

The First Year Writing Program

Placement

When assigning students to seminars, the Writing Program will consider several factors: your own appraisal of your writing competency; your preferences for particular courses; SAT and ACT test scores and achievement tests where relevant; and the placement essay which you are being asked to write.

You will receive your seminar placement along with your other placements; your faculty advisor will also be given your writing seminar placement. Class lists for the seminars will be posted to the home page of the Writing Program.

Below you will find links to the placement overview page which explains the placement process for writing seminars; a guide to writing seminars being offered; instructions for the placement essay; and the online seminar preference/essay submission form. We have also included a link to download the entire placement packet. (You will be asked to write an essay on James Baldwin's "If Black English isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?", which is included as a link in the Placement Instructions and also as part of the placement package which can be downloaded.) Seminar preferences and your essay are due **Sunday, July 25 at 12:00 midnight ET** through the online form. Students will not be able to register for the fall semester until they submit the writing placement.

If you have any questions about the Writing Seminars or the placement process, please contact Prof. [Debra Sherman](#), Director of College Writing.

Overview

Welcome to the Class of 2025!

The Writing Program welcomes you to Haverford and looks forward to your arrival! In the meantime, we need your help as we plan for one of the foundational experiences of your first year: the Writing Seminar. Writing Seminars are integral to a Haverford education and every student (without exception) takes one in the fall or spring of the first year in order to fulfill the Writing Requirement. This page describes policies related to the Writing Seminar and explains what you must do before **Sunday, July 25 at 12:00 midnight ET** to ensure your placement in a course that matches your interests.

Writing Seminars: All writing seminars pair writing instruction with intellectual inquiry; all pay close attention to all stages of the composing process. Different seminars may extend intellectual inquiry into visual studies; the interrogation of the literary canon; Quaker history; categories of difference (racial, sexual, religious, and national identity); popular culture; or engaged social practice. Consider not only those courses that play on your strengths but also those that will stretch your interests in new directions.

Seminars are limited to 12 students and meet twice weekly for 90 minutes; all engage in revision as essential to writing, either through additional small group tutorials, or peer review in the class and/or individual conferences to discuss student writing. All writing seminars agree that writing is not simply a reflection of what we have learned but a means by which we understand the materials we encounter, and that we are, in fact, "writing to learn." Only these seminars fulfill the Writing Requirement.

Writing Intensive (WSI) seminars also teach critical inquiry and writing, meet twice weekly, and explore a thematically interrelated set of readings similar to the other seminars. They differ from other seminars in a few ways: they meet only in the fall; they are limited to 10 instead of 12 students; they include more time for individual conferences; and they break down the writing of academic essays into even more manageable and explicit steps. WSI seminars do not by themselves satisfy the Writing Requirement but are intended to prepare students to continue their study of writing in a second writing seminar in the spring semester which will satisfy the requirement. If you have not had much experience composing academic essays or would like to develop more confidence in your ability to meet the rigors of college-level writing, these seminars will encourage, strengthen and develop those abilities.

How Placement Works: When assigning students to sections, the Writing Program will consider several factors: your own appraisal of your writing competence; your preferences for particular courses; and a placement essay that you will soon submit.

What You Need to Do: To help us in the placement process, you need to 1) inform us of your preferences and 2) write a short essay.

- [Complete the preference form](#). Consider your options and let us know both which kind of seminar you think is best for you and which particular seminars you find most appealing.
- You will be asked to rank your top five seminar preferences. Complete descriptions of all seminars can be found on the [Courses page](#), and are also included in the online placement form. Courses which will be taught exclusively online are marked as such in the list of courses.

- Write and submit your placement essay. For your own benefit in being matched with an appropriate seminar, and in accord with the Haverford Honor Code, you must write this essay without assistance from anyone (and without consulting outside sources).

These materials are due by **Sunday, July 25 at 12:00 midnight ET. Students will not be able to register for the fall semester until they complete the writing placement.**

Instructions

Guidelines: When writing the essay, please observe the following guidelines. Submit the essay using the space provided in the [online form](#) to upload your essay.

- Limit the length to approximately 750-1000 words.
- Be sure to include an essay title and your name in the text boxes provided for these in the online form. This will ensure that when your essay is printed out, it will be identified as yours; **otherwise, the essay will appear to have no author or title.**
- Compose the essay without any assistance, either in the form of other people or outside commentary. You cannot use the web or the library for research. You are, however, permitted to use a dictionary (online or paper) for words which are unfamiliar to you. And you can use reference tools (online or otherwise) to identify names which you don't recognize. Your best interests will be served only if the Writing Program can make an honest appraisal of how you write on your own. This will be your first opportunity to put Haverford's Honor Code into practice.

Assignment: Read James Baldwin's "[If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is](#)"?

James Baldwin, writing in 1979 for The New York Times, defends Black English and anticipates what has become known as the "linguistic justice movement" or a respect for the varieties of English that is spoken, read and written, in particular for what he identifies as Black English. What does he claim for this language? What can we learn from his argument? And what might be the implications of this argument for the practice of a "standard" English?

Drawing upon the essay as evidence, construct a well-structured argument of approximately 750-1000 words that responds to the prompt. You need not nor should you simply answer each of the above questions one after another: these questions are only meant to help you begin to formulate a thoughtful, clear and cogent response to the assignment.

CITATION: There are no page numbers for this essay, which originally appeared as an Op-Ed in the Times. All you need provide as documentation is a single footnote or single Works Cited entry with the author's name, title of the essay, the newspaper, the date, and the online URL.

When evaluating your essay, Writing Program faculty will draw upon the following criteria:

- Engagement and reasoning: How well do you demonstrate an understanding of the argument while still establishing and supporting your own position?
- Structure and style: Does the organization help or hinder readers? Is there enough control of particular sentences to allow us to follow your reasoning?

The New York Times
July 29, 1979

If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?

By JAMES BALDWIN

St. Paul de Vence, France--The argument concerning the use, or the status, or the reality, of black English is rooted in American history and has absolutely nothing to do with the question the argument supposes itself to be posing. The argument has nothing to do with language itself but with the *role* of language. Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other--and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged.) A Frenchman living in Paris speaks a subtly and crucially different language from that of the man living in Marseilles; neither sounds very much like a man living in Quebec; and they would all have great difficulty in apprehending what the man from Guadeloupe, or Martinique, is saying, to say nothing of the man from Senegal--although the "common" language of all these areas is French. But each has paid, and is paying, a different price for this "common" language, in which, as it turns out, they are not saying, and cannot be saying, the same things: They each have very different realities to articulate, or control.

What joins all languages, and all men, is the necessity to confront life, in order, not inconceivably, to outwit death: The price for this is the acceptance, and achievement, of one's temporal identity. So that, for example, thought it is not taught in the schools (and this has the potential of becoming a political issue) the south of France still clings to its ancient and musical Provençal, which resists being described as a "dialect." And much of the tension in the Basque countries, and in Wales, is due to the Basque and Welsh determination not to allow their languages to be destroyed. This determination also feeds the flames in Ireland for many indignities the Irish have been forced to undergo at English hands is the English contempt for their language.

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden. This is true in France, and is absolutely true in England: The range (and reign) of accents on that damp little island make England coherent for the English and totally incomprehensible for everyone else. To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future.

Now, I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States, but they would not sound the way they sound. *Jazz*, for example, is a very specific sexual term, as in *jazz me, baby*, but white people purified it into the Jazz Age. *Sock it to me*, which means, roughly, the same thing, has been adopted by Nathaniel Hawthorne's descendants with no qualms or hesitations at all, along with *let it all hang out* and *right on! Beat to his socks* which was once the black's most total and despairing image of poverty, was transformed into a thing called the Beat Generation, which phenomenon was, largely, composed of *uptight*, middle-class white people, imitating poverty, trying to *get down*, to get *with it*, doing their *thing*, doing their despairing best to be *funky*, which we, the blacks, never dreamed of doing--we *were* funky, baby, like *funk* was going out of style.

Now, no one can eat his cake, and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is.

I say that the present skirmish is rooted in American history, and it is. Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible--or in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

There was a moment, in time, and in this place, when my brother, or my mother, or my father, or my sister, had to convey to me, for example, the danger in which I was standing from the white man standing just behind me, and to convey this with a speed, and in a language, that the white man could not possibly understand, and that, indeed, he cannot understand, until today. He cannot afford to understand it. This understanding would reveal to him too much about himself, and smash that mirror before which he has been frozen for so long.

Now, if this passion, this skill, this (to quote Toni Morrison) "sheer intelligence," this incredible music, the mighty achievement of having brought a people utterly unknown to, or despised by "history"--to have brought this people to their present, troubled, troubling, and unassailable and unanswerable place--if this absolutely unprecedented journey does not indicate that black English is a language, I am curious to know what definition of language is to be trusted.

A people at the center of the Western world, and in the midst of so hostile a population, has not endured and transcended by means of what is patronizingly called a "dialect." We, the blacks, are in trouble, certainly, but we are not doomed, and we are not inarticulate because we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in American never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.

And, after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle, or standing, futureless, in the streets--it may very well be that both the child, and his elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little.

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