



PUBLIC SEMINAR

In the spirit of The New School for Social Research, informing debate about the pressing issues of our times

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EDUCATION FEATURE **FIRST DRAFTS** LETTERS

Public Shakespeare in Public Seminar

Public writing is framed as an alternative to both academic writing and creative projects

Jeffrey R. Wilson — June 17, 2019



By JasaShmasa | Shutterstock.com

The Public Shakespeare essays appearing on *Public Seminar* come from a first-year writing course at Harvard called *Why Shakespeare?*, which takes students' minds seriously enough to ask them to be generators, not just consumers, of knowledge. After grappling in our course with Shakespeare's prominence in modern life, our final meeting is a Public Shakespeare workshop. Students turn their 10-page heavily footnoted research projects about Shakespeare's modern manifestations into short public-facing essays written with fire and joy.

The **assignment**, which you're welcome to use or adapt as you like, starts with students selecting two essays from our **Public Shakespeare** page. Based on their research topics, they identify three possible venues for their Public Shakespeare essays, reading some recent (non-Shakespearean)

Jeffrey R. Wilson

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Biden has said and done nothing that adds anything new to policy debate or enhances the Democratic Party's ability to mobilize new voters and to reinvigorate itself, writes Jeffrey C. Isaac

<https://t.co/Xok8dwpUUv>

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Ep 185: Podcasters discuss the passing of political

essays from these venues to get a feel for public writing.

In class, our day of public writing is framed as an alternative to both academic writing (scholars speaking only to each other) and creative projects (which are increasingly replacing the argumentative paper as course capstones). A guided planning session addresses some conventions — style and structure — of **public writing**. Embrace the absurd; mix high culture and low; foreground the comical. Give the cool, quirky, crazy evidence. Keep quotation to a minimum. Make sentences snappy and short. It's OK to write in the first person. Rain down fire if needed. Make it jokey. Use metaphors, analogies, and other creative gestures. "Peg" your piece to something newsy: an upcoming event, an anniversary, some recent headline, a current controversy.

Students then have 25 minutes to write the most epic in-class essay ever, with weeks if not months of preparation behind it. They read each other's essays and workshop them. That's the final moment of our class, not a soaring feel-good speech from the prof about all we've learned, but students as creators of knowledge then given to the people.

After class, students tidy up and submit their essays to their venues of choice. The first time around, in Fall 2018, one of our essays got picked up by *Public Seminar*. **Iman Lavery** wrote about "What Shakespeare Can Tell Us About School Shootings." In Spring 2019, two more essays were published. For the *Northern Kentucky Tribune*, **Alex Greyson** wrote on Disney's obsession with parental interference and youthful rebellion, and its source in *Romeo and Juliet*. For *The Spectator USA*, **Philip LaPorte** wrote about *Romeo and Juliet* in recent Indian cinema. And now *Public Seminar* is running a series featuring:

Jordan Mubako on Shakespeare in African education

Seven Richmond on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in African American literature

Mercedes Sapuppo on Shakespeare in the European migration debate

Max Serrano-Wu on Shakespeare in classical music

Luke Williams on helicopter parenting in *Coriolanus*


Most of these essays are by people of color. Some are first-generation college students. This has also been a focus of **The OpEd Project**. Not coincidentally, the greatest energy in Shakespeare studies right now is a group of scholars of color tweeting with a hashtag curated by Kim F. Hall, **#ShakeRace**, which the Shakespeare establishment ignores at its own peril. Add in rural, LBTGQ+, and other voices under-represented in the

historian Alan Brinkley and socialite fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt, and the historical significance of a viral BuzzFeed essay about attending a lesbian cruise

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Emily Rutherford

@echomikeromeo · 8h

My review of Naomi Wolf's 'Outrages' is now up at **@PublicSeminar!**

<https://t.co/rPoVTMYA37>

Come for the moment I threw the book across the room, stay for the serious critical engagement from an expert in the field who read it carefully cover to cover.

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Public Seminar Page



Public Seminar

2 hours ago

"It is important to oppose him without demonizing him."

Being Against Biden

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In early April I published two columns opposing Joe Biden's entry into the Democratic presidential race, arguing that "he is looking backward at a time

traditional image of elite higher education in America, and a vision of **Shakespeare and the 99%** starts to emerge. Our push for Public Shakespeare is tied to the rise of new voices. We want to speak to the zip codes we grew up in.

And only one of the Public Shakespeareans in this group is thinking about a future in literary studies. They're future doctors, economists, lawyers, scientists, and social workers who recognize the value of what Julia Reinhard Lupton calls **thinking with Shakespeare**, cycling modern ideas and events through his art and afterlives to discover new angles of interpretation.

Public writing shouldn't replace academic writing. The strength of these essays flows from the traditional research papers they're based on. But public writing is an important change to the mode of articulating scholarship – a skill – rarely addressed explicitly in the humanities. As Rebecca Fall, curator of the **#PublicShax** hashtag, said in a 2018 interview on the **Remixing the Humanities** podcast, we need to focus on “meeting audiences where they're at” in contrast to “the outreach model,” which is, “We have knowledge. You're welcome.”

Public writing gets us out of our specialist enclaves, where we are addressing already like-minded people, if not preaching to the choir. It gets us talking to people who might think differently, have different values, or don't understand why humanities scholarship matters. Public writing is our challenge to demonstrate, in concrete ways, the defense-of-the-humanities argument we've been making for years. It's an opportunity to show, not tell, that humanities scholarship matters for the lives we lead. We too seldom take on that challenge. Admittedly, there's a structural professional system – tenure – discouraging junior scholars from public writing: that's one reason we need a peer-reviewed *Journal of the Public Humanities*. And fear of the unknown often prevents humanities scholars from public writing, though we perform that fear as holier-than-thou professionalism refusing to debase itself from the dignified glories of scholarship. Public writing illustrates what some scholars scoff at (why?): our work has what social scientists call “policy implications,” and opens avenues to what human beings call “happiness.”

Our students may be our greatest resource for getting outside the academy. They can write for the public better than we can. They can transfer knowledge beyond our classrooms. We can learn as much from them about how to talk in public as they can from us about how to think in college.

Shakespeare studies is particularly well positioned for public humanities because his works – both very old texts imbued with history, and constantly performed today all around us – by design bring the past into conversation

when we need to move forward,” and “he offers too little, beyond nostalgia, at a time when much is called for.” Everything that has happen...

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Public Seminar

5 hours ago

Episode 185 of the Past Present podcast is now Live!

Alan Brinkley, Gloria Vanderbilt, and Lesbian Cruises

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In this episode, Niki, Neil, and Natalia discuss the recent passing of two major figures: political historian Alan Brinkley and socialite fashion designer Gloria Vanderbilt, and the historical significance of a viral BuzzFeed essay about attending a lesbian cruise. Here are some links and refer

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Public Seminar

6 hours ago

As Britain's LGBTQ+ heritage has become a product for mainstream cultural consumption, many accounts have been destructive precisely to the aspects of this heritage that make it meaningful to queer people today.

What's Missing In Naomi Wolf's 'Outrages: Sex, Censorship, and the Criminalization of Love'

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with the present. That's what he did in his plays, and what we do with them. Traditionally, theater and film adaptations have been the platform for making Shakespeare modern, as in the Trump-themed *Julius Caesar* at the [Public Theater](#). But the swell of digital news venues has opened new possibilities for Public Shakespeare in argumentative writing. Just as Shakespeare's plays are both theatrical performances and written texts, Public Shakespeare comes in the form of community events, like the [Public Shakespeare Initiative](#), and written word, as with the Folger Shakespeare Library's [Shakespeare and Beyond](#). Decentralized grassroots community events and scattered op-eds are rising. That's progress. Public Shakespeare is no longer restricted to well-moneyed institutions, or to people who can afford the price of a ticket. By-the-people-for-the-people Public Shakespeare democratizes Shakespearean adaptation.

A cute appropriation — *To impeach or not to impeach? That is the question* — is not Public Shakespeare. It's not even iambic pentameter. Public Shakespeare is about using Shakespeare's conceptually rich plays to enhance our understanding of lived experience, including the personal, ethical, and political valences scholarship often erases. It's about scholarly rigor in publicly accessible forms, Shakespeare explains the news, modern manifestations, new meanings and resonances. Just as Shakespeare wrote both tragedies and comedies, Public Shakespeare can be tragic (during times of trouble, the arts and humanities help us look more closely to understand what's really going on) or comic (they remind us of the sources of joy in life, even when hope seems lost). Public Shakespeare must be flexible enough to accommodate different enterprises: community events, public writing, productions, adaptations, the educational wings of institutions like the [Chicago Shakespeare Theater](#) and the [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#), sometimes [politics](#), yes, but definitely not always, please not always.

And it's catching on. There are upcoming panels on Public Shakespeare at the [Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association](#) convention and the [Shakespeare Association of America](#) annual meeting. You should join the cause. Post your favorite [#PublicShax](#). You don't need to be a scholar or actor. You simply need to be committed to the idea that, at a time when government has failed public education, and we're seeing the effects in a weakened political discourse, and intellectuals have ceded the public square to social media and cable news, there is value in seeking out an audience beyond the profession, who may not already be inclined to agree with you, and showing them how to use the past to think about the present and the future.

Jeffery R. Wilson is a faculty member in the Writing Program at Harvard University, where he teaches the Why Shakespeare? section of the University's first-year writing course. His first book, Shakespeare and Trump,

In 2013, when I heard Naomi Wolf give a talk about the Ph.D. research she was then pursuing at Oxford, my first reaction was panic. Twenty-three years old, I had recently completed what is still the most intense, all-consuming experience of my life: researching and writing a 75,000-word undergraduat

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