

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation

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Writing the City (PLA6586)  
Wednesdays, 5-7  
300 Buell South

The grid's two-dimensional discipline creates undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy. The city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos.

—Rem Koolhaas

There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be served.

—Jane Jacobs

I raise my stein to the builder who can remove ghettos without removing people, as I hail the chef who can make omelets without breaking eggs.

—Robert Moses

We live in an urban world. Despite proclamations by some scholars that “the era of the city is over,” the world has become more “citified” both in form and culture. Revolutions in transportation, communications, and manufacturing have not led to a “virtual” system of settlement, as some predicted, but an increasing importance of face-to-face interactions.

In this seminar, in order to master writing, we will explore the nature of the city, with special attention to the greatest of them all. Week by week, we will explore another dimension of urban life through the people, places, and processes of New York. We will read great writing—in all genres—that helps us to see the “inner logic” of the city.

I think of this class as a form of “cross training.” We explore placemaking in order to write well; we write in order to explore placemaking. Both activities require us to explore, observe, make and test judgments, and connect with others about our experiences and ideas. Both placemaking and writing are, in essence, *practices*. A practice is an endeavor that requires constant engagement; unlike a rote skill, we do not just learn technique and then apply it. Every act of creation is an act of learning; every act of learning is an act of creation.

## #ASSIGNMENTS AND LOGISTICS

Since this is a writing-intensive course, we will keep the reading to a minimum. But since we keep writing to a minimum, we need *everyone* to do the reading, every single time, without fail.

The only assigned book is *The Elements of Writing for Architects and Planners*, which can be obtained in both ebook and paper formats on Amazon. You can get other readings online, via the hyperlinks in the syllabus.

### **Our work will follow six two-week cycles.**

**Week 1.** In the first week, we will explore the skills and techniques described in *The Elements of Writing for Architects and Planners* (known henceforth as TEOW-AP), as well as two or three short pieces on architecture, planning, or cities. (TEOW-AP is available on Amazon and through the instructor.)

In addition to reading assignments, students will:

- Elements example: Contribute, on our Facebook page, at least one example of a writing passage that illustrates one of the “elements” we explore that week. *Elements examples are due no later than 9 a.m. on Tuesday.*
- Write “draftings” of your paper. A drafting is a plan of attack that includes a map, a polished first and last paragraph, and one scene and summary. You may also include questions, for my response and class discussion. You’re your drafting on Facebook or emailed them to me. *Draftings are due no later than 9 a.m. on Wednesday.*

**Week 2.** In the second week of the cycle, we get into the nitty-gritty of writing papers. In addition to the reading assignments, students will write a brief paper (from 1,200 to 1,500 words) on the cycle’s topic. *Papers will be due in class on Wednesday.*

### **About those writing assignments . . .**

Your writing assignments will be “stand-alone” pieces. That is, each paper will be a complete exploration of the assignment, within the space limits. If you choose to take on similar topics throughout the course, you could stitch these papers together as whole, unified longform narrative/analytic piece.

Each of the five papers are worth 30 percent of the final grade. The other 20 percent will be based on class attendance and participation, draftings, and other contributions to the Facebook page.

## #INTRODUCTION: WRITING AND THE CITY

SEPTEMBER 6

We begin with some iconic scenes from New York, which model people's ideas of the city's ordered and chaotic qualities. We use those scenes to begin to master the fundamental rule of all writing.

### About the city

- *Rear Window* and *After Hours* (films), selections.

### About writing

- Charles Euchner, *The Elements of Writing for Architects and Planners*, "Overture: The Golden Rule of Writing" ([link](#))

## #1. WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE

SEPTEMBER 13 AND 20

At the center of all writing—and the job of placemakers—are people. To do any work, we need to understand people's goals, motivations, possibilities, and limitations. So let's start by looking at the people of the city, who they are, where they come from, how they settle, the goals they pursue, and the unspoken values that drive their action.

### About the city

- Rebecca Mead, "The Garmento King," *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2013 ([link](#)).
- Tracy Kidder, *House*, passage ([link](#))
- Heather Mac Donald, "The Black Cops You Never Hear About," *City Journal*, Summer 2002 ([link](#)).
- Malcolm Gladwell, "The Terrazzo Jungle," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2004 ([link](#))

### About writing

- *TEOW-AP*, ch. 2, 6 (section on status details), 10, and 12.

### The assignment

*Paper 1: Portrait of a person.* Using the Character Dossier, give a portrait of a character. Do not just describe that person, but put him or her *into motion*. Show (*don't tell*) how "character is destiny" for that person.

## #2. WRITING ABOUT PLACE

SEPTEMBER 27 AND OCTOBER 4

Winston Churchill famously said that "we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." So let's explore what we find in our communities—buildings, streets and plazas,

parks and natural systems, stadiums and arenas, theaters and cultural resources, infrastructure, and other physical places.

### Places

- Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place*, passage ([link](#))
- Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York*, passage ([link](#))
- Michael Pollan, "City Building is No Mickey Mouse Operation," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1997 ([link](#))
- Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden*, ch. 1 ([link](#)). Want more? ([link](#))

### About writing

- *TEOW*, ch. 1, 6, 11, and 13.

### The assignment

*Paper 2: Portrait of a place.* Using the concepts of "a small, knowable place," "movement in place," and "circles of life," describe a place. Show, somehow, how the place shapes the action of a larger story and that story's characters.

## #3. WRITING ABOUT ACTION

OCTOBER 11 AND 18

Jane Jacobs once described city life as a great ballet, where people move separately and in groups to a unique rhythm. How people act—on minor decisions like changing lanes in traffic to major decisions about starting a business—determines what our communities look like.

### About the city

- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, ch. 1 ([link](#)). ([excerpt](#))
- Tom Vanderbilt, *Traffic*, passage ([link](#))
- Frederick Wiseman, *Central Park* (film documentary).

### About writing

- *TEOW*, ch. 4, 5, and 7.

### The assignment

*Paper 3: Action and scene.* Using Stanislavsky's technique of "making a score," create one to three short action scenes. For each scene, show the distinct stages of action. Make sure the action reveals something about the characters and the world of the story. Make sure the scene also embodies the narrative arc. Use positive and negative "beats" to drive the scene forward.

## #4. EXPLAINING COMPLEX IDEAS

OCTOBER 25 AND NOVEMBER 1

As Wittgenstein famously showed with his lever-and-rod analogy, everything in the world is part of a larger system. We cannot understand any subject without reference to what surrounds and connects to it. City systems include diverse and densely populated people, streets and neighborhoods, economic processes, political systems, and social and cultural influences.

- Robert Caro, “One Mile,” in *The Power Broker*, ch. 37 ([link](#)).
- Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York*, excerpt ([link](#)).
- Sherry Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, November 2007 ([link](#)).

### **About writing**

- *TEOW*, ch. 7, 14, 15, and 17.

### **The assignment**

*Paper 5: Explanation of an idea.* Explain one of the concepts in the readings on inequality. Define terms, identify important variables, and show relationships. In your discussion, yo-yo from particular to general.

### **The assignment**

*Paper 4: Exploring an urban system.* Using the “recipe strategy,” explain some complex process that occurs in in the city. Identify the distinct pieces of knowledge that you want to convey to the reader. Identify the things and actions that have to take place. Explain the sequence can be found in this system. Build drama into the explanation with the hide-and-reveal technique and Aristotelian arc.

## **#5. WRITING ANALYSIS**

NOVEMBER 8 AND 15

What changes things—in people, communities, and systems? The Greek mathematician Archimedes changed the way we look at relationships with his pioneering work in geometry and calculus. He might be best known today for the idea of leverage—the idea that force exerted in the right way can transform a situation. So we might now ask: What actions could change the way we live?

- Louis Wirth, “The City as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology*, July 1938 ([link](#)).
- Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine,” *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1976 ([link](#)).
- Neil Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification,” JAPA, November 2007 ([link](#)).
- Jonathan Bell, “Reyner Banham, Mike Davis, and the Discourse on Los Angeles Ecology,” *UrbDeZine Los Angeles*, July 14, 2015 ([link](#)).
- George Kelling and James Wilson, “Broken Windows,” *The Atlantic*, March 1982 ([link](#)).

### **About writing**

- *TEOW*, ch. 13, 18, and 19.

### **The assignment**

*Paper 5: Development of an argument.* Make a causal argument. Identify and operationalize variables. Show how one to three variables produce some outcome(s). Use evidence—statistical, logical, historical, observational, experimental—to demonstrate your point. Consider alternate perspectives.

## **#6. VISIONING THE CITY**

NOVEMBER 29 AND DECEMBER 6

Neurologists call the brain a “prediction machine.” Whatever we do, we anticipate what’s happening next. This is especially so for placemakers. When we design or fix or organize a place—a building, a park, a street or plaza, a stadium—we do so with expectations. We make plans with the expectation that those plans will change things in particular ways. Once the project is complete, we discover “unintended consequences.” As Stewart Brand reminds us: “All buildings are predictions. All predictions are wrong.” At the very least, this reality requires us to be open and humble about our work.

- James Howard Kunstler, “Back to the Future” ([link](#)) and “Man in Nature: The Fiasco of Suburbia” ([link](#)), from *Orion*.
- William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness” from *Uncommon Ground* ([link](#)).
- Delores Hayden, “What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?” *Signs*, Spring 1980 ([link](#)).
- Virginia Postrel, *The Future and Its Enemies*, excerpts ([link](#)).

### **About writing**

- *TEOW*, ch. 8 and 16.

*Paper 6: Describing a vision.* Describe a placemaking project and its consequences. Using scenario analysis, describe the extreme possibilities as well as a “middle of the road” possibility. Briefly describe causality, while painting a vivid image of the possibilities to come.