

ENGL 4670: Fermentation, Culture, and Writing (16095)

Peck Hall 319 | Mon. & Wed. | 12:40 – 2:05 p.m.

Instructor: Dr. Eric Detweiler

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Office Hours: MW 2:05 – 3:20 p.m., TR 2:30 – 3:15 p.m.

Course Description

In this course, students will read and write about fermentation and culture from a variety of angles. Students will study the culture of fermentation—its histories, stories, and contexts. With that cultural background in mind, students will also write about processes of fermentation and culturing, practicing more technical genres like recipes and how-to guides. Finally, students will practice the craft of writing about fermented and other cultured goods by studying, using, and expanding the vocabularies of description and judgment that have been developed by food writers as well as other stakeholders involved in the creation, circulation, and distribution of fermented goods and fermentation culture alike.

One important note: This is the first time that this class—which I developed in collaboration with MTSU’s new B.S. in Fermentation Science—has been offered. Because of that, I’m especially open to and interested in any feedback, ideas, or concerns that you all have. Like making your first batch of homemade pickles, this is a kind of experiment. A meticulously crafted one, but an experiment nonetheless. Feel free to talk with me about the direction of the course anytime.

Required Course Texts

I have purposefully frontloaded this course with online articles and PDFs so that you have a couple of weeks to get your hands on the three required books. Just make sure you have copies of them by January 31.

- [*Wild Fermentation: The Flavor, Nutrition, and Craft of Live-Culture Foods*](#) by Sandor Ellix Katz (2nd edition)
- [*Reinventing the Wheel: Milk, Microbes, and the Fight for Real Cheese*](#) by Bronwen Percival and Francis Percival
- [*Craft Obsession: The Social Rhetorics of Beer*](#) by Jeff Rice
- selected PDFs and online articles available via D2L

Course Goals

This course is designed to help students

1. understand and practice the kinds of writing involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of fermented products;
2. develop a broad sense of the history, present state, and possible futures of fermentation and the cultures surrounding it;
3. communicate with professionals and amateurs interested in fermentation and fermentation industries;
4. consider ethical dilemmas involved in the operation and representation of fermentation culture and fermentation industries; and
5. track and anticipate the rise and fall of fermented goods as well as fermentation trends and regulations.

Coursework

First, a quick note on participation: I don't usually grade on participation because it's a hard thing to quantify and can manifest in a lot of different ways. I've had a lot of great students who are the first to speak up in a class discussion and a lot of great students who are fantastic listeners and rarely say a word. However, this is a small class, so you all need to come prepared to participate and interact every day. Otherwise we'll have a lot of awkward silences. I will do my best to offer you a variety of ways to participate, including full-class discussions, small-group activities, and responding to each other's work in writing.

Tasting Notes (5% of Grade)

Everyone in the class will sign up for a day on which they're responsible for bringing a food or beverage to class (I will take a survey regarding dietary needs and restrictions before this happens). On those days, we will begin by sampling what the person has brought and practicing our ability to give "tasting notes"—basically, developing our vocabularies for talking about and analyzing food. The product you bring must be a fermented product, which could include anything from a store-bought jar of pickles to sourdough bread that took you three days to make. No alcohol, obviously. For bringing your product on your assigned day, you get full credit for 5% of your course grade.

Responses to Course Texts and Reading Notes (20%)

Over the course of the semester, students are responsible for twelve D2L forum posts in response to course readings. Each response must be 200-250 words and is due by 10:00 a.m. the day we discuss the reading in question, which leaves me time to read them over before class begins. While the tone of the responses can be informal, they should demonstrate thoughtful engagement with the reading to which you're responding. This could include specific questions about the reading, discussions of passages you found especially interesting or confusing, putting the reading in conversation with other work we've done in the class, etc. The main thing the responses must demonstrate is that you actually did the reading, even if you still have a lot of questions about it. Don't try to talk vague circles around what you think an unread chapter or article was probably about.

In tandem with these responses, on any day we're discussing an assigned reading, I will begin by looking at everyone's reading notes. I use that term pretty loosely. "Notes" could include substantial highlighting, underlining, margin scribbles, etc. in the books assigned for the course. In the case of PDFs and online readings, you can print them out and write on them, annotate them using a program like Adobe Reader (which is free), or use an online annotation platform like hypothes.is (also free). You're also welcome to take reading notes in a separate notebook or digital document. I'll give you three free passes over the course of the semester. If you have no reading notes on more than three occasions, it will start to affect your grade. You're more than welcome to use these notes as the basis for your D2L posts.

As long as they demonstrate actual engagement with readings, individual D2L responses and notes will be assessed on a pass/fail basis: full credit or no credit.

Major Writing Assignments

You will have four main writing assignments for this course. You must submit two drafts of all four assignments, with the second draft revised based on feedback from your peers and your instructor. While this class is not a traditional writing workshop, the writing and work you do will be a major focus of the course, both inside and outside of class. You will receive more detailed prompts for each of the following assignments as they approach.

1. **Oral History (20%):** Interview someone who has been involved, as an amateur and/or professional, in the making of a fermented good for at least five years. Submit the interview as an audio recording or written transcript.
2. **Description and Review (15%):** Write a description and review of a particular fermented good. The description will require you to use relatively neutral language, doing your best to provide a profile of your chosen good for your audience. The review will require you to use more evaluative language to offer a positive, negative, and/or mixed assessment of your chosen good. Again, this assignment will be accompanied by a piece of reflective writing describing your writing process and rhetorical decisions.
3. **How-To Guide (15%):** Create two versions of a how-to guide for creating a particular fermented good (e.g., a cheese, ginger beer, pickles, sourdough bread, etc.). Each version must be targeted at a different audience, and your project must be accompanied by a short piece of reflective writing in which you explain the similarities and differences between the two versions. For instance, you might write two versions of a recipe for making sauerkraut—one for publication on a blog directed at amateur teenage cooks; another for inclusion in a recipe book for experienced fermenters. The styles of your pieces could thus range from the intensely personal to the extremely technical.
4. **The Circulation of Fermentation (25%):** The final project for this course. You will research the history of a particular fermented good (e.g., a type of cheese, a style of beer, etc.), then write a research-based paper in which you provide an overview of that good's historical and contemporary circulation, both in terms of its cultural reputation and changes in the way(s) it has been made, processed, etc.

Grading

The grading scale for this course is as follows:

A: 90-100	C+: 77-79	D: 63-66
B+: 87-89	C: 73-76	D-: 60-62
B: 83-86	C-: 70-72	F: 59 and under
B-: 80-82	D+: 67-69	

Late Work

Because they contribute to what we are doing in class on the day they're due, I will not accept any late D2L posts or reading notes. However, I will give you two no-questions-asked, 48-hour extensions on one of the two drafts of any of the four major assignments. I would advise you not to blow these extensions early in the semester. I give them to you because I know technology fails and emergencies arise, but you only have two. If you take an extension on a first draft, you'll be responsible for finding a way to get feedback on your draft outside of class.

Attendance

If you miss class more than four times, you will not pass this course. Any time you are absent, you are responsible for getting in touch with me to find out what you missed. If you arrive after I take roll or leave class early, you'll be marked tardy. Tardiness counts as half an absence. As for the four absences you are allowed, you do not need to provide me with an excuse or explanation. Just be sure you get in touch to find out what you missed. As with late work, if you think you'll have any problem sticking to this attendance policy, let me know in advance. Again, no guarantees, but I am more likely to be flexible if I know you're planning ahead.

Email

MTMail will be the official way that I pass on information about this course. Because of privacy laws, I will not use your personal email accounts. I won't send you email every day, but check your MTHMail each weekday to make sure you don't miss important updates from the university, me, or your other teachers. You can find more information on MTHMail here: <http://mtsu.edu/email/index.php>.

Students with Disabilities

Middle Tennessee State University is committed to campus access in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any student interested in reasonable accommodations can consult the [Disability & Access Center \(DAC\) website](#) and/or contact the DAC for assistance at (615) 898-2783 or dacemail@mtsu.edu.

If I can provide or assist with any accommodations related specifically to this course, let me know. I would be glad to help.

Course Calendar

I hope this will be an enjoyable course, but it will also be a challenging and carefully coordinated one, so I intend for us to stick to the following schedule fairly closely. Unforeseen circumstances and delays do arise, so I reserve the right to revise our schedule as necessary, though I will not do so without advance notice and, in most cases, discussion. If at any point during the semester you have concerns about the schedule, feel free to bring them to my attention. We will be doing something important every day in this course. Do not assume any day is unimportant. Assigned readings are italicized, while writing assignments are italicized and in bold. Both kinds of assignments are due the day they are listed below. Everything else is a description of what we'll be doing in class that day. "(PDF)" means that reading is available as a downloadable PDF via D2L. If there's an asterisk by the date, that means there's a possible D2L post in response to that day's readings.

The hyperlinks in this document probably won't work on D2L. You'll need to download it and click the links in the downloaded version. One important heads-up: this version of the syllabus only contains our first few weeks of readings plus deadlines for the major writing assignments. I will post a revised version of the syllabus with the full schedule by the end of January, once I have a clearer sense of your interests and the class's personality.

Date	Work
Jan. 17	Snow Day
Jan. 22*	<p>Introductions, Syllabus Overview</p> <p>In Class: Discuss Oral History Prompt</p> <p>To read in class on Jan. 22:</p> <p><i>Lauren Michele Jackson, "The White Lies of Craft Culture":</i> https://www.eater.com/2017/8/17/16146164/the-whiteness-of-artisanal-food-craft-culture</p> <p><i>Clay Risen, "When Jack Daniel's Failed to Honor a Slave, an Author Rewrote History":</i> https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/dining/jack-daniels-whiskey-slave-nearest-green.html</p> <p><i>Lizzy Alfs, "Distillery, Music Venue Slated for Tennessee Horse Farm":</i> http://www.dnj.com/story/money/2017/12/22/jack-daniel-nearest-green-distillery-tennessee-walking-horse-farm/970853001/</p>
Jan. 24*	<p>Today's two readings are oral histories from the Southern Foodways Alliance. Read the information on these pages, then click the "Download Transcript" button at the bottom of the page and read the transcripts:</p> <p><i>Hana Gebretensae:</i> https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/hana-gebretensea/</p> <p><i>Farmer's Daughter</i> (April McGreger): https://www.southernfoodways.org/interview/farmers-daughter/</p>
Jan. 29*	<p><i>Judith M. Bennett, "The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England" (PDF)</i></p>

	Jill Neiman, "From Hooch to Haute Cuisine: A Nearly Extinct Bootlegger's Corn Gets a Second Shot": http://wmot.org/post/hooch-haute-cuisine-nearly-extinct-bootleggers-corn-gets-second-shot-0#stream/0 Allston McCrady, "The Return of Jimmy Red": http://thelocalpalate.com/articles/the-return-of-jimmy-red/
Jan. 31*	
Feb. 5*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Preface (pp. ix-xvi) and Introduction (pp. 1-19)
Feb. 7*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Chapter 1 (pp. 20-40)
Feb. 12	First Draft: Oral History
Feb. 14*	<i>Wild Fermentation</i> , Introduction (pp. xvii-xxii)
	Robbie Gonzalez, "Wine Tasting is Bullshit. Here's Why": https://io9.gizmodo.com/wine-tasting-is-bullshit-heres-why-496098276 Anna M. Young, "The Politics of Wine and the Style of Bullshit" (PDF)
Feb. 19*	
Feb. 21	Second Draft: Oral History
Feb. 26*	<i>Wild Fermentation</i> , Chapters 2 & 3 (pp. 13-34)
Feb. 28	First Draft: Description/Review
Mar. 5	Spring Break
Mar. 7	Spring Break
Mar. 12*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Chapter 3 (pp. 72-97)
Mar. 14	Second Draft: Description/Review
	<i>Wild Fermentation</i> , Chapter 4 (pp. 35-48) plus your choice of one additional chapter from 5-12
Mar. 19*	
Mar. 21*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Chapter 4 (pp. 98-126)
Mar. 26*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Chapter 5 (pp. 155-178)
Mar. 28	First Draft: How-To Guide
Apr. 2*	<i>Craft Obsession</i> , Chapter 7, (pp. 179-205)
Apr. 4*	<i>Reinventing the Wheel</i> , Prologue – Chapter 3 (pp. ix-41)
Apr. 9	Second Draft: How-To Guide
Apr. 11*	<i>Reinventing the Wheel</i> , Chapter 5 (pp. 68-92)
Apr. 16*	<i>Reinventing the Wheel</i> , Chapter 8 (pp. 147-174)
Apr. 18*	<i>Reinventing the Wheel</i> , Chapters 9 & 10 (pp. 175-217)
Apr. 23	First Draft: The Circulation of Fermentation
Apr. 25*	<i>Reinventing the Wheel</i> , Chapter 12 (pp. 234-246)
Apr. 30	Second Draft: The Circulation of Fermentation (due by midnight on Mon., Apr. 30)