

WRI 101-H01—Writing Boston: Athens of America
Simmons University
Spring 2025

Professor Gregory P. Williams, Ph.D.

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Class meeting: Lefavour Hall, E-H440, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3:30 to 4:50

Office hours: Thursdays, 10:00 to 12:00, Main College Building (A), Room 340B

Course Description

Writing Boston is a writing-intensive course that utilizes Boston as a theme to teach basic writing skills. Through engagement with readings about the City, this course develops students' writing, critical analysis, and information literacy skills. The course centers assignments that require observing, reflecting, drafting, and rewriting. Through active inquiry tied to readings about the City and writing assignments tied to research and proper use of technological tools (including AI), students develop basic information literacy and college level writing skills.

In this section, **Writing Boston: Athens of America**, we learn about writing by exploring Boston as a model for America. The course's title is a reference to Boston's self-described role in American society. As America's Athens, Boston's politics were central to the formation of the United States itself. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, in fact, served as a model for the U.S. Constitution of 1789. And the mode of United States economic development also followed in the footsteps of Boston: extensive international trade, later paired with intensive industry inland. Like Athens, Boston became a cultural hub, and, like Athens, it developed an elite-run political system characterized by inequality.

Learning Objectives

- a) Demonstrate competencies in writing, reading, and thinking;
- b) Demonstrate an understanding of writing as a rigorous process;
- c) Demonstrate awareness of context, audience, and purpose;
- d) Access and use information in accordance with academic standards;
- e) Evaluate information/sources for credibility and relevance;
- f) Learn best practices in using writing and narrative generating tools (including but not limited to AI prompt engineering, citation management systems, tools for evaluating digital output).

Books

Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, *A Pocket Style Manual*, 9th ed. (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2021).

Mark Peterson, *The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of An Atlantic Power, 1630-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Recommended: Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *The Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 5th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021).

Assignments

There are low stakes and polished assignments in this course. Students receive credit for completing the former, whereas the latter are graded. We will practice many types of writing, such as personal narrative, summary, description, and analysis and argumentation. You can expect to write at 5,000 words (about 20 pages) this semester.

Low-stakes assignments totaling about 2,000 words (40%) include, for example: in class writing exercises, peer feedback, and an in-class exercise on AI/ machine learning.

Polished assignments include the following:

1. Personal narrative/ reflection (15%). This 1,000-word essay asks you to perform a narrative style of writing in response to a prompt, provided in class.
2. Analytical Paper Assignment (25%). The longest paper of the semester, this 1,500-word essay asks you to write an analytical paper in response to a prompt, provided in class. You will demonstrate skills such as summary, paraphrasing and direct quotation.
3. Op-Ed (20%). The shortest but most thoroughly revised paper of the semester, this 800-word essay asks you to write an op-ed essay about Boston today, also in response to a prompt provided in class.

Course Outline

On most days, class will begin with a short writing or peer editing exercise based on the topics we have been reading and discussing. Our politics theme is really a venue for learning and practicing informed nonfiction writing. Thus, a lot of our reading is on the politics of Boston (I have tried to pick examples of good writing); a lot of our in-class work and all assignments are about writing.

Week 1 (1/21, 1/23): Welcome to Writing Boston

Robert J. Allison, "Why Was Boston the Athens of America?" Blog, Old North Church

& Historic Site (January 2017).

Week 2: (1/28, 1/30): Establishing Boston

Peterson, Introduction (pp. 1-24); Book I introduction, “Render Unto Caesar;” Ch. 1, “Boston Emerges” introduction (pp. 27-31), Trouble with Trade: Atlantic Commerce and Commonwealth Values” (pp. 61-66); “Narragansetts, Mohegans, and the Birth of the United Colonies” (pp. 67-71); and “The Birth of the Commonwealth, 1643” (pp. 82-84).

Week 3 (2/4, 2/6): Boston Political Economy I

Peterson, Ch. 2, “The World in a Shilling (pp. 85-138)

Week 4 (2/11, 2/13): Cultural Power, Regional Hegemony

Peterson, Ch. 4, “*Theopolis Americana*” introduction (pp. 191-195) and Samuel Sewall and *The Selling of Joseph* (pp. 195-206); Ch. 5 introduction (pp. 247-250) and Boston and Acadia

Week 5 (2/18, 2/20): Reflecting on Boston: Drafts and Edits

Paper 1 draft due Tuesday 2/18 Plan to bring a hard copy of your paper to class. You will swap papers with a peer, and edit each other’s work.

Week 6 (2/25, 2/27): Reflecting on Boston: Good Writing is Done Writing

Paper 1 due Tuesday 2/27

SPRING BREAK (3/3 to 3/7)

Week 7 (3/11, 3/13): Massachusetts’ Unique Political Form

Peterson, Ch. 7, “John Adams, Boston’s Diplomat” (pp. 326-375)

Week 8 (3/18, 3/20): Living in Adams’s World

Shannon Jenkins, “The Massachusetts General Court: Exceptionally Old-School,” in *The Politics of Massachusetts Exceptionalism: Reputation Meets Reality*, Jerold Duquette and Erin O’Brien, eds. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022, 95-115).

Week 9 (3/25, 3/27): Political and Technological Experiments

Peterson, Ch. 8, “The Failure of Federalism” (pp. 379-443)

Bring your laptop! We will be asking prompts of AI/ machine learning and writing reflections about what we find.

Week 10 (4/1, 4/3): The Athens of America

Thomas O’Connor, *The Athens of America: Boston, 1825-1845*, Ch. 5 “The Grecian Model” (pp. 91-125).

Paper 2 draft due Tuesday 4/1 Plan to bring a hard copy to class. We will do a peer editing exercise.

Week 11 (4/8, 4/10):

Question Time and Meetings with Professor Williams

This week we’ll be doing something a little different. Professor Williams will provide more information as we get closer to the day.

Week 12 (4/15, 4/17): Boston Political Economy II

Peterson, Ch. 9, “From Merchant Princes to Lords of the Loom: Remaking Boston’s Political Economy” (pp. 444-485)

Paper 2 due Tuesday, 4/15

Week 13 (4/22, 4/24): Reflective Writing

There will be no class on 4/22 due to Administrative Monday, and there will be no class on 4/24 when Professor Williams will be at a conference. Take this week to do low stakes reflective writing. An assignment will be announced.

Week 14 (4/29, 5/1): Fragmentation, or, A Reckoning?

Peterson, Ch. 11, “Dismembering the Body: Boston’s Spatial Fragmentation” introduction (pp. 540-542), Immigration and Ethnic Segregation in the Corporate City (pp. 564-568); Ch. 12, “The Was a Boston Once,” introduction (pp. 578-579), Violent Renditions (pp. 605-622).

Paper 3 draft due Tuesday 4/29. Plan to bring a hard copy to class. We will do a different kind of peer editing assignment.

Week 15 (Tuesday, 5/6): The Evolving City

Paper 3 due Tuesday 5/6

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

One of the subjects covered by this course is artificial intelligence (AI)/ machine learning technology. We will cover the potential uses, pitfalls, and ethical implications of AI. However, AI should not be used for any writing assignments, unless otherwise specified. Unpermitted use of AI tools on assignments (even as first drafts) will be considered a violation of Simmons' academic integrity policy.

Other Policies and Notes

(a) Students are expected to treat one another with respect and hold themselves to high academic standards. Follow this link for Simmons University's policies on academic integrity, student resources, accessibility, and gender-based misconduct (such as sexual harassment): <https://internal.simmons.edu/students/academics/syllabus-policies>.

(b) Letter grades will be assigned to averages as follows: >93= A; 90-92.9= A-; 86-89.9= B+; 83-85.9= B; 80-82.9= B-; 76-79.9= C+; 73-75.9= C; 70-72.9= C-; 66-69.9= D+; 63-65.9= D; 60-62.9= D-; <60= F.

(c) Simmons University and Professor Williams are committed to equal access to programs and learning opportunities. Students who believe they may be entitled to an academic accommodation should consult with the Office of Accessibility Services (OAS) at access@simmons.edu.

(d) This syllabus is not a contract. The instructor reserves the right to alter course requirements and/or assignments based on new materials, class discussions, or other legitimate pedagogical objectives.

(e) The course materials are the intellectual property of the instructor and Simmons University. Students may not share, in person or online, course material (such as notes, the syllabus, paper prompts, and tests). Unauthorized copying of course materials violates the Simmons Honor Code and federal copyright laws. Students may not record lectures or class discussions without explicit permission of the instructor (unless recordings are permitted by a student's accommodation).