

SPRING 2022—CA 319W  
**CRITICAL WRITING IN THE ARTS**

Course Times and Location:

M 6:30-9:20 PM

HC 1800, Vancouver\*

Instructor:

Dr. Peter Dickinson

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Office Hours: GCA 3855, by appointment

Teaching Assistant:

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Course Description:

In this class students will develop and put into practice a set of skills for writing critically about the fine and performing arts. These skills will be honed in two concurrent and mutually informing ways: by reading, researching, and analyzing a selection of popular and academic arts criticism across the disciplines; and by completing and workshopping a number of in-class and take-home writing assignments. In both cases, our focus will be on closely examining, unpacking, and revising each piece of writing to ensure its substantive and stylistic engagement with the work being represented and/or critiqued, and its suitability for its targeted audience. Our goal, above all, is to become honest and intelligent communicators about our own and others' artistic practice. To that end, in addition to responding to a range of works that will be shown in-class, students will be asked to attend and comment on a selection of exhibitions and live performance events in the city.

Course-Level Educational Goals:

- To introduce, through practice, different written formats (reviews, artist statements, interviews, position pieces) associated with a critical analysis of the arts.
- To develop an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different aesthetic theories and critical approaches to the fine and performing arts.
- To use analytical and interpretative strategies to advance arguments, ideas and position statements, both written and verbal, about the nature of interdisciplinary artistic expression.
- To analyze and evaluate in words the formal elements and expressive ideas of works of art and performance across a range of media.
- To develop and hone students' critical thinking and writing skills.

\*Health and Safety:

As the Omicron variant of COVID-19 continues to spread around the world, SFU has mandated that all lecture and seminar courses move on-line until January 24. That means that our first two classes will be held **synchronously via Zoom**. Links for these classes can be accessed through the course Canvas site. We will determine the nature of future course delivery pending further instructions from SFU's senior administration.

Assuming we do eventually return to in-person instruction, please continue to practice self-care and care for others in all activities related to this course, including our weekly meetings. If you are feeling ill or experiencing any symptoms related to COVID-19, please stay home and contact me regarding ways in which you can make up missed material.

Unless you have an approved exemption, you are required to wear a mask in all indoor common and learning spaces at SFU, including classrooms. Please come to campus prepared with a non-medical mask. If you forget your mask, I will have disposable masks available for you. If you require a mask exemption in the classroom for medical reasons, please contact the Centre for Accessible Learning at [cal\\_admin@sfu.ca](mailto:cal_admin@sfu.ca) for assistance. If you are requesting mask exemptions on other protected grounds, such as religion, you can contact the Office of Student Support, Rights and Responsibilities at [student\\_support@sfu.ca](mailto:student_support@sfu.ca).

#### Required Texts:

Unless otherwise indicated via online hyperlinks included in the weekly syllabus below, all readings for this course have been posted as pdf documents to Canvas. To access Canvas, go to <https://canvas.sfu.ca> and enter your SFU computing id and password. From your dropdown list of courses, click CA 319W; this will take you to our course homepage.

#### Materials/Supplies:

Though not required, it would be helpful if students who have access to their own laptop computers or tablets (and adapters, if needed) could bring them to each class in order to help facilitate the sharing of in-class writing exercises and online examples.

#### Grading:

Attendance and active participation 10%

- While I will be lecturing on the new material each week, a significant portion of our time together will be devoted to discussion—both of the readings and of your critical writing on art across the disciplines. Everybody starts with an automatic 12 marks for this portion of your grade. **You are allowed to miss one class without penalty.** For every additional absence that can't be medically documented, your automatic 12 marks will decrease by 1. I reserve a discretionary 8 marks to reward you for active and engaged participation in our weekly class discussions and in-class activities. I will divide your total marks achieved for this portion of the course by 2 to arrive at your final attendance and participation grade.

Blog posts and weekly short writing assignments 15%

- As this is a writing-intensive course, a portion of every class will be given over to articulating in prose your thoughts about different aesthetic questions and the critical analysis of the fine and performing arts. These will

be low-stakes writing prompts based on questions posed by me and/or material we will review together. In addition, you will be responsible for making a series of posts to our course blog site throughout the semester. These will be based on questions I will pose in connection with our weekly readings, as well as various homework assignments. Specific instructions about the blog posts can be found in a separate document posted to Canvas.

Peer profile/interview	15%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>See the instructions posted to Canvas.</u></li> </ul>	
Artist/critic's statement	15%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>See the instructions posted to Canvas.</u></li> </ul>	
Critical review	20%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>See the instructions posted to Canvas.</u></li> </ul>	
Position piece	25%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>See the instructions posted to Canvas.</u></li> </ul>	

#### Weekly Syllabus:

##### 1. Jan 10: Intro

###### *Readings:*

Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

##### 2. Jan 17: Peer Profiles 1

###### *Readings:*

- Julia Gelshorn, "Two Are Better than One: Notes on the Interview and Techniques of Multiplication"

- Scott MacDonald, "An Ethics and an Aesthetics of Interviewing"

- William Zissner, "Writing about People"

##### 3. Jan 24: Peer Profiles 2

###### *Readings:*

- [Ana Bogdan](#) on Alicia Keys

- [Colleen Hochberger](#) and [Mackenzie Seaborn](#) on Brandon Fernandes

- Ann Powers on Leonard Cohen

- [Rüdiger Sturm](#) on Chloé Zhao

**PEER PROFILES DUE FRIDAY, JAN 28: see assignment instructions on Canvas**

#### 4. Jan 31: What is Criticism and Who Gets to Be a Critic?

##### *Readings:*

- Joan Acocella, "What Critics Do" and "What's Good about Bad Reviews"
- Cole Alvis et al., "Radical Refusals and Indigenous Gifts of Love: A Conversation on Indigenous Theatre after *bug*"
- Miguel Gutierrez, ["The Perfect Dance Critic"](#)
- Daniel Mendelsohn, "A Critic's Manifesto"
- Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang, ["The Dominance of the White Male Critic," \*New York Times\*, 5 July 2019](#)
- Irit Rogoff, "From Criticism to Critique to Criticality"

#### 5. Feb 7: Practising Criticism Otherwise

##### *Readings:*

- Kareem Estefan, ["Reparative Criticism," \*Brooklyn Rail\*, December 2016-January 2017](#)
- Andy Horowitz, ["Re-Framing the Critic for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Dramaturgy, Advocacy and Engagement," \*Culturebot\*, September 2012](#)
- Jennifer L. Roberts, ["The Power of Patience," \*Harvard Magazine\*, November-December 2013](#)
- Anya Ventura, ["Slow Criticism: Art in the Age of Post-Judgement," \*Temporary Art Review\*, 15 February 2016](#)
- Lori Waxman, ["60 Wrd/Min Art Critic"](#)

#### 6. Feb 14: The Fundamentals of Critical Reviewing

##### Readings:

- Sally Banes, "On Your Fingertips: Writing Dance Criticism"
- Robert Christgau, "Writing about Music is Writing First"
- Don McLeese, "Opinion: Critical Essays and Reviews" and "The Keys to Quality Criticism"
- Sample reviews from Michiko Kakutani and A.O. Scott and Peter Schjeldahl

**REVIEWS DUE FRIDAY, FEB 18: see assignment instructions on Canvas**

Feb 21          READING BREAK

#### 7. Feb 28: Artist/Critic's Statements 1

##### Readings:

- Lawrence Alloway, "Network: The Artworld Described as a System"
- Jennifer Liese, ["Toward a History \(and a Future\) of the Artist Statement"](#)
- Artist statements by Joseph Beuys, Dick Higgins, Keith Haring, and Cindy Sherman (from Stiles and Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*)

## 8. March 7: Artist/Critic's Statements 2

### Readings:

- Loney Abrams, [“Don't Quote Deleuze': How to Write a Good Artist Statement”](#)
- Darryl Hocking, “Artist Statements, ‘how to guides’ and the conceptualisation of creative practice”

**ARTIST/CRITIC'S STATEMENTS DUE FRIDAY, MARCH 11: see assignment instructions on Canvas**

## 9. March 14: Multimodal Criticism

### Readings:

- Jason Mittell, [“Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method”](#)
- Dario Llinares, “Podcasting as Liminal Praxis: Mediation, Sound Writing and Identity”
- Kate Mattingly, “Digital Dance Criticism: Screens as Choreographic Apparatus”

## 10. March 21: Position Piece 1

Mira Sucharov, from *Public Influence: A Guide to Op-Ed Writing and Social Media Engagement*

Gilda Williams, from *How to Write about Contemporary Art*

## 11. March 28: Position Piece 2

### Readings:

- Elisha Lim, [“How BIPOC Artists Fight Canada's Biased Art Scene,” \*Hyperallergic\*, 5 August 2021](#)
- Amy Fung, [“Who Bears the Steep Costs of Ethnic Fraud?,” \*Hyperallergic\*, 2 June 2021](#)
- Jules Gimbrone, [“Touching a Third Sound: Trans-Sensing in a World of Deep Fakes,” \*Walker Art Magazine\*, May 16, 2019](#)
- Kim Senklip Harvey, [“The Digital Shift Theatre Must Make”](#)

## 12. April 4: Position Piece Presentations

**POSITION PIECES DUE FRIDAY, APRIL 8: see assignment instructions on Canvas**

## 13. April 11: Position Piece Presentations

### Course and Grading Policies

- It is our collective responsibility to maintain a classroom environment where all feel comfortable to speak, and where intellectual curiosity fuels dialogue and debate. All students are advised to become familiar with SFU regulations pertaining to student conduct

(<http://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-05.html>), and to bring any questions or concerns to my attention.

- Students with hidden or visible disabilities who believe they may need classroom or assignment accommodations are encouraged to register with the [SFU Centre for Accessible Learning](#) (CAL) as soon as possible to ensure that they are eligible, and that approved accommodations and services are implemented in a timely fashion.
- **No late assignments will be accepted without a documented medical excuse.**
- **Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated.** Consult the following website for more information: <https://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-01.html>. **Ignorance of the standards set out by the School and university will not preclude the imposition of severe penalties for any instance of academic dishonesty.**
- All assignments (oral and written) will be assessed according to **content** and **expression**: that is, **what** you say and **how** you say it. All assignments will be given letter grades and will be assessed according to the following standards:

Grade	GPA/%	Description	Comments
A+	4.33 95-100%	<b>Outstanding</b>	Demonstrates an outstanding knowledge of concepts and techniques with a very high degree of skill and originality; an exceptional ability to communicate; evidence of outstanding research skills and an extensive knowledge base.
A	4.0 90-94%	<b>Excellent</b>	Demonstrates an excellent knowledge of concepts and techniques with a high degree of skill and elements of originality; a strong ability to communicate; excellent research and conceptual skills.
A-	3.67 85-89%		
B+	3.33 80-84%	<b>Very Good</b>	Demonstrates a very good knowledge of concepts and techniques, some originality and independence of thought; above average research and conceptual skills.
B	3.0 75-79%	<b>Good</b>	Demonstrates a good knowledge of concepts and techniques; an ability to organize and analyze ideas and to communicate clearly and fluently; good indication of research.
B-	2.67 70-74%		
C+	2.33 65-69%	<b>Satisfactory</b>	Demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of concepts and techniques, together with some skill in using them; an adequate indication of research.
C	2.0 60-64%		

<b>C-</b>	1.67 55-59%	<b>Marginal</b>	Demonstrates a marginal grasp of the subject matter; a less than satisfactory ability to communicate and organize ideas; little indication of research.
<b>D</b>	1.0 50-54%	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	Demonstrates an unsatisfactory grasp of the concepts and techniques; rudimentary knowledge of the subject matter; some evidence that organizational and analytic skills have been developed, but with significant weaknesses in some areas; no indication of research; barely meets the minimum requirements to pass.
<b>F</b>	0-49%	<b>Fail</b>	Demonstrates an inadequate understanding of the subject matter; poor organization and communication skills. A student at this level has failed to meet the minimum requirements to pass.
<b>N</b>	0	<b>Incomplete</b>	Some or all of the coursework is incomplete. The instructor does not expect the student to ever complete the coursework.
<b>DE</b>	N/A	<b>Deferred</b>	Some of the coursework is not yet complete for valid (documented) reasons (e.g., medical). The instructor and student have determined a mutually agreeable timeline for the completion of the coursework.
<b>GN</b>	N/A	<b>Grade Not Available</b>	Grade not available due to circumstances beyond instructor/TA control.
<b>AE</b>	N/A	<b>Compassionate Pass</b>	The student has done at least 50% of the coursework, and would pass the course by completing the remainder, but has a compelling reason not to do so (e.g., medical, family crisis/death, etc.).