Objectification: How to Write (and Talk, and Think) about Objects
MAS.377/21W.734 (CI-H)
2-0-7
Instructors: V. Michael Bove, Jr. and Nora Jackson
Examines stylistic strategies for discussing technological, artistic, and natural objects, with goals of developing a deeper understanding of them, communicating about them in a thoughtfull and effective way, and ultimately improving students’ ability to envision new objects. The writing and communication component of this course prepares students for professional writing and presentation for specialist, technical and general audiences. Students analyze and discuss professional writing samples from a wide variety of disciplines, and conduct written and oral exercises, including peer critique, using their insight from in-class genre analysis to practice describing and communicating clearly and concisely about a wide range of objects. Limited to 18 undergraduates; meets with graduate subject MAS.677.

Course Objectives
Our primary goal in this class is to create and shape texts and oral presentations in relation to different purposes, audiences, and rhetorical situations. By completing a set of writing exercises and reading, discussing, and presenting on a wide range of writings and criticism, you will solidify your understanding of the concept of genre, and learn basic genre analysis.

In addition, you will gain confidence in your ability to construct the foundational structure of an argument, especially how to link claims, evidence, and analysis to support and develop a central thesis, including consideration of alternative perspectives or counterarguments. Discussion of types of argument (categorical propositions, cause and effect assertions, evaluative arguments, and proposals) and models of argumentation (e.g. Toulmin) will help you better understand the underlying assumptions in critical argumentation, the needs of an audience, and how to respond to counterarguments.

You will apply these types and models of argument in a series of written and oral assignments, including:
- four essays that make persuasive arguments about objects by supporting evaluative claims with definition and cause and effect assertions;
- oral presentations that justify analysis of, and evaluative claims about, class readings;
- peer reviews where you will support your claims about the strengths and weaknesses of peer writing with analysis, reasoning and constructive criticism.

In the course of the term, you will also develop the flexibility in word-choice and sentence construction necessary for conveying complex ideas coherently and adapting prose for different audiences. In addition, this class will teach you how to develop strategies for reading analytically, managing and structuring information, drafting, and
revising. You will evaluate sources of information (e.g. using the BEAM model), integrate sources effectively for specific rhetorical purposes, and understand reasons for and systems of source citation in academic writing.

Finally, in-class writing workshops and peer reviews will help you understand how to critique others’ texts constructively and productively, and to use the peer review process to develop your own texts.

Reading List

Textbooks (available at The Coop and on library reserve):

Other Readings:
See Stellar site

Class Meetings

T 2/6
Class Discussion
Heidi Estrem, “Writing is a knowledge-making activity;” John Maguire, “Object-Based Writing”

In-Class writing exercise
Short writing exercise using objects (following Maguire’s advice of “writing with things you can drop on your foot”)

R 2/8
To Read
Forsyth, preface and ch 1-2, Trimble, ch 1-2; Pinker, ch 1: “Good Writing”

Communication Skill Objective
Introduction to Purpose and Rhetorical Situation (rhetor-exigence-text-audience)

T 2/13
To Read
MacGregor, “Introduction: Signals from the Past” plus your choice of object descriptions that interest you.

Writing DUE
Choose one of the objects in MacGregor, and write a brief (250-500 words) description of the writer’s approach to the object and its context. Comment on the effectiveness and any shortcomings of the essay. Come prepared to present/debate your analysis in class.

Communication Skill Objective
Genre/Textual analysis; Presentation and justification of review
R 2/15
To Read
4 readings of your choice from the Technological Objects section on Stellar (will be discussed this class and next); Trimble, ch 3-5; Forsyth, ch 3-5
Suggested Reading: “Writing as Design, Design as Writing,” by Don Norman (see Writing Resources on Stellar)
Class Discussion Writing and communicating about technological objects
Communication Skill Objective Organizing and designing text

T 2/20
NO CLASS (Presidents Day – Monday Schedule)

R 2/22
To Read Forsyth, ch 6-7; Trimble 6-7; Pinker, “A Window Onto the World”
Class Discussion Writing and communicating about technological objects (continued); Guidelines on how to conduct a Peer Review
Communication Skill Objective Clarity and “Classic Prose”

T 2/27
Writing DUE Essay 1 (1250 words) + self-reflection due: Write an essay on a technological object, for either a general audience or one familiar with the relevant technical field (your choice). Describe the object, its operational principles, its societal context, its user experience, and its aesthetics. In your self-reflection, identify the audience you chose to write for, and explain how you catered to the needs of that audience.
To Read Forsyth, ch 8-9
Class Activity Oral presentation and peer critique of technological object essay.
Communication Skill Objective Analytical reading and review of peer work

R 3/1
Class Activity Oral presentation and peer critique of technological object essay.
To Read Forsyth, ch 10-11
Communication Skill Objective Analytical reading and review of peer work

T 3/6
To Read Forsyth, ch 12-13, Trimble, ch 8-9; slides on Argument (Stellar)
Class Discussion How to make an argument: Fahnestock & Secor’s types of argument (categorical proposition, cause and effect assertion, evaluative argument, proposal)
Communication Skill Objective Rhetorical moves in critical argumentation

R 3/8
To Read “Using Toulmin’s Model of Argumentation,” by Joan Karbach (see Writing Resources on Stellar); Pinker, “The Curse of Knowledge” (text and slides)
Class discussion
Elements of the argument: Toulmin model of critical argumentation

Communication Skill Objective
Rhetorical moves in critical argumentation; Counterargument; Sizing up your audience; establishing *identification* (Kenneth Burke)

T 3/13
To Read
4 readings of your choice from the Natural Objects section on Stellar (will be discussed this class and next)
Forsyth, ch 14-15; Trimble, ch 10

Class Discussion
Writing and communicating about natural objects

R 3/15
To Read
Forsyth, ch 16-17; Trimble, ch 11-12

Class Discussion
Writing and communicating about natural objects (continued)

T 3/20
Writing DUE
*Essay 2 (1250 words) + self-reflection due: Write an essay about a natural object. Describe the object and its relationships with the natural environment and with human society. In your self-reflection, report on how you used both Fahnestock and Secor’s types of argument and Toulmin’s model for argumentation to make your case.*

To Read
Forsyth, ch 18-19

Class Activity
Oral presentation and peer critique of natural object essay.

Communication Skill Objective
Analytical reading and review of peer work

R 3/22
Class Activity
Oral presentation and peer critique of natural object essay.

To Read
Forsyth, ch 20-21

Communication Skill Objective
Analytical reading and review of peer work

SPRING BREAK

T 4/3
To Read
4 readings of your choice from the Aesthetic Objects section on Stellar
Forsyth, ch 22-23; Trimble, ch 13; Pinker, “Arcs of Coherence” (text and slides)

Communication Skill Objective
Coherence and Organization

R 4/5
To Read
4 readings of your choice from the Evocative Objects section on Stellar (will be discussed this class and next)
Forsyth, ch 24-25; slides on “Finding an Organizing Scheme”

Class Discussion
Writing and communicating about evocative objects
T 4/10
Writing DUE
Revision of Essay 2: please edit in response to the instructors’ comments as well as to in-class peer review comments, and make any other changes that you think will improve the essay. In a self-reflection briefly describe what changes you’ve made and explain why.

To Read
Forsyth, ch 26-27

Class Discussion
Writing and communicating about evocative and aesthetic objects (continued)

Communication Skill Objective
Coherence and Organization continued

R 4/12
Writing DUE
Essay 3 (1250 words) + self-reflection due: Write an essay on an evocative object. Describe the object with a focus on people, places, experiences, times, and/or other objects that it evokes. In your self-reflection, report on your purpose as a writer, and on the organizational scheme of your essay, and why it suits your purpose.

To Read
Forsyth, ch 28-29

Class Activity
Oral presentation and peer critique of evocative object essay.

Communication Skill Objective
Analytical reading and review of peer work

T 4/17
Patriots Day – Vacation

R 4/19
Class Activity
Oral presentation and peer critique of evocative object essay.

To Read
Forsyth, ch 30-31; Trimble, ch 14

Communication Skill Objective
Analytical reading and review of peer work

T 4/24
Exercise DUE
Find a short essay (not among the assigned readings) involving an object you can experience for yourself — for example, an essay on a building you can visit or an artistic work you can see in person, or a review of a food/drink item or other product you can try — and write a brief (250-500 words) description of the writer’s approach to the object and its context. Do you agree with the author’s evaluation of the object? Comment on your experience relative to the author’s. Come prepared to present/debate your analysis in class. Please post to the class Web site a copy of or link to the essay prior to class so that we can distribute these essays to the rest of the students. We encourage you to look more broadly for this essay than just a Google search, whether exploring books at the MIT Libraries or using some of the digital resources at https://libraries.mit.edu/experts/

To Read
In preparation for this short essay, read Evaluating Sources Rhetorically: The BEAM Model (Bizup) (see Writing Resources)
R 4/26

To Read  
4 readings of your choice from the Oblique Objects section on Stellar  
Forsyth, ch 32-33

Class Discussion  
Writing about something else by writing about an object

T 5/1

To Read  
4 readings of your choice from the Imaginary Objects section on Stellar (will be discussed this class and next)  
Forsyth, ch 34-35

Class Discussion  
Writing and communicating about imaginary objects

R 5/3

To Read  
Forsyth, ch 36-37

Class Discussion  
Writing and communicating about imaginary objects (continued)

T 5/8

NO CLASS (Media Lab event)

R 5/10

Writing DUE  
Essay 4 (1250 words) + self-reflection due: Write an essay on an imaginary object. Describe an object that does not exist (whether fanciful or mundane) in such a way as to make it real for the reader. In your self-reflection, report on the rhetorical strategies you employed to visualize your imaginary object, and on what you did to persuade your reader to imagine the object as real.

To Read  
Forsyth, ch 38-39

Class Activity  
Oral presentation and peer critique of imaginary object essay.

Communication Skill Objective  
Analytical reading and review of peer work

T 5/15

Class Activity  
Oral presentation and peer critique of imaginary object essay.

To Read  
Forsyth, Peroration and Epilogue

Communication Skill Objective  
Analytical reading and review of peer work

R 5/17

Writing DUE  
Revision of Essay 3 or 4 (your choice) due: in addition, in a self-reflection briefly describe what changes you’ve made and explain why

Conclusion and Course Evaluation
Grading:

- Class participation will count for 20%, and includes oral presentation of the two short analytical writing exercises due on 2/13 and 4/24, presentation of peer critique, and your ability to justify your own choices as a writer during peer critique.

- The essays (four total) will count for 15% each, and the two revisions for 5% each, totaling a writing grade of 70%;

- The two short exercises together count for 10%.

Class participation is required. More than two unexcused absences will drop your final grade by a letter, and more than five are grounds for failing the course.

Papers that are late and unexcused in advance will be penalized by one-half of a letter grade for each class meeting that they're late, up to two letter grades. If you need an extension, please tell the instructors at least one week ahead of time. The second essay – and your choice of either the third or fourth – will be revised and resubmitted, addressing instructors’ and peers’ suggestions.

Essays are submitted as exercises in development and expression of your thoughts. It’s not a good use of the instructors’ time to have to mark up simple errors, so please thoroughly proofread your assignments before turning them in. If you are in need of guidance in particular matters of grammar or style, please meet with one of the instructors, or contact the Writing and Communication Center.

Plagiarism Policy: When writing a paper or creating any expressive work, you must identify the nature and extent of your intellectual indebtedness to the authors whom you have read or to anyone else from whom you have gotten ideas (e.g., classmates, invited lecturers, etc.). You can do so through footnotes, a bibliography, or some other kind of credit in the text. While some of the writing in this subject will be of a popular rather than a scholarly nature, quotations and ideas from others must still be acknowledged. Failure to disclose your reliance on the research or thinking of others is plagiarism, which is considered to be the most serious academic offense and will be treated as such. If you have any questions about how you should document the sources of your ideas, please ask your instructors before you submit your written work. MIT’s academic policy can be found at the following link: http://web.mit.edu/policies/10/10.2.html.