

Fall 2013  
RHE 309K: Rhetoric of Failure  
Syllabus

**Instructor:** Kendall J. Gerdes

**Unique Number:** 44765

**Time and Place:** PAR 104, MW 2:00 pm – 3:15 pm

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**Office:** FAC 16

**Office hours:** T 1 pm – 2:30 pm, Th 2 pm – 3:30 pm and by appointment

## ***I. THE GIST***

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

When you think about **failure** (perhaps you try not to think of it at all), perhaps you think about getting an **F**, **failing** a class, or perhaps about losing a job, or losing a contest or competition. Perhaps you fear being found out: perhaps you feel you *are* a **failure**, and some seam in your projected attitude will soon unravel and your intensely-felt inadequacy will be revealed. If yes? This class is for you. **Failure** opposes itself to the social order of optimism, happiness, and power. **Failure** may be attended by bad feelings such as negativity, disappointment, depression, embarrassment, and humiliation. **Failure** informs and constricts the domain of the successful, intelligent, and even normal.

This class will explore some of the unlikely territories belonging to **failure**: namely, social **failures** such as revolt, anti-sociality, and fascism; gender **failures** from masculinity to femininity and the gender outlaw; and intellectual **failures** from stupidity to forgetting and repeating. Our exploration will be guided by the questions of rhetoric: How does our culture argue about **failure**? Where are the points of agreement and disagreement? Does the meaning of **failure** change in different historical moments? Can **failure** be a source of invention—a way of creating new arguments, new beliefs, new ways of living? We will also use **failure** as a way of exploring rhetoric itself: Is there a **failure** inherent to persuasion? What does the ruin and residue of **failure** tell us about rhetorical feelings, logics, and identities? Students in this course will develop their own relation to **failure** as a rhetorical object, a rhetorical strategy, and even a boundary on rhetorical practice; students will also pursue the rhetoric of **failure** as a site of resources for unconventional and often undervalued forms of thought.

### **READINGS**

1. Crowley, Sharon and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. Fifth Edition. Longman, 2011. Print. (Textbook)
2. *Easy Writer: A Pocket Reference*. Fourth Edition. Lunsford. Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. Print. (Handbook)

In addition, we will also read or watch and discuss the following:

1. *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009)
2. Lauren Berlant, from *Cruel Optimism*

3. Francis Ray White, "No Fat Future?" in *Queer Futures*
4. Judith Halberstam, from *The Queer Art of Failure*
5. Valerie Solanas, *The SCUM Manifesto*
6. Nellie McKay, "Mother of Pearl"
7. *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009)
8. From *Persistence*, ed. Ivan Coyote and Zena Sharman
9. Amber Hollibaugh, from *My Dangerous Desires*
10. Sarah Murray, "Femme is a Verb"
11. S. Bear Bergman, "Two Trans Guys Have a Son" *Slate*
12. Thomas Quinn, from *Figures of Speech*
13. José Muñoz, from *Cruising Utopia*
14. *Finding Nemo* (2003)
15. J. Jack Halberstam, from *Gaga Feminism*

A schedule of these readings is available on our class website.

### **ACCESSIBILITY**

I assume that each student learns differently, and any course will accommodate each student differently as well. The university offers support services to all students, including the Undergraduate Writing Center, online at <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>. If you have a documented disability, you may contact Services for Students with Disabilities at 512-471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone) to request an official letter outlining authorized accommodations. More information is available online at <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd>.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

This class carries a writing flag and will be writing intensive. Expect to write every week of the semester. Estimated writing assignments include:

- Three Learning Record evaluations (initial, midterm, and final)
- An exposition of a *failure*-related artifact of your choice, and revision
- Four short rhetorical analyses, and revision
- Five to six short progymnasmata (exercises), and revision

You will also keep a Learning Record journal in the form of our class blog, reflecting throughout the semester on what you're learning and how you're learning it.

### **REVISION**

Writing is a recursive process, which means you should plan to produce multiple drafts of your work. You should expect your writing to undergo criticism and change. You should begin drafting the day you receive an assignment, and continue at a regular pace until the assignment is completed.

While editing, proofreading, and correcting spelling and grammar are important writing practices, *they are not revision*. Be prepared to alter your argument and its structure, and to make other global changes when you revise.

## LEARNING RECORD

Grades for the course are determined by a portfolio-style, evidence-based model called the Learning Record (LR). Once at the midterm and once at the final, you will compose a persuasive essay that documents your improvement as a student by explaining both what you learned and how you learned it. You will base your assessment on your other coursework, including writing, revision, and class participation, as documented in your LR journal. You will argue for the grade you think is fair. I will review your argument and either agree with or revise your request.

We will discuss the Learning Record in more detail throughout the semester. The four Course Goals you will use to analyze what you've learned are these:

1. Rhetoric
2. Writing Process
3. Research
4. Failure

## CLASS WEBSITE AND BLOG

<http://failure309k.wordpress.com/>

Because we have the privilege of meeting in a Digital Writing and Research Lab (DWRL) classroom, we will make frequent use of our technological resources. Our class website will house this syllabus, our schedule, electronic copies of readings, assignment sheets, and an ongoing class blog.

The class blog will serve as a collective Learning Record journal. Working together, you'll create an archive of your experience in this course. You should anticipate citing from the course blog when you compose your Learning Record midterm and final.

Each student will create\* five posts over the semester (about once every two-three weeks). You will sign up on a schedule so that you can plan a post well in advance of your deadline. The primary purpose of each post should be reflecting on your own learning. In pursuit of this purpose, you may

- write about the assigned reading;
- pose a question about rhetoric, [failure](#), or their intersections;
- share and reflect on part of a draft;
- explain your approach to an assignment or exercise and what you learned from it;
- contribute your observations about related outside texts; and so on.

Whenever you are not scheduled to create a post, you are expected to post thoughtful comments on one or more of the other posts. The whole class is expected to read our blog regularly, as it will frequently enter our class discussions.

A note about using WordPress: If you can't figure out how to do something, or how to make it look like you want it to, try googling your question. Read several of the results. If you still need help, email me, or try me on gchat.

\* NB: "create" a post does not exclusively mean "write" a post. The subject of your post may also be images, links, videos, quotations, chat conversations, or audio files. If you are citing someone else's media, you will probably still be expected to write about it. If you are creating your own media (a poster, a website, a short video or audio podcast, etc.), you may allow this work to speak for itself.

## **II. THE RULES**

### **EXPECTATIONS**

I expect each of you to come to class prepared, having read any assigned readings and completed any assignments that are due.

Since grades in this class depend on the basic theory that you are responsible for your own education, I expect you to anticipate when you will need help, ask for help when you need it, and ask early enough for help to be useful to you.

### **CLASS DISCUSSIONS**

Class discussions are crucial. I expect every one of you to ask questions and give your opinions. If you are a shy class participator, I recommend you write down a question or observation in advance of class that you can share during discussions.

Our discussions may provoke strong emotions and disagreements. I expect you each to question your own received beliefs, the ways that you received them, and why you may continue to believe them.

### **HAVING OPINIONS**

If you do the reading and the writing, you will have plenty of material to form questions and opinions. You will not, however, have all possible data, nor ever be able to form a perfect opinion. This is in the nature of opinions. Therefore uncertainty will be valued highly in our class. You do not have to be sure you believe your own opinion in order to share it. Uncertainty will be far preferred to apathy, or any attitude that indicates you have **failed** to take an interest in the material.

### **ATTENDANCE**

You are allowed a maximum of 4 absences. If you miss 5+ classes, you will **fail**. You are responsible for making up all missed class activities.

### **TARDINESS**

If you know you will be late, please let me know why in advance of class. If you are 15+ minutes late, you'll be docked 1/2 an absence (that is, two tardies count as one absence).

### **DISTRACTIONS**

Turn off your phones when you walk in the door. When we use computers during class, do not check your email, facebook, twitter, tumblr, etc. unless I asked you to do so.

\*\*\* If I see you fooling around, texting, or otherwise tuning out, I will mark you absent. \*\*\*

## **LATE WORK**

I will not accept late work. If think you need a deadline extended, you must propose and *get me to agree* to an alternative deadline at least 24 hours in advance of the original. Your proposal must include the reason for your request.

## **BACK UP YOUR DATA**

All hard drives *fail*. They got old and hot and they *fail*. It's a matter of when, not if. Drive *failure* is not a valid reason for late work. You should regularly back up all the data that's important to you. Back up your work to multiple sites: email it to yourself; save it to a free Dropbox account; put it on a USB drive; etc. You can get a free Dropbox account here:

<http://db.tt/vXYWu6He>

## **PLAGIARISM**

All work submitted for this class must be composed by you for this class. If you represent someone else's work as your own, you will *fail* my class and be reported to the Dean of Students.

## **EMAIL**

You should use your @utexas.edu email address for official university communication, including this class. You can get a free UTMail address here:

<http://www.utexas.edu/its/email/>

You should make sure your email address of record is correct here:

[https://utdirect.utexas.edu/apps/utd/all\\_my\\_addresses/](https://utdirect.utexas.edu/apps/utd/all_my_addresses/)