

What's Up with This Class?

An Open Letter to Potential EWRT 1B Students

Thanks for considering this class. Please take a moment to read and reflect upon this little essay. In it, I attempt to make clear what is often unclear when you sign up for most classes—namely, who is the professor, what's he about, and what will life be like in this class for the next eleven weeks? In short, I hope this little essay answers the title question *what's up with this class?* After you read it, feel free to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification on any point. Once you're finished, you'll be able to make an informed decision about whether you want to be in this particular section of English 1B. I'm a big fan of choice and responsibility. If you return to class for the second session, I'll assume that you've chosen—that is, you've considered this information carefully, checked out my web site, and decided that you want to be here. With that choice comes the responsibility to follow-through and complete it. If you decide, however, that this class is not for you after all, no hard feelings—please send me an email tonight letting me know you've dropped so that I can add one of the people on the waiting list who want your space.

The title of this course is Reading, Writing, and Research. It's an accurate title. We spend most of our time together reading, writing and, yep, researching. We will write in class into our Journals on a regular basis. Bring your copy of the book we're currently reading, your Journal, and a blue or black ink pen to every class session. We will also read aloud our writing on a regular basis. Be prepared to read aloud to the class. If this sounds like your personal equivalent of waterboarding, then this might not be the English 1B class for you because I will ask you to read aloud often. Very often. Your Journal is also the place for you to jot class notes, work on class projects, keep a record of your progress, explore ideas, play with words, and draft your thoughts. Important stuff.

We'll also write a series of out-of-class papers that address the English Department's critical and creative thinking objectives for English 1B. The out-of-

class papers (4 of them) are more polished pieces of writing. In these papers I expect a higher caliber of thinking and writing because the out-of-class papers assume more time for reflection and revision. I will post the instructions for the out-of-class paper topics on my English 1B web page. I recommend that you take about a week, but no more than two, to complete each assignment. You are at a point in your education where you should be able to produce a thoughtful, well-written paper within about a week's time.

Speaking of my web site, you'll want to check it often. It's there, as I said, that I'll post the writing assignments. But it's also there that I provide links to other web sites that I use as the basis for some of my instruction. Think of these web sites as on-line textbooks. Required textbooks. Occasionally I'll ask you to print something off the web and bring it to class, but normally I'll ask you to read it before you come to class. There is a quick email link to me also on the site. Feel free to email me any relevant questions or comments that arise. I respond to email daily, slower on weekends. If I were you I would Bookmark my web site (at least for the next eleven weeks) since you'll need quick, regular access to it. By the way, you will submit your out-of-class papers to the web site Turnitin.com. Another Bookmark? If you've never used this site before, go to it soon and click through the introductory material. It explains why the site exists and how to use it.

In addition to the Journal and the out-of-class papers, you will write a comprehensive final essay exam during our scheduled exam time (see this quarter's class schedule for final exam schedule). In two hours you will plan, write, and edit the best essay you've ever written in your life—no pressure, right? But by that time you'll have enough practice under your belt to make it doable. I can't, in good conscience, send you off to the big bad university without this grueling experience. There are those who say that this is the real test of whether you've been educated or not—the ability to write extemporaneously about your learning. Can you produce a clear, coherent, readable expository essay within prescribed limits of time and space? In this case, two hours + eight pages of bluebook paper. If you can do this, you can do anything. Well, almost anything. Who knows—by then you may even be able to use the word extemporaneously in a sentence without blinking.

Participation is huge with me. I expect you to be a dedicated, mature, thoughtful contributor to our class. I expect that you'll treat your classmates and me with respect. Save private conversations for between classes. Don't eat, text, or do homework for other classes while in this class. These behaviors are rude, disrespectful, and childish. When you're in class, be prepared, focused, on task. I will keep track of such things in my handy little roll book, writing a *plus* next to your name for brilliance, creativity, intelligence. I'll put a *checkmark* if you're doing good and participating in a positive manner. But I will jot the evil *minus* next to your name if you're unprepared, unfocused, or downright contrary. I can even resort to a *zero* if I call on you and you're not there—physically or mentally. If you have more than one minus or zero at the end of the quarter, I will ding your participation grade. That's the thing with participation points: you have to participate to get them. You can't learn if you're not present. Literal Hint: don't take this class if you don't want to learn. Metaphorical hint: if you don't want to swim, stay away from the pool!

In addition to the aforementioned and frequent reading and writing tasks, you will be asked on occasion to contribute to our class knowledge by doing small research projects in which you give short oral reports to the class based on one-page handouts that you prepare for us. These short research assignments will provide us with necessary background information for our reading and will give you experience in looking up info quickly and finding effective ways to communicate your findings.

A few quick answers to commonly asked questions: No, I don't give extra credit. No, I don't allow you to rewrite poorly-written papers. (Do it right the first time.) No, I don't give extra credit. Did I say that already? Extra credit is a nefarious little game of desperation. I refuse to play. Either take the class as it is being taught, or move away from the pool so somebody who *wants* to swim can jump in.

For the next eleven weeks we will each be participants in a short-term community called English 1B. It exists in a physical classroom and also on-line. Every community needs boundaries—you can call them rules—in order to function smoothly. I've already embedded some of the rules for this course within earlier parts of this discussion. Can we agree on a few more? Can we

please agree that our cell phones will be on “silent” while we are in class? If you have to take an emergency call, kindly walk outside to take it. No loose and funky interpretations of the word *emergency* either. I mean only if somebody is sick or in danger and really needs you do you answer the phone. Anything else can wait.

Can we also agree to avoid plagiarism in our writing? Go to the Turnitin.com site and click on “resources” for a complete explanation of plagiarism and how to avoid it. This is not a suggestion; it’s an assignment. You may think you know what the word means. My experience tells me that many people simply don’t get it. I will hold you responsible for the information you find there. For the sake of reinforcement, the following paragraph contains the De Anza College English Department’s policy on Academic Integrity:

Plagiarism and cheating include copying someone else’s test or homework, lifting sentences from someone else without quoting (whether the source is published or not) and any small or large act of academic forgery in the work that you submit as your own effort in this class. The penalty is, at minimum, a “0” on that assignment, and it could result in an “F” in the course. Read the full policy on plagiarism in the “College Policies” section of the Catalogue for further information about plagiarism and its consequences.

A word of advice: If English is a weakness for you, seek tutorial help soon and often. I myself am available to help you during my posted office hours. For additional help, or if you have a time conflict with my published office hours (or if you just can’t stand my bad breath), there are other resources on campus where you can get assistance with your reading, writing, and research skills:

- Disability Support Services (<http://www.deanza.edu/dsps>);
- Student Success Center (<http://www.deanza.edu/studentsuccess/wrc>).

As you can tell from what I’ve said so far, you must have regular access to the internet to be successful in this class. You will use my campus web site to see our study schedule, as a portal to supplementary reading, and you will use the Turnitin.com site to submit your papers for evaluation. You must also have a

regular, working email account. Take a few minutes today or tomorrow to familiarize yourself with my web site, especially the “English 1B” page.

There are a few things you might like to know about me as we begin this class. For one thing, my hearing is beginning to fade. You will need to speak loudly and clearly in my class. I may have to ask you to repeat something now and then. Normally I’ll signal when I can’t hear you by putting my hand behind my ear to show you that I’m not picking up what you’re saying. Also, I find that I cannot hear well when there is ambient noise in the room—that is, if others are talking when I’m trying to listen to someone. So if somebody is talking, please be silent until they finish. The place for private conversations or socializing is outside. Did I say that already? My memory is also fading. Things I have trouble remembering: names, titles, dates. Don’t take it personally if I can’t remember your name. I have looked at my own daughter a full 10 seconds, calling her by every female name in our family until it finally clicked. Sad, I know. But some day, if you’re lucky enough to grow old, your lights, too, will begin to fade. It’s good to remember this and respect your elders, even if they are funny-looking, have bad breath, and can’t remember your name. Some day you will be the old fart in the room, and you’ll be grateful for the kindness and patience of youngsters.

I also have patience issues. That’s a nice way of saying that I get grumpy and annoyed when students don’t pay attention. I don’t mind repeating information if you need reinforcement, but I’m not wild about re-teaching something I just taught ten minutes earlier because you weren’t alert when I was teaching it the first time. I’ve also been known to bark at students who come in late. I make every effort to be here on time every day. It’s an important part of being a civilized human. I expect you to do the same. If you don’t, I *will* notice (it’s a small class; there are only thirty of us) and it *will* affect your grade. That’s my only leverage against apathy and rudeness.

I am a college professor because of my passion for the subject I teach. Your passion for literature may not match mine, but I expect you to participate fully in this class nevertheless. When you’re in class, be alert and on task. Take notes and study them regularly. My expectation is that you are a dedicated, curious student. Increasingly, I notice that some De Anza students do not know

the basics of classroom protocol. Generally speaking, in college we expect an adult maturity level. If you cannot abide by the rules of common courtesy, if you don't really want to be here, or if you are here to please someone other than yourself, then you are in the wrong place. Find out where you really want to be and go there. I am a good teacher for those students who are mature, focused, and dedicated to learning. But I have little patience with students who are apathetic, lazy, or self-obsessed. Also, I have little sympathy with those who view themselves as victims or who habitually make excuses for themselves. I teach this course based on the assumption that you are transferring soon to a university. One of my goals in English 1B is to prepare you for both the skill level you will need to compete there and the intellectual climate that you will encounter there.

And now for a word about academic preparedness. De Anza is a school that has no entrance requirements. Anybody with a pulse can come here, and anybody does. That means that sometimes students come to this class without the necessary basic skills in reading and writing that are prerequisites to the course. There is very little I can do about this except make you aware of the campus resources for individualized help. I will not teach at a level lower than English 1B. If you need help with vocabulary, sentence basics, or other fundamentals, you must seek it out and bring yourself up to speed in these matters. I will not "correct" your papers or do your editing or proofreading for you. Also, our reading and study materials are geared toward adult learners. Some of the subject matter may be inappropriate for minors or folks who find controversial subjects painful or offensive. I let you know these things now, as we begin our course of study, so that you can decide if I am the right teacher for you or not.

OK, I saved grading for last because it is my probably my least favorite subject and certainly the least interesting aspect of our work together. My grading criteria for your papers are based on the advice given in our textbook, *Writing with Style*. If you want to succeed in this class, pay close attention to it. Of the many writing books I've surveyed throughout my 30+ year teaching career, it's the best one on writing clear, concise, successful university-level essays. I use Trimble's criteria when putting a grade on your writing.

I will determine a final grade for you in this course only because the college requires it of me. If it were up to me, we would abolish letter grades entirely. They are only useful to satisfy the bureaucratic needs of large, dispassionate institutions. I will dutifully add up the points you've earned and assign the letter next to those points. It does you no good to ask me how you're doing in the class if by that you mean which grade you are earning. You have all the same information I do in that regard (see the "Grading" section of the course syllabus). Therefore, if you try to discuss your grade with me I will probably redirect the discussion to our course content. That's what's really important, not some letter that somebody puts next to your name on a roll sheet.

Nevertheless, students often ask me what kind of a grader I am because most people are afraid of getting the grade they know they deserve. Usually when people ask the question, "Are you a tough grader or are you lenient?" what they really want to know is, "Can I make some sort of a deal? Please, please, be merciful because my parents expect me to blah, blah, blah" or "I really need to get an A in this class because blah, blah, blah" Trust me, I've heard them all. If my eyes glaze over and I look like a zombie when you talk like this it's because I'm so flipping sick of grade talk I could puke. If you persist in talking this talk I may just toss my cookies all over your shiny new shoes.

No, the answer is, for real, I'm not a tough grader. I can inflate grades with the best of them. But let me be clear: an A means *excellent*. I see very few excellent papers because most De Anza students are simply not excellent writers. And most De Anza students are not willing to put in the kind of work on their writing to become excellent writers because it's just not a high priority for them. Most people earn B's and C's on their papers because they've developed a series of bad habits that they refuse to break. And most community college students are not readers. You can't write well if you don't read challenging prose on a regular basis. Also, let's be realistic: how much can you improve in eleven lousy weeks? This is only the beginning of our troubles when we open the can of fat, ugly grade worms and watch them wriggle around the classroom. Grade-mongering has so corrupted the system of education that I've even had students (I kid you not) come by my office *before the quarter begins* to see if I will give them an A in

the course they are *about to take* because, well, they just have to have an A because blah, blah, blah

Here's my promise to you: I will read your papers carefully and do the best job I can to objectively evaluate your writing according to our course evaluation criteria. I've been trained and hired to teach you *and* to judge your progress within this academic discipline. If you can't cope with that, or feel that you have the right to negotiate your grade, then you might be happier in another English 1B class.

Every single thing you do or write or say as a member of this classroom community will be considered at the point when I am compelled by this institution to put a letter next to your name. In particular, the following assignments and/or activities will influence the outcome: Analysis Paper, Comparison Paper, Creative Paper, Research Paper, Final In-class Essay Exam, Journal, Quizzes, and Participation.

One last thing. Don't be afraid to ask me for help. I like helping people learn stuff. Especially if they have a genuine desire to learn. But don't go along on cruise control the whole quarter and then panic when there's two weeks left. I can't re-teach you a course you've slept through for nine weeks. Also, I have a busy life: a family, a writing career, obligations and commitments in and outside of work. Respect the boundaries. I'm here to teach you, but I'm not your new best friend. Don't monopolize my time. Tell me what I can do for you, then get out of my face.

This little essay is written in a manner deliberately based upon the advice of John Trimble, author of our textbook, *Writing with Style*. In the book, Trimble teaches a personal, conversational style—a style he calls General English—designed to meet the needs of most of the writing tasks you will do in your academic, business, or creative pursuits. Ignore him at your peril. And now for your first Journal assignment: write a one-page response to this essay in which you identify three traits from Trimble's first two chapters that my writing here exhibits. It's a safe bet I'll ask you to read your response aloud in our next class session. Ready . . . write!