

Emily Balch Seminar: How To Do Nothing

COURSE INFO

Instructor: Joel Alden Schlosser

Classroom: Dalton 119 (Bryn Mawr College)

Meeting Times: Tu & Th, 11:40 am – 1 pm

Conference hours: Wednesdays, 10 am - noon and 2 - 4 pm (Dalton Hall 100C)

Office hours: Tuesdays, 3 - 5 pm (Dalton 100C)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

“Nothing is harder to do these days than nothing,” writes Jenny Odell in How To Do Nothing. Everything vies for our attention: important news, exciting updates from friends, cat videos, advertisements. How could we possibly do nothing when there’s always something? This course investigates how and why doing nothing might be the most important thing to do at a time when it feels like there’s so much to do. If we really want to do something in our lives and in the world, we might need to begin by doing nothing, resisting or refusing the immediate demands on our attention and energy to refocus and concentrate ourselves toward more meaningful action in common with human and non-human others. We will experiment with different forms of writing that avoid just doing something and instead cultivate attention and intention. In dialogue with Odell’s book, this writing will investigate resistance and refusal with writers including Melville, Thoreau, and M.L. King; attention and ecology with Robin Wall Kimmerer and Masanobu Fukuoka; and political imagination with Rebecca Solnit and Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

PROMISES & PRACTICES

The Emily Balch Seminars seek to teach critical thinking within and across disciplines through close reading, re-reading, and interpretation of substantial written, visual, and material texts. Writing stands at the center of this enterprise: developing writing as a flexible tool of inquiry and interpretation; responding thoughtfully in writing to course texts; constructing clear, convincing written arguments; developing these arguments through reasoning and evidence; and communicating in clear, readable prose.

I believe that writing is a process and a practice. The process involves thinking, drafting, discussing, workshopping, revising, and editing (and not necessarily in that order!). The practice involves committing to the writing life through developing the habits of a writer: attending words, sentences, paragraphs, and the broader rhetoric of all writing; carrying a notebook (and using it!); and accepting that writing is a verb, something we do and continue doing throughout our lives.

I am committed to fostering a learning community marked by imagination, creativity, honesty, openness, earnest inquiry and playful speculation. Through the structures of reading, writing, revision, and discussion that this course offers, I also seek to help you develop certain habits of mind that I consider essential to the liberal arts: to learn to listen and to speak, to

read and to write, and to think with creativity and focus. I also hope that we can collaborate and learn from one another as we bring this community of learning into being, making space for silence as well as voice, for dissent as well as agreement, for personal transformation as well as political deliberation.

Given the subject matter of this course, many of our discussions in class will involve sensitive issues. You may find some of this material upsetting. Again, my hope is that together we can foster an environment of respect and openness conducive to everyone's full and honest participation. Whatever success or pleasure the course might occasion depends in large part on what all of us bring and contribute.

I have created this course with the hopes of helping all of you develop as effective speakers and listeners, intelligent readers and writers, and critical thinkers. Yet I acknowledge that without your distinctive contributions the course would amount to very little. I welcome your suggestions and criticisms and I hope that we can make this course together into something worthwhile for each and every one of us.

ACTIVITIES

Because this course seeks to develop you as a speaker and a listener, a writer and a reader, and a critical thinker, we will focus our work in several areas. Please note: Because this course seeks to evaluate not how well you already write but your learning across the semester, I will not grade individual essays during the semester. If you are curious about your progress, I encourage you to talk to me about this. At the midpoint of the semester, I can also send you a provisional grade if requested.

1. Contributions to class and online discussions

Consistent and thorough preparation for class activities as well as quality and appropriate contributions to class discussions are the most essential part for fully realizing the promises of this course. Enrolling in this course signifies your agreement to contribute to the education of your fellow students and to learn from them and your professor in turn. Contributing during class sessions provides an opportunity to practice speaking and the skills of persuasion, as well to listen to, critique, and develop the arguments and analyses of your peers. (Please see my [Contribution Rubric](#) for more specific suggestions and criteria. Your contributions will count for 20% of your final grade.)

Once a week, you will post on the Moodle discussion forum in response to the discussion questions on the syllabus for that class period. These posts should run around 200 words and address at least one of the questions in such a way that includes specific reference to the readings (with page numbers included). I will read each of your posts prior to class and then adjust the course according to your interests, questions, and connections. Please post no later than 10 am on the morning of our class meeting.

2. Writing projects

This course will require frequent writing and revision during the course of the semester. Each of the essays listed in the course schedule must be posted in the appropriate Moodle forum by 10 am on the morning before the class during which we will discuss it. These writing projects are staged, helping you to develop from close reading and interpretation to high-level analysis and

comparison then eventually to evaluation and creation of your own ideas out of those we have been discussing. The writing, revision, and rewriting of these essays will go as follows:

1. Complete draft due for workshop. On the day designated on the course schedule you will bring a finished copy of your essay. This essay should be approximately the required word count and respond to the general question for that particular essay as listed in the syllabus. The essay should engage the readings thus far in the course, developing an argument of your own devising that speaks to issues we have discussed during the regular meetings of the seminar. We will discuss possible approaches to the general essay questions during class meetings; I am also always happy to meet and discuss essays topics at any time. During our class session we will read one another's essays and discuss revision in small groups.
2. Conferences with me. Every other week you are required to meet with me for 20 minutes to discuss your writing. These conferences will usually involve your reading your essay aloud to me or talking about how you plan to revise a piece of writing you have brought to our workshop. Please make sure that you bring copies of the essay or email them ahead of time. If you miss a conference you are required to attend my regularly scheduled office hours to make it up.
3. Evaluation. Please see my [Essay Rubric](#) for specific criteria and suggestions. You must workshop every essay to receive credit for this course. Your participation and contributions to the workshop will count for 20% of your final grade.

3. Final Portfolio

The final portfolio is an opportunity to reflect upon your development as a writer and thinker. The writing you select should represent your growth during the fall. Along with the writing you choose from among your Moodle responses, revised essays, and other informal responses to class prompts or discussion, I ask that you submit a detailed reflective letter. This letter should be addressed as much to me as yourself. Think of it as a chance to articulate what you learned through the various experiments you undertook. Be specific about how you addressed areas that were not working in your writing (and thinking more generally), what steps you took to improve those elements, and why you made those choices versus others. You might also include what you would still like to work on if you had more time, since even strong writing is never "finished" but, more honestly, abandoned. These questions should guide your selection. In other words, be clear about the purpose of each selection: what does it reveal about your growth as a writer and thinker and where do you want to go from here? (The final portfolio and your reflection on it will count for 60% of your final grade.)

TEXTS

To quote Sarah Ahmed, these are our "companion texts" for the collective inquiry of the course. These books are available for purchase at the Bryn Mawr Bookshop and for checkout from the Bryn Mawr Library. If you are having trouble acquiring these books, please let me know well in advance of our discussion. Please note that (except with explicit accommodation) you must bring print copies of all texts to class meetings.

1. Jenny Odell, [How To Do Nothing](#) (Melville, 2019)

2. Masanobu Fukuoka, The One-Straw Revolution (NYRB Classics, 2009)
3. Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass (Milkweed, 2013)

We will also have additional readings on Moodle and you are welcome to purchase hard copies of those books; I will provide information at least one week prior to our reading.

RESOURCES AND POLICIES

Overview.

I am committed to creating and supporting a classroom community that is inclusive, equitable, and conducive to learning for all students, as well as sensitive to the specific, unique, and unpredictable challenges we will each and all encounter this semester. To this end, I have designed course activities and assignments meant to help you gain and demonstrate understanding of key course content in ways that are flexible and personally meaningful. Our class meetings will include time for group check-ins, and the syllabus includes structured occasions for one on one and small group conferences with me as well.

Academic Support.

I encourage you to reach out to the Academic Support and Learning Resources Specialist to explore effective learning, studying, test-taking, note-taking and time and stress management strategies that are essential to success in this course and college life. Bryn Mawr students can schedule a meeting with Rachel Heiser, the Academic Support and Learning Resources Specialist by calling the Dean's Office at 610-526-5375 or emailing Rachel at rheiser@brynmawr.edu. For more information, please visit [the Academic Support Website](#).

Accommodations.

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can call 610-526-7516 to make an appointment with the Director of Access Services, Deb Alder, or email her at dalder@brynmawr.edu to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with me as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website.

[\(http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/\)](http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class first must speak with the Director of Access Services and to me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

AI.¹

I ask that you complete your work without using AI tools to develop your thinking or revise your writing. Other than spell checking, t[he only exception to the rule is if your instructor gives explicit instructions and parameters for the use of AI tools. If you submit work that appears to

¹ The following is the policy developed by the Political Science Department at Bryn Mawr College.

have been written using AI sources, I will ask you to meet with me to discuss your thinking and writing process. If, after this conversation, I conclude it's likelier than not that you did not personally complete an assignment you submitted under your name, I will refer you to the Honor Board in accordance with normal procedures.

The Political Science Department seeks to develop essential skills of inquiry, analysis, argument, and imagination. These skills require practice and reflection without the assistance of AI. While AI can be a useful tool, I believe that a liberal arts education requires learning how to think, research, write, and revise independently and my courses focus on helping students develop these skills themselves.

If you have questions about AI use and/or proper attribution of other people's work, please talk to me.

Library.

I encourage you to use the library resources. If you're curious about a topic, you can always schedule an appointment by emailing library@brynmawr.edu

Due Dates and Extensions.

If you are unable to attend class or complete an assignment by the due date, I ask that whenever possible you let me know ahead of time and work with me to determine when you will complete the work (from class or assigned). In this situation there will be no grade penalty for late work. If it is not possible to ask ahead of time, I ask that you maintain communication with me as much as possible so that we can work together to determine a good course of action. I encourage those of you who need more than a one-week extension to talk with your Dean to arrive at a practical and workable plan for completing the work.

Integrity.

I am committed to adhering to the standards regarding academic honesty contained in the Bryn Mawr and Haverford honor codes and the values of mutual trust, concern, and respect for oneself and for others upon which the bi-co community depends; I invite all of you to continue the conversation with me and with one another about how we can create the best intellectual community possible.

Moodle.

On our course Moodle site you can find electronic copies of course readings, a copy of the syllabus, and other useful information. Here all of our communications with the entire class will be archived under "Announcements" and course discussions conducted electronically will be archived.

Religious Observance.

While Bryn Mawr does not cancel classes for any religious holidays, it does respect the right of its students to observe holidays that are important to them. Absences around a religious holiday will be excused. I am committed to help you make up work missed because of such absences. If you foresee a conflict with a scheduled activity, please let me know so we can adjust accordingly.

Title IX.

Bryn Mawr/Haverford College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and

dating violence are violations of Bryn Mawr/Haverford's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr/Haverford faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sexual misconduct. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr/Haverford employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the [Bi-College Title IX Coordinator](#).

Information about the College's Sexual Misconduct policy, reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website.

[Writing Center](#).

The Writing Center offers free appointments and experienced peer tutors who are there to help you at any stage of the writing process. The Writing Center is located on the first floor of Canaday Library. You can get more information at [The Writing Center's Website](#).

[Your Fellow Classmates](#).

Your fellow classmates are your best and most available resource for making sure you get the most out of this course. I encourage you to exchange information and contact one another if logistical questions arise, if you have to miss a class and want to know what happened in your absence, or if you want to discuss readings or course topics outside of class. We will be creating an intellectual community together over the course of the semester, and you can contribute to this project by building relationships with one another just as you seek to build a relationship with your professor.

[Your Dean](#).

In case of serious illness, family emergency, or any other situation that requires you to miss class and fall behind on coursework, please contact your dean as soon as possible.

[Your Professor](#).

In addition to scheduled meetings, you are welcome to meet with me during office hours or at an alternative time if necessary. The best way to contact me outside of class is via email.

[Zoom](#).

If it becomes necessary to pivot to online, we will be using Zoom for our synchronous class discussion. Please review the [Zoom Norms](#) for this course.

SCHEDULE

<u>DATE</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>To be prepared before class:</u>
Tu, 9/3	Introduction How to Read a Syllabus / Envisioning our Work Together Read and discuss syllabus together: What is this course about? How to prepare? What is a seminar? "Moodle"? In-class writing on "doing nothing."	Read syllabus prior to class, annotate with any questions or concerns.
Th, 9/5	No class: Joel at American Political Science Association Annual Conference	
Tu, 9/10	"Doing Nothing" Discussion: What does "doing nothing" involve according to Odell? Who is she in conversation with? (Post a response on Moodle by 10 am.)	Prepare Odell, Ch. 1 NOTE: All students will have short conferences with Joel on Wednesday, September 11. Sign up via Calendly.
Th, 9/12	Essay 1: Walk the Bryn Mawr labyrinth and write about it. Were you "doing nothing"? (500 words)	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.

Tu, 9/17	Discussion: What does it mean to “delight” for Ross Gay? Is this “doing nothing”? Why or why not? CONFERENCE GROUP A MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Prepare Ross Gay, <i>The Book of Delights</i> (selections on Moodle)
Th, 9/19	Essay 2: Write your own delights, following Gay’s form. (You can write more than one if you feel so moved.) (500 words)	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.
Tu, 9/24	Resisting the Attention Economy Discussion: What kind of citizen does the “attention economy” produce and what problems or challenges does it present to democracy? CONFERENCE GROUP B MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Prepare James Williams, <i>Stand Out of Our Light</i>, pp. 43 – 84 (on Moodle)
Th, 9/26	Essay 3: Explain and assess Williams’ argument about attention, distraction, and democracy. (500 words)	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.
Tu, 10/1	Discussion: What is Williams’ response to the problems of the attention economy he diagnoses? How might Odell respond to this? CONFERENCE GROUP A MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Williams, <i>Stand Out of Our Light</i>, pp. 87 – 128 and Odell, p. 114 - 120

Th, 10/3	Essay 4: Is “doing nothing” sufficient for responding to the perils Williams discusses? Why or why not? (500 words)	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.
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Tu, 10/8	Imagining How To Do Nothing: “Do Nothing” Farming Discussion: What does Fukuoka add to our discussion of “doing nothing”? How can agricultural practices be translated to modern, non-agricultural life? CONFERENCE GROUP B MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Fukuoka, The One Straw Revolution, Part I (pp. 1 – 29) and optional Fukuoka, The One Straw Revolution, Part III (79 – 119)
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Th, 10/10 No class

Friday, 10/11 - Friday, 10/18	Fall break!
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Tu, 10/22	Refusal as “Doing Nothing” Discussion: Is Diogenes’ cynicism a way to do nothing? Why or why not?	Diogenes Laertius, Life of Diogenes (on Moodle) Odell, pp. 63 - 77
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Th, 10/24	Discussion: What do you think of Odell's reading of "the anatomy of refusal"? How do these old stories speak to the present?	Melville, "Bartelby, the Scrivener: Or, a Tale of Wall Street" (on Moodle) Odell, pp. 77 – 93
Tu, 10/29	Essay 5: Is refusal a political practice? Does it provide a sufficient response to the problems of the attention economy? (1000 words) CONFERENCE GROUP A MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.
Th, 10/31	Civil Disobedience as Refusal Discussion: What is the difference (if any) between civil disobedience and refusal? Which of our four examples – Diogenes, Bartelby, Thoreau, and King – do you prefer and why?	Henry David Thoreau, "On Civil Disobedience" (on Moodle) Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (on Moodle)
Tu, 11/5	Essay 6: How might these different practices of refusal speak to the problems of the 21st century attention economy? Which seems most fruitful and why? (1000 words) CONFERENCE GROUP B MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.

Th, 11/7	Refusal and Ecological Awareness Discussion: What key questions is Kimmerer addressing and what do you think about her responses?	Kimmerer, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> (selections on Moodle) Odell, pp. 141 - 148
Tu, 11/12	Essay 7: How (if at all) is cultivating ecological awareness a form of “doing nothing”? How (if it all) is it a form of refusal? (1250 words) CONFERENCE GROUP A MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Bring two hard copies of your essay to class.
Th, 11/14	Discussion: How does Kimmerer develop her own ideas through combining story and argument? How might we learn from this?	Kimmerer, <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> (selections)
Tu, 11/19	Essay 8: Revision Workshop! CONFERENCE GROUP B MEETS WITH JOEL THIS WEEK	Follow the instructions on Moodle when posting your essay and bring two hard copies of your revised essay to class.
Th, 11/21	How to Cite *Meet in Canaday 314*	Prepare <i>Writing with Sources</i> (on Moodle) and post one question about citation in the Moodle Forum.

Tu, 11/26 No class (Thanksgiving week)

Tu, 12/3 Manifest Dismantling? Or, "The Politics of Doing Nothing" Odell, pp. 186 - 204

Discussion: Post your own questions that engage this reading and connect it to the big questions of the course.

Th, 12/5 Discussion: Post your own questions that engage this reading and connect it to the big questions of the course.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned* (selections on Moodle)

OR

Kohei Saito, *The Degrowth Manifesto*, Intro & Chapter 7 ([ebook](#))

Tu, 12/10 Conferences: Reflections for Portfolio Prepare notes for reflection and portfolio to discuss with Joel.

Th, 12/12 Conferences: Reflections for Portfolio Prepare notes for reflection and portfolio to discuss with Joel.