11.S.948
Seeing the City Afresh: Writing About the Modern American City
Instructor: Garnette Cadogan, Room TBD, Tuesdays, 2:00 p.m.—5:00 p.m., 12 credits
Office hours: By appointment; phone number upon request

Brief Description:

The modern American city—with its attractive industry, infectious vitality, strange solitudes, and wide human contrasts—gathers peoples and forces with such dynamism that it is as incomprehensible as it is interesting. America, the historian Richard Hofstadter remarked, “was born in the country and moved to the city,” so it’s no wonder that Americans view urban life with ambivalence as much as full-throated enthusiasm. As we tell stories of the city, then, the challenge is to capture its animating tensions, attuned to a rich understanding of the multitudinous lives and institutions and sensibilities that populate it.

Through extensive reading of a broad range of nonfiction—commentary, criticism, essay, memoir, reportage-driven narrative—and fiction, students will explore the possibilities and frustrations of the city, especially on those perennial topics (e.g., climate change, inequality, racial discrimination, civic participation) too often met with indifference or fatigue. They will seek to understand the variegated city through stories, and attempt to create artful narratives by focusing on three nonfiction forms—essay, memoir, reportage—as they acquaint themselves with other forms that enrich the imagination and understanding—poetry, fiction, podcast/audio essay, documentary film, photo essay. Special emphasis will be on the writer-editor relationship, on writing with academic rigor for a general-interest audience, and on the role of the writer as the reader’s advocate. Each week we will be joined by a guest whose work is a model for thoughtful, fresh engagement with the city, a writer or editor who is on staff at or contributes to national publications with a general-interest audience, such as The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, Wired, Virginia Quarterly Review. Writing is organized thinking, and we will listen to masters of the craft to improve our thinking about writing and about cities. The goal—the hope—is to write about cities with greater sophistication and creativity for both specialized and general-interest audiences.

Expectations and Responsibilities:

A seminar is a directed conversation—at its heart is listening. Come prepared to talk and reflect, and, above all else, ready to listen. You will be at a disadvantage if you haven’t read the assigned readings—after all, reading is a type of listening; you give your intellect and imagination over to the images, ideas, worlds of another. Prepare, then. Otherwise, you rob yourself and your peers of not only insight but also respect.

A conversation invites—nay, requires—you to actively and generously participate. Not that you need a reminder, but here we go: A generous participant doesn’t hog the limelight, courteously raises objections, humbly gives and receives criticisms, and honors the intelligence and dignity of those around. This means focusing on one conversation at a time—the one before you, refusing the distractions accessed through a smartphone or laptop or sketchpad (or notebook
converted into a sketchpad for doodles). And introverts need not worry: If you need time to till your mind, that’s fine; as long as your ears and eyes are engaged, and you eventually contribute in class, you’ll be considered an active participant.

If you have half-formed thoughts, strange theories, confused ideas, and anything else you fear will make you less valuable in conversation, you are not alone. Come as you are, and think alongside us. This class is, in part, a reminder that writing is more than a solitary practice: it is social in sensibility, a conversation across space and time, with people near and far, dead and alive, as we move from connecting to others through reading to connecting to others through discussion and writing (writing, of course, that never loses sight of its readers).

This seminar is also an arena for you to take risks. You might be tempted to censor important parts of you that are messy, weird, playful, dark, complex, religious, anti-religious—that is, you might tiptoe as you write. Each week, then, we will respond primarily to the assigned readings and engage with each other with the generosity and respect that encourages us to take risks. Remind yourself of this before every class, especially because I’ll remind you by deducting marks for unbecoming behavior.

Because the class will be a workshop in which we’ll look at each other’s work, you are expected to conduct yourself with the decency that fosters trust and allows others to take risks. You should not discuss or show the work of your peers to anyone outside of this class; even discussing someone’s work when the person is in the company of others is to be avoided.

You will be writing as professionals, so I expect you to attend every class—you’ll lose marks on your final grade for more than one excused absence; a full grade drop for two unexcused absences or consistent tardiness; failure for three absences. Be on time—marks will be deducted for tardiness—and submit your due assignments at the beginning of class.

The heaviest intellectual lifting you’ll do is your **final project, a narrative (Due December 15)** whose natural length I expect to be around 2,500 words. You’ll write in different forms—commentary, criticism, memoir, essay, reportage-informed narrative—all building on the other. A series of assignments before your final essay, each increasingly weighed more as the semester progresses, will train your writing muscles and simultaneously strengthen your understanding of the city. You’ll have short exercises—maintain a notebook; create a music playlist; fact-check an essay—that will, in tandem with the written assignments, build to a portfolio. The portfolio will be most determinative of your final grade. Why? I’d like to inculcate in you the idea that you good writers focus on creating a body of work, and the arc of your work—more than a single piece—should be squarely in your focus. Also, organization is crucial to writing.

As a result, I’d like you to take your portfolio to every class. (Sometimes I’ll have you pull work from it for in-class exercises). All your work should be in this portfolio, in chronological order. For every assignment, as of the second page (through the end) have the following on the top right margin: page number, surname, assignment number (“Assignment 1”; “In-class exercise 2,” etc.), due date. The font should be sans serif (easier to read; examples include Times Roman, Courier, Palatino; fonts to avoid include Helvetica, Arial, Geneva).
Perfect is the enemy of done. Let me shout as I repeat: **Perfect is the enemy of done!** Better to give me an incomplete essay than none at all. Life is complicated; bad things happen; brain cells stubbornly refuse to cooperate when stress or grief jumps you. I’ll work to accommodate you if you need to submit something late. Each assignment builds on the previous one, so if you are playing catch-up with one assignment, you are already falling behind with subsequent ones. If you get stuck, don’t stand still and sink—let me know you’re flailing so I can extend a helping hand.

Feedback on your work will, in general, come a week—two weeks the latest—after you submit it, and you should feel free to contact me if you want to discuss it. If you’re in academic trouble, I’ll tell you right away. I expect you to work hard to climb out of the ditch you’re in, or drop the class if a low or failing grade is a wound you’re not willing to bear.

If you have any learning disabilities, I’ll accommodate you—but I also want to meet with you to work on pedagogical adjustments that will make you thrive and not just endure in the class.

I’ve made clear that I expect you to learn from and be ready to teach each other (and me). Makes sense, doesn’t it? The best conversations are collaborative, involving a helpful give-and-take. Nonetheless, I expect the work you submit to be entirely your own. Draw on conversations you’ve had, but every sentence should be yours. Beg and borrow ideas, being conscientious to make clear when you’ve done so, but don’t steal. Don’t pass off someone else’s ideas or sentences (verbatim or closely recast) as yours. You owe your sources more; you owe your classmates and instructor more; you certainly owe yourself much more. (Please see “Eight Reasons Plagiarism Sucks,” Jack Shafer, *Slate*, 3/7/08). And if you disagree, there’s always MIT’s policy on academic integrity, which I will uphold in cases when students choose not to. Quite often, cheating in academic environments is the product of panic. Someone gets overwhelmed and tries to find a way out, allowing anxiety to overtake reason and decency. So: If you start to fret, contact me. Let me know you need help. Don’t lose confidence in your ability to tell a good story. And don’t fall into one of the oldest and saddest of stories: throwing away your integrity.

A class should not just be an extension of the instructor’s expectations and preferences. Students have expectations, too, and jotting them down in an evaluation at the end of the semester is not usually helpful—it’s often too late for anyone in the class to benefit. Therefore, throughout the semester please let me know what is and, more so, is not working for you. “You suck!” and “You’re boring” is too general to be helpful. Let me know the particularities that grate or edify you and I’ll adjust, best I can, to ensure the learning experience is enriching for you and your classmates.
Grades are assessed with 60% of the weight for written work, 20% for class attendance and participation, 10% for quizzes, 10% for editorial responses to student papers. An A+ is awarded to work that is consistently, without exception, spectacular—work that would be published in a first-rate general-interest publication—along with attendance, participation, and comportment that is outstanding and beyond reproach. An A is given to stellar work and in-class performance, a B+ is very good work and in-class performance, B is for work and performance that was fair, C for work and performance that is less than fair, and D and below for work and performance that not only was weak but also didn’t show promise. (I didn’t forget C+, but don’t foresee someone wrangling to change a C to a C+).

Calendar of Readings, Listenings, Viewings, and Assignments:

The readings in this seminar do not provide a general history or theory of cities. Our focus is on selected readings that are, for the most part, outstanding prose on cities. Many offer fresh insights on perennial problems. Most are models of writing and analysis you’ll want to read and re-read. All will illuminate our understanding of cities. (My approach means you will miss some important thinkers on the city, but the consolation is that you will encounter wonderful and wise voices you might not have thought to listen for). We will discuss ideas that are execrable or laughable, not to scorn or mock—after all, we all have ideas that we’ll one day laugh or cringe at—but to get a firmer grasp on understanding cities and identifying good writing.

“Reading, writing, revision, reading, writing writing writing. More revision. More reading.”—That’s a good summary of this class.

Literary Wingwomen and Wingmen:

Fine reference books on writing that are helpful but not necessary for this class, and that you will turn to regularly as you start to treat your prose with care, are immediately below. They will be of great benefit if they are within close reach. Don’t let the word “reference” put you off; you will turn to these indispensable assistants—cum-teachers frequently. It goes without saying that you should own an excellent—which means, recent version (since language is dynamic and ever-evolving)—desk dictionary. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate* is my recommendation, though *American Heritage College* and *Webster’s New World* are good runners-up. (Online, [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com) is a must; it’s more up-to-date than all the aforementioned).

Your dream reference team:

*The Copyeditor’s Handbook, 4th Edition*, edited by Amy Einsohn and Marilyn Schwartz [the one from this list that’s a must-have]

*Chicago Manual of Style, 17th Edition* [This is the style guide this class will follow]

*Garner’s Modern English Usage, 4th Edition* [Sometimes too prescriptivist for my taste; balance with the descriptivist *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage]*

*Oxford American Writer’s Thesaurus, 3rd Edition* [thesaurus for grown-ups]
If you are not ready to go whole hog with a reference library, and are not familiar with the style requirements of the Chicago Manual of Style (default for this class; all assignments will be judged by this, not MLA or any other style manual), then purchase the mini-me version, A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 9th Edition, ed. Kate Turabian and others. And for an authoritative, unstuffy—indeed, fun—guide to style, grammar, clarity, common sense in writing, etc. get Dreyer’s English: An Utterly Correct Guide to Clarity and Style. Written by the longtime copy chief for Random House, this indispensable book should displace the overrated Strunk & White from your library. Put Strunk & White in the donation bin of the nearest used-book store (I DO NOT recommend this much-lauded book, except as a historical curiosity—a winsome, delightful, outdated guide you should dip in, but not refer to when in search of judgment).

Haters Gonna Hate:

Writers and writing teachers have been recommending The Elements of Style (aka Strunk & White) for decades. And one can see why—it’s pithy, it’s clear, it’s memorable (the advice “Omit needless words,” is a model of concision and good sense). But I’m full agreement with the verdict of The Copyeditor’s Handbook:

Many people swear by William Stunk Jr. and E. B. White’s Elements of Style, often referred to simply as “Stunken-White.” Copyeditors, however, must realize that The Elements of Style present a vision of a style of English, one that feely mixes rules, outdated conventions, idiosyncratic preferences, and hokum. Before applying any Strunkian maxim, copyeditors must cross-examine the text: Is recommendation X a hard-and-fast rule that admits no exceptions? Or is it a convention that may or may not be appropriate to the manuscript at hand? Could it be a well-founded nicety, an antique prejudice, or curmudgeonly crotchet?

My main contention with Strunk & White is that time has overtaken it. But my complaints about Lynn Truss’ Eats, Shoots and Leaves, a book some of you might be tempted to use, is that it’s a deeply flawed book—uninformed, wrongheaded, smug, poorly written, even more poorly argued. This is a book to give to your enemies and wait for them to obey it and write themselves into the yawns and shrugs of readers. But you, being of sound judgment and common sense, should avoid it. More than that: tell your friends to throw out their copies—not to a used-book store, but in the recycling bin.

If you have no interest in reading but are interested in writing, then you truly have no interest in writing. (And, frankly, this class is not for you). Someone who doesn’t read has no place being a writer. Writing is a conversation with other writers, and many of the problems in writing that are described as errors of grammar and style—for example, cliché and “zombie rules”—are more fundamentally problems of listening. By not listening to others, by not reading enough, we make the errors common among people who don’t pay attention to the words and ideas of others.

Cities are complex, and writing about them is a minefield, so you’ll sometimes get grounded by frustration. You will find yourself hating every thought and word that leaves your head. When
that happens you can hardly do worse than turn to “Weird Al” Yankovic’s song, “Word Crimes.” A sense of humor will get you far in this course. Writing is unforgiving to the humorless among us.

The required texts for the class are (in alphabetical order):

*Boomtown: The Fantastical Saga of Oklahoma City, its Chaotic Founding...and the Dream of Becoming a World-class Metropolis*, Sam Anderson
*The Yellow House*, Sarah M. Broom
*Open City*, Teju Cole
*Lost in the City*, Edward P. Jones
*Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd
*Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, Valeria Luiselli
*Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine

I expect you to read all of these books, cover to cover, and come ready to discuss and, sometimes, write about them in class. Occasionally, I’ll give you a pop quiz, to keep you on your toes, yes, but also because research overwhelmingly shows that tests are good for retention.

The following reading and listening schedule—*to be read and heard in the order it’s listed*—is subject to tweaks depending on my early-semester assessment of the seminar’s interests and needs. If a majority is interested in transportation, for example, I’ll add supplemental or replacement readings on walking, cars, subways, and so on, updating the syllabus.

**WEEK ONE, 10/1/19. On Possibility: A Writer’s Beginnings.** How is the city a place of possibility—possibility seen and hidden, sought after and thwarted—and how is writing a set of imaginative possibilities that illuminate the city? How is the relationship between writer and editor a rich soil for developing ideas and improving writing?

**Required:**


*Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Chapter 1 (“Beginnings”) and 2 (“Narratives”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd


“The Task,” Edward Hirsch  
“The Joy of Writing,” Wisława Szymborska  
“Why I Write,” George Orwell  
“Not-Knowing,” Donald Barthelme, in Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme

“Box Full of Letters,” Wilco, from the album A.M.

Highly Recommended:
Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino

Recommended:
The New New Journalism: Conversations With America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft, Robert S. Boynton

Assignment No. 1 (due 10/8/19): Write a 600- to 800-word essay on what the city means to you and why cities are important.

WEEK TWO, 10/8/19. On Trust: Being the Reader’s Advocate. We are beset by a deep distrust of institutions, of authority, and of the reliability and power of words. Forget worrying about truth; we can’t even agree on basic facts. How, then, to write in an age where the retort “fake news!” is ubiquitous and where the public square is an arena for incessant squabbling and corrosive suspicion and even spewing hate? How is writing an act of trust, and structure a function of trust—earning the reader’s trust, eroding the reader’s indifference—more than a design or method of organization?

Required:
Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction, Chapter 4 (“Essays”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd

Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions, Valeria Luiselli

“why some people be mad at me sometimes,” Lucille Clifton
“Amid a Measles Outbreak, an Ultra-Orthodox Nurse Fights Vaccination Fears in Her Community,” Amanda Schaffer, The New Yorker, 1/25/19
Kamila Shamsie, “The Storytellers of Empire,” Guernica Magazine, 2/1/12
“We the People,” A Tribe Called Quest, from the album We Got It From Here... Thank You 4 Your Service

Highly Recommended:
The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative, Vivian Gornick
“My Dungeon Shook: Letter To My Nephew On the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” James Baldwin, in The Fire Next Time
Whereas: Poems, Layli Long Soldier
Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life, Eric Klinenberg
Recommended:
*Writing to Persuade: How To Bring People Over To Your Side*, Trish Hall

**Assignment No. 2 (due 10/22/19):** Write a 800-word Op-Ed essay that tackles a pressing issue of national relevance through your personal experience.

**WEEK THREE, 10/22/19. On Seeing: Taking the World In, Building Worlds.** What does it take to become a great noticer? How does movement, particularly walking, provide a rich entry into understanding and inhabiting the city? How do we recognize and counter our blind spots? How does point of view, character, and structure carve out and shape the world we want readers to see?

**Required:**

*Open City*, Teju Cole


“Mansplaining the City: Why Are Men Driving the Conversations About the Future of Our Neighborhoods?,” Alissa Walker, *Curbed*, 4/16/17

“Seeing,” Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*


“Fordham Road,” Lana Del Ray

**Highly Recommended:**

*Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs

*Writing About Architecture: Mastering the Language of Buildings and Cities*, Alexandra Lange

*Flaneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, Lauren Elkin

*Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*, John McPhee

**Assignment 3 (due 10/29/19):** Write a 600- to 800-word commentary that draws on your close, patient observations from walking around the city.

**WEEK FOUR, 10/29/19. On Accuracy: Getting Facts, Grasping Truth.** What do we see clearly that is too-often hidden from others, and how do we then write ourselves out of people’s blind spots? Should we? And how do we ensure that we have gotten things right? How do we get our facts straight and not lose sight of the truth?
Required:

*Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Chapter 3 (“Memoirs”) and Chapter 5 (“Beyond Accuracy”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd

*The Yellow House*, Parts I and II, Sarah M. Broom

“Checkpoints,” John McPhee, 2/1/09
“Men Explain Things To Me; Facts Didn’t Get In Their Way,” Rebecca Solnit, *TomDispatch*, 4/13/08

Recommended:

*The Chicago Guide to Fact-checking*, Brooke Borel

Assignment No. 4 (due 11/5/19): Fact-check a story (which will be distributed in class)

**WEEK 5, 11/5/19. On Vulnerability: Being Exposed.** How to understand the vulnerable and speak of them, write about them, without denying their agency and dignity? How to bear witness to the segregated city? the lonely city? the drowning city?

Required:

*The Yellow House*, Parts III and IV, Sarah M. Broom

*Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Chapter 8 (“Being Edited and Editing”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd


Highly Recommended:

Assignment No. 5 (due 11/12/19): Write a review-essay of *The Yellow House*, discussing pertinent issues of urban change and planning.

WEEK 6, 11/12/19. **On Intimacy: Expressing Warmth With Grace.** How do we bear witness to the personal and give it public resonance?

**Required:**

*Lost in the City*, Edward P. Jones


**Highly Recommended:**

*Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward

*Brother, I’m Dying*, Edwidge Danticat

**Recommended:**

*Random Family*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

Assignment No. 6 (due 11/19/19): Make a music playlist (length: 45 minutes to an hour) for Assignment 3 that gives the listener a clear sense of the narrative arc based on the musical arc.

WEEK 7, 11/19/19. **On Belonging (and Exclusion): Finding Home, Fighting For Home.** Who belongs in the city, and what institutions, people, processes push them to the margins or keep them at arm’s length? What internal dissonances emerge in response to the external prejudices?

**Required:**

*Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine

*Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, Chapter 6 (“The Problem of Style”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd


“Lime Light Blues,” Kevin Young

“The Injustice of Siwatu Ra’s Imprisonment and the Relentless Logic of Mass Incarceration,” Masha Gessen, *New Yorker*, 11/21/18

“Foreign-Returned,” Sadia Shephard, *New Yorker*, 1/1/18
Assignment No. 7 (due 11/26/19): Revise essay submitted on 10/29/19

Highly Recommended:
Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois
Good Talk, Mira Jacob
What Editors Do: The Art, Craft, and Business of Book Editing, Peter Ginna

WEEK 8, 11/26/19. On Dreams: Hopes Writ Large. How to capture the aspirations of a city and of those trying to preserve or remake it?

Required:

Boomtown: The Fantastical Saga of Oklahoma City, its Chaotic Founding...and the Dream of Becoming a World-class Metropolis, Sam Anderson


“The City-Shaper,” Robert Caro, New Yorker, 12/28/97

Highly Recommended:
Dreamland (Seasons 1 & 2), dir. Rob Sitch (Netflix)
Transaction Man: The Rise of the Deal and the Decline of the American Dream, Nicholas Lemann
Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction, Chapter 7 (“Art and Commerce”), Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd

Assignment No. 8 (due 12/3/19): Write a three-paragraph pitch for the final paper. The pitch, meant for a magazine that publishes for a general-interest audience, should focus on a problem in the city. Explain in your pitch why you are the person to write the proposed story, why now is the time for this story, and why it should be of interest to the editor and the magazine’s audience.

WEEK 9, 12/3/19. On Change: Renewal Marches Across Time. The city is an ever-evolving creature—how to capture it? How does change pull us in, push us away, leave us behind—or, worst of all, threaten us?

Required:

Boomtown: The Fantastical Saga of Oklahoma City, its Chaotic Founding...and the Dream of Becoming a World-class Metropolis, Sam Anderson

“Climate Signs,” Emily Raboteau, New York Review Daily, 2/1/19
Highly Recommended:

*Saving America’s Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age*, Lizabth Cohen

*The World is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*, Carlo Rotella

**WEEK 10, 12/10/19. On Imagination.** How do we layer information onto the imagination and approach cities and our writing with an abundance of both? Revision as an act of imagination.

**Required:**


Highly Recommended:

*No Small Plans*, Gabrielle Lyon, et. al.

*The Design of Childhood: How the Material World Shapes Independent Kids*, Alexandra Lange

*City on a Hill: Urban Idealism in America from the Puritans to the Present*, Alex Kreiger

*Building and Dwelling*, Richard Sennett

*The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself*, Susan Bell

Assignment 9: Final project—a 2,500-word narrative that’s driven by a problem in the city. **Due December 13 at 5:00 p.m.**