

# COMM 4340: Rhetoric & Politics a.k.a “Compassion in Agonism”

Spring 2026

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<b>Meeting Times:</b>	Tuesdays & Thursdays 2-3:20pm
<b>Location:</b>	115 Physics Building
<b>Professor:</b>	Dr. Andrew Davis
<b>Office Location:</b>	320E General Academic Building
<b>Office Hours:</b>	Tuesdays & Thursdays 10:30am-1:30pm (and by appointment)
<b>Email:</b>	Andrew.Davis@unt.edu

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## Course Overview & Objectives

Welcome to Rhetoric & Politics—a course designed to stimulate sophisticated considerations of the ethical implications of our communication behaviors, particularly as they impact our participation in civic life through the public sphere. Throughout the semester, we will examine the relationship between rhetoric and politics through the lens of communication ethics. For the purposes of this course, we understand ethics as our collective struggle to create practical consensus about the issues that affect us as a society. Ethics is a process of questioning and negotiating; it is NOT the imposition of final answers. We strive for *compassion in agonism*—an ongoing conversation founded on the presumption that not only is conflict inevitable in political life, it can also be productive and mutually-beneficial when grounded in a commitment to civility and plurality.

This course combines readings, lectures, seminar discussions, small-group activities, screenings, and individual research for the purposes of understanding politics in ways that go beyond our everyday experience and notions of common sense. By the end of the semester, we will have acquired fundamental intellectual tools for understanding the role of rhetoric in our larger systems of philosophical and moral reasoning and for applying those tools to practical political problems.

Topics will include: foundations of communication ethics; rhetorical foundations of American democracy; political divisions throughout American history; propaganda, persuasion and misinformation; the impacts of media on political beliefs and communication behaviors; and ethical research practices. Whether you are going into politics, business, science, education, or any other publicly-facing enterprise, this course will help you develop the communication skills necessary to participate in civic life in a more productive, responsible, and informed manner.

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### **Texts & Materials**

You will be required to purchase or rent *We Are Not One People: Secession & Separatism in American Politics Since 1776* by Michael J. Lee and R. Jarrod Atchison. You will also need to purchase a spiral notebook, pens/pencils, and blank notecards. All other required and supplemental materials will be available through Canvas.

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## **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](mailto: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](mailto:oeo@unt.edu) or at (940) 565 2759.

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## Course Policies

### Course Communication

I will use university 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 Materials

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.

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## **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.

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## 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	15%	(30 points)
Participation	15%	(30 points)
Rhetoric & Politics Journal	30%	(60 points)
Research Proposal	30%	(60 points)
Research Presentation	10%	(20 points)

100% = 200 points

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

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## Course Schedule

### Week 1: Course Introduction & Rhetorical Foundations of American Democracy

Tuesday 01/13                      Course Introduction

Thursday 01/15                    **Readings:** Syllabus  
*The Declaration of Independence*  
*The Constitution of the United States*

### Week 2: Rhetorical Foundations (cont'd.) & Communication Ethics

Tuesday 01/20                    **Reading:** “The Public Sphere” by Jurgen Habermas

Thursday 01/22                    **Readings:** “Preface” & “Communication Ethics: A Pragmatic  
Necessity” by Ronald C. Arnett, et al.

### Week 3: Communication Ethics (cont'd.)

Tuesday 01/027                    **Readings:** “Dialogic Ethics: Meeting Differing Ground of the  
‘Good’” by Ronald C. Arnett, et al.  
“Political Perspectives” by Richard L. Johannesen, et  
al.

Thursday 01/29                    In-class Workshop

### Week 4: Foundational Problems of Rhetoric & Politics in American Democracy

Tuesday 02/03                    **Readings:** “Prologue” & Chapter 1 in Lee & Atchison

Thursday 02/05                    In-class Workshop





Week 14: The Politics of Information – The Online Public Sphere

Tuesday 04/14                      In-class Screening: *The Century of the Self*, episode 4

Thursday 04/16                    **Reading:** “Infoglut & Clutter-Cutting” by Mark Andrejevic

Week 15: The Politics of Information – Brave New World

Tuesday 04/21                    **Reading:** “The War Begins: An Introduction to LikeWar” by P. W. Singer & Emerson T. Brooking

Thursday 04/23                    In-class Workshop

Week 16: So, It Has Come to This...

Tuesday 04/28                    In-class Workshop

Thursday 04/30                    LDOC—Course Wrap-up

Final Exam Period                Tuesday 05/05            3-5pm  
**Research Presentations will take place during the Final Exam period. Research Proposals are also due at this time.**