### ENGL 4230: Special Topics in Rhetoric and Writing Studies | Fall 2025 | TuTh 12:30 pm – 1:50 pm | LANG 114

sick discourse

health, medicine, and wellness through rhetorical studies

### Dr. Matthew Heard | Assoc. Professor, Communication Studies | [matthew.heard@unt.edu](mailto:matthew.heard@unt.edu) | Office Hrs MW 11am – noon | Office: GAB 328

# KEY ASSIGNMENTS:

## 1. RHM Scholarship Report

A 3-4 page written report, engaging directly with existing scholarship in RHM. For the report, you will select a key topic from our course (e.g., Medicalization, Narrative, Biopower) and analyze 2-3 RHM articles on the subject. More details to be provided.

## 2. Reading Responses

For several course readings in Units 2 and 3, you will be asked to post a reading response on Canvas before class. Each response will cover questions helping you focus on the key ideas and connections from one reading to another.

## 3. "Sick Discourse" Project Proposal

This 2-page proposal will help you plan for your final project contribution. The proposal will ask you to outline your chosen topic, frame it as a central research question (using the "Did you know...?" format), describe the specific public audience you intend to reach, and provide an initial list of sources.

## 4. "Sick Discourse" Final Project

This final project is a creative and collaborative effort to put RHM into practice. Our class will produce an informal, public-facing project (such as a **zine** or **advocacy website**) on health and wellness related to a course topic that we choose together (initially, the topic will be Child Welfare). Your individual contribution will be a short, well-researched piece (e.g., an article, an infographic, a comic) that translates complex information into an accessible and ethical format designed to educate a non-academic audience.

## Grading Breakdown

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Daily Assignments and In-Class Work | 25 |
| Reading Responses | 20 |
| RHM Scholarship Report | 15 |
| Sick Discourse Proposal | 10 |
| Final Project | 30 |
| Total | 100 |

## 5. Daily and In-Class Work

This grade reflects your active and thoughtful contribution to our classroom's learning community through class discussions, preparation for class, participation in class activities (including workshops, brainstorming sessions, etc.), and in-class work such as quizzes or reflection responses.

# ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Although I encourage perfect attendance, I recognize the challenges of the semester by offering you four “free” absences. You do not need to provide any excuses or doctor’s notes for these, although I would ask that you give me notice ahead of time when you know you will be absent. After four absences, each additional absence will bring down your attendance and participation grade. Note that if you are absent more than 8 times, you will not earn any points for your entire attendance and participation grade. If you are absent more than 10 times, you will not pass the course.

Please note that I will begin class on time every class period, and that we may have quizzes or other in-class assignments at the start of class. These assignments cannot be made up or missed if you are late or absent. If you are late, please join the class without distracting others. More than two instances of lateness will result in an absence from class, and habitual lateness will affect your participation grade. Please talk with me if you have a problem with getting to class on time.

# Course Description

Our course will examine how we as communities co-construct understandings of health, wellness, and the body through language, symbols, and other ways of making our motivations manifest. The course explores foundational topics in the Rhetoric of Health & Medicine (RHM), including medicalization, health literacy, and biopower, with a special focus questions of how health and wellness are defined differently by different groups. The class will exercise skills in both critical analysis and practical, public-facing communication. Overall, we will aim not only to enrich our own perspectives on crucial topics of health and wellness, but also to intervene in rhetorical practices that affect the bodies and minds of those around us.

# Catalog Description

Specialized, focused study of a particular topic, theme, figure, practice and/or theory within the field of rhetoric and writing studies. May be repeated for credit as topics vary for a maximum of 6 hours.

# Required Texts

All readings in this class will be posted to our Canvas course site. You do not need to purchase any books for this course.

# Instructor Information

Matthew Heard, Associate Professor, Dept. of Communication Studies.

[Matthew.heard@unt.edu](mailto:Matthew.heard@unt.edu)

Pronouns: He/Him/His

Office: GAB 328

Office Hours: MW 11:00 am – noon

# Communication with me

To facilitate communication with me, please connect with me through my UNT email and/or by attending office hours. Keep in mind that I always try to respond to emails within 24 hours. Please reach out if you need help or want to talk over anything related to our class.

# Course Objectives:

## We will thoughtfully consider these big questions:

* Who has the authority to define "sickness" and "wellness"?
* How are medical 'facts' and 'truths' argued into existence?
* How can rhetoric be a tool for both social control and health justice?
* What is the ethical responsibility of rhetors when analyzing health and medicine?
* How methods of rhetorical inquiry evolve to address the complexity of "sick discourse"?

## We will work to understand that:

* Health is a Rhetorical and Cultural Construction. Our ideas about health are not simply biological facts; they are shaped by language, culture, and argument. RHM queries medicine's entire epistemology, culture, and practices.
* Medical "Truth" is Forged Through Persuasion and Power. Medical knowledge is established through argumentation, the management of controversy, and persuasive practices that occur in labs, clinics, and public forums .
* Languages of health and medicine reflect ethical and political commitments. Health and medical discourses are primary sites for the exercise of power. Rhetorical analysis can reveal how discourse marginalizes or empowers individuals, making it a crucial tool for understanding health justice .

## We will develop these key ideas and skills:

* Analyzing how health, illness, and wellness are rhetorically constructed in public, professional, and academic discourses.
* Evaluating the ethical and social justice implications of health-related communication, particularly concerning issues of race and precarity.
* Synthesizing key scholarly conversations in the Rhetoric of Health & Medicine to produce a well-researched academic report.
* Translating complex research into an accessible and ethical piece of public communication designed to intervene in a specific health issue.
* Collaborate with peers to produce a public-facing project that addresses a real-world problem in health and wellness.

# CLASS POLICIES

## Artificial Intelligence

From the UNT VPAA Office: based on the Student Academic Integrity Policy (UNT Policy 6.003), any form of "unauthorized assistance" constitutes cheating. The use of artificial intelligence to create phrases, sentences, or paragraphs for assignments in this class is not authorized. Violations of this policy will be considered cheating and will be reported to the office of Student Academic Integrity office.

## Texas Senate Bill 17

Texas Senate Bill 17, the recent law that outlaws diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public colleges and universities in Texas, does not in any way affect content, instruction or discussion in a course at public colleges and universities in Texas. Expectations regarding academic freedom for teaching and class discussion have not been altered post-SB 17, and students should not feel the need to censor their speech pertaining to topics pertaining to race and racism, structural inequality, LGBTQ+ issues, or diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## ADA ACCOMMODATION

The University of North Texas makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking reasonable accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide you with a reasonable accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding your specific needs in a course. You may request reasonable accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of reasonable 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 reasonable accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. Students are strongly encouraged to deliver letters of reasonable accommodation during faculty office hours or by appointment. Faculty members have the authority to ask students to discuss such letters during their designated office hours to protect the privacy of the student. For additional information, refer to the Office of Disability Access website (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/office-disability-access). You may also contact ODA by phone at (940) 565-4323.

# ACADEMIC SUCCESS

UNT strives to offer you a high-quality education and a supportive environment, so you learn and grow. As a faculty member, I am committed to helping you be successful as a student. To learn more about campus resources and information on how you can be successful at UNT, go to unt.edu/success and explore unt.edu/wellness. For all of your enrollment and student financial-related questions answered, go to scrappysays.unt.edu.

## Supporting Your Success And Creating An Inclusive Learning Environment

I value your perspective along with the many different perspectives your classmates bring to our campus. Please work with me to create a classroom culture of open communication, mutual respect, and belonging. All discussions should be respectful and civil. Although disagreements and debates are encouraged, personal attacks are unacceptable. My goal each class is to ensure a safe and welcoming classroom for all. If you ever feel like this is not the case, please stop by my office and let me know. We are all learning together. I also encourage you to review UNT’s student code of conduct so that we can all start with the same baseline expectations (Code of Student Conduct) (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/07-012).

## ASSESSING YOUR WORK

### Grading Scale

For the purposes of this course,

* “A” WORK will constitute a final score of 90-100% of total points, and will represent an overall response that is impressively sophisticated and illuminating: inventive, balanced, justified, effective, mature, and expertly situated in time and context
* “B” WORK will constitute a final score of 80-89.99% of total points, and will represent an overall response that is thorough and systematic: skilled, revealing, developed, perceptive, but not unusually or surprisingly original
* “C” WORK will constitute a final score of 70-79.99% of total points, and will represent an overall response that is acceptable but limited: coherent, significant, and perhaps even insightful in places, but ultimately insufficient in organization, articulation, perception, and/or effectiveness
* “D” WORK will constitute a final score of 60-69.99% of total points, and will represent an overall response that is incomplete and severely lacking: incoherent, limited, uncritical, immature, undeveloped, and overall, not reflective of the performance expected of UNT undergraduates
* “F” WORK will constitute a final score of 0-59.99% of total points, and will represent an overall response that is unacceptable.

## ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Every student in my class can improve by doing their own work and trying their hardest with access to appropriate resources. Students who use other people’s work without citations will be violating UNT’s Academic Integrity Policy.

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.

The decision of the instructor will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity, which is responsible for maintaining student conduct records. The incident may result in an official disciplinary record for the student(s).

Academic integrity violations can include copying a passage from a source verbatim, but they can also include improper or misleading citations. Please note that all source material must be acknowledged, even if the material is paraphrased. Be careful to always acknowledge the work of other writers, and take the time to work out your thoughts and arguments without copying the work of others.

Please read and follow this important set of guidelines for your academic success (https://policy.unt.edu/policy/06-003). If you have questions about this, or any UNT policy, please email me or come discuss this with me during my office hours.

## LATE WORK

All assignments are due by class time on the due date indicated on the assignment schedule or in Canvas. Late work will be penalized per class period and assignments more than two weeks late will not be accepted. In some cases, I may grant extensions on assignments. To request an extension, please contact me before the assignment is due and I will consider your circumstances. Note that I will not grade subsequent assignments from any students until all previous assignments have been completed, and you cannot pass the course if you have not received a grade for all major assignments. Please contact me as soon as possible if you miss a deadline for an assignment.

## Additional Class Support:

* Make an appointment with me. You are more than welcome to e-mail, to visit during office hours, or make an appointment. I can help resolve many issues & questions.
* Writing Lab. This is great place to talk about ideas, improve the organization of your paper, or work on your writing skills. Check the Writing Center website for more information about hours, request an appointment, or even find out how to receive feedback on your writing online. You can also contact them at 940-565-2563, e-mail: [WritingLab@unt.edu](mailto:WritingLab@unt.edu), or go visit them in Sage Hall 150 (to set up an appointment) or during Walk-In hours at Willis 250.
* Use the COMM Library! Seriously — our student librarians are awesome! Drop by GAB 318; you can also see our holdings and hours online through the [COMM website](https://communication.unt.edu/communications-library-search).

## Basic Needs Security

Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing and believes this may affect their academic performance is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support (940-565-2648). UNT has both a Food Pantry and a “Seeking Options & Solutions” (SOS) team who work to help students navigate diverse concerns, including identifying resources for personal, academic, financial, and social issues.

## Recording Class

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 Office of Disability Access (ODA). In such cases, all students in the course will be notified whenever recording will be taking place.

## Concealed Handgun Carry

As of August 1, 2016, a concealed handgun license holder may carry a concealed handgun while on the campus premises, except in locations and at activities prohibited by law or UNT policy. A license holder may not carry a partially or wholly visible handgun, or intentionally or knowingly display a handgun in plain view of another person.

## 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.

# Student Support

STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

In order to help support you as a student in every way, UNT offers multiple resources to care for your physical, mental, and academic health. Here are some of the resources:

* Student Health and Wellness Center (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center)
* Counseling and Testing Services (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services)
* UNT Care Team (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/care)
* UNT Psychiatric Services (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/services/psychiatry)
* Individual Counseling (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/individual-counseling)

## Other student support services offered by UNT include

* Registrar (https://registrar.unt.edu/registration)
* Financial Aid (https://financialaid.unt.edu/)
* Student Legal Services (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-legal-services)
* Career Center (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/career-center)
* Multicultural Center (https://edo.unt.edu/multicultural-center)
* Counseling and Testing Services (https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services)
* Pride Alliance (https://edo.unt.edu/pridealliance)
* UNT Food Pantry (https://deanofstudents.unt.edu/resources/food-pantry)

## Academic Support Services

* Academic Resource Center (https://clear.unt.edu/canvas/student-resources)
* Academic Success Center (https://success.unt.edu/asc)
* UNT Libraries (https://library.unt.edu/)
* Writing Center (http://writingcenter.unt.edu/)
* MathLab (<https://math.unt.edu/mathlab>

# Schedule of Assignments

Please have all readings read by class time of the date indicated on the schedule below. All readings will be posted on Canvas unless otherwise indicated. Schedule is subject to change. Always check our CANVAS page before class to see if any readings have changed!

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Wk | Unit | Tu | Tu Class Focus / Readings | Th | Th Class Focus / Readings |
| 1 | 1 | Aug 19 | Unit 1: Core ideas of RHM  Course Intro | Aug 21 | Why Rhetoric? Why Health? |
| 2 | Aug 26 | Defining RHM | Aug 28 | Topics and Exigencies in RHM  Activity: Brainstorming Exigencies |
| 3 | Sep 2 | Workshop: RHM Topics | Sep 4 | Roundtable on RHM Topics  Unit 2 Preview: "Constructing Sickness."  📌 Due: Health Exigency Brief |
| 4 | 2 | Sep 9 | Unit 2: Constructing Sickness and Wellness  Eudaimonia: The “Good” Life | Sep 11 | Medicalization: How does difference become disorder? |
| 5 | Sep 16 | Narrative and Pathography: The Power of the Patient Story | Sep 18 | Pathography and Graphic Pathography |
| 6 | Sep 23 | Selling Sickness & Wellness | Sep 25 | Health Literacy |
| 7 | 3 | Sep 30 | Unit 3: Health, Power, and Justice  Health & Social Identity | Oct 2 | Health and Ability |
| 8 | Oct 7 | Establishing Medical Credibility | Oct 9 | Creating Controversy |
| 9 | Oct 14 | Biopower & Precarity | Oct 16 | The Politics of Life Itself  📌 Due: RHM Scholarship Report |
| 10 | 4 | Oct 21 | Unit 4: Extended Case Study - Health and Wellness in US Child Welfare  Topic overview and introduction | Oct 23 | Historical and Rhetorical Context of Child Welfare |
| 11 | Oct 28 | Rhetorics of Health via Parenting and Childhood | Oct 30 | Rhetorics of Health via Child Welfare Law and Policy |
| 12 | Nov 4 | Analyzing "Sick Discourses" in Child Welfare | Nov 6 | Analyzing "Sick Discourses" in Child Welfare  📌 DUE: Final Project Proposals |
| 13 | Nov 11 | Workshop: Final Project | Nov 13 | Final Project Check-in |
| 14 | Nov 18 | Work Session: Finalizing Interventions | Nov 20 | Final Work Session: Preparing for Presentations |
|  | Nov 25 | THANKSGIVING BREAK - NO CLASS 🦃 | Nov 27 | THANKSGIVING BREAK - NO CLASS |
| 15 | Dec 2 | Project Showcase | Dec 4 | Course Wrap-Up & Reflection  📌 DUE: Final Project |
| F | Unit | Dec 9 | TBD |  |  |