

# **Interdisciplinary Writing through Multidisciplinary Writing**

**Riv-Ellen Prell**

**Technical Report Series  
No. 3 ♦ 1993**

**Lillian Bridwell-Bowles,  
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**THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING**

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## **Preface**

In this report, Riv-Ellen Prell and her colleagues describe their “real-world” experience with trying to turn American Studies 3112, American Everyday Life, into a “writing-intensive” course, complete with successes and innumerable “challenges.” Their work should be of interest to all faculty members who try to comply with the Council on Liberal Education’s announcement that all students at the University of Minnesota should take four writing-intensive courses before they graduate.

One of the most striking observations offered by this report is the reaction that students had to a course that would expect them to write. Prell reports that there were over ninety students interested in taking the course, but once the syllabus published the fact that they would have to produce a significant amount of writing, fewer than thirty remained by the end of the first week. Prell is a highly respected teacher in the American Studies Department, and students are attracted to her courses. We take her account as significant evidence that writing is often missing from the curriculum at the University, and that students, sometimes for understandable reasons, seek “the path of least resistance” when they have the option of taking courses that are less demanding.

This technical report appears in a series of informal papers published by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota. The Center annually funds projects proposed by University of Minnesota faculty to study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University’s curriculum;
- status reports on students’ writing ability at the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;

- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity , race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing.

One of the goals of the Center is to disseminate the results of its funded projects as broadly as possible within the University community and at a national level. We encourage discussion of Professor Prell's findings and interpretations, and we invite you to contact the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing for information about other publications or Center activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor  
Susan Batchelder and Mark Olson, Editors  
December 1993

This report summarizes our experience revising American Studies 3112, *American Everyday Life*, to include a writing-intensive component. In addition, it describes future directions for incorporating writing into a course that has required minimal writing in the past.

The curriculum of the course we revised attempted to balance (rather than fundamentally transform) course content between experiences of white men and women with experiences of people of color within the United States, but our conclusions are in no way particular to matters of cultural pluralism. Indeed, one of our most successful strategies focused on students' understanding their own experiences, which were overwhelmingly white, European-American, and middle class.

We are interested in describing and reflecting on the experience of the course, its successes and failures, as a vehicle to analyze writing within an interdisciplinary course that had integrating theory and everyday life as its purpose and race, gender, and to some extent, class as its focus.

### **The Proposal: Interdisciplinary Writing through Multidisciplinary Writing**

Riv-Ellen Prell proposed a revision of American Studies 3112, *American Everyday Life*, to the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing. The original proposal requested funding to structure the course to encourage students to write in a variety of "genres" which would directly imitate the ones under study. Providing students with a variety of writing experiences promised to allow them to reflect on the type of writing they did best, why it was successful for them, and to strengthen all areas of their writing. These forms of writing were also tied to a variety of types of research—historical, ethnographic, cultural criticism, and TV criticism. The class also was designed

to teach students how to integrate theory with ordinary experience with the hope of deepening their ability to read critically and to reason.

Research funds were used to hire two research assistants, Jeanne Halgren Kilde and Amy Farrell, both graduate students in American Studies with considerable experience in teaching composition. We spent approximately four months designing the course and the writing exercises, and together we produced a syllabus that located four areas within everyday life for discussion: families, work, desire, and U.S. television. Each of these four areas was keyed to a writing assignment that required some small amount of hands-on research—reading historical magazines, observing human behavior, and watching television. One involved a journalistic or fictional assignment based on one's own experiences at work.

Throughout the course we consulted with Lillian Bridwell- Bowles. Her input was tremendously important in helping us understand how to ask people to write, and particularly how to write to a specific audience.

### **The Course**

*American Everyday Life* was assigned a teaching assistant, Elizabeth Anderson, a graduate student in American Studies, allowing enrollment to open to seventy-five students; five more signed up on the waiting list. The first day the students received their lengthy and explicit syllabi and met what we called the “teaching staff.” By the second week fewer than thirty students remained in the class. This was more striking than it initially appears because on the second day of class at least twenty new people appeared to replace ones who left the first day, including the many students who left the room before I even spoke. I would not be exaggerating to say that some ninety students

expressed interest in this class until they were confronted by our request for writing papers, none of which were major research papers, all of which were very topical and lively. The teaching and research assistants knew many of the students. Students dropped whom the assistants identified from composition courses as very good students. One or two students explained that they simply could not commit the time that such a class required.

We learned vividly that writing is not a way to attract students if one is in pursuit of large enrollments. One Institute of Technology student who remained told me that all his friends said he was crazy to take a course that required writing. Students seemed particularly bothered by the length of the assignments. They were less concerned by what they were asked to do than the number of pages they were asked to produce. They could tolerate short papers, despite what was involved, but any assignment that asked them to produce ten pages was extremely upsetting. Further, students commented repeatedly that this was not a composition course: why were they writing? They simply saw no essential and fundamental connection between writing and learning. Even the students who stayed, knowing precisely what was required, continued to ask why writing was part of the class.

### **The Writing Process**

We attempted to integrate writing into the class by devoting one of every four-class sessions to students discussing their drafts in small peer groups. In lecture/discussions we made some (and then increasing) attempts to draw attention to the way papers and books were written, how arguments were constructed, and particularly in the area of cultural criticism, how rhetorical strategies were used. We learned when only seven of the twenty-eight students who remained in the course attended draft discussions

that we had to require drafts by threatening severe penalties. It was then that the experienced composition teachers informed me that they require students to turn in drafts. Only when students were penalized in this class, and obviously others, did they then agree to share their drafts.

I do not think this non-participation was primarily motivated by last-minute paper writing. Rather, we learned in this writing-intensive course about the abiding anxiety and shame students feel about their writing and the particular agony of showing their work to peers. In their evaluations they expressed great discomfort with critiquing or asking others to make comments on their work. The need to create a community of learners is pressing in the College of Liberal Arts. Students are protective and supportive of one another, but they have less information about how to work together constructively. Students did express tremendous appreciation for any feedback they received on drafts. They wanted drafts to be required of them, but they found the process of writing and reading, and above all showing their drafts, distressing.

In addition to requiring drafts, we met with students twice during the quarter to talk about their writing; we learned that very few of them, despite their composition training, had developed a writing process. Few used outlines or wrote multiple drafts. Many students did write drafts before typing them and then edited in the process of typing. Most students felt that they would benefit from more frequently writing drafts.

### **Teaching a Subject and Teaching Writing**

Finally, as the quarter wore on, we found ourselves being more committed to getting students to write what we considered a good paper than to treating the material as complexly as we had hoped. In fact, I felt that as a teacher, and with the students in my

class, I more or less recapitulated the very problem I attempted to address. I found it more and more difficult to teach or to get them to produce papers about how to integrate abstraction with everyday life. The teaching staff more and more yearned simply to have students clearly write about TV or work or family history. We could not seem to succeed in getting them to integrate theoretical questions or concerns about the subject. For example, we felt that the assignment that students wrote about work was on the whole successful. Virtually all of these papers showed more vivid writing than other assignments. All of them seemed to demonstrate some awareness of the complexity of the workplace. Most were impressed by *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild's fine book on the selling of emotions in airline attendants' work. Most were sensitive to those issues in their own workplaces. The finest papers were extraordinary—a fictional account of a sports box where journalists wrote fifty years ago and a memoir piece about working for one night in a canning factory with Chicana workers by a then-undergraduate about to leave for college.

By contrast, a paper requiring students to analyze TV programs around themes of contemporary culture, asking them to look at articles about cultural criticism and a fine example of historical analysis of TV by George Lipsitz as well as an article by Henry Louis Gates about the portrayal of African Americans on TV yielded plot description. Despite conferences, reading drafts, and other forms of feedback, students slavishly described plots and nothing beyond that. Students insisted that they were frustrated, that the reading had nothing to do with the paper, and that we could not effectively communicate our goals to them.

Their final assignment, a revision of a paper written during the course, focused on writing alone. We tried to get them to articulate an audience for their paper and then to consider how to write to those readers. Most students rewrote their work papers. Little consideration was paid to how their papers revealed their understanding of work as a cultural process or how work articulated with and structured everyday life. Most often, a fine paper was a paper built on clear prose. A draft often did show considerable growth in writing skills for the student, but no other type of intellectual growth. We never felt these skills were unimportant, but they were some distance from how the course was first envisioned.

### **The Evaluation**

We were convinced that how students understood writing and how they felt about themselves as writers might provide some insights into what we felt was constant frustration at integrating writing and analysis and getting students to take writing seriously. To this end, we constructed a lengthy evaluation and self-inventory about writing for students to fill out at the end of the class. Because I was teaching this class for the first time, there was no question that I made a number of mistakes, that the assignments were not as clear as they would be the next time, and that I required too much writing. But holding those matters constant, we all felt that we did learn a great deal about students, ideas about writing that we believe affected the success of the class.

From the self-inventories, we concluded the following about writing and attitudes toward writing:

1. How writing is presented to students and the frequency with which it is required are important factors;

2. Student authority is very much involved in the process of self -evaluation about writing; and
3. On a continuum of passive to active, students are more inclined toward passive aids in writing. They have difficulty seeing themselves as central to the writing process.

Students were asked to rank their confidence in themselves as writers when they began and completed the class. Apart from our own doubts about how much students actually did improve, students' self-reporting indicated that sixty percent of the students believed that they became better writers in this class. Thirty-two percent felt their confidence did not change. Only eight percent, or two students, felt less confidence in their writing. On a scale of five, students, on average, judged themselves as 3.375 and concluded on average ranking themselves as 3.9. Most students felt some change had occurred, with some feeling that the change was substantial.

The increase in confidence seems to be directly linked to practice. As one student wrote, "By sheer volume I got better." Closely linked to this was feedback from the teaching staff. Students clearly prized positive feedback, but any feedback was desirable. One of the research assistants questioned if mediocre paper writing really can yield improvement in writing skills, but the students, at least, felt that it could.

We also wondered which type of writing students liked best and least. The fictional/journal writing was their favorite, followed by the historical writing assignment. Interestingly, the students who liked the history writing tended to like the fictional writing the least and vice versa. We learned that some students felt put upon to be "creative" and others to be "factual." Even those who most liked writing about work felt

they learned the most from historical writing; somewhat devaluing other types of learning, learning that might be more theoretical or critical. Two contrasting comments make the point: “I feel the information to write on is more laid out for me and that it doesn’t require much personal thought. Fiction work seems hardest for me because it requires me to be more creative.” And the other opinion: “Journal/fiction was the best. I find it easier to write when it relates to me personally. I hated the magazine assignment. It was more analytical and research oriented.”

Students’ voices, their responsibility for knowledge, and their relationship to what they should know is highly problematic. They seem centrally concerned with what they can know and how they can know it. A small minority felt they could not write the way they liked “easy-going,” “casual,” or other such terms. And it follows in their writing process.

We discussed process at length outlines, drafts, feedback, etc. Students felt the most important contributions to their writing were first, contact with teaching staff and, second, contact with other students. At the same time, twenty-two of the twenty-five respondents said they would use drafts in the future. Most students did want to take positive action, but those students who responded that they would not use a particular strategy for their writing process (feedback, outlines, etc.) put the burden for writing difficulty on others.

What we learned upholds long-term studies reported about Harvard students, which were released during the quarter this course was taught. Students want feedback on their writing. Frequent writing assignments are immensely helpful. For example, one student lamented that she learns about writing only not to have it required for years and

then she forgets again. Paying attention to the students voices in writing, educating them to be scholars, and helping them assume authority in all kinds of writing seems a very profound challenge that came out of this work. I have learned how frightened students are of writing and that they unquestionably want to write better, but that they have little sense of how to go about doing that, despite having taken composition courses. They were startled that people would care so much about writing outside of composition, and the split we wanted very much to overcome in this class was something we came to describe more ably than we were able to heal.

### **For The Future**

I have learned from this challenging, exciting, sometimes depressing, and thoroughly interesting project that I will never teach without assigning writing. But I have also learned that it is better to require a few papers and to incorporate writing in different ways—short in-class papers and journals.

To integrate theory and experience, and writing and reasoning, requires a much less ambitious course than we constructed. I would use far fewer books and articles and use them far more carefully. Accomplishing less to understand more is the chastening lesson of this class.

I would also urge the use of writing surveys at the beginning of each course of the sort we constructed and have students refer to and think about them throughout the course.

I learned as well that many students are alienated learners and, with that, alienated writers. The “culture” of undergraduate life, based on the experience of this course, does not promote student community, does not empower students to take control of their own

educations, and allows them to dichotomize frequently between “facts” and “personal opinions.” Writing might well help in addressing many of these problems.

## **Appendix**

The appendix includes the course syllabus, assignments, and handouts from *American Everyday Life*, American Studies 3112.

- Syllabus and Writing Assignments
- Responses to Writing Assignment 1
- Discussion questions for Homeward Bound
- Assignment 2 Revision
- Assignment 2 Draft Questions
- Discussion Questions for Work Articles
- Conference Questions for “Everyday Life of Work”  
Assignment
- Final Assignment
- Tracking Record

**American Studies 3112**  
**American Everyday Life**  
**Winter Quarter 1990**

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**WHAT THIS COURSE IS ABOUT**

Everyday life, like culture, is something we experience on a daily basis. It is created by our ability to take for granted, without question, that what we do is “natural.” But all commentators on society, from novelists and poets, to social scientists and psychoanalysts, understand that there are patterns and power relations that structure “natural” and daily experience. The “taken for granted” is anything but natural. It has been historically constructed within a *particular* time, place, and set of relations that have changed. Everyday life is not the same for rich and poor, males and females, blacks and Hispanics, elderly and young, and professionals and workers. Everyone lives a daily life-- eating, finding a means of support, sleeping somewhere, and being in a series of relationships. But the *content and meaning* of these processes differs within the United States and between societies. Everyday life, in addition, is not simply inherited or structured but created through the activities of those who live it. We challenge, undermine, change, and co-operate with the “rules” of daily life. That active participation and protest is also key to understanding everyday life.

This class primarily concentrates on the U.S. after World War II. We begin with an historical work on the family in the 1950s and end with a novel set in the 1980s that looks at how the war in Vietnam affects a series of people in a small town. This period is marked by dramatic shifts in everyday life—transformations of family, work, consumption, and ideas about American society. The class is not “about” the period but uses it to explore issues of everyday life.

In this class, we want to learn something about how daily life is lived and how scholars have thought about the creation of daily life. We want to pay particularly close attention to how daily life is WRITTEN about, and writing will be an important element of learning in the class. We will examine the CONTENT of daily life, the CONSTRUCTION of daily life, and the INSCRIPTION of daily life. You will participate in reproducing each of these levels of knowledge as writers, readers, and collectors of data.

## **JOIN US IN AN EXPERIMENT**

This class is designed for you to learn something about the impact of writing on learning. Funds from a University program, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, allowed us to develop writing exercises and the content of this class. You will be asked to write often during the quarter, and a great deal of time will be devoted to the writing assignments. Whether you find writing difficult or enjoy it, this class has something to offer you. We want to explore what type of writing works best for you as an individual learner and how to enhance your writing and learning. Writing assignments are listed in a separate section of the syllabus.

## **REQUIRED READING**

*Homeward Bound: Families in the Cold War*, Elaine Tyler May

*All Our Kin*, Carol Stack

*Reading the Popular*, John Fiske

*The Managed Heart*, Arlie Russell Hochschild

*In Country*, Bobbie Lee Mason

A packet of articles will be available at Copies on Campus in the basement of Coffman Union. They will be listed in the syllabus with an asterisk (\*).

## **CLASS TOPICS AND DATES**

I. Everyday life and why it's interesting:

January 2-4

Read: "Understanding Popular Culture," p. 1-13 in *Reading the Popular*

II. Families

January 9-18

Read: *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May and *All Our Kin*, Carol Stack

In this section we will discuss how families organize daily experience and what constructs and defines families. How do families vary in American culture and in what ways have they changed and why? We will discuss ideas of what a family is and should be and the link between those definitions. We will also examine the significance of the perspective of whether the family member is male or female, young or old, in what social class and culture.

### III. Work as everyday life

January 23-February 1

Read: *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild

\*"The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century," Ruth Schwartz Cowan, in Thomas J. Schlereth ed. *Material Culture Studies in America*.

\*" 'The Customers Ain't God': The Work Culture of Department Store Saleswomen, 1890-1940," Susan Porter Benson in Frisch and Walkowitz eds. *Working -Class Americans*.

\*"Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Good," Toni Cade Bambara, *The Seabirds Are Still Alive*, Vintage Books, 1982.

In this section we will discuss work from the point of view of the worker. How is work experienced and why? What is the impact of the type of job on the experience of the worker? What happens at work for the workers that is not connected to what is formally produced? What does the workplace mean in the twentieth century?

#### IV. Desire—Wanting and Having in Contemporary Society

February 6-15

Read: \*From *Salvation of Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930, the Culture of Consumption*. “Shopping for Pleasure,” p. 13-42 and/or “Video Pleasures,” p. 77 -94 from *Reading the Popular*.

\*”The Jeaning of America, “ *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske.

\*’Waste a Lot, Want a Lot: Our All-Consuming Quest for Style, “Stuan Ewen, *Utne Reader* (insert also attached).

\*”The Lesson,” Toni Cade Bambara, from *Gorilla, My Love*, Vintage 1981.

This section will examine the idea of a consumer culture and with it the emphasis on experience and the therapeutic. It will contrast a producer and consumer culture and the impact on everyday life. It will look at how these processes differ by gender/class. The consumer as a “guerilla fighter” in the war against mass culture will also be discussed.

#### V. U.S. Television: The Production of Images and Meanings within Everyday Life

February 24- March 6

Read: *In Country*, Bobbie Ann Mason

\*”The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” George Lipsitz, *Camera Obscura*, January 1988.

“Madonna,” p. 95-114; “Romancing the Rock,” p. 115-132; “Everyday Quizzes Everyday Life”; “News, History and Undisciplined Events”; “Popular News” from *Reading the Popular*, John Fiske.

\*"We Keep America on Top of the World," Daniel C. Hallin.

\*"The Look of the Sound," Pat Aufderheide.

\*"TV's Black World Turns—But Stays Unreal," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *New York Times*.

This section will examine TV as it structures daily life and how it provides a crucial source of information, usually distorted, but still persuasive, about social, political, and interpersonal reality. We will discuss how the TV viewer interacts with the screen, not simply as a passive receptor, but as an activist as well. We will look at various forms of TV and videos.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Class members will produce a paper about every two weeks, as well as bring drafts to class for discussion. Papers will be returned within one week. This schedule requires class members to turn all work in on time and to keep up with all reading. As a result, we cannot accept late papers without a medical excuse. Papers should be typed double-spaced or printed neatly by skipping lines. All papers are due in class on the due date.

#### **Assignment 1—Everyday Life**

Method: Participant observer

Writing Form: Ethnographic

Due: January 9 in class—5 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to examine everyday life and then to write about it. Anthropologists and sociologists conduct participant-observation fieldwork by observing behavior and interaction, interviewing people, and then inscribing

or writing up the process. You should select a setting to observe everyday life in which you are NOT a participant—a restaurant, gas station, store, domestic setting, classroom, etc. Observe it twice. Spend about 1-2 hours each time. You can ask people what they are up to, but you do not have to interview anyone.

In the write up, describe what you see. Description that simply elaborates, details, or lists communicates much less than one that shapes a story or scene. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes ethnographic writing as a “fiction,” a “thing made,” more than something invented. You are to *construct* an incident of everyday life.

### **Assignment 2—Historical Readings of the Family**

Method: Use of primary historical resources

Writing form: Historical Writing

Due: January 23-7-10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to apply some of Elaine May’s and Carol Stack’s ideas about the family to some examples of images of the family from two historical periods prior to 1960. You will find these images in what historians call primary sources—texts taken from a particular period about which one is writing. Select two popular magazines that are published over a period of several decades. Select two popular magazines that are published over a period of several decades. Select three decades, for example, 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. Read these magazines in order to find images of the family in advertising, articles, fiction, and even advice columns. Define the images. You may find contrasting ones within the same period. Then compare and contrast them to one another. When you choose magazines, consider who the readers

were—middle class, white, black, working class, men, women, etc. Compare the images in light of the readership.

Historical writing is widely regarded as the finest writing in the social sciences. It is narrative par excellence, telling a story using detail and rich illustrations derived from primary sources. At the same time, historical writing is never a catalogue of disconnected details. Its narrative force comes from the power of the “story” over the details. Its interpretations of events are woven into the story. Your essay should tell a story about what images of the family are in these two periods and some reasons why they develop as they do. The view of the family held by middle-class Americans in the 1950s and the working-class blacks described by Stack in the 1960s should help you think more broadly about what is meant by the family.

On January 16 we will devote a portion of the class to reacting to one another’s assignments. Bring to class a draft of some portion of your essay for discussion.

### **Assignment Three—Everyday life of work**

Method: Reflection on “work culture” and “marketing emotion”

Writing form: Fiction/Journal

Due: February 6-6-10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to write in your own voice or through the voice of a character you create. You should have a narrator who is experiencing the workplace from the “floor.” Drawing on your own experience or fictional or sociological writing, describe an incident of work culture.

The value of first-person writing is to give a close reading of emotion, interaction, interpersonal power and experience. Like for Bambara, small events can be made to stand

for far larger and more powerful relations, like racism, dignity, and power. You should aim to write a piece that may work at more than one level, for example, work culture as a subversion of management or work as a setting for emotional autonomy, etc. Bring a draft to the January 30 class.

#### **Assignment Four—Reading a Cultural Artifact**

Method: Participant observation

Writing form: Cultural Criticism

Due: February 20-7 -10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to interpret a symbol of contemporary American culture. Using John Fiske's approach as a model, you should interpret an item of clothing (for example, jeans), personal adornment (such as hairstyle or jewelry), or some other "style" by which a person asserts uniqueness and identifies with a group or movement.

Fiske often refers to magazines or advertisements (primary sources) or interviews of people. For this assignment, please interview three different people about the same cultural symbol. These may be brief interviews of thirty minutes or so in which you learn when the person started using the item, why he/she uses it, and what he/she thinks it "represents" about self and society. How do people make the item a statement of uniqueness? Do they use the item for a form of "resistance" to mass culture? If not, how might you understand it?

Cultural criticism often examines popular culture as an important example of how "ordinary" people act back upon society, creating alternative statements through symbols of identity to ones intended by manufacturers or schools or families. Cultural critics write

“broadly,” drawing examples from many aspects of contemporary culture. They write with a “point of view,” rather than beginning with “data” which they then attempt to interpret. Their point of view is usually a theory of social experience such as social class relations, or the operation of a mass culture, or the domination of society by the linked connections of ideology and power relations (hegemony). Cultural criticism depends upon the ability to weave together an abstract view of society with the details of cultural and symbolic expressions of ordinary life.

Your papers should, based on your readings in this section and your “data,” state a view of personal adornment and then examine the specific example you have chosen. You should conclude with a broad discussion drawing on readings, data, and other examples you would like to include. Bring a draft to class on February 15.

### **Assignment Five—Analyzing Television**

Method: “Textual” analysis

Writing form: Television Criticism

Due: March 8-6-8 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to closely “read” two television programs or videos. The readings for this section are divided between television criticism and the fictional treatment of the meaning of television in the lives of characters. Television is understood from the point of view of the “script,” and from the viewer who actively interacts with it, often appropriating its meanings in innovative ways. Your paper will focus on the textual aspects of television, and by contrasting programs will allow you to understand contrasting and similar ways that programs communicate information, ideas, and images.

For this assignment you need to select a topic rather than particular programs. Your topic should be an aspect of everyday life—intimacy, the family, the workplace, consumption, or others. Look at two television or video representations of that topic. You might want to examine a sitcom and a news segment, a sports event and a dramatic series. You may choose different types of programs or similar ones for this assignment. If you can video the programs, all the better. The more closely you can analyze the “text” the better for your purposes. As in the examples of criticism you have read, you need to pay attention to the words, their order, commercial breaks, visuals, and every other aspect of representation you can find. In your paper, set up the problem you want to explore and then develop features of the programs that you have selected. What have you learned? How is this topic treated? What are the points of contrast? Why?

Media criticism, like all criticism, depends on the balance of illustration and perspective. Your writing should aim to integrate both well. Bring a draft to class on March 6.

### **Assignment Six—Final paper and evaluation**

## **American Studies 3112**

### **Responses to Writing Assignment 1**

The four members of the teaching staff wanted to provide some general feedback about the observation papers. We hope this will be helpful in future writing assignment.

1. The focus of a paper or particular paragraphs is a key to successful writing. Papers that located the narrator and developed around a carefully thought-out theme were most successful. One student who observed a bus talked about what she could see from her seat. Another paper about bus riding located the narrator immediately:

Over a couple of days I rode a couple of different buses on the #14 route through South Minneapolis. This is not an abnormal thing for me to do; I do it almost every day. But, on the last few rides I did not do my normal routine as I rode the bus. Normally I read and pay very little attention to what is going on around me. Other times I'll just sit there staring out the window, again oblivious to those in my immediate vicinity sharing the ride.

He goes on to describe what he sees.

A paper that does not locate the observer or let us know why some detail is included and others not, includes the following passage:

Their conversation went on to how he used to play hockey. I got the impression that they didn't know each other very well. I looked at their hands to see no wedding bands. The waitress comes with their food, two orders of eggs benedict with hashbrowns. The couple didn't talk at all while they ate.

This paragraph differs because it is a series of descriptive statements, both unfocused, in which the describer has no perspective.

The focus of the paper often changed midpoint. A student began writing about the social class of the clientele of a bar and ended writing about male/female relations. No focus, a shifting focus, or disconnected foci were common problems.

2. How to use description is a key issue in good writing. Many papers made statements that needed more detail or examples. Generalizations, passive voice writing, and “to be” constructions contribute to this problem. One student wrote: “They came to converse with friends, to think, to escape their studies.” She didn’t include any specific examples about someone studying or a particular person reading or talking. We selected some examples of paragraphs from papers where detail was used well in combination with focus.

I got on the bus at 6th and Hennepin Ave. in downtown Minneapolis. There were two other people riding already, a fiftyish Caucasian man with a moustache and an African American woman in her late thirties. Both were going to the airport as well; they had luggage. Two stops later, another Caucasian man entered the bus and sat near the front. He removed his jacket and started chatting amiably with himself. It was difficult to guess his age, as he had a young face, but graying hair as well.

The paragraph goes on to describe his conversation.

A paragraph about laundry also achieved this balance:

While their clothes are washing, the two men leave the laundry, but they time their return to coincide with the end of the washer cycle. One grabs a wheeled cart on his way in and shoots it ahead with just the right amount of energy to stop in front of his three loads of wash. The denim-jacket man disdains the use of a

wheeled cart. He tosses handfuls of wet clothes across the aisle through the door of the front-loading dryer. He doesn't miss. While their clothes dry they stand in the aisle, talking and smoking.

This paragraph uses detail to communicate the great comfort these men have in the laundry and the ways they own its space. We would not learn this without the nice use of detail.

3. The relationship between generalization and detail is our main focus in writing this quarter. Many papers made tremendous generalizations and leaps on the basis of very little information. Students described habits as “security blankets.” Psychological interpretations such as motivation, distress, and introverted personalities were often associated with behavior. It would be virtually impossible to guess at such grand interpretations on the basis of a few observations. Often introductions and conclusions in the papers presented such generalizations. Students often overlooked their genuinely interesting interpretations in favor of a well-known phrase about everyone having everyday life or everyday life is never the same.

4. The assignment should have been even more explicit about asking you to write your paper for an outsider or to see a setting as an outsider. Student descriptions of bars or groups at a billiard parlor used words completely unfamiliar to readers. The writer cannot assume a reader will know what a “roach” as description of a person is, or what a bouncer is, or what a shot is. These assumptions sometimes made the papers very difficult read.

Every writer in the class had some clear, strong sentences or paragraphs. We aim to make writing better by asking you to concentrate on focusing your writing, taking a

perspective and avoiding the passive form (“a thick brown sweater clothed an impatient black man” as compared to “an impatient black man wore a thick brown sweater”), “to be” constructions. Seriously consider how one sentence follows another in a paragraph and how each paragraph follows another in a paper. The relative balance of detail and generalizations, analysis and description, and example and argument will be our task for the next papers.

## **American Studies 3112**

### **Discussion Questions for *Homeward Bound***

The year is 1950. Imagine yourself considering forming a family from the point of view of a 21-year-old white woman in college and a 24-year-old white man who is in his third year of college on the GI Bill. In the group, discuss what you consider the advantages and disadvantages for deciding to marry. Will you have children? Will you have them soon or put off the decision for some time? Why or why not? What will the next decade bring you if you are male or female? What are likely to be your important decisions? What are your dreams for the next 20 or 30 years?

Have the group decide where you live and then role-play and/or discuss these decisions in light of May's book. Use your imaginations to consider everything from whether the man might face military service again, ideas about who your children might someday be, and whether the woman should work to what a Communist America might look like.

What are some of the differences in the considerations of the man and the woman? What are some differences in their view of daily life?

## Assignment 2

### American Studies 3112

#### Revision

To clarify several points in the assignment, we wanted to provide the following information.

1. You should examine **TWO** different magazines for **TWO** different decades. If you compared the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Look*, you would look at one issue of each magazine in each decade—*Saturday Evening Post* in September 1922 and 1932, and *Look* in September 1922 and 1932. It would be a good idea to read other issues of the magazine in the 1920s superficially, but for your paper you should concentrate on two issues of two different magazines for two different decades.

2. Describe what you see, but **analyze or interpret** it as well. You are concentrating on views of families and gender roles. If women are never portrayed in families in the 1940s and always in families in the 1950s you have learned something about families even though there is no evidence of them in one decade. What is being said about the family? Compare and contrast views of the family in these decades.

3. Elaine May's book, and to some extent Carol Stack's book, may be helpful in this process. Be sure to draw explicitly from May and directly cite her ideas about the family at various periods. Do your interpretations of the family complement or challenge May's ideas?

4. What is most crucial to your analysis is being aware of to whom the images or stories or advice are directed. Advertising and advice may present the same image or different ones. Be aware that an advertiser is going to promote certain views of women or

men depending on the product sold. Be aware that a magazine knows who buys it and will feature articles of interest that are relevant to that portion of the market. Be explicit in your papers about to whom the magazine is directed and what aspects of the magazine in particular are directed.

5. If you can find two magazines directed to African Americans, Asians, or Hispanics you can bring your paper up through the 1960s. You can compare the magazine to a primarily white magazine if you are sure you are dealing with the same social class market, which is how magazines are organized.

Thursday, January 18, will be devoted to a discussion of your drafts. If you do not have a complete draft, please bring what you have.

**Assignment 2: Historical Writing**

**American Studies 3112**

**Draft Questions**

1. What are the strongest points of this paper?
  
2. What specific details does the writer give you about the images of the family in the two magazines?
  
3. How does the writer interpret these details? What is the writer's focus?
  
4. Do the details and the focus support each other to create a coherent interpretation? Where could the writer use more details? Fewer?
  
5. As a reader, what part of this paper convinces you the most? The least? Why? Does the writer make any unwarranted assumptions? (For instance, does the writer assume all families are nuclear families without making that assumption explicit?)
  
6. Has the writer located his or her work within a logical, comfortable context (introducing the magazines, audiences, dates, etc.) early in the paper?
  
7. Does the writer fulfill all the requirements of the assignment?

## American Studies 3112

### Discussion Questions for Work Articles

1. Ruth Schwartz Cowan writes: “What happened to this particular work force when the technology of its work was revolutionized? Did structural changes occur? Were new jobs created for which new skills were required? Can we discern new ideologies that influenced the behavior of workers?” In your small groups answer these questions about the changes in housework for women after WWI.

2. Bambara writes: “The dude in drugs always looks a little crumbled, a little rough dry, like he jumped straight out the hamper, but not quite straight. But he got stuff to him if you listen rather than look.”

- a. Who are the people with stuff in this story?
- b. How do they show it?
- c. How does the workplace reveal their stuff?

3. Why does Bambara link Candy’s story of her family and her own ideas about “this woman I’m going to be” with life at the drugstore on Christmas Eve? Who is Candy at the drugstore and what does she learn at Johnson’s? Who is she and what does she learn at Leon D. Salon?

4. As a piece of African-American literature Bambara uses words that may be unfamiliar. Be sure that you know what “Kwanza” is, what she means when she says of a character “a sister who’s been passing for years,” and accusations about who is or is not an “equal opportunity employer.” What is the significance of the name Obatae? What does this name tell us about the character?

5. Susan Potter Benson describes the “work culture” of department-store saleswomen, 1890-1940. What does she mean by a work culture? How does she understand how work culture can “resist structural constraints?”

Is Bambara describing a work culture at Johnson’s? What is its significance?

**American Studies 3112****Conference Questions****Journal/Fiction Assignment: Everyday Life of Work**

1. What are immediate strengths you see in this paper?
2. As you read this paper, what larger issue about work culture do you think the writer is trying to convey? (For instance, tensions between men and women in the workplace, the empowerment or powerlessness of being a new worker, the stress of managing emotions, camaraderie among workers).
3. Does the specific incident the writer describes illustrate this larger issue?
4. Are there enough details given to maintain your interest as a reader?
5. Discuss how the writer could improve overall organization, coherence, and language use.
6. Is the broader significance of the specific instance of work culture conveyed in ways other than declarative sentences explicitly stating the significance? In other words, does the writer show as well as tell? How could the writer convey this significance more effectively?

**Final Assignment**  
**American Studies 3112**  
**Winter 1990**

Your formal assignment is designed to allow you to demonstrate both what you have learned about writing and what you have learned about everyday life. We believe that you can best demonstrate your development by selecting one of your first three papers and rewriting it. You may select your observation paper, your family paper, or your work paper. We have in mind more than simply a revision but a substantial expansion as well.

1. Select one of these papers and first assess its strengths and weaknesses. How can you build on its strengths and develop the weaker aspects? What about the writing will you change. If voice, shifting tenses, paragraphing, and organization have presented problems, how will you address these?

2. In this paper, you have addressed something about everyday life. Do you see more about the family, work, or ordinary life now as a result of the class? What books, articles, and ideas from class discussions have expanded your sense of everyday life? How can you integrate these expanded ideas into the text? Based on comments received on the papers as well, how can you expand the vision you presented in your paper?

3. A successful paper will do the following things:

- a. It will be written with serious attention to the process of writing.
- b. It will present a perspective and balance a few ideas or conceptions with illustrations and details.

c. It will thoughtfully integrate an expanded bibliography into the paper. For example, in the family paper, you might expand your understanding of family beyond May to include Cowan 's article, Lear's work on consumption, and Lipsitz's article on the family in early TV .You would use these articles to be able to say more about the changing nature of the American family. You might also go back and look again at some of the data you used and expand that as well.

d. It will demonstrate your understanding of everyday life. This paper will allow you to articulate the key themes and ideas of the quarter through one topic area.

The paper is worth 20 points

It is due—You are required to consult with one member of the teaching staff about the assignment. Failure to consult with us will result in the loss of 5 points from the paper.

3112 Tracking Record

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Paper #	The Assignment	Basic Writing Skills	Presentation and Development of Ideas	Reader Experience