**ENC 4931.001 Selected Topics: “Environmental Rhetoric in the Anthropocene”**

CRN 10279

Spring 2021. 3 credits

Prof. Carl G. Herndl

Class meets 12:30-1:45 Tuesday and Thursday. Course is online with live virtual meetings every Tuesday and Thursday from 12:30-1:45.

Drop in office hours are Tuesdays 2:00 to 3:00 and Thursdays 3:30 to 4:30.

**USF Catalogue description**

Focus of the course will be determined by student demand and instructor interest. Topics to be covered may include legal writing, the conventions of business writing, writing in the medical fields, and writing for the social sciences. May be taken twice for credit with different topics.  
  
Prerequisite(s): [ENC 3250](https://catalog.usf.edu/search_advanced.php?cur_cat_oid=13&search_database=Search&search_db=Search&cpage=1&ecpage=1&ppage=1&spage=1&tpage=1&location=33&filter%5Bkeyword%5D=ENC+4931&filter%5Bexact_match%5D=1#tt9580), [ENC 2210](https://catalog.usf.edu/search_advanced.php?cur_cat_oid=13&search_database=Search&search_db=Search&cpage=1&ecpage=1&ppage=1&spage=1&tpage=1&location=33&filter%5Bkeyword%5D=ENC+4931&filter%5Bexact_match%5D=1#tt47), or [ENC 3310](https://catalog.usf.edu/search_advanced.php?cur_cat_oid=13&search_database=Search&search_db=Search&cpage=1&ecpage=1&ppage=1&spage=1&tpage=1&location=33&filter%5Bkeyword%5D=ENC+4931&filter%5Bexact_match%5D=1#tt2900)

**What’s This Course About?**

Writing about the environment in science, in policy and in popular culture has always been an important but difficult task. How do you explain complicated science to everyday readers? How do you communicate with policy makers in ways that influence public policy? How do you manage public scientific controversies in which science, public policy and citizens’ concerns all intersect? How do you understand and communicate risks such as those associated with climate change? These rhetorical challenges take on new political, moral and technical significance in our current anthropocene era. The anthropocene is a term popularized in 2000 by the Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen to refer to the current geological era as one in which human activity is the dominant force on the planet’s natural systems. Climate change is the most obvious force in the anthropocene, but there are other significant environmental changes that are unintended consequence of human activity. For example, the science writer Elizabeth Kolbert’s book *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* describes the current loss of biodiversity as one of the six great mass extinctions in the Earth’s history. Many of these challenges are global and seem abstract, but many of them, like climate change, are manifested locally as well.

In this course, we will begin by reading a few pieces about the anthropocene and the scientific assessment of climate change. These readings establish the context and exigency for studying the rhetorical challenges of the anthropocene, or as the schedule says, “What is the anthropocene and why does it matter?” We will spend the remainder of the course reading about the rhetorical and communication challenges writers face when they try to explain complex scientific issues such as climate change or biodiversity, or when they engage the public about public scientific controversies. We will examine the “deficit model” of science communication, the problem of climate denialism, the reality that providing reliable facts seldom persuades people. We will work to understand how people process information about science and policy and why they oppose seemingly sensible proposals. Finally, we will develop rhetorical concepts and strategies that address these challenges and apply these ideas to practical writing tasks associated with environmental science and policy. Students will be encouraged to identify a topic in science communication or policy that they find compelling, especially an issue affecting the local community, and use that as a semester-long project to focus their reading and written work.

**Reality Check**

It seems like Covid 19 has been with us forever at this point, and we are all pretty (expletive deleted) tired of it. Each of us is dealing with it differently and facing different challenges, but it is a burden. At the same time that I feel the need to teach a professionally respectable course that gives you your money’s worth, rewards your time, and meets department learning outcome expectations, I also recognize that these are not normal times. Everyone needs a little understanding on occasion. If you are struggling, let me know and I’ll do what I can to help.

**Course Objectives**

The course will take up a series of related questions about rhetoric and environmental communication that are especially compelling in the anthropocene era. Our work will be organized by the topics that organize the readings:

* How can you make technical information accessible and compelling to non-expert readers?
* What is the traditional “deficit model” of science communication and why is it so unsuccessful, especially in dealing with controversies like that over climate change?
* What drives climate change denialism and how can we act in this context?
* What are the alternatives to fact-based arguments about environmental controversies?
* How can we improve the connection between sound science and public action?

**Student Learning Outcomes**

After we have read and discussed the readings and students have completed the writing assignments, students will be able to:

* Communicate complex scientific and technical material to non-expert audiences.
* Understand environmental risk and the social and political dynamics of communicating risk.
* Understand how people process and interpret information and how to design communication accordingly.
* Use rhetorical concepts to analyze specific communication situations and challenges and develop practical rhetorical strategies for responding to them.
* Identify possible research topics and resources in environmental communication.

**Texts**

Philip Eubanks. *The Troubled Rhetoric and Communication of Climate Change: The Argumentative Situation*. London: Routledge, 2015. **(ON ELECTRONIC RESERVE)**

Mike Hulme. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2009. **(Print)**

John Meyer. *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma*. MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2015 **(On Electronic Reserve)**

We will also read several articles and book chapters that will be loaded in the “Files” tab on the course Canvas site.

**Written Assignments**

**1) Daily “Quotation-Comment-Connection-Question” (QCCQ) response to assigned readings.** **(length 250-500 words. 40% of course grade.)** Doing the reading, coming to the TEAMS meeting prepared and participating in class discussions is essential to the course. I will occasionally lecture, but mostly we will discuss the readings, the rhetorical issues they introduce and how those ideas connect to the problems of the anthropocene. The best way for you to make this course address your interests is to come prepared and talk about the issues you care about. The QCCQs are designed to prepare you for class discussion.

This assignment asks you to do four things:

1. Select and quote a passage from the assigned reading that you think is especially important or interesting because it is central to the reading’s argument, it connects to an important idea in other readings or it suggests a compelling problem or opportunity in the overall issue of communicating about the anthropocene**. If there is more than one reading assigned for the day, select a passage from whichever reading you choose. You do not need to do separate QCCQs on each reading if there is more than one for a specific day though you may combine ideas from the two readings.** (You **DO** need to read both.)
2. Write a brief comment exploring the meaning, importance and relevance of the passage you quoted. You can also disagree with the writer and explain what you find problematic. That should be somewhere between.
3. Connect the topic or ideas in the passage you chose with other ideas, topics, readings in the course. The goal here is to synthesize ideas across multiple readings over the course of the semester.
4. Formulate a question about the ideas, problems or connections to other readings which you think would be a useful topic for class discussion. I will build many of these questions directly into the class discussion plan.

These QCQs will be **due by 11:00am** on the day we discuss the relevant reading. That way I can read your QCQs and build some of them into my plans for that day’s class so that we address some of the topics and questions you guys find most interesting.

There are 25 days on which we have readings appropriate for QCQ. **You should do 22 QCQs** during the semester. Since these are part of preparing for class discussion, you can’t make them up and submit them after the day we discuss the reading. I will set this up as a “group assignment” and tell Canvas to drop the three lowest grades for each student.

I’ll assign the QCQs a grade between 1 and 5 (5 being the highest) depending on how well they capture important pieces of the reading, draw connections to larger issues in the course and other readings, suggest productive questions for discussion.

**2) Accommodating technical information (15% of course grade. Due Sun. 3/21 by 11:59pm )** Knowing how to take technical information or data and make it not only accessible but also compelling to non-expert audiences is important in almost any communication situation associated with science, policy and the environment. Students will work in small groups to “accommodate” a piece of highly technical information about climate change or scientific issues of the anthropocene (including the definition of the anthropocene) to a lay audience. Each group will locate an article that provides scientific information about a problem related to climate or environment. Groups will accommodate that article to a specific audience which they identify when they submit the paper. In weeks 7 and 8, we will talk about accommodating science for the public and examine a few examples.

**3) Interview report** **(5% of course grade.** **Due Tuesday 3/9 at 12:30 pm.)** We will be reading a lot about how people interpret and respond to information about climate change and thinking about how we might engage them more rather than less productively. Rather than rely purely on readings, I’d like all of us to do a little empirical research. Each member of the class should go out and talk with two people who are skeptical about climate change in some form, i.e. they reject it altogether or they aren’t sure and harbor some doubts. Your task is two-fold.

--First, ask them what they think about climate change and why they think what they do. This is information gathering not an occasion to tell them they are wrong. You are trying to find out what they think, what they believe and what arguments, facts or positions they find persuasive.

--Second, make notes of your conversation and record (in writing or audio tape) what they think, why they believe what they do and how they feel about climate change and the Anthropocene generally. We’ll spend a day in class (3/9) discussing what you learn and thinking about what that means for the greater Anthropocene project.

As part of this assignment, you’ll have to turn in a brief report that describes (but does not identify) who you talked to and the major points of the interview. While you should document anything that you think is rhetorically important, make sure at the minimum to:

summarize

--what they think,

--why they think it,

--what arguments against climate change they offer,

--what criticisms of climate science or the IPCC they make.

You might want to quote them in places if they say especially interesting or graphic things. This report should be about 500 words and should be formatted with subheadings for easy reading.

**4) Final project. (30% of course grade. Due Thursday, 6 May by noon)** Each student will choose between one of the three assignments described below depending on which serves their personal and professional interests. All three options are group projects and should be 2000 to 3000 words.

**Option A. “Case** **study of and environmental dispute”** One option is to identify a specific case of an environmental controversy or a current policy issue concerning the environment in our local community. You might explore the controversy over controlling the nutrient load flowing from Lake Okeechobee and its consequences for downstream ecosystems, the problem of sea level rise in coastal Florida community, the proposal to recycle wastewater in Tampa etc. The recent (December and January 2020) *Tampa Bay Times* series on Climate Change in Florida is a great place to look for topics. You should develop a description of the case (what is the problem or issue? Who is involved? What are the possible responses/solutions? What are the barriers or challenges to implementing policy?), an analysis of the communication challenges and possible communication strategies (who supports and who opposes the proposed changes? And why? What arguments do each side make about the issue and what strategy might bring the sides closer to some consensus and why? (minimum 3000 words)) This will work best as a group project where a small group, say three or four students, work together to produce one case study. (I can point you to a few published case studies that do this sort of thing, only much more developed than you’ll have time to do.) I suggest that you get started on this early in the semester.

**Option B. “Real people arguing”** One of the places where contemporary people argue about climate change or other environmental controversies is on the internet, especially in comment threads associated with popular BLOGS. I think you might enjoy or be energized by connecting what we read with real people confronting, communicating, arguing, trolling each other on the internet. I’d like you to identify a site/topic/exchange on the internet where people talk to/with/at each other about climate change or another controversial environmental topic. I’d like you to follow the discussion for a good portion of the semester, researching the past exchanges and following the current activity. While I won’t require it, I think it would be interesting and productive if you commented in the thread in order to test strategies for communicating with people and trying to make the dialogue more productive. In all this, you are “gathering data” about how environmental controversy or argument is conducted. Once you have a lot of “data,” I want you to use the things we have read, supplemented by some strategically selected additional reading that seems especially useful given your emerging ideas/analysis, to make sense of the public behavior you see online. What is going on? How should we understand it? How can it be analyzed to make more sense than just a messy free-for-all? What organizes the exchanges? Are there controlling metaphors? Powerful assumptions/warrants? What do the moments of flaming look like and are there ever moments where people actually talk to each other? Most importantly, how might someone intervene to make the exchange more productive? On Tuesday, 3/16 we’ll read an article I co-authored with Lauren Cagle on climate change deliberations on the internet as an example of what this might look like. I think this is best done as a group assignment.

Option C. **“Research Paper”** The third option is to identify a topic in environmental communication that you find interesting, e.g. climate denialism, the deficit model of science communication and alternative strategies, the notion of risk and risk communication, public deliberation and democracy, the power of “place” in environmental debates, and read some of the scholarship on the topic. The final paper will probably take the form of a traditional research paper, but I am open to alternative proposals. This can be either a group assignment or an individual effort.

**Class Participation** **(10%)**

The scientific, political, and communication issues associated with the anthropocene are both fascinating and terrifying. The stakes are large; there is a lot riding on our collective response to climate change and other challenges in the anthropocene. The science is complex, deeply sophisticated and compelling. The political and policy situation is deeply frustrating. The public perception and discussion of these issues is confused and a pressing challenge. These are tough issues that we need to talk about and think through together. So, participating in class discussion is a required part of this class. Not only does participation allow you to shift the discussion towards things you are interested in, it is pretty clear that commenting on readings and responding to what others say helps people understand and internalize what they read. Besides, if you don’t talk, you’ll end up listening to me all day and, while I consider myself a font of wisdom, a repository of arcane humor, and an all-around totally fascinating dude, you may get tired of me sucking all the oxygen out of the (virtual) room.

I realize that “participating” in a discussion is different online than in person. But being online may actually help those of you who don’t like to talk in class; you can write down notes and formulate a question, and you’ll often have time to frame the question before you get to talk. We will use the “raise your hand” function in TEAMS, but you can also just speak up if the moment is pressing and passing.

**If you are present every class but do not talk, your participation grade will be a “C.”** If you talk, your participation grade will go up. As always quantity and quality combined define good participation; thoughtful questions and comments are more valuable than lots of less-than-compelling participation. Note that absences will lower your participation grade; if you aren’t here a lot, you aren’t participating. *After you miss three classes, I will deduct half a letter grade from your semester participation grade for each absence (e.g. from B+ to a B)***.**

**Grades**

Accommodation 15%

QCCQ 40%

Interview report 5%

Final Project 30%

Participation 10%

(Note: I assign “plus” (+) and “minus” (-) grades on assignments and on the final grade in this class.)

**Course Policies**

**Inclusion Statement.** I believe in the value of diverse learning spaces. As such, this class will value and respect those of diverse backgrounds including but not limited to: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, culture, and religion. Please be sure to inform me of what name and pronoun you want to go by. I will make every effort to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. If you have concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with me.

**University policies:** <https://www.usf.edu/provost/faculty/core-syllabus-policy-statements.aspx>

**Attendance** “Attendance” means something different in a virtual class than in a face to face classroom. Like “participation,” however, it is essentially the same; you are logged in, paying attention and talking when you have something to say. I expect you to be logged on and engaged in discussion every day.

I know that there are good reasons why people sometimes want to keep their cameras turned off. I won’t require you to have your camera turned on all the time. That said, being able to see each other, see people’s faces and listen to their words makes a much better online experience.

I will not deduct points for the first three absences. If you have a major illness or accident that makes it impossible for you to be in class, give me documentation and we will work out a suitable accommodation. Do not use your three “free” absences for trivial things and then expect to get additional “excused” absences later because you are sick, throwing up or have a fever. Save the three freebies for real necessities.

I take roll at the beginning of class, so if you are late, it is your responsibility to check with me after class and make sure you are marked late and not absent.

After you miss three classes, I will deduct half a letter grade from your semester participation grade for each absence (e.g. from B+ to a B).

If you miss more than 8 classes, a month of the semester, I will enter a grade of “F” for you unless you have medical documentation of a major health crisis and arrange some accommodation with me.

**Students with a disability** and thus requiring accommodations are encouraged to consult with the instructor during the first week of class to discuss accommodations. See Student Responsibilities: http://www.sds.usf.edu/Students.htm. Each student making this request must bring a current “Memorandum of Accommodations” from the office of Student Disabilities Services. I will accommodate your specific needs as much as possible and keep these arrangements confidential. If you have a disability that makes it difficult for you to leave the building in case of emergency, please let me know.

**You are excused from class** for major observances of your religion. Inform the instructor at the beginning of the term when you expect to be absent for these events.

**Plagiarism** See http://www.usg.usf.edu/catalogs/0405/adap.htm for *USF Undergraduate Catalog's* definitions and policy, and consult with the instructor if you are uncertain. Essentially, plagiarism refers to using another writer's words or ideas without proper citation. This boils down to doing your own work and giving credit to others when you copy and use their words. You can’t copy and paste materials from the web into your writing without acknowledging the source of the materials. And buying a paper off the internet is the equivalent to an academic felony. If I catch someone plagiarizing, I will give them an “F” in the course and turn them over to the university’s disciplinary mechanism.

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1** **What is the anthropocene? And why does it matter?**

Tues. 1/12 Introduction

Thur. 1/14 Steffen et al. “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives”

**Week 2**

Tues. 1/19 Kolbert, *Sixth Extinction*, “Prologue” (1-3); Ch. 1 “The Sixth Extinction” (4-22);

Ch. 13 “The Thing With Feathers” (259-269)

Thur. 1/21 IPCC AR5 “Summary for Policy Makers”

**Week 3** **Why we disagree about climate change**

Tues. 1/26 Hulme. Forward & Preface (xxi-xxxix) and Chapter 1: “The Social Meaning of Climate” (1-34)

Thur. 1/28 Hulme. chapter 2: “Discovery of Climate Change,” chapter 3: “Performance of Science” (35-109)

**Week 4**

Tues. 2/2 Dunlop & McCright. “Organized Denial” & Mathews. “Why Are People Skeptical About Climate Change?”

Thur. 2/4 Hulme. chapter 6: “Things We Fear” (178-210)

**Week 5**

Tues. 2/9 Kahan & Braman. “Cultural Cognition and Public Policy”

Thur. 2/11 Hulme. chapter 7: “The Communication of Risk” (211-247)

**Week 6**

Tues. 2/16 Blue. “Framing Climate Change for Public Deliberation”

Thur. 2/18 Hulme. chapter 10: “Beyond Climate Change” (322-365)

**Week 7 Accomodating science**

Tues. 2/23 Carroll. “High Tech Trash” & Robinson. “E-Waste: An Assessment of Global Production and Environmental Impact”

Thur. 2/25 pick topics for group accommodation

**Week 8**

Tues. 3/2 Elizabeth Kolbert “The Darkening Sea”

Thur. 3/4 Story of stuff

**Week 9 How can we talk productively about climate change?**

Tues. 3/9 ***Interview reports due***

Thur. 3/11 Eubanks. “Introduction” (x-xii) chapter 1: “What’s Wrong With Argument” (1-11)

**Week 10**

Tues. 3/16 Cagle & Herndl “Shades of Denialism”

Thur. 3/18 Meyer. ”Introduction: The Resonance Dilemma and Environmental Social Criticism” (1-10)

***Accommodation assignment due Sunday 3/21 by 11:59pm.***

**Week 11**

Tues. 3/23 Naomi Klein. “Introduction” (1-28)

Thur. 3/25 Eubanks. Chs. 5

**Week 12**

Tues. 3/30 Moser & Dilling. “Communicating Climate Change”

Thur. 4/1 Meyer. ch 3 “The Question of Materiality” (47-74)

**Week 13**

Tues. 4/6 Lajano et al. “Climate and Narrative”

Thur. 4/8 **NO CLASS** (Carl will be in the TEAMS meeting during class time if you want to talk)

**Week 14**

Tues. 4/13 Spring Break 😎

Thur. 4/15 Spring Break 😎

**Week 15**

Tues. 4/20 Eubanks ch. 10 “How Should We Argue?”

Thur. 4/22 Angsley. “Listening with Intent”

**Week 16**

Tues. 4/27 Group workshops on final project

Thur. 4/29 Group workshops on final project

***Final Projects due: Thursday, 6 May at 12:00pm*** (the day scheduled for the final exam)