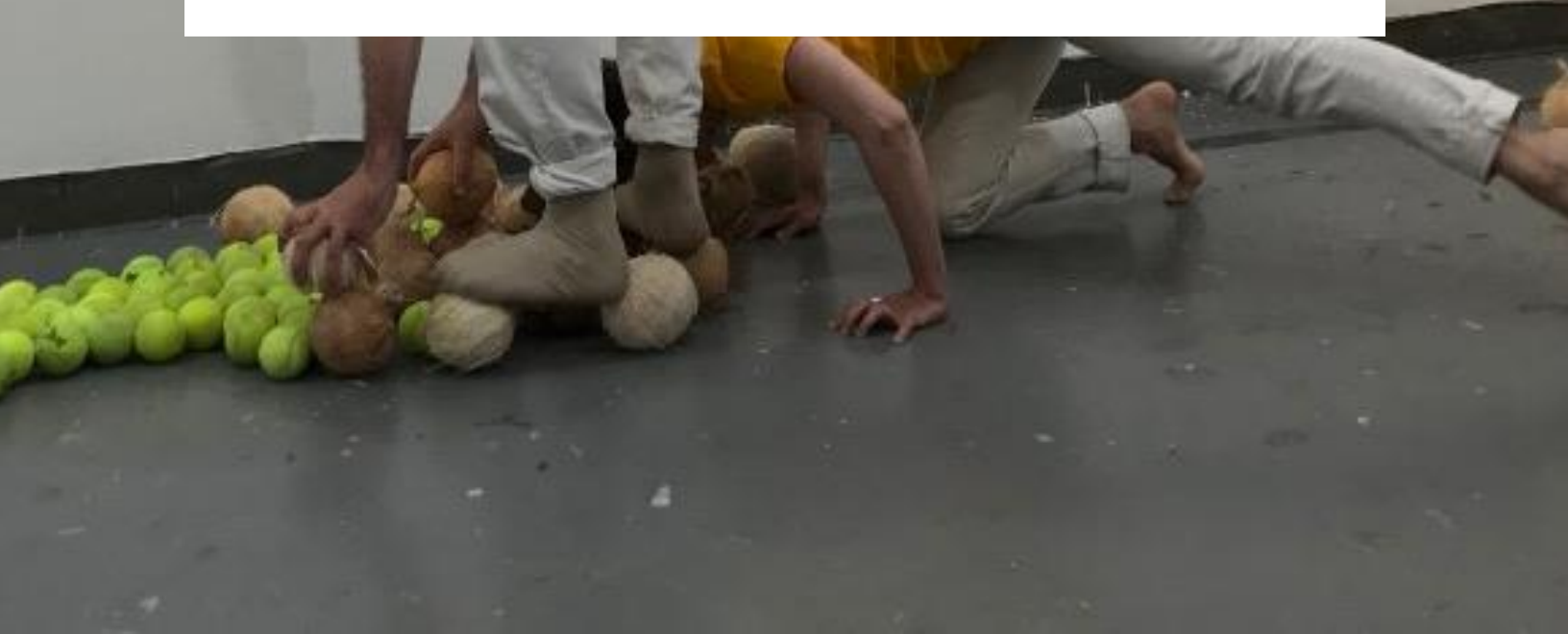
MAJOR WRITING PROJECTS.

- **Rhetorical Analysis.** A close reading and critical analysis of any book in the Object Lessons series. Written as a letter to a friend. Due February 16, 17, 18.
- **Literature Review.** A synthesis of the sources summarized in the Annotated Bibliography, a mapping (metaphorically) of the connections and overlaps (as well as the disconnections and divergences) that define the already-existing conversation around your object of research. Written as a zine. Due April 13, 14, 15.
- **Research Paper.** A research-based answer to the question, “What does a deep investigation of your ordinary object reveal about the current (historical, political, economic, environmental, or social) moment?” Written as a search narrative. Due May 4, 5, 6.

CLASS MEETINGS. Weekly 75-minute gatherings to discuss course concepts, to share our writing with each other, and to try to find something resembling community in this long pandemic moment. My intention is that class meetings be largely discussion-based, with time set aside for sharing our writing in small groups. Though I'll have an agenda for each class meeting, I'll arrive 5 minutes after start-time so that you can collaboratively put together an agenda of your own, which we can negotiate when I arrive.

PREPARATION FOR CLASS MEETINGS. Readings, films, writing, and other activities to introduce course concepts and prepare for class meetings.

WRITING CONFERENCE. A one-on-one meeting between you and me to discuss a piece of writing you're working on for this class. Drop in during office hours anytime before the Lit Review is due.



The background image shows a person in a tan shirt and light-colored pants standing in a room, possibly a kitchen or a workshop. They are surrounded by coconuts on the floor. Some coconuts are whole, while others are cracked open, revealing the green flesh inside. The person appears to be in the process of grading or sorting the coconuts. The scene is brightly lit, and the overall atmosphere is one of manual labor or food preparation.

GRADES

In my ideal writing class, there would be no grades at all. This is partly because of my own personality and values. To grade is to sort, to arrange, to level. (It's revealing, I think, that a grader is a machine that scrapes uneven terrain into a flat surface.) Personally, I don't think sorting, arranging, or leveling are particularly ethical things for humans to do to each other. Maybe it's important to grade meat and eggs and roads, but grading humans feels strange.

There are also practical problems with grades. Plenty of research on grading shows that the coercive force of grades gets in the way of the intrinsic desire to learn. This is especially problematic in a writing class, where grades encourage students to write for a teacher's preferences, while they discourage experimenting and flirting with failure. But experimenting and failing are necessary for figuring out writing processes and practices that work for you and for figuring out what you actually like (and don't like) about your own writing.

So, in this class, I won't grade your writing. I'll read your writing. I'll give you feedback on your writing. I just won't grade it.

Unfortunately, there's no way around final course grades, so instead I'll ask you each to determine your own final grade. At the end of the semester, I'll ask you to write a letter to me that reflects on the quality and quantity of writing you produced, the contributions you made to class meetings, and the effort you put into preparing for those meetings. At the end, you'll tell me the final grade I should record for you. The only caveat is that completing the course's three major writing projects is required for a passing grade. Otherwise, your final grade is entirely up to you.

My goal here is not to force you to do to yourselves that which I refuse to do to you. Better would be to abolish grades altogether. But in the meantime, I hope this approach to grades allows us to spend the semester treating each other not as objects to be ranked, but simply as humans practicing our writing together.

We'll talk additional details in class meetings.

SCHEDULE. CLASS PREP AND WRITING DUE LISTED IN GREEN

JANUARY 19, 20, 21. greetings / syllabus discussion

JANUARY 26, 27, 28. ten cars / proof of purchase

FEBRUARY 2, 3, 4. intro to rhetorical analysis / ten cars / the feels

FEBRUARY 9, 10, 11. Rhetorical Analysis workshop / Rhetorical Analysis draft

FEBRUARY 16, 17, 18. no class meeting / Rhetorical Analysis

FEBRUARY 23, 24, 25. intro to stasis theory & the lit review / cupholder / library tutorials

MARCH 2, 3, 4. intro to arguments of definition / glitter

MARCH 9, 10, 11. intro to arguments of cause / kilogram

MARCH 16, 17, 18. intro to arguments of evaluation / mustache

MARCH 23, 24, 25. no class meeting

MARCH 30, 31, APRIL 1. intro to arguments of proposal / jet engine

APRIL 6, 7, 8. Lit Review workshop / Lit Review draft

APRIL 13, 14, 15. film discussion / intro to the search narrative / Lit Review / illumination

APRIL 20, 21, 22. search narrative (continued) / tbd

APRIL 27, 28, 29. Research Paper workshop / Research Paper draft

MAY 4, 5, 6. goodbyes / sharing from Research Papers / Research Paper

MAY 11, 12, 13. no class meeting / letter to Nate due Monday, May 10th, at noon





WORKS CITED

Barnett, Scot and Casey Boyle. *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*.
University of Alabama, 2017.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome and Linda T. Elkins-Tanton. *Earth*.
Bloomsbury, 2017.

IMAGE CREDITS

Fogel, Corey and Abigail Levine. *Coconut Experiment 1*.
Conceived by Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, 19 May 2018, 18th Street
Arts Center, Santa Monica, California.

Images used with kind permission of Abby Levine.