

# The Myth of Meritocracy: Linguistic Anthropology, Education, and Equity

**Instructor:** Dr. Haleema Welji

**Course Website:** [www.sakai.duke.edu](http://www.sakai.duke.edu)

## Course Overview

“Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” “I’m self-made.” “I earned this.” Hard work for the American Dream. These clichés center around the idea that as long as you work hard, you will be successful. It is easy to find examples of individuals who earned their “American dream.” The ideal that one is judged and rewarded by their merit is a powerful concept. But does everyone have the same access?

In this course, we use the lens of linguistic anthropology to examine the overt and subtle ways in which the myth of meritocracy justifies, excuses, and perpetuates inequity. Linguistic anthropology is the study of people, society, and culture through the lens of language, language use, and the speakers of language. This includes looking at the ways in which language can be used to create or reinforce hierarchies. We also look at the intersection between language and social justice to consider how the ideology of a “standard language” impacts speakers of non-standard varieties of a language or minority languages.

The course is structured around 4 key questions:

1. How does the ideology of meritocracy impact an education system?

In this section, we explore the concept of linguistic ideologies to understand the myth of meritocracy and explore some of the challenges the ideology perpetuates in the US educational system.

2. What does an anthropological method reveal about the experience of students disadvantaged by the ideology of meritocracy?

Here, we look closely at ethnographies analyzing the impact of ideologies like meritocracy, success, belonging, and intelligence have on individual students and their experience in the classroom.

3. To what extent can interventions be used to make the educational system more equitable?

In this section, we look at case studies of some interventions and discuss how they increase equity and challenge systemic privilege in education. We also discuss to what extent these interventions are successful.

4. How can an intellectual investigation of language help challenge injustice and inequality?

“The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences” – Ruth Benedict. In the spirit of Benedict’s quote, we end the course by reading a selection of work by linguistic anthropologists articulating ways in which language and linguistic ideologies can help highlight inequity in the hopes for more acceptance of diversity, in education and beyond. We discuss how these areas of research impact our everyday lives and if and how this information could reach (and change) larger audiences.

## Course Objectives and Practices

Writing 101 introduces Duke first-year students to key goals and practices of academic writing. Students choose from among Writing 101 courses that are designed and taught by scholars across disciplines but applicable and transferable long after the course. Thus, individual sections of Writing 101 often focus on different topics and readings, but all sections share an emphasis on writing as a social process and a commitment to helping students generate effective academic arguments.

Achieving these goals involves several integral writing practices. Through print, in-person, and digital interactions, students in all sections of Writing 101 are offered practice in:

- Researching and analysis
- Workshopping with the help of peers to improve your drafts before submitting the final version
- Revising
- Editing

Additionally, the course objectives for “The Myth of Meritocracy” include the following:

- to use writing as a means of reflecting on the social, including questions of justice and equity

- to learn research and writing skills such as finding or collecting primary data (interviewing), and analysis.
- to become more proficient, careful thinkers by becoming more proficient, careful writers.
- to clearly and confidently take a position in conversation and writing and support it with insightful analysis.
- to engage with the writing, concepts, and analysis of others.
- to write for specific audiences.
- to transfer writing knowledge into situations beyond Writing 101.

### **Overview of Writing Assignments:**

**Critical Thinking Exercises (CTE):** To help build critical thinking, writing, and analysis skills, you will be assigned short homework exercises. These may ask you to summarize the readings, reflect on what you thought about the readings, or to bring in examples related to the reading to discuss in class. These are due on Sakai: Assignments, at the start of class (unless otherwise noted). There are 10 throughout the semesters. While CTE 1 and CTE 10 are required, you can miss 2 other CTEs without penalty. CTEs will not be accepted late.

**Major Assignments:** There are two major writing assignments for this class. You must complete both papers (even if late), and you must pass the final paper to pass the class.

Both assignments are written in a series of drafts. Each draft will be workshopped or commented on by either the instructor or your peers (or both). This process will help you develop writing and editing skills that you can carry with you after Writing 101.

### **Paper 1: *Ethnographic Exploration (5-7 pages)***

Your first project will give you the opportunity to explore some of the impacts of the ideology of meritocracy first hand. You will design a research question and methodology to explore an issue and research question that interests you. Your question should be something that you can explore through ethnographic interviews. This project will allow you to examine how the issues we have been reading about impact the community around you. This project will be broken down into a series of stages to help you develop your methodology, conduct your data collection, analyze your data, write and revise your paper. Your peers (and the instructor) will help you workshop your project and your writing throughout this process.

### **Paper 2: *Meritocracy in Practice (8-10 pages)***

Your second major project is a research project. You will be using both primary data and secondary research to examine meritocracy in practice. This should be an investigation of a contemporary educational issue or policy, not a historical one. The goal is to examine how policies, and/or programs try and impact a meritocratic system (or at least ideologically meritocratic), *or* how the ideology of meritocracy affects systems, policies, and/or programs.

There are many directions in which you could take this paper, so you should start with something that is of interest to you. This could include:

- contemporary interventions designed to combat the imbalance ignored by a system built on the ideology of meritocracy
- areas where the ideology of meritocracy intersects with educational theory or practice
- policies that play indirect roles on educational equity
- OR, applications of the ideology of meritocracy in areas beyond education

**Embedded Writing Consultants (EWCs):** This term, we are fortunate to have two fantastic EWCs, one for each section. Each of you will have the opportunity to meet with your EWC a few times to get one-on-one writing consultation and guidance before a final draft is due. More information on when you will be meeting and how to schedule an appointment will be provided later in the semester

**Late Work:** Unless I have approved a deadline extension *in advance*, all assignments are due according to the deadlines specified. Late assignments (if allowed) will result in the lowering of the assignment grade by 1/3 of a letter grade for each 24-hour period of being late (e.g. an A becomes A- for one day late). Late

penalties begin immediately following the date/time deadline. If you are ill and unable to complete an assignment on time, please submit an incapacitation form and discuss with me an adjusted deadline.

## Course Materials

### Electronic Readings:

This course draws on academic journals, book chapters, news articles, and popular media. I will post all links on the Working Schedule on Sakai. **I strongly encourage you to print all readings so that you can easily make notes in the margins. Please bring the annotated copy to class and so that we can refer to specific passages in our class discussions. If you decide to do the readings on an electronic device, you are still expected to engage with the readings and make notes as you read. If you cannot do that on your device, you need to read/makes notes on a hardcopy.**

If you ever have trouble accessing any course materials online, please let me know as soon as possible.

The readings vary in difficulty during the course. I do not expect you to understand each and every part of all the readings but I do expect you to try and get something out of even the difficult readings.

**As you read, make annotations and notes in the margins, especially things that help you answer the following questions:**

- What is the author's argument (thesis)?
- How is the argument supported (evidence)?
- Why is that argument worth reading (significance)?
- What is problematic about the argument (potential counter arguments)?
- What is the motive of the author? Who are they writing to and why?
- What do you notice about the author's writing style and how does it help build their argument?
- What can you borrow from the style in your own writing (alternative, what will you NOT borrow)?

## Course Details and Policies

**Class Attendance and Participation:** Writing 101 Seminars are designed around course discussion. We learn from being in class, engaging and developing our own ideas, and debating and challenging the ideas of our peers and authors. We all come from different backgrounds and with different experiences; we should all be sensitive to each other's reactions, emotions, and ways of processing the material. You each bring an important, valuable, and insightful perspective on the material. Thus, I ask that you help make our discussions a space in which we all participate, collaborate, and learn from each other.

Sometimes things come up and you can't make class. In that case, please send me a short, explanatory e-mail or if eligible, submit an incapacitation form.

The Duke guidelines around incapacitation are as follows: "An incapacitating health issue is one in which you are hospitalized, under medical care for a short-term condition, or otherwise sufficiently debilitated as to be unable to perform basic academic tasks. Colds, headaches, or other such mild complaints that result in your feeling less than 100% are not considered incapacitating, and you should not use the Incapacitation Form in such instances" (Trinity College of Arts and Sciences "Health Issues, Short- and Long-term")

In the case of any absences, it will be your responsibility to catch up, including getting notes from a classmate. **You will be granted a maximum of three absences for the course, regardless of the reason. Each further absence will result in the lowering of your final course grade (1/3 of a letter grade off your final course grade for each additional absence).** Upon your third absence, I will contact your Dean and schedule a meeting with you.

Please be on time, prepared (and have required readings with you), and give your full attention to your peers and the class. Repeated tardy arrivals will count as the equivalent of an absence. Arriving more than 15 minutes late qualifies as an absence. Coming to class unprepared to participate (i.e. half-asleep, without requested materials) or being disengaged or distracted will count against your participation grade.

**Student Led Discussion:** In addition to participating in discussion throughout the semester, you will also be responsible for leading, in pairs, a 45 minute discussion once during the semester. You will be able to select the topic you would like to lead early in the semester. Outside of class, you and your partner will

need to prepare discussion questions (and optionally a short activity). We will discuss what this should look like and model good questions in class.

Your grade will be based on how you conduct the discussion as well as your preparation for the day. In order to gauge preparation, your group will be asked to submit the following:

- 1) List of discussion questions/conversation material for the day
- 2) Self and peer reflection worksheet
- 3) Optional: Any preparation documents (reading notes, brainstorm of questions, collaboration documents) that may be helpful in my assessment

The above materials are due by the class after your discussion.

**Technology:** There will be times when we may use laptops and headphones to look at data during class or to do collaborative work. If you do not have access to a laptop, please notify me and I will be happy to make accommodations. **You should not be using your laptop or phone in class unless for a specified activity (such as only when we are discussing the reading). Repeated use of technology outside of those times will result in lowering of your participation grade.**

### **Office Hours and Email Policy**

I am always pleased to have you join me in office hours to talk about the course, your progress in the course, or your interests more broadly. If you cannot make my office hours, please email me with some possible times to schedule an appointment.

You are also free to email me questions you have. I will not discuss grades over email. Questions about your writing may be much easier in person than via email, so I may ask you to make an appointment to discuss the response. However, do not expect immediate replies. I do not regularly check email in the evenings and on weekends.

**Integrity:** Academic writing is seldom self-contained with respect to its ideas. You will be expected to collaborate, share ideas, and use the ideas of others. However, in academia, there is a protocol for giving credit to those collaborators which is strict, demanding, and can have serious consequences if violated. It is important to keep referencing and citation in mind from the very beginning so that you can easily determine the source and exact location of quotes and even the ideas that inspire your thinking. Quoting and citing sources strengthens your writing by explicitly situating your argument within an ongoing conversation and strengthens your work with a body of evidence. In this course, we will learn and employ Chicago Author-date style citation.

The Community Standard in Practice provides a definition of plagiarism:

“Plagiarism” occurs when a student, with intent to deceive or with reckless disregard for proper scholarly procedures, presents any information, ideas, or phrasing of another as if they were his/her own and/or does not give appropriate credit to the original source. Proper scholarly procedures require that all quoted material be identified by quotation marks or indentation on the page, and the source of information and ideas, if from another, must be identified and be attributed to that source. Students are responsible for learning proper scholarly procedures.

On occasion, a student attempts to disguise his or her sources, sometimes because they feel unprepared to complete an assignment, and sometimes because they are under time constraints. Copying without attribution from the work of a classmate, from a printed text, or an electronic text weakens your integrity as a student and writer and prevents you from engaging properly with other scholars through writing. Getting caught carries very serious consequences. If I suspect anyone of plagiarism, I am *obligated* to report it to the Duke University Office of Student Conduct. Plagiarism on any aspect of our course work will result in failure of the course.

Recall the [Duke Community Standard](#): 1. I will not lie, cheat, or steal in my academic endeavors, nor will I accept the actions of those who do; 2. I will conduct myself responsibly and honorably in all my activities as a Duke student. Please ask me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. You may also consult: <http://library.duke.edu/research/plagiarism>.

### **Grade Breakdown**

- **Critical Thinking Exercises (10%)** – These will be graded as √+ (excellent), √ (satisfactory), or √- (unsatisfactory) (you can miss up to 2 without penalty).
- **Student Led Discussions (5%)** – These will be given a letter grade based on your preparation and facilitation of the discussion.
- **Classroom attendance and engagement (10%)** – This includes your engagement, contribution and participation during class as well as your engagement with the contribution of your peers. You can miss up to three classes before penalties to your attendance and final course grade.
- **Assignment 1 (30%)** – (5%) for on-time sign-up and draft submission, attendance at 1-on-1 conference and peer review; (5%) for preparation and participation during methodology workshop and peer review workshop; (20%) final draft - The final draft will be graded with a letter grade.
- **Assignment 2 (45%)** - (5%) for on-time sign-up and draft submission, attendance at 1-on-1 conference and peer review and for preparation and participation during peer review workshops; (3%) Paper 2 proposal; (7%) data analysis draft – letter grade will be given; and (30%) final draft - The final draft will be graded with a letter grade.

**Grading scale:** Letter grades map to the following scale:

A (93–100), A- (90–92)

C+ (77–79), C (73–76), C- (70–72)

F (0–59)

B+ (87–89), B (83–86), B- (80–82)

D+ (67–69), D (63–66), D- (60–62)

### Writing 101 Support & Resources

**Course Librarian:** Our course librarian is Greta Boers (greta.boers@duke.edu). Greta is a great resource to help you navigate Duke's library system and to assist you with formulating and pursuing your research project. We will be working with Greta for paper 2 and she is available for individual consultations.

**The Writing Studio:** The Writing Studio is a great resource for you as a student in Writing 101 and beyond. Staffed by trained consultants, the Writing Studio can assist you at all stages of the writing process. Be sure to check out their website for helpful handouts and resources as you prewrite, draft, revise, and edit your work: <http://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio>. You can also schedule an appointment with a tutor at <http://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio/appointments/appointment>.

**International and Intercultural Writers, DukeWrites Enrichment Suite.** An online suite of video tutorials accompanied by quizzes about U.S. classroom and U.S. English academic writing practices (essay structure, verbs, citation practices, intercultural norms, etc.) designed by TWP experts in intercultural communication: <https://dukewritesuite.com/>

**Students with Disabilities:** Students who may need special accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact the Student Disability Access Office (<http://www.access.duke.edu/students/index.php>) to ensure that such accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion. Please let me know what I can do.

**Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):** Each of you will face some level of challenge during your time at Duke – whether it be procrastination, or a more profound challenge that impairs your ability to function. The CAPS staff includes psychologists, clinical social workers, and psychiatrists experienced in working with college-age adults: <http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/caps/about-us>

**The Academic Resource Center:** The ARC provides academic support and programming for all Duke undergraduates. Their services include one-on-one consultations and peer tutoring, and they work alongside the Student Disability Access Office to serve students with diagnosed learning disabilities: <http://duke.edu/arc/index.php>

**The Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity:** This center provides education, advocacy, support, mentoring, academic engagement, and space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning, queer and allied students, staff, and faculty at Duke: <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/csgd>

**Deliberations: A Journal of First-Year Writing at Duke University.** *Deliberations* is published annually, in the fall semester. The Thompson Writing Program invites submissions of student writing, of any type or length,

from any Writing 101 course. For submission guidelines, visit: <http://twp.duke.edu/deliberations/submission-information>

### List of Course Texts:

- Alim, H. Samy. 2005. "Critical Language Awareness in the United States: Revisiting Issues and Revising Pedagogies in a Resegregated Society." *American Educational Research Journal*. October 24-31.
- . 2019. "(De)Occupying Language." IN *Language and social justice in practice*. Eds Netta Avineri, Laura R. Graham, Eric J. Johnson, Robin Conley Riner, and Jonathan Rosa. New York: Routledge.
- Avineri, Netta, & Eric J. Johnson, eds. 2015. "Invited Forum: Bridging the 'Language Gap.'" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 25(1):66-86.
- Eddy, Sarah L. & Kelly A. Hogan. 2014. "Getting Under the Hood: How and for Whom Does Increasing Course Structure Work?" *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 13:453-468.
- García-Sánchez, Inmaculada M. 2014. "The Public School: Ground Zero for the Politics of Inclusion." IN *Language and Muslim Immigrant Childhoods: The Politics of Belonging*. Wiley Blackwell Studies in Discourse and Culture. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Gonzales, Roberto G. 2015. "College-Goers: Managing the Distance between Aspirations and Reality." IN *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Haviland, John B. 2003. "Ideologies of Language: Some Reflections on Language and U.S. Law." *American Anthropologist* 105(4):764-774.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. 1986. "What no Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School." In *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, edited by Bambi B. Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs, 97-124. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. "Biographies of Hegemony: The Culture of Smartness and the Recruitment and Construction of Investment Bankers." IN *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Johnson, Eric J. 2019. "A Critical Interrogation of the 'Language Gap.'" IN *Language and social justice in practice*. Eds Netta Avineri, Laura R. Graham, Eric J. Johnson, Robin Conley Riner, and Jonathan Rosa. New York: Routledge.
- Kendall, Frances E. 2001. "Understanding White Privilege."
- King, Charles. 2019. *Gods of the upper air: how a circle of renegade anthropologists reinvented race, sex, and gender in the twentieth century*. New York: Doubleday.
- Kroskrity, Paul V. 2004. "Language Ideologies." IN *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Alessandro Duranti, ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Lake, Robert. 1990. "An Indian Father's Plea." *Teacher Magazine* September: 48-52.
- Maguire, Marti. 2015. "Tar Heel: Kelly Hogan learned a better way to teach; not she's sharing it with others." *News and Observer* December 12, 2015.
- McElhinny, Bonnie. 2001. "See No Evil, Speak No Evil: White Police Officers' Talk about Race and Affirmative Action." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11(1):65-78.
- Philips, Susan Urmston. 2004. "Language and Social Inequality" IN *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Alessandro Duranti, ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Reeves, Richard V. 2017. "Hoarding the Dream." IN *Dream hoarders: how the American upper middle class is leaving everyone else in the dust, why that is a problem, and what to do about it.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

### Working Schedule

Please check the working schedule on Sakai for the most up-to-date schedule.