

**WRITING THE CITY**  
**Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation**

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Monday, 4-6, 201 Fayerweather Hall

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 urbanized in both 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.

To master writing, we will explore the nature of the city, with special attention to the greatest city 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. To learn, we need to do.

**ASSIGNMENTS AND LOGISTICS**

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

The only assigned book is *Writing About Place*, by Charles Euchner, which can be obtained in both ebook and paper formats on Amazon. You can get other readings online, via the hyperlinks in the syllabus.

## THE CYCLES

Our work will follow five two-week cycles, with two workshops as changes of pace.

### Week 1: Setup

In the first week of every cycle, we will explore the skills and techniques described in *Writing About Place* (known henceforth as *WAP*). In addition to reading assignments, students will:

- **Facebook posts** (due before 9 a.m. on the first Monday of the cycle): Contribute a passage that illustrates one of the “elements” we explore that week. In each post, write a brief explanation or analysis of at least one element of writing.
- **Liner notes** (due at 3 p.m. on first Monday of the cycle): Write at least one page of “liner notes” for your paper. Liner notes consist of *propositions and moments*, along with bullets of supporting evidence.\* Be sure to use complete sentences, following the Golden Rule; despite the name; these are not “just” notes, but complete thoughts that will help you to craft complete essays.

### Week 2: Delivery

In the second week of the cycle, we will give close readings of two or three short pieces on architecture, planning, or cities. These pieces offer models for us to apply the writing skills we have learned in Week 1 of the cycle. Using these skills, students will write a brief paper (from 1,200 to 1,500 words) on the cycle’s topic. *Papers will be due at the beginning of class on at 3 p.m.*

### Workshops

In addition to five writing cycles, we will hold two special workshops with exemplary authors on cities and planning. The author will lead us through one or two short pieces to identify techniques that you can use in your writing. We may also use passages from your papers to get advice from the guest writer.

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Your writing assignments will be five “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.

*Please note that papers should concern some aspect of planning or cities. Also please note that your pieces should be fact-based. You can do “library” research, careful observation, and gathering first-hand information.*

*Of course, you must do your own work. Any instances of plagiarism—using other paper’s material without complete attribution—is a violation of the university’s code of academic honesty. Papers that use other people’s work will get a failing grade. Go to <http://bit.do/academichonesty> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site. for more information.*

## A special paper option

To make the most progress as a writer, you should follow the techniques of this class to everything you write. Therefore, for a few intrepid souls, I offer the following deal:

You can skip writing any one of the five papers if you create a “Liner Notes” document and use it to develop your ideas, paper fragments, class notes, etc., for all of your classes. If you choose this option, you will “share” this document with me. Every week, I will see how you apply the skills we develop in all your other writing. The thinking is simple: Since you write constantly in your everyday work, why not use that writing to develop the skills you learn in a writing class?

## About Liner Notes

A few points about liner notes:

- A *proposition* is a statement of fact or necessity. A proposition could be specific (“After the clearing of the site, the developer battled with city authorities over design issues, delaying the groundbreaking”) or general (“Political conflicts often delay the actual construction of projects like roads, transit, affordable housing, and parks”).
- A *moment* is a point in time, in which particular people take particular actions, engaging particular people, with particular consequences. For the purposes of writing, good moments require a clear setup and a definite consequence. A moment could be physical and visual (“Protesters gathered at the entrance of Tompkins Square Park to block builders from evicting homeless people”) or more general (“The protester’s lawyer filed a suit in Superior Court to prevent police from evicting homeless people”).

## GRADES

Each of the five papers is worth 15 percent of the final grade. The other 25 percent will be based on class attendance and participation, liner notes, and contributions to the Facebook page.

## COURSE CALENDAR

### INTRODUCTION: THE GOLDEN RULE OF WRITING September 10

Wouldn’t it be great if we could identify one simple principle that could guide your writing at all levels—the sentence, paragraph, section, and whole piece? Guess what? We can. That principle is the Golden Rule of Writing. In our first meeting, we’ll explore the Golden Rule with reference to examples from the literature on cities and planning.

- Charles Euchner, *Writing About Place (WAP)*, “The Core Idea”)

## **CYCLE 1: WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE**

### **September 17 and 24**

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.

#### **September 17 (focus on dossier and archetypes, plus sentences)**

- *WAP*, ch. 1-4.
- Facebook post (9 a.m.) and liner notes (beginning of class) are both due.

#### **September 24 (focus on arc's problem/resolution structure, plus word choices)**

- Malcolm Gladwell, "The Terrazzo Jungle," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2004 ([bit.ly/victorgruen](http://bit.ly/victorgruen) (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.).
- Rebecca Mead, "The Garmento King," *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2013 (<http://bit.ly/garmentoking> (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.).
- **Also:** Paper 1 is due.
- **And:** A few prefatory words about place ...

## **WORKSHOP: ON PEOPLE AND PLACE**

### **October 1**

A session with real estate and development reporter Charlie Bagli of *The New York Times*.

- Charles Bagli, "A Joyful Homecoming Cut Short," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2018 (<http://bit.ly/cbagli>).
- Charles Bagli, *Other People's Money*, chapter 2.

## **CYCLE 2: WRITING ABOUT PLACE**

### **October 8 and 15**

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.

#### **October 8 (focus on the world of the story as an "extra character," plus paragraphs as arcs)**

- *WAP*, ch. 5-7.
- Facebook post (9 a.m.) and liner notes (beginning of class) are both due.

## October 15 (focus on sensual information, plus more on paragraphs)

- Michael Pollan, "City Building is No Mickey Mouse Operation," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1997 (<http://bit.ly/nomickeymouse>)
- Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden*, ch. 1 (<http://bit.ly/awspirn>). Want more? (<http://bit.ly/awspirn2>)
- **Also:** Paper 2 is due.
- **And:** A few prefatory words about action

## CYCLE 3: WRITING ABOUT ACTION October 22 and 29

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.

## October 22 (focus on details as surprises, plus grammar as a narrative device)

- *WAP*, ch. 8-11.
- Facebook post (9 a.m.) and liner notes (beginning of class) are both due.

## October 29 (focus on action as sequences of moments, plus editing as a sequence of actions)

- Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, ch. 1 (<http://bit.ly/jacobsonsidewalks>).
- Tom Vanderbilt, *Traffic*, passage (<http://bit.ly/tvontraffic>)
- **Also:** Paper 3 is due.
- **And:** A few words about complex ideas and processes

## WORKSHOP: IDEAS AND ANALYSIS November 12

A session with Nicole Gelinas of the Manhattan Institute, with a deep dive into writing about the intersection of ideas and analysis.

- Nicole Gelinas, "Eminent Domain as Central Planning," *City Journal*, Winter 2010 (<http://bit.ly/gelinas1>).
- Nicole Gelinas, "How Gotham Saved Its Subways," *City Journal*, Summer 2016 (<http://bit.ly/gelinas2>).

## **CYCLE 4: EXPLAINING COMPLEX IDEAS**

### **November 19 and 26**

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.

#### **November 19 (focus on brainstorming, plus using "vectors" to give order to thoughts)**

- WAP, ch. 12-15.
- Facebook post (9 a.m.) and liner notes (beginning of class) are both due.

#### **November 26 (focus on framing issues, the three "shapes" of writing, and numbers)**

- Robert Caro, "One Mile," in *The Power Broker*, 37 (<http://bit.ly/caroononemile>).
- Jeremiah Moss, *Vanishing New York*, excerpt (<http://bit.ly/2vanishingny>).
- Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, November 2007 (<http://bit.ly/participationladder>).
- **Also:** Paper 4 is due.
- **And:** A few words about analysis.

## **CYCLE 5: WRITING ANALYSIS**

### **December 3 and 10**

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?

#### **December 3 (focus on analysis as narrative with a different "n")**

- WAP, ch. 16-19.
- Facebook post (9 a.m.) and liner notes (beginning of class) are both due.

#### **December 10 (focus on evidence and models)**

- Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine," *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1976 (<http://bit.ly/cityasgrowthmachine>).

- George Kelling and James Wilson, "Broken Windows," *The Atlantic*, March 1982 (<http://bit.ly/onbrokenwindows>).
- **Also:** Paper 5 is due.