

COMM 4240: RHETORIC & POPULAR CULTURE

Fall 2026

Meeting Times:	Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:20 – 3:40
Location:	113 Language Building
Professor:	Dr. Andrew Davis
Office Location:	320E General Academic Building
Office Hours:	Tuesdays & Thursdays 11am – 2pm (and by appointment)
Email:	Andrew.Davis@unt.edu

Course Overview & Objectives

Popular culture is more than a source of entertainment or diversion. It constitutes a significant form of mediation between our selves and the world in which we live. Our engagement with popular culture is one of the primary activities of our daily lives. As such, much of our understanding of the world comes from forms of popular culture—books, art, film, music, newspapers, television, advertising, video games, social networking platforms, and other forms of analog, electronic, and digital media. During the semester, we will develop a basic understanding of the ways in which popular culture mediates our relations with our selves; other people; the political, economic, and social systems in which we live; and even our sense of reality itself.

This course is designed as an introduction to various theoretical approaches to the study of popular culture. Additionally, this course will examine various methods for researching, critically analyzing, and writing about this field of academic study. Primary attention will be given to the relations between popular culture and: media technologies; economic production; consumer society; race; gender, sex, and sexuality; representation and mediation; power; and political and social struggles.

This course combines reading, lecture, seminar, small-group activities, screenings, and individual research for the purposes of understanding popular culture in ways that go beyond our everyday experience and notions of common sense. By the end of the semester, we will have acquired crucial, fundamental intellectual tools for understanding the role of popular culture in our larger systems of philosophical and moral reasoning.

Texts & Materials

You will be required to purchase or rent *Introduction to Popular Culture in the US: People, Politics & Power* by Jenn Brandt and Callie Clare. You will also need to purchase a spiral notebook and pens/pencils. All other required and supplemental materials will be available through Canvas.

University Policies

Academic Integrity Standards & Consequences

According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University.

Any use of artificial intelligence (AI) on assignments constitutes an act of academic dishonesty in this course. Students may not use any form of AI beyond a basic spelling and grammar check. If you have questions about this, please contact me before handing in an assignment. Any act of academic dishonesty (including use of AI) will result in an automatic zero for the assignment and may lead to further penalties. When in doubt, ask for help.

ADA Accommodations

UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the ODA website at [Office of Disability Access | University of North Texas](#).

Emergency Notification & Procedures

UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (i.e., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). In the event of a university closure, please refer to the UNT Learning Management System (LMS) for contingency plans for covering course materials.

Acceptable Student Behavior

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Dean of Students to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The University's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including University and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at [Student Conduct and Community Standards | University of North Texas](#).

Survivor Advocacy

UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to the Title IX Coordinator at oeo@unt.edu or at (940) 565 2759.

Course Policies

Course Communication

I will use email for all course communication. Be sure to check it regularly.

It is your responsibility to contact me if you have any questions or need assistance with the course. The best option is to arrange a meeting at my office. You may also contact me via email or Canvas Inbox. I strongly encourage you to meet with me concerning assignments, as well as your progress in the course. I will not, however, answer questions about an assignment within the final 24 hours before the assignment is due. This is to encourage you to plan and organize efficiently so that you can submit the best work possible. Please contact me with any problems or questions *when they arise*.

Please include the course number and your name in the subject line of emails. I will not, however, answer emails after 6 pm (weekdays) or on the weekend unless there is a situation that requires immediate attention.

Please contact me if you need help with anything concerning your success in this course. There are no stupid questions and there is no shame in asking for help. The sooner you reach out, the better our chances of dealing with a problem in a productive manner.

Public Sharing of Course Material

All course materials may be subject to intellectual property protections under applicable law and regulation, and are for the sole use of students enrolled in this class. Students do not have permission to copy or record materials except for personal use in the context of this class, and do not have permission to share any class materials in any manner on any platform without the prior express permission of the faculty member teaching this course.

This course will encourage open and robust discussions on issues and ideas without fear that any statements made will be used for inappropriate or retaliatory purposes. To ensure the comfort and protection of everyone in our classroom, recording of any kind is prohibited in this space (this includes audio recordings, live-streaming, photographs of course materials, etc.) unless a student has an approved accommodation from the ODA. In such cases, all students in the course will be notified whenever recording will be taking place.

Attendance

Your success in this course depends on regular attendance. In fact, participation is part of your grade. You should attend every class unless you have a documented university-excused absence such as active military service, a religious holy day, or an official university function as stated in the Student Attendance and Authorized Absences Policy. If you cannot attend class due to an emergency, please let me know.

Assignments

Although we will talk about upcoming assignments in class, it is NOT my responsibility to constantly remind you when assignments are due. Keeping track of due dates is your responsibility.

Late work will not be accepted without prior approval. If you have an issue with an assignment, talk to me about it before the assignment is due. I will, not, however, answer questions in the last 24 hours before an assignment is due. If you need an extension, talk to me before then.

Useful Information

Cell phones should be turned off, off the table, and out of your hands during class.

The four practices that are essential to success in this class are: 1) take notes (on all readings, class discussions and screenings); 2) attend and participate in class meetings; 3) ask questions; and 4) follow directions for assignments.

While the use of computers in class is allowed, they are to be used only for class-related purposes. No web browsing. No social media or messaging. No goofing off. No exceptions. If anyone is found to be using a computer for anything other than course purposes, all computers will be banned for all students for the remainder of the semester.

I strongly encourage you to take notes by hand. This is for 3 reasons: 1) studies overwhelmingly show that students who use pen and paper understand more and retain more knowledge than students who use laptops; 2) the purpose of taking notes is not transcription, but to enhance understanding; and 3) the internet is a constant, distracting temptation that few of us are able to resist.

If you disagree with a grade, please email me a written, detailed explanation of why you think the grade should be re-evaluated. Do not attempt to challenge a grade during office hours or class. If I find your explanation convincing, I will re-grade the assignment. This means that the grade may go up or down or stay the same. Your challenge is no guarantee of a better grade. As a hint, “I think I deserve an A because I worked really hard on this” is not a convincing explanation. You must wait 24 hours after being given a grade to challenge it.

The readings and screenings have been selected, in line with the course objectives, to help foster challenging discussions in the class and hopefully beyond. These works have been chosen assuming that you are not only legally adults, but that you understand higher education to involve encounters with ideas and arguments that may question your own beliefs and assumptions. Some of our readings or screenings may startle you or challenge you. Some of the material might be considered controversial or even offensive. All reactions will be welcomed in class and respected, and they will be received in the spirit of extending discussion rather than forestalling it.

Chronic tardiness will negatively affect your grade, at my discretion.

Grading, Writing Guidelines & Assignments

Grading

An “A” means that you did excellent work. You did work that reflects the very best of UNT’s proud tradition of undergraduate education. If you received an A your work was deep, clear, insightful, creative, and needed very little (if any) revision.

A “B” means that you did very good work. This work reflects a solid engagement with the material and an admirable execution of the concepts of the course. “B” work is a little less clear, perhaps not as insightful or creative, but certainly competent. Some revision on key themes would move this into the “A” realm.

A “C” is average. C work is hurriedly produced, not thought-through or rehearsed enough to be above average. This work does not fail massively in any significant respect, but it does not distinguish itself in terms of analytical clarity or presentation.

A “D” means you are producing work below average, and an “F” means work is missing, incomplete, or poor.

Writing Guidelines

- 1) All papers must conform to APA or MLA style and citation guidelines. These guidelines can be found here: [Citation and Research Tools - Citations & Style Guide - Guides at University of North Texas](#)
- 2) Your essays will be double-spaced in 12-point font, with one-inch margins and no spaces between paragraphs.
- 3) DO NOT put a header on your essays (i.e., do not take up half a page with your name, my name, the course number, the date, the assignment, etc.). Put only your name at the top of the first page of your assignment.
- 4) Insert page numbers.
- 5) The assignment should be in .doc or .docx format only.
- 6) The title of your document should be “Your Last Name_Assignment Title.”
- 7) If I say that an assignment should be (for example) at least 3 pages long, that means 3 FULL pages, not 2 pages and a paragraph.
- 8) Proofread your work before you submit it.

Failure to meet these guidelines will result in an automatic D for an assignment. The same goes for excessive spelling and grammatical errors. Blatant disregard for these guidelines will result in an automatic F.

Assignments

Reading, Lecture & Screening Notes	10%
Participation	10%
Weekly Media & Rhetoric Ritual	20%
Popular Culture Journal	30%
Dinner Party	20%
Last Night a DJ Saved My Life / Damn, that DJ Made My Day!	10%

Details for all assignments and their due dates will be given in class and posted to Canvas.

Course Schedule

Week 1

Required Readings: Syllabus

“What Is Popular Culture?” by John Storey

Week 2

Required Readings: “What Is Pop Culture?” by Marcel Danesi

Chapter 1 in Brandt & Clare

Week 3

Required Readings: Chapter 2 in Brandt & Clare

“Pop Language” by Marcel Danesi

“Technology of Writing” by William S. Burroughs

Week 4

Required Readings: Chapter 3 in Brandt & Clare

Selections from *Q* by Quincy Jones

Media Ritual 1 due at beginning of class on Thursday, September 10

Week 5

Required Readings: Chapter 4 in Brandt & Clare

Chapter 5 in Brandt & Clare

“Taste Is the Place: Cookbooks & Predictive Worldmaking” by Andrew Davis

Week 6

Required Readings: Chapter 6 in Brandt & Clare

Selections from *Blues Legacies & Black Feminisms* by Angela Y. Davis

Popular Culture Journal entry 1 due at beginning of class on Thursday, September 24

Week 7

Required Readings: Chapter 7 in Brandt & Clare

Chapter 8 in Brandt & Clare

Selections from *Dummy* by R.J. Wheaton

Week 8

Required Readings: Chapter 9 in Brandt & Clare

Selections from *The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train & the Evolution of Culture & Style* by Nelson George

“Advertising: Civilizing the *Self*” by Stuart Ewen

Media Ritual 2 due at beginning of class on Thursday, October 8

Week 9

Required Readings: “The Story of a Cook” and Selections from *Kitchen Confidential* by Anthony Bourdain

Selections from *David Bowie: The Oral History* by Dylan Jones

Selections from *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* by Hunter S. Thompson

Week 10

Required Reading: Chapter 10 in Brandt & Clare

Popular Culture Journal entry 2 due at beginning of class on Tuesday, October 20

NO CLASS on Thursday, October 22. Alternative activity TBA.

Week 11

Required Readings: Selections from *Chefs, Drugs and Rock & Roll: How Food Lovers, Free Spirits, Misfits and Wanderers Created a New American Profession* by Andrew Friedman

Selections from *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of "Hallelujah"* by Alan Light

Selections from *Let's Go (So We Can Get Back): A Memoir of Recording and Discording with Wilco, Etc.* by Jeff Tweedy

Week 12

Required Readings: Selections from *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* by Karen L. Cox

Selections from *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* by Michael W. Twitty

Week 13

Required Readings: Selections from *Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties & the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius* by Gary Lachman

Selections from *Counter Intelligence: Where to Eat in the Real Los Angeles* by Jonathan Gold

Popular Culture Journal entry 3 due at beginning of class on Thursday, November 12

Week 14

Required Reading: “Interactive & Immersive Culture” by Marcel Danesi

Reading, Lecture & Screening Notes due at beginning of class on Tuesday, November 17

NO CLASS on Thursday, November 19. Alternative activity TBA.

Week 15

NO CLASS

Week 16

Required Readings: *The Manual (How to Have a Number One the Easy Way)* by The KLF
The McWilliams II Word Processor Instruction Manual by Peter A.
McWilliams

**Last Night a DJ Saved My Life / Damn, that DJ Made My Day! to be presented in class on
Tuesday, December 1 & Thursday, December 3**

Final Exam Period: Tuesday, December 8, 3:30 – 5:30 pm
Dinner Party due at this time