

Call for Proposals for First Year Seminar

FSEM Goals

First year seminars will be distributed across the disciplines, yet they are structured around a set of common principles whose purpose is to introduce first year students to the pursuit of intellectual inquiry. Specific topics are determined by the instructor's background and interests. The objective of the first year seminar is to cultivate the intellectual skills necessary for liberal learning through the in-depth study of a topic and the provision of instruction on how to gather and analyze information for the purpose of formulating and defending an opinion. Seminars will be deep in terms of the critical approach employed, but will involve topics, which are accessible to first year students. In addition, first year seminars anticipate the experience of the senior seminar without the requisite background knowledge and skills that such seminars demand.

Although first year seminars will neither be part of the Writing/Speaking Intensive Program(s) nor be a replacement for a first year writing course, all first year seminars involve meaningful writing and speaking assignments in which students are given instruction and guidance on writing and speaking at the college level.

Every course should have the following basic components and new student learning outcomes, outlined in the QEP.

First-year seminars will:

- utilize active, discussion-based, participatory learning;
- be exploratory in nature, rather than just presenting conclusions;
- have students read primary sources, not simply textbooks;
- have students synthesize material from multiple sources to develop their own views on the topic; and
- be capped at 15 students.

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Utilize a variety of research techniques to retrieve information efficiently, evaluate retrieved information, and synthesize information effectively to support their messages or arguments;
- Improve development and organization of written arguments;
- Demonstrate the ability to edit and revise in the writing process;
- Apply the basic theories and principles of oral communication;
- Communicate effectively in a variety of settings, including public speaking and group discussion.

We are looking for seminars, which are not traditional courses, but illustrate the sort of intellectual inquiry higher education can offer. See, for instance, the sample syllabus appended to this document. In other words, you should not take an existing course and re-title and renumber it.

Deadline for FSEM proposals:

Monday, September 30th 2013 for courses to be offered in the **Spring 2014** course schedule.

Proposals must be **submitted electronically** to John P. Broome (jbroome@umw.edu) using the FSEM Course Proposal Form. An example of a completed proposal is attached.

Please address your questions to any member of the committee.

Sincerely,

First Year Seminar Committee

John P. Broome, Chair

Rosalyn Cooperman

Janie Lee

Will Mackintosh, Secretary

Dave Stahlman

FIRST YEAR SEMINAR COURSE PROPOSAL
UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON

Use this form to submit **FSEM 100 topics** courses for review **or** any **other existing course** that you wish to have designated to meet the first year seminar requirement.

COURSE NUMBER:	FSEM 100		
COURSE TITLE:	POLITICS, DOUBLESPEAK, AND BUILDING A BS DETECTOR		
SUBMITTED BY:	Ranjit Singh	DATE:	October 1, 2014
<i>This course proposal has the department's approval. (Put a check in the box to the right.)</i>			X

COURSE DESCRIPTION. In the space below, provide a one to two sentence description of this class. The description will be entered in Banner, and will also be used in other publications about the first year seminar program (such as the “Eagle Essentials” booklet).

Through the use of “real world” examples, this course examines the factors that make for a good political argument, a bad argument, and how to tell the difference. Students will research, write, and present arguments that meet high standards of language, logic, and ethics.

RATIONALE. Include short statement addressing how this course meets the FSEM’s basic components and new student learning outcomes (see FSEM call above), and why this course should be approved to meet the FSEM General Education requirement.

This course will meet FSEM goals by supporting a number of key learning processes. Students will be required to retrieve, review, and critique diverse sources of political information and opinion, including campaign videos, press conferences, state of the union speeches, newspaper op-eds, and so forth. As part of a semester long project, they also will be expected to produce their own written and oral political arguments, thereby honing their ability to make and identify effective arguments. A number of imaginative group exercises will complement this goal. For example, students will choose criteria and candidates for our class’s version of the “Doublespeak Award,” (an annual “award” given to the most deceptive public speakers). Another group exercise will be to create a “BS Detector”: a rubric that helps users gauge a speech or text’s level of honesty and clarity, in part by compiling lists of phrases that seek to “defend the indefensible” (as Orwell put it). Writing skills will be stressed throughout via revisions and editing of research-based advocacy papers, and a workshop on the writing craft. This workshop, lasting for 2-3 classes, will be rooted in discussions of a required text on college-level writing. Oral communication skills will be enhanced by student oversight of group discussions, the development of formal oral presentations of research, and peer review of student presentations.

SYLLABUS. *Attach a course syllabus.*

SUBMIT this form and attached syllabus **electronically as one document** to John P. Broome (jbroome@umw.edu). All submissions **must** be in electronic form.

FSEM 100: Politics, Doublespeak, and Building a BS Detector

Draft Syllabus for Fall 2015

Instructor: Dr. Ranjit Singh. My office hours (Monroe Hall 356) are TR 10:00 to 11:30 and 12:30 to 2:00, and by appointment.

Contact: rsingh@umw.edu. You are strongly encouraged to visit my office during the above hours. I prefer friendly visits to e-mails.

It is your responsibility to read this entire document at the start of the course.

“Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” (1946).

1. Description of Course:

In politics, we are surrounded by attempts to persuade us, with an eye towards shaping our behavior. How shall we know what to believe or to take seriously? How can we distinguish reasoned argument from Orwellian “doublespeak” – language that deliberately disguises, distorts, or reverses the meanings of words?

This course examines the common trickeries of political language and argumentation. Together, we’ll study the pitfalls of logic, the use of rhetorical devices, “frames,” unquestioned assumptions, and other sorts of traps set – for noble purposes or not – by politicians, pundits, interest groups, governments, and so on. We’ll conduct mandatory group discussions of readings, speeches, interviews, and other concrete examples of political manipulation and discourse. Examples will be drawn from contemporary, historical, domestic, and foreign political contexts. Near the end of the semester, we’ll create and present our own version of the Doublespeak Award¹ (the award’s name is TBD by the class), and collectively build a “BS Detector.” Our primary goals are 1) to increase our ability to recognize political quackery, charlatanism, dissemblance, fraud, and misdirection when we see – or hear – it; 2) to boost our ability to produce solid, ethical political arguments of our own; and 3) to encourage active, critical participation in civic life.

As a Freshman Seminar, we will also pursue the following learning outcomes. Students will:

- use a variety of research techniques to retrieve, evaluate, and synthesize information efficiently to support their messages or arguments;
- demonstrate the ability to edit and revise in the writing process;
- apply the basic theories and principles of oral communication;
- communicate effectively in a variety of settings, including public speaking and group discussion.

The Course Rules

Please note that this syllabus is subject to minor changes with advance notification.

¹ <http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/groups/publiclangcom/doublespeakaward>.

We discuss politics in this class. Exposure to unfamiliar and possibly discomfiting ideas is basic to liberal arts education; as a student wrote, “College is the epicenter of opposing opinion.” Language or conduct inconsistent with UMW Community Values may result in removal from class or other penalties. <http://www.umw.edu/about/community-values/>

Electronics policy: Anyone wishing to use a lap-top or similar device in my class must type up and hand to me a formal memo pledging to use it strictly for class purposes. Violations of this agreement represent dishonesty, and may constitute an Honor Code violation.²

Final bits of unsolicited advice: This is adult education. I assume self-motivation. Make courtesy and professional “smarts” habits *before* you need a letter of recommendation or a job. So please be on time, look interested, don’t bug me for info found on the syllabus, assume my profound disinterest in your pet’s demise, and proofread your work. Students who are routinely late or chat in class are disruptive and unwelcome.

2. Assignments: There will be 5 graded assignments. Each counts for 20% of your final grade.

1. **Daily participation** is based on attendance, timeliness, my subjective sense of your familiarity with readings, quality of contributions, focus, etc. Good participation often includes citing examples from the readings, videos, or other materials – be prepared for such exercises. I will also ask students to lead specific discussions. Each student is allowed one unexcused absence without penalty. Then things go downhill.³
2. **Research Paper** on a political topic. This assignment requires you to extensively research, develop, and write a 5-8 page paper that presents an argument on a political topic of your choice. To do this well, you must conduct far more research than the paper’s modest length may suggest. Your goal is to produce a very well-informed and considered attempt to persuade a critical reader (i.e., someone who is knowledgeable and may not agree with you) of the validity of your viewpoint. A good paper anticipates and handles the reader’s likely objections.
3. **Required Research Paper Rewrite.** In line with my comments stemming from your first paper attempt, and any subsequent research you may have undertaken, this is a revised, thoroughly-edited and proofread version of the research paper described above.
4. **Classroom Presentation with follow-up discussion.** A formal presentation of your paper to class. No PowerPoint allowed – the focus is on ideas and your presence – but simple handouts are fine. Peer grading will be used in addition to my own grade. We’ll develop the criteria and expectations of this assignment later in the semester.

² Students with disabilities should contact me and the Office of Disability Services at the start of the semester. All information will be held in confidence.

³ Excused absences are rare: activities that should have been scheduled around class (regular dental visits, vacations, cat burials, etc.) don’t count even if you tell me ahead of time. What counts? Official travel for UMW sports, debate club, true medical and family crises, job interviews, and the like. See me if you have a question.

5. **Op-ed Exercise.** A different style of writing from before. You will write a wildly-persuasive 600-800 word opinion piece based on the argument you developed in your research paper. The model is to be found in the daily newspapers. Again, the goal is bring the reader to your viewpoint, but this is not the same as a research paper (no footnotes or arcane terminology, for example). Again, we'll detail expectations later in the semester.

N.B. Many students find the UMW Speaking and Writing Centers (in the ITCC) to be useful resources. Also, the library staff is here to help you. Ask them!

3. Grading Policy: The opinions you express will not affect your grade. Everything else matters, including effort, substance, and attendance, which is expected and strongly correlates with performance. "A" grades seek to reward consistent, back-slapping excellence of form and content. They are therefore reserved for the truly outstanding. In accordance with UMW guidelines, "C" grades represent average work. UMW's honor code is always in effect. All work must be "pledged."

Grades work like this: A 100-92; A- 91-90; B+ 89-88; B 87-82; B- 81-80; C+ 79-78; C 77-72; C- 71-70; D+ 69-68; D 67-62; D- 61-60; F 59 or less. Grades are rounded to the nearest whole number, and posted on Canvas.

4. Required Texts: The UMW bookstore sells the following required texts.

Michael Harvey. *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*.
Anthony Weston. *A Rulebook for Arguments*.

5. Schedule of Readings: Keep up with the readings and other materials, and take good notes. This will be crucial for discussions. Apart from the required textbooks, readings will be posted on the course's Canvas website or a listed web address.

UNIT 1. Introduction. On Orwell, Ethics, and Doublespeak

Readings to include excerpts from George Orwell. *Why I Write*. Analyze writing examples.

UNIT 2. Logic and Natural Language.

Read and discuss *A Rulebook for Arguments*, and "Informal Fallacies in Reasoning" on <http://logic.umwblogs.org/informal-fallacies-in-reasoning/>.

Analyze political speech and writing examples, supplied by instructor and students.

UNIT 3. Workshop: Writing and Editing for College

Read and discuss *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing*. Bring questions about college-level writing. Analyze examples supplied by instructor.

UNIT 4. Detailed analyses and discussions of select public political speeches, interviews, campaign materials, and other written and oral materials.

Readings to include excerpts on political "frames" from Charlotte Ryan. *Prime Time Activism*.

Research Paper due.

UNIT 5. Continued analyses and discussions of select public political speeches, interviews, campaign materials, and other written and oral materials.

UNIT 6. Classroom Presentations of research and argument.

Includes peer selection of grading criteria, and peer grading of presentations.

UNIT 7. Continued analyses and discussions of select public political speeches, interviews, campaign materials, and other written and oral materials.

Research Paper rewrite due.

UNIT 8. Building a BS Detector.

Group exercise. Based on our analyses over the semester, we will create a set of useful criteria for assessing the “BS” value of any political communication. Also, we will collaborate in choosing a recipient of our award for the worst example of public Doublespeak.

UNIT 9. Writing an effective and ethical “Op-ed.”

Readings to include “Tip Sheet: Opinions Count – Write and Submit and Op-ed”; and “How to Submit and Op-Ed Article” at <http://www.nytimes.com/content/help/site/editorial/op-ed/op-ed.html>.

Final “Op-Ed Exercise” due during exam week. (Day and time TBA). Why not submit yours to a newspaper, and see what happens?