WA 01375: Writing About Popular Culture
Spring 2022

The problem isn't picking out what will last. That, actually, is relatively easy. Critical reception is imperfect and it's not always aligned with popular taste, but major oversights are rare. The problem is figuring out, in the constant bombardment of attention-seeking missiles, which ones tell us something about who we are.

— [Louis Menand](#)

Whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is.

— [bell hooks](#)

What's important is the context in which the opinion was reached and the manner in which it is expressed. This is the difference between film criticism and pub talk. Pub talk can be all opinion and nothing else; film criticism, if it is done properly, should involve opinion, description, contextualisation, analysis and (if you're lucky) entertainment.

— [Mark Kermode](#)

Dr. Jason Luther (he/him)

✉️ **Email:** luther@rowan.edu I typically respond within 24 hours and during the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., though it may take me longer over the weekends. Please take this response time into account when reaching out—it's difficult for me to help if you contact me the night before something is due.

📞 The Writing Arts Department's Main Office Number is (856) 256-4345. Call this number if you need to reach me by phone.

🎥 **Zoom**: I am available to chat by appointment throughout the week. My office hours are after class on Wednesdays (11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.) [[Zoom link](#)]

Materials

💻 📺 📼 💿 🎦 📽️ **Technology**. You'll need reliable access to a computer, high-speed internet, Canvas, Zoom, and your Rowan email. Ideally you'll also have access to various intermediaries of pop culture: primarily streaming services and social media (especially YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok). Occasionally (like this weekend) you'll need

to pay to rent something ($5-6). Of course, library cards, TV antennas, and torrents work too.

🕐 **Time**. This course requires commitment to readings, discussions, research, and the process of composing and revising. That said, people work at their own pace so seek support and plan accordingly.

📂🔗 **Links, videos, & pdfs**. I believe in Rowan's pillars, including affordability, and for all the problems the web presents us, I believe it also supplies us with enough resources that we don't have to buy textbooks.

Course description

Whether we are ranking the greatest gangster films of all time, contextualizing Megan Thee Stallion's brand of feminism, deciding if *Cobra Kai* is a postmodern twist on heroism or a franchise flex, or explicating the steampunk weaponry of Fallout 4, the various texts of popular culture serve as important public moments for meaning-making, opportunities for how we — artists, companies, publishers, writers, audiences — make sense of the world.

Writing About Pop Culture thus considers the different approaches writers take as they situate, analyze, and evaluate pop culture through its various forms of writing, including reviews, interviews, listicles, features, and digital media. You will read from these genres and learn how critics think about them, both before publication (as part of their listening, viewing, reading, and writing process) and after — including when they get things "wrong."

We will explore what's "popular" and "cultural" about pop culture — and the subjects, objects, and genres that authors and outlets choose to write about. We'll talk about ethical concerns about representation, inclusion, credibility, commercialism, and objectivity. And we'll grapple with problems that writers and editors encounter when writing about pop culture — how to research artistic context; deal with troubling or challenging subjects; and qualify one's tastes, perspectives, and preferences. You'll also develop vocabularies for understanding some of the competing interests involved in pop culture, including the creative industries, fans, consumers, artists, genres, as well as the critics and outlets themselves. We'll ask questions about the methods by which writers and editors should interpret or evaluate their subjects, which aspects of pop culture writers and editors should feel accountable to, how different objects and media necessitate varying practices of reception, and how writers should account for these practices in their drafting process.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this course prepares you to make your writing public. I will encourage you to submit your work to *Halftone*, a new digital-born

publication run by students in Writing Arts, as an apprenticeship for freelancing or submitting your work to other national and international digital publications. As such, we will workshop drafts of your writing periodically, sharpening your work so that it is publication-ready.

The Workshop Model

Pop culture is a social phenomenon and we will approach it as such via class discussion — and lots of it. In addition to discussing readings, genres, and examples of texts that circulate within pop culture, we'll be spending the majority of our time talking about *your* writing and your encounters with pop culture through **THREE ROUNDS** of intensive workshops. These workshops will invite you to read and respond to essays your classmates post, each focusing on a different kind of media, including film, television, and music. You will be graded on both the completeness of your initial drafts and the responses you give to your peers. Because there are so many writers in this class, we will break you up into groups of 4-5 for each workshop. You will revise 2 of these essays -- either for *Halftone* (see below) or for a final portfolio, which will include a detailed reflection about your revision process and what you will do with your pieces after our class ends. What follows is a point breakdown but you can also see the [rough schedule here](#).

Workshop 1 (Weeks 4-6): Film	
Your draft, posted on Canvas at least 2 days prior to workshop	45
Feedback, posted in Canvas at the end of each workshop session x 15 (3 points each)	45
Oral feedback (in class, holistic)	10
	100 points
Workshop 2 (Weeks 8-10): Music	
Your draft, posted on Canvas at least 2 days prior to workshop	45
Feedback, posted in Canvas at the end of each workshop session x 15 (3 points each)	45
Oral feedback (in class, holistic)	10
	100 points
Workshop 3 (Weeks 12-14): Television	
Your draft, posted on Canvas at least 2 days prior to workshop	45
Feedback, posted in Canvas at the end of each workshop	45

session x 15 (3 points each)	
Oral feedback (in class, holistic)	10
	100 points
Portfolio (Week 15)	
Revisions x 2 (50 points each)	100
Reflection	50
	150 points
TOTAL	450 points

Grades are posted on Canvas as soon as possible after I assess your work, though point totals might fluctuate slightly depending on mode of instruction and the class' collective needs.

In terms of my responses to your work, you should expect my feedback to be constructive and kind. I will respond primarily in two ways: according to the learning and assessment goals articulated in the unit assignment, and as a reader who is interacting with the text you've produced. Feedback on your work is one of the primary available spaces for individual instruction, so please see me during office hours or make an appointment if you'd like to discuss your work further!

Letter grades will be based on the following final averages:

A	94-100	C+	77-79.9
A-	90-93.9	C	74-76.9
B+	87-89.9	C-	70-73.9
B	84-86.9	D	65-69.9
B-	80-83.9	F	64.9 or less

Getting your work out there: *Halftone*

With the help of some members from this class, Writing Arts softly launched *Halftone* in Fall 2021. Halftone's [mission](#) is to "produce thought-provoking content about popular culture that both advances public discourse and inspires new conversations." It has the potential to be an important platform for consolidating the work of our collective, thus making it more visible. As Ben Falk writes in his book, *Entertainment Journalism*, in an era where mass reviewing is the norm, and media is judged with a thumbs up or down, it can be difficult to stand out from the other writers. *Halftone* helps with this, as we seek to publish new work weekly, if not daily. Throughout the course I will encourage you to revise and submit your writing, building a public portfolio of your work that you can later share with other publications or prospective employers. Whether you take me up on that offer is up to you.

Course Policies

Learning during a pandemic. We are living at a time when unexpected life changes outside the classroom — unemployment, illness, and grief — are the new normal. Even before the first wave devastated New Jersey, nearly half of Rowan University students experienced food insecurity. For that reason, I'm determined to be as flexible with deadlines and course requirements as possible while acknowledging that we also depend on each other's commitment to a vibrant and healthy learning environment. A common refrain I use with students is this: *you can't stop a moving train*. Please communicate your needs to me, but also to your classmates when it comes to collaborative work. Complex and sensitive issues — such as those that may require one or more of the resources mentioned below — should be resolved via phone or chat (not email or text) whenever possible. If an issue occurs, please let me know as soon as it is reasonable, especially before it becomes more difficult to manage. There also may be times, whether because of my own health or exposure (or my children's) when I have to teach this course remotely. We *all* have to be reasonably flexible.

COVID-19 Safety. We will follow the most up-to-date university policies and health guidelines throughout the semester, including masking guidelines. Below is a review of the university policies (updated on the Return to Rowan website on January 6, 2022) followed by some additional guidance for our specific classroom.

Masking:
- Everyone at Rowan [needs to wear a mask](#) in classrooms and other indoor public spaces (such as offices) indefinitely, regardless of vaccination status.
- Masks must be worn properly; that is, they need to *cover your*
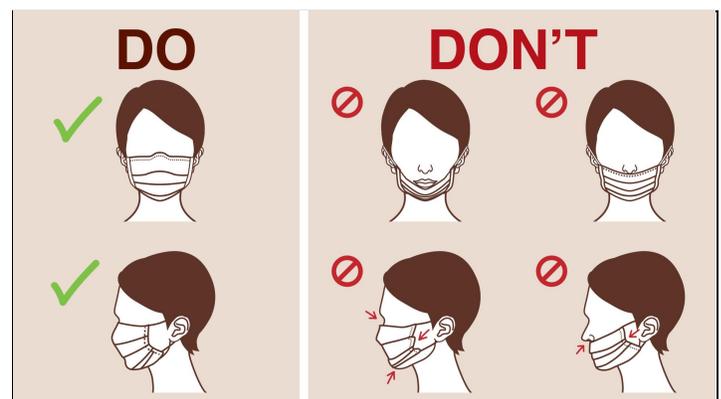
nose and mouth. If you need to take a brief break from your mask, please do it briefly and outside. If you are not wearing your mask correctly, I will say something to you about it.
- Masks are inconvenient and slightly uncomfortable; however, they protect us and they protect others, especially those of us who have compromised immune systems or live with vulnerable loved ones.

If you feel sick or have symptoms:
- Stay home!
- Get tested. See below or check out [other sites across the state of NJ](#)
- If you have COVID or know you have been exposed, follow Rowan's latest [Isolation and Quarantine Requirements](#) and complete a [student form](#).
- Check our [lesson plan doc](#) and Canvas for information on what you missed. Email me if you have any questions or want to update me on anything. Although I will not offer a synchronous version of our class, I will work with you so you can complete the work successfully at your own pace.

New! From the University:

If you're a student exhibiting COVID-related symptoms (sore throat, headache, congestion, nausea, or loss of taste or smell) please call [the Wellness Center](#) at 856-256-4333 to schedule a COVID test.

Rapid antigen testing. Through Feb. 18, rapid antigen testing for students and employees who are symptomatic or who have been exposed to COVID-19 is available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. at Hollybush. No registration is required, but you must have your Banner ID information on site.

Asymptomatic testing. Any student or employee who is asymptomatic for COVID-19 may receive a PCR test if they feel they've been exposed to the coronavirus. Asymptomatic testing is available in the Owl's Nest on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Prior to the first test, participants must [register for an account](#). Click on the "forgot password" link, enter your Rowan email and follow instructions to complete registration.

Cleaning
- There are cleaning products and hand sanitizer in our classroom.
- Classrooms get a thorough cleaning overnight, but it is smart to still clean our workspaces between classes. (This isn't just a COVID thing; college campuses are germy and other viruses like the flu are easily spread.)
- Rather than assume the previous class cleaned up after themselves, I am recommending that we all clean the surfaces where we will sit before we get started.

Mutual Respect and Smooth Class Sessions
- If anyone is not following the university guidelines, my goals are to handle this as privately as possible, to check for understanding, and to find solutions so that person can attend class and everyone has a smooth experience. For example, if you forget a mask, I will give you a spare disposable one that I have on hand.
- However, we need to think about the best interest of our whole community in class, and disruptions to our sessions need to be kept to a minimum. If an individual student is not complying with university policies and we cannot arrive at a solution in a timely manner to get class started, I will have to ask that student to leave, and we can work with the Dean of Students to resolve the issue later in the day.

Student resources. Please keep in mind that there are many resources available to you. The First Year Writing Program has an incredibly helpful [Student Resource page](#) that provides an overview of many of these resources.

Participation and presence. *In my experience, students fail this class when there is a lack of meaningful presence.* As such, I don't have an attendance policy as much as I believe that our learning environment depends on a commitment to such presence. For me, being present means working actively, collaboratively, responsively, thoughtfully, responsibly, and constructively to one another, and generally being a resource for our collective intellectual development.

If we have to pivot to a remote format at some point, our College has developed some helpful [policy guidelines](#) on classroom conduct and use of Zoom in a virtual classroom. While I agree it is no fun to teach to black squares, you should know that I also understand the personal and social challenges of remote learning, so while I strongly encourage you to turn your camera on, also keep in mind the basic principle of presence. In addition to having your camera on during class, you can be present by:
- Speaking using the microphone.
- Using the chat feature of Zoom.
- Checking in with the course every day on Canvas.
- Communicating with me or a group via email, discussion boards, meetings, and more.
- Adding comments to lessons in Google Docs.
- Annotating readings.

Learning with and about technology. I hope you will develop and practice a mindful workflow that allows you to integrate your smart technologies while being as present as possible in our activities. This is not easy and so I may on occasion assist individuals or the class as a whole in this practice, depending on how well your presence is being managed.

Further, you can expect technology to fail in plenty of ways throughout the semester.

To avoid disaster, whenever applicable please be sure to save all of your materials in three ways: (1) to your device's hard drive, (2) to a physical external drive, and (3) to a cloud-based storage system (i.e. Google Drive). As someone who has used this system for nearly 10 years I can attest to its effectiveness: I have never lost, deleted, or suffered a loss from a corrupted file.

Like many other learning contexts, iteration and failure are instrumental to becoming more competent with technologies; users must be both tenacious and flexible. I expect you to engage with the material thoughtfully while also being critical in troubleshooting those unexpected problems. Of course some of you are better equipped to adapt to and learn with new technologies than others. Although this course occasionally requires technical instruction, it also assumes you have *some* facility with digital vocabularies. If you find yourself needing assistance, consider Googling the problem or using resources like YouTube TV or better yet, [LinkedIn Learning](#).

If after trying these self-learning strategies you're still stuck, please do get in touch with me. Technical problems can be difficult to describe, especially when we are using different operating systems and devices. So if you email me about a problem that is technical, *take the time to include additional details and screenshots*. Tell me about your system, settings, what you've tried, what you don't have access to, or your specific limitations. Trying to troubleshoot one question per email is frustrating for both of us and not a good use of our time. A better course of action would be to set up a time to meet, where we can share screens.

Late work. If you anticipate not being able to complete an assignment on time, please reach out and let me know what is going on at least 48 hours before the deadline. I will work with you to come up with a reasonable extension.

Email. I typically respond to emails within 24 hours and during the hours of 9am and 5pm, though it may take me longer over the weekends. Please take this response time into account when reaching out—it's difficult for me to help if you contact me the night before something is due.

Civility. I strive to cultivate an educational environment in our classroom that is inclusive, honest, democratic, and, above all, kind. In my experience, such an environment can take time to build, but it must begin with an assumed sense of respect and sensitivity, and especially toward those who do not write, act, speak, or look like ourselves. Toward that end, we will use preferred names and otherwise respect the communicative needs of each person based on aspects of their social identity as quickly as possible.

Accessibility. I assume that all of us learn in different ways, and that the organization of any course will accommodate each student differently. For example, you may prefer to process information by speaking and listening, so that some of the information on this course site is difficult to absorb. Or you might prefer to annotate printed texts over digital ones. Please talk to me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them.

Remember too that support services, including the Writing Center, are available to **all** students.

If you have a disability that may have an impact upon your work in this class, please contact me. Students must provide documentation of their disability to the Academic Success Center in order to receive official University services and accommodations.The Academic Success Center can be reached at 856-256-4234. The Center is located on the 3rd floor of Savitz Hall. The staff is available to answer questions regarding accommodations or assist you in your pursuit of accommodations. They look forward to working with you to meet your learning goals.

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From the University: Your academic success is important. If you have a documented disability that may have an impact upon your work in this class, please contact me. Students must provide documentation of their disability to the Academic Success Center in order to receive official University services and accommodations. The Academic Success Center can be reached at 856-256-4234. The Center is located on the 3rd floor of Savitz Hall. The staff is available to answer questions regarding accommodations or assist you in your pursuit of accommodations. We look forward to working with you to meet your learning goals.

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Rowan Success Network

The Rowan Success Network powered by Starfish® is designed to make it easier for you to connect with the resources you need to be successful at Rowan. Throughout the term, you may receive emails from the Rowan Success Network team (Starfish®) regarding your academic performance. Please pay attention to these emails and consider taking the recommended actions. Utilize the scheduling tools to make appointments at your convenience (i.e. Tutoring, Advising, Financial Aid, etc.). Additional information about RSN may be found at rowan.edu/rsn.

The Writing Center

For support in any stage of the composing process, please consider consulting the Writing Center, For hours and to book an appointment, visit their website.

Academic integrity

All non-original content that appears in your work should be documented. Any phrases or passages used that are not in your own words absolutely must be put in quotation marks. Please let me know if you have questions about your citation work in a particular assignment or writing context. That said, I encourage a conscientious application of Fair Use for Education principles. As we are writing for hybrid academic and public contexts, I expect citation to be consistent and

visually/functionally appropriate for the medium in which borrowed and remixed work appears. Please be in touch if you have any questions about this.

Further, I expect all compositions submitted for course credit to be the work of the student(s) who turned in the work. Per Rowan University policy, all academic integrity violations — no matter the level or sanction — will be reported to the Office of the Provost.

The Department of Writing Arts does not allow students to turn in the same writing assignment for more than one class. Students must receive express permission of their instructor to submit writing or a substantial part of a written text previously submitted to another class. Not doing so is considered academic dishonesty and, following the policies laid out by Rowan, may result in an F for that assignment.

Incompletes
The grade of INC may be awarded only at the end of a term, when all but a minor portion of the coursework has been satisfactorily completed. The grade of INC is not to be awarded in place of a failing grade or when you are expected to repeat the course; inH such a case, a grade other than INC must be assigned. You should make arrangements with me to receive an incomplete grade before the end of the term.

Writing Arts Core Values
Like other courses in the Writing Arts sequence, the above objectives are informed by the major's core values (note: for more details on how these can help you with Portfolio Seminar, see the document "Questions to Help Further Your Understanding of the Department of Writing Arts Core Values").

While WAPC touches upon every value to some extent, the following will be explicitly emphasized:
- **Value 1:** Writing Arts students will demonstrate understanding of a variety of genre conventions and exhibit rhetorical adaptability in applying those conventions.
- **Value 4:** Writing Arts students will be able to investigate, discover, evaluate, and incorporate information in the creation of text.
- **Value 5:** Writing Arts students will demonstrate self-critical awareness of their writing.
- **Value 7**: Writing arts students will show an understanding of the power of the written word and that such power requires ethical responsibilities in its application.