

Rhetoric, Nature and Environmentalism

COMM 377/EVST 377

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Course Description

The primary purpose of this course is to help students engage thoughtfully with public discourse about environmental issues within a US context. It introduces students to key texts, standard appeals, and recurring strategies of environmental advocacy. Our object of investigation in the course is “environmental movement,” not “the” environmental movement. That is, we are interested less in environmental organizations *per se* than we are in the rhetorical efforts by those organizations and other public voices that *move* public opinion and public policy in a more environmentally sustainable direction. Consequently, we will spend most of our time examining the rhetoric of individuals and groups who are attempting to enable that movement. To a lesser degree, we will examine rhetoric that attempts to resist that movement.

The power of environmental rhetoric to generate such movement is significantly influenced by the way it articulates cultural and ideological assumptions about <nature> and <progress>. Thus, the course begins by stimulating reflection on a range of historical discourses that have shaped public understanding of <nature> and <progress> and then turns to examine contemporary advocacy on environmental issues. Overall, we are interested in critically examining attempts to influence attitudes and actions, personal opinions, and public decisions through the circulation of persuasive public discourse.

The secondary purpose of the course is to improve your writing abilities in the context of rhetorical analysis. The course will introduce you to a broadly conceived rhetorical perspective on discourse, a perspective that takes seriously the role that symbols, images, narratives, metaphors, audiences, identities and ideologies play in influencing attitude and action. During the semester, you will write read and write essays that bring those concepts to bear on various environmental texts. In other words, the essays you write for this course will analyze environmental rhetoric or engage scholarly research about environmental rhetoric – they will not be reports about environmental topics. Your writing ability should improve, as should your skills of analysis and criticism. **Because of the emphasis on writing throughout the course, this course fulfills the upper-division writing requirement in COMM (other students should consult with their advisor).**

Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- 1) explain how foundational rhetorical artifacts of the US environmental movement have influenced public understanding of nature and progress
- 2) identify and analyze strategies and tactics in environmental discourse
- 3) make persuasive critical judgments about environmental rhetoric on the basis of effectiveness, ethical quality, and ecological soundness.

Students also should achieve the following learning outcomes for upper-division writing courses:

- Identify and pursue more sophisticated questions for academic inquiry
- Find, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information effectively from diverse sources
- Manage multiple perspectives as appropriate

- Recognize the purposes and needs of discipline-specific audiences and adopt the academic voice necessary for the chosen discipline
- Use multiple drafts, revision, and editing in conducting inquiry and preparing written work
- Follow the conventions of citation, documentation, and formal presentation appropriate to that discipline
- Develop competence in information technology and digital literacy

Texts

The main text for the course is *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, 2nd ed., by Robert Cox. Robbie is a colleague of mine at UNC-Chapel Hill and three-time president of the Sierra Club, the largest citizen-driven environmental group in the US. I think you'll find his writing clear and compelling.

I will also post occasional readings to a Blackboard shell for the course. I'm new at using Blackboard so please have a little patience. I will gradually add features as we go.

Beyond these official forums, there are several outlets that I would like you to make part of your daily diet of reading. They will help you get up to speed on environmental issues, and we will occasionally discuss items from these outlets in class or incorporate them in assignments.

1. *Headwaters News*, a daily email news service sponsored by UM's Center for the Rocky Mountain West. It is a collection of the day's news about our region, and it is an excellent way of getting familiar with regional environmental issues (public land management, growth and sprawl, waste issues (toxic and otherwise), energy development, endangered species, etc.). You can subscribe at <http://www.headwatersnews.org/HeadwatersSub.html>.

2. *High Country News*, a twice-monthly news magazine. It has more in-depth reporting and usually one long-form piece of journalism in each issue. Some articles are for pay-subscribers only, but many are available at www.hcn.org.

3. *Yale Environment 360*, which bills itself as an "online magazine offering opinion, analysis, reporting and debate on global environmental issues." It gets a wide range of contributors (not just journalists) and addresses an equally wide range of topics. Available at: e360.yale.edu/

4. *Dot Earth*, a blog by Andrew Revkin, science writer at the *New York Times*. Since everyone wants to influence "the paper of record," he can stage a good deal of debate on core issues that can't be addressed adequately in standard journalism. Also has a great "blogroll" of other blogs and websites on enviro issues. Available at: <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/>

5. *Grist Magazine*, a Seattle-based, non-profit, online environmental magazine. One of their mottos/slogans is "Gloom and doom with a sense of humor," so it is not exactly *Newsweek*, and they editorialize pretty freely. Their daily service sends short, snarky blurbs about the day's news as well as links to original sources and links to other parts of their website (interviews – which are often quite good, enviro "advice," commentaries). You can subscribe at: <http://www.grist.org/cgi-bin/signmeup.pl>

There are many others that are more topic-specific than the ones mentioned here. For example, *Above the Fold* intends to “help increase public understanding of emerging scientific links between environmental exposures and human health. <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org> Take some time early in the semester to surf the web and draw our attention to some good ones.

Assessment and Grading

To achieve the objectives listed above, you will have a set of assignments that provide an opportunity to demonstrate your proficiency.

- 1) Short responses. In this area, you will write *four short (~3 pg) critical responses* to reading materials. The topics of these will vary. They may be guided by my prompts or discussion questions from the book. Others may involve responding to a scholarly essay that is related to the topics we are discussing in class. Or the assignment may ask you to engage a topic or article from the outlets listed above. I will give you specific guidance and due dates in class. Total in this area counts toward 20% of your course grade.
- 2) Critical Analysis. In this area, you will write two essays of 6-8 pages each, and revise one of those essays based on my feedback at the end of the semester. It will involve critical analysis of some rhetorical artifact(s) with environmental dimensions. You will negotiate the choice of artifact with me. Papers will be presented at the end of the semester. 20% each for a total of 60% towards your course grade.

As an alternative in this area, you may write an essay of 12-15 pages that is revised based on my feedback. The goal is to produce a strong draft that, with revision, could be submitted to a conferences in the spring, such as the UM Conference on Undergraduate Research, and/or the Northwest Communication Association Conference. If you are interested in this option, start engaging me in conversations right away.

- 3) Class participation. Thoughtful engagement and regularly offered comments that reflect reading and thinking outside of class. 20% of course grade.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability that may require modification of some element of the course, please obtain the appropriate documentation and then see me so we can make arrangements.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct includes cheating, plagiarism, and deliberate interference with the work of others. It is the intellectual equivalent of theft, and the aesthetic equivalent of plastic surgery. Like the former, it ruins the trust necessary for a well-functioning community; like the latter, it mistakenly sacrifices your unique contributions and characteristics and replaces them with a disfigured, false ideal.

There is a clear statement about plagiarism and a specific process for dealing with potential plagiarism cases

In this course, it is primarily a matter of conducting scholarship ethically: giving credit to others for their ideas, and fairly and accurately gathering and representing the discourse of others (your “data”). It results in an ‘F’ on the particular piece of work and, in cases of willful disregard for the rules, a permanent ‘F’ on your course transcript. Bottom line: don’t do it.

Expectations

Those of you in COMM know that mine are high. Beyond that, I need to say a few things specific to this course. First, while it is a writing course, I suspect the bigger challenge will be the fact that it is reading-intensive. To get something out of our class time, You HAVE to do the reading and you HAVE to stay on top of it. Get out your daily planners, start blocking off the hours, and stick to it. Taking notes, having a dictionary by your side (and perhaps your notes from COMM 250, if you haven't already donated them to the Smithsonian or used them to line your birdcage), and writing down questions and connections as you go will help to make the readings meaningful for you.

Also, it is to your benefit to start reading about environmental issues on your own. You can do this on the cheap if you make use of the internet as mentioned earlier and keep your eyes open around campus and town (it is Missoula, after all). The main articles from the *Missoulian* each day are online, the *Independent* is free every Thursday, and there are several online environmental news services that can send you daily emails. Several environmental organizations have offices in Missoula, and they would love to have you drop by and pick up (and read) their stuff. We're also home to the regional headquarters of the US Forest Service in an area that often sets the precedent for national forest policy. Further, take a few seconds to scan the bulletin boards around campus and you'll find several talks, meetings, films, etc. around town that address environmental issues from a variety of perspectives (conservationist, preservationist, EJ, ecofeminist, free-market, etc). It's all rhetoric, my friends, and we have plenty of it here.

As far as classroom expectations: this is an undergrad-only course, but it earns you upper-division credits and Honors credit, and therefore it is fair to expect you to be able to do more than sit in the back of the room and take notes. (Contrary to popular opinion, you are not a customer of the University. If you want to stick with the business metaphor, thought, you are the raw material and I have been tasked to turn you into a product: a thoughtful, articulate citizen.) That means we will engage in serious intellectual activity – reading serious thinkers, writing and speaking seriously – about serious matters. As many of you know, I believe we can engage in serious intellectual activity *and* enjoy it too, so I don't mean to mislead you about the classroom environment. I do mean to say that you must be willing to come to class ready to engage every day, and if you are not then you might want to reconsider your options.

On a different note: for some odd reason, people get hot under the collar pretty quickly about environmental issues. (I will argue that the main reason is "ideology," and we'll discuss that idea throughout the semester). This can translate into some rather unproductive communication patterns in the classroom, so I want to call attention to that now. Berating people with differing opinions, barking the party line, or pontificating about your pet issue are among such patterns. The purpose is not to provide you with a political platform; instead, we are trying to understand environmental rhetoric. That means that often, you will need to bracket your initial impulses to support or reject a particular position on an environmental issue. Instead, I will encourage you first to understand that position as it functions rhetorically – how it might be persuasive in relation to situation, purposes, and audiences. Eventually you may take a position, but *only after* you have done the hard work of understanding the rhetorical dynamics of a particular piece of discourse. This holds for environmental rhetoric, academic essays about environmental rhetoric, and your colleague's arguments about environmental rhetoric.

There are good interpersonal reasons for doing all of this, but just as important are the personal reasons. One by-product of studying environmental rhetoric is that you, hopefully, will start to see how your own beliefs, attitudes and values have ALREADY been shaped by rhetorical discourse.

You will consistently hear me ask, “Why do you think that,” or “What’s your evidence for that?” These questions are intended to get you to think more carefully about the positions you take, how you have come to accept those positions, and why you respond to environmental rhetoric in certain ways. You may even come to change your mind as a result of our investigations throughout the semester. There’s nothing wrong with that, by the way. Ultimately, that’s what a liberal arts education is intended to enable – your ability to make sound judgments rather than offer knee-jerk reactions based on unexamined assumptions.

I say all of this because I enjoy teaching this course, and I want us to get started on the right foot and be mindful of opportunities and hazards as we go. Please keep me informed as to how the class is going for you and what we can do to enhance your learning.

	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
31-Aug	Course Introduction	Cox, Introduction	Price, "13 Ways of Seeing Nature in LA" (Blackboard)
7-Sep	Labor Day-no class	Cox, Ch 1 Studying Environmental Comm	Cox, Ch 2 Social/Symbolic Constructions...
14-Sep	Muir excerpt Oravec, "Sublime Response" (both on Bb)	Carson excerpt Glotfelty, "Cold War, Silent Spring (Bb)	Blackfeet/Ft. Belknap articles DiChiro, "Nature as Community" (Bb)
21-Sep	Cox, Ch 2 Follow-up	Cox, Ch 3 Public Participation	Articles on USFS mgmt & wilderness designation
28-Sep	Cox, Ch 4 Conflict Resolution & Collab	Workshop	PAPER DUE
5-Oct	Cox, Ch 7 Enviro Advocacy Campaigns	Cox, Ch 7 Enviro Advocacy Campaigns	Cox, Ch 7 Enviro Advocacy Campaigns
12-Oct	Cox, Ch 8 EJ & Climate Justice	Cox, Ch 8 EJ & Climate Justice (Warner event Thursday)	Cox, Ch 8 EJ & Climate Justice
19-Oct	Cox, Ch 9 Science Communication	Cox, Ch 9 Science Comm	Writing Workshop
26-Oct	Cox, Ch 10 Green Mktg/Corp. Advocacy	Cox, Ch 10 Green Mktg/Corp. Advocacy	Cox, Ch 5 Media and Environment Online
2-Nov	Cox, Ch 6 Risk Comm	Intro to Libby case study	Workshop
9-Nov	PAPER DUE	Veterans' Day-no class	Libby
16-Nov	Libby	Libby	Libby
23-Nov	Libby	Thanksgiving-no class	
30-Nov	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations
7-Dec	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations	Paper Presentations
Finals	Finals Week--Meet Monday	Dec. 14, 8:00-10:00 am	