



Honors 300: When Bad Words Happen to Good People: A Study of Swears, Slang, Slurs, and other Syntactical Sins

Course Information

Course Identification:	Honors 300: When Bad Words Happen to Good People
Number of Credits:	4.0 credits
Delivery Mode:	Face to face
Course Schedule:	MW 2:00-3:15, Blair 115

Faculty

Professor:	Mike Mattison, Ph.D. Writing Center (Library)/Recitation Hall 208 mmattison@wittenberg.edu , 937-327-7922 <i>Drop-In Hours:</i> Tuesday and Friday, 9:00-11:00 (Writing Center), and by appointment. https://wittenberg.mywconline.com/
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Course Description

How does a swear word become a swear word? Does it start out decent and then take a wrong turn, or was it notorious from the start? And why do we react so strongly to a certain grouping of letters? It's just a word, isn't it? This class will embark on a historical, cultural, and etymological journey to discover how our dirty words got that way, and what effect they can have on us, our health, and our relationships. This class will (not surprisingly) contain mature language and themes.¹

Course Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Describe the history of language categorized as swear words and slurs.
2. Articulate an informed perspective on the current issues regarding swear words and slurs.
3. Analyze an area of language use using relevant methods and evidence.

Connections Learning Outcomes

This course supports both of the following LOs for the Connections Curriculum:

LEARNING OUTCOME 2 (LO2)

Students will write effectively, considering audience and purpose

LEARNING OUTCOME 10 (LO10)

Students will analyze problems, issues, or representations using knowledge, theories, and/or methods appropriate to the humanities.

For the older general education model, the course satisfies the S credit and is writing intensive.

¹ There will be some difficult language encountered in class—words that carry an enormous amount of weight and can be troubling to read/hear. We will discuss how we wish to approach such language in class, how we can talk about such words, considering their history and examining the power that they hold.



Required Textbooks and Materials

Adams, Michael. *In Praise of Profanity*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Bergen, Benjamin. *What the F—: What Swearing Reveals about Our Language, Our Brains, Ourselves*. Basic Books, 2018.

McWhorter, John. *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter: Now, Then, and Forever*. Avery, 2021.

Mohr, Melissa. *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Assignments (Opportunities!)

The following give a quick overview of our work this term—there will be more discussion about the requirements and expectations for each one in class.

Participation 20%

As this is a seminar class, your participation is crucial. You'll need to come to each class having read (and considered) our assigned readings, and be prepared to contribute to the conversation. Each day I will ask for someone to give us an overview of the reading for the day—this should be a coherent one-to-two-minute summary of the material. I will then also ask for one or two people to offer places for us to plug in to the readings—these should be places where you have questions or concerns or make connections with other material. These will not be pre-assigned, so you should come to *each* class ready to offer both a summary and a few questions. You should also be prepared to contribute to both large-group and small-group discussions and activities. (CO 1, 2)

Letter of Expectations 5%

For this assignment, you should write me a letter (a "Dear Mike" tone is fine) explaining your expectations for the course—what do you hope to learn and how do you envision the course connecting to your education and other courses. (See my enclosed letter to you, which can serve as a model for yours—approximately 500-600 words is good, though you may write more.)

Early Midterm 5%

To give you a chance to practice utilizing our material (and to see how I grade), we will have an early midterm. We'll look to incorporate our readings from the semester, as well as building upon our class conversations. You may use your notes and your texts for the early midterm. We will also discuss possible questions in class. (CO 1, 2)

Swearing Profile 20%

As Ohio was once deemed the top state in swearing ([Congratulations, Ohio! You Are the Sweariest State in the Union - The Atlantic](#)), it seems appropriate that we talk to some native Ohioans to ask them their thoughts about swearing. You, then, will need to find a native Ohioan and ask them about their swearing habits and their thoughts about such language use. We will brainstorm in class some possible questions for the interviews. From the interview, you will write up a ~1000-word profile of the person, connecting their responses to what we have read in class. (CO 1, 3)

Midterm 10%

There will be a midterm for the course, allowing you a chance to showcase what you have learned from the first half of the semester. We'll look to incorporate our readings from the semester, as well as building upon our class conversations. You may use your notes and your texts for the midterm. We will also discuss possible questions in class. (CO 1, 2)



Lexical Investigation 30%

For your final project, you will choose some aspect of language use that intrigues you—mostly likely it might start with an interest in a single word, but we can discuss possibilities for topics in class. Then, you will need to research that area of interest, eventually composing a ~2000 word article written for a general audience (our writing style will likely follow that of the authors we read this term, although I am open to other possibilities).

You will need to combine a range of research activities for this assignment, and consider the perspectives of different constituencies: students, faculty, and administrators. Though you might be investigating a question of language in general, it should be grounded in our context here at Witt (or in Springfield, or in your own family).

We will talk more in class about this assignment and the criteria, but it will be scaffolded and include drafts as well as an annotated bibliography. (CO 2, 3)

Peer Response 10%

For both the Swearing Profile and the Lexical Investigation assignments, you will be asked to provide detailed feedback to your peers. (LO2)

Grades

Are you graded on what you know? What you learned? How well you complete assignments? All of the above? Grading is the tricky, ubiquitous subject in just about any college class. Here are some starting ideas for us:

A work is distinguished by its depth and its smoothness of presentation. The writer/student shows a willingness to go beyond first impressions and previous assumptions to wrestle with ideas and language and text in an original and thoughtful way. There is consideration of other perspectives, and any arguments made are carefully constructed and presented. The thinking is first rate as well as the writing. **A** work is complex, enviable work.

B work is quality work, showing thoughtfulness on the writer’s part and indicating time spent on the issues and ideas. **B** work is less specific than **A** work, highlighting general themes or points of an argument without necessarily delving into the details. Occasionally, **B** work relies more on the writing itself than on the thinking that prompted the writing. The language and style can overshadow the argument on occasion.

C work is work that satisfies the requirements of an assignment without reaching beyond them.

D and **F** work is work not completed or work that fails to achieve the goals of the assignment.

Given recent student concerns over grading, I will offer some early opportunities for you to gain a sense of how I will grade. You should also come talk with me if you ever have a question or concern about a grade or your standing in the class. We will use a 1000-point scale for the class (for each assignment above, drop the percentage sign and add a zero and you’ll have the points).²

A 930-1000	B 830-869	C 730-769	D 630-669
A- 900-929	B- 800-829	C- 700-729	D- 600-629
B+ 870-899	C+ 770-799	D+ 670-699	F 599 and below

² I am a firm believer in the power of revision, and so I think students should usually have the opportunity to revise written work, even something like a midterm. However, I do not believe in being overrun with revisions the last week of class, so if you do wish to revise an assignment (other than the Lexical Investigation), you need to let me know within one week of receiving it back, and you need to schedule a meeting with me to discuss a timeline.

Technology

Technology can be an asset, but also a distraction. Do not let your phone or other devices distract you from the moment. If you are using technology to help support your learning, that's understood. If it is keeping you (or others) from learning, then you'll need to change your approach. ³

Attendance

Quite simply, you are expected to be in class (our class time accounts for less than 1.5% of your week). If you cannot make it to class, let me know as soon as possible. In a course like this, more than two absences would be a cause to worry, and we should sit and have a conversation.

- We will also have two scheduled conferences this term (one of which might be a group conference)—you can, though, always schedule a time to meet with me.

Course Outline, Schedule, and Due Dates

Readings are in italics; assignments in bold.

M=Moodle

Date	What to Do	Date	What to Do
Aug 28	Offensive Material <i>Pinker on Swearing (M)</i>	Aug 30	<i>Pinker, Ch. 7 (handout)</i> Read, "Obscenity Symbol" (M) <i>The Science of Swearing (M)</i> Letter of Expectations (9/1)
Sept 4	No Class: Labor Day <i>Benefits of Swearing (M)</i> <i>Does Swearing Make You Likeable? (M)</i>	Sept 6	All Introductions: <i>Adams Bergin</i> <i>McWhorter Mohr</i> <i>Vingerhoets, et al., "Psychosocial" (M)</i>
Sept 11	<i>Mohr, Ch. 1-2</i>	Sept 13	<i>Mohr, Ch. 3-4</i>
Sept 18	<i>Mohr, Ch. 5-6</i>	Sept 20	Early Midterm (9/22)
Sept 25	<i>Adams, Ch. 1-2</i>	Sept 27	<i>Adams, Ch. 3</i>
Conferences!			
Oct 2	Swearing Profile Draft	Oct 4	Swearing Profile Peer Responses
Oct 9	<i>Adams, Ch. 4 & Coda</i>	Oct 11	Midterm (10/13)
Oct 16	No Class: Fall Break	Oct 18	<i>Stapleton, et al., "Power of Swearing"</i> Swearing Profile Revision (10/20)
Oct 23	<i>McWhorter Interview (M)</i> <i>McWhorter, Ch. 1-3</i>	Oct 25	<i>McWhorter, Ch. 4-6</i>

³ We can talk also about how AI intersects with writing assignments—I believe there are possible ways to utilize the technology efficiently while still allowing you control of the work.

Oct 30	<i>McWhorter, Ch. 7-9</i>	Nov 1	Lexical Investigation (Annotated) List of Sources
Nov 6	<i>Bergen, Ch. 1-3</i>	Nov 8	<i>Bergen, Ch. 4-5</i>
Nov 13	<i>Bergen, Ch. 6-8</i>	Nov 15	<i>Bergen, Ch. 9-11 & Epilogue</i>
Nov 20	Lexical Investigation Draft	Nov 22	Thanksgiving Break: No Class
Nov 27	Lexical Investigation Peer Responses	Nov 29	Conferences: No Class
Dec 4	Lexical Investigation Revision	Dec 6	What's Next?
Final: TDB	Lexical Investigation		

Guidelines for Success

Integrity and Respect

This class, more than most, will demand that we are considerate with one another, carefully considering the language that we use. We will have, I hope, some difficult conversations, as it is through those conversations that we better understand ourselves and our connections with others. Those conversations, though, will require patience and compassion and an ability (and willingness) to listen to what others have to say. Please also know that you can, and should, reach out to me at any time if you wish to talk about some aspect of class.

Moodle

This course does have a Moodle site, so please make sure you have access to it, and know how to download/upload assignments and readings. (Do not hesitate to ask questions—it is always possible that I mistakenly clicked the wrong button on the page—and I trust you to tell me if an assignment or reading is not on the site as it should be—before it is due.) You should also make sure you can access grades there, as I will post them for each assignment.

Communication (E-mail & Course Messages)

Email is the best way to reach me. If you send me an assignment through email, I will acknowledge that I received it. If you do not hear from me in 24 hours—excepting Saturday—assume the email did not go through and resend. You should also be checking your email for any notes or updates from me.

Time Commitment

For each credit hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction, you are expected to engage in two hours of out-of-class, course-related work each week for approximately fifteen weeks. (Some of our direct instruction will include conferences with me and conferences with your classmates, as well as some of the videos we will watch about language use.) A four-credit-hour course should require about eight hours per week of out-of-class work.



Accessibility and ADA Accommodation

Wittenberg University strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on a disability (including mental health, learning, chronic health, physical, hearing, vision and neurological, or temporary medical conditions, etc.), please let me know immediately so that we can privately discuss options. To establish reasonable accommodations, you must register with Accessibility Services. Please note that services are confidential and may take time to put into place, and are not retroactive. The Accessibility Services Office is located in the Office of Academic Services COMPASS Sweet Success Center, Thomas Library on the first floor. Walk-in appointments are welcome 8 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday.

Communication (Re: class concerns)

At any time during the semester, if you are encountering difficulty keeping up with assignments, or just have questions on the material or the course, please let me know. I am happy to work with you but cannot do so unless I know. Don't wait on (or expect) a *deus ex machina* at the end of the semester.

Use of Student Materials

As a teacher of writing, much of my research focuses on the work that students produce, and oftentimes I use that work in articles, conference presentations, or in other classes. Unless you inform me via e-mail that you do not want your class materials to be used for educational research, instructional purposes, and institutional use, I assume that you grant me and Wittenberg University the unlimited right to use, reproduce, and publish your course assignments, both print and online. You will not receive any monetary compensation for the use of your assignments (neither do I), and your name will not be used in any way in connection to your assignments. You may also withdraw your consent at any time, and that decision will in no way affect your standing in the course.

Syllabus Change Statement

I do reserve the right to adjust this syllabus and content to meet our needs/concerns and to address course outcomes. I will do so, however, only in consultation with all of you.

The foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing is a vice so mean and low that every person of sense and character detests and despises it.

-George Washington

There are ways of swearing that express all of your love and emotions.

-Brett Goldstein