

Stories that Stick: Personal, Political, and Cultural Narratives
2023-2024, Fall Semester, Sciences Po Toulouse
Instructor: Nancy BOISSONNET

International & Comparative Studies Diploma – English Track

Contact hours: 10

ECTS: 5 ECTS

COURSE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of history, humans have told stories. But why are we wired for narrative? What can stories achieve? And how do stories define and change our understanding of ourselves, others, and key issues of our time?

From the earliest cave paintings and the Egyptian Book of the Dead to stories told in the oral traditions around the globe, humans have always relied on stories to share information, influence their audience, or incite others to action. A good story can inform and inspire, motivate and unite. But the awesome power of stories isn't always used for good. During our exploration, we'll think critically about the role of narrative and storytelling in culture, the media, and politics: While some stories are forces of good, are others manipulative or downright dangerous?

This course is divided into three sections:

- **Stories in theory**, during which we'll explore the history of storytelling and examine theories of narrative and rhetoric
- **Stories in practice**, when we'll study approaches to storytelling and learn to tell a great story
- **Stories in action**, when we'll look at examples of how stories play out in practice and in the public sphere

Throughout the semester, we'll consider a wide range of mediums and forms of expression that include literature, podcasts, fashion, visual art, children's books, music, and film. We'll examine the role of storytelling in culture, the law, politics, and the media, and consider how storytelling can shape public opinion, inspire action, and change—or reinforce—long-held notions. And we'll put theory into practice: students will develop a toolkit that allows them to identify, craft, and share meaningful, persuasive stories.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Explore the roles stories play in areas that include literature, the arts and performance, politics, the media, and law
- Introduce key concepts and frameworks related to story, storytelling, and narrative
- Reflect on the historical origins of story and storytelling, foundational narratives, and canonical literature
- Examine the relationships between form and narrative across mediums
- Problematize the concept of story: The danger of a single story, narrative used to bend public opinion, the "cult" of story
- Learn what it takes to capture an audience and master strategies for telling more meaningful, compelling stories
- Consider case studies that illustrate the ways that storytelling shapes public understanding of contemporary issues
- Encourage exploration of various mediums and genres

GRADING AND EVALUATION

Student grades will include marks for course participation (30%), an in-class presentation (30%), and a final exam (40%).

Course Participation

Course participation grades will include regular class participation and periodic quizzes throughout the semester.

Presentation

Students will work individually or in groups to deliver a presentation to the class. (More information available during the first class sessions.)

Final Exam

Students will sit for a 2-hour exam during the exam period.

COURSE MATERIALS

All course materials—such as readings, assignments, and revision summaries—will be made available on the Sciences Po Toulouse Moodle Platform.

CALENDAR

Classes will be held during the fall semester over a 10-week period, with 2-hour lectures once a week. Exact schedule TBD.

TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Class 1

Introduction and Introductions: The power of stories throughout history

Discussion of:

“The Big Question: Why Do We Tell Stories.” New York Times. December 8, 2022.

Class 2

Stories in Practice: Oral histories and the power of true stories

Discussion of:

[READ] Bowles, Meg, & Burns, Catherine, & Hixson, Jennifer, & Jenness, Sarah Austin, & Tellers, Kate. *How to Tell a Story*. Crown New York, 2022. Pages: Introduction, pages 27-39, 50-70.

Class 3

Stories in Practice: How to tell a great story

Discussion of:

[READ] Storr, Will. *The Science of Storytelling*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2019. (Excerpt)

Class 4

Stories in Theory: Problematizing the story

Discussion of:

[READ] Brooks, Peter. *Seduced By Story, The Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York Review Books, 2022. (Excerpt)

[WATCH] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *The Danger of a Single Story* [Video]. TED Conferences.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>

Class 5

Stories in Theory: Narrative & literature

Discussion of:

[READ] Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1997. (Excerpt)

[READ] One of a selection of short stories (TBA)

Class 6

Stories in Action: Children's stories, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the question of interpretation

Discussion of:

[READ] Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things Are*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.

[WATCH] Jonze, Spike. *Where the Wild Things Are*. Warner Bros., 2009. (excerpt)

Class 7

Stories in Action: True crime, *Serial* podcast, stories & the law

Discussion of:

[LISTEN] Serial #1

Koenig, Sarah. "The Alibi." Serial, Season 1, episode 1, Serial Productions, 3 October 2014.

[READ] Mattise, Nathan. "Serial's Transformation of Audio Journalism is Just Beginning." Wired, December 18, 2014.

Class 8

Stories in Action: The media & politics; A case study on climate change (part 1)

Presentations

Readings TBA

Class 9

Stories in Action: The media & politics; A case study on climate change (part 2)

Presentations

Readings TBA

Class 10

Conclusion and conclusions: With great power comes great responsibility

Presentations

PARTIAL CLASS BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative (Third Edition)*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Bowles, Meg, & Burns, Catherine, & Hixson, Jennifer, & Jenness, Sarah Austin, & Tellers, Kate. *How to Tell a Story*, Crown New York, 2022.

Brooks, Peter. *Seduced By Story, The Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York Review Books, 2022.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Storr, Will. *The science of Storytelling*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.

Additional bibliographic information will be provided during the semester.