Seminar in Liberal Arts

The Birth of Creativity: Early Modern Accounts of Artistic and Rhetorical Thinking

General Information

Course #:	**LIBA 402**
Section #:	**001**
Term:	**Winter**
Year:	**2021**
Course pre-requisite(s):	**Open only to U2 and U3 students**
Course co-requisite(s):	**N/A**
Course schedule:	**Tue. / Thu. @ 10:05 AM – 11:20 AM**
No. of credits:	**3**

Instructor Information

Name and Title:	**Jonathan Powers**
E-mail:	**jonathan.powers@mcgill.ca**
Virtual office hours:	**Tue. / Thu. @ 11:30 AM – 12:30 PM and by appointment.**
Communication plan:	Classes meetings will be convened using Zoom. I will be available for individual meetings (virtual office hours) by Zoom and by phone. I make every effort to respond to emails within two business days. I look forward to our conversations!

Course Overview

This seminar course is designed as a capstone to the Liberal Arts program in McGill's Dept. of Languages, Literatures & Cultures. Further details are available in the "Course Content" section below.

Instructor Message Regarding Remote Delivery

Learning together. Although we are currently in an adaptive mode, struggling with a new context, we have come together to build and share questions, knowledge, skills, and insights. Online or in-person, a course is a community. In any context, learning as a team is easier, more fun, and more effective than learning by oneself. It is part of my commitment to you that every decision I take will be informed by those values to build community: kindness, openness, respect, and trust. I look forward to our conversation!

Still a university course. It bears repeating that McGill University policies and considerations remain relevant in the remote delivery context. These policies and considerations include, but are not limited to, academic integrity, intellectual property concerns, respectful comportment toward one another, etc.

Seminar. While lectures aim to distribute knowledge, seminars aim to create it. For that reason, every seminar is built around a *conversation*. In this course, we will strive to cultivate, through the semester, a warm, open, collegial conversation with one another. Excellent conversations must be nourished by substantial subject matter and developed in a culture of safety that supports mature intellectual risk-taking.

Zoom. Our term-long conversation during this season of social distancing will be conducted on Zoom. Knowing how many things can get in the way of attending a meeting on Zoom (unstable internet connections being the least of them), we will record every session for convenient review. That said, our sessions will be substantially improvisational, and much of the value of the seminar format derives from thinking spontaneously together as a group.

Perusall. All course readings will be provided digitally, almost all as PDFs. While you are welcome to read these any way you like (as paper printouts, PDFs on your phone, etc.), we will be using the social reading tool [Perusall](#) to annotate each reading as a team. The purpose of annotating texts together is to help each other move deeper into the readings and further into the lines inquiries we will develop during the course. The course readings will be the foundation of our conversation, and our shared annotations will constitute the first layer of thoughtful exchange that we lay down together in advance of each meeting.

Video capsules. According to the group's needs and requests, I will build and share video capsules covering crucial points. Please don't hesitate to bring this up if you would like to propose a subject for a capsule.

McGill resources on remote learning. I strongly recommend you review the resources related to remote learning that McGill makes available to students.
- Guidelines for Students on Remote Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.
- Remote Learning Resources.

Learning Outcomes

Academic skills. By the end of this course, students will have made substantial advances in several core academic skills, including close reading, listening, conceptual synthesis, research, and writing. While not every advance will be visible at each moment, they will be occurring. This seminar is also designed to integrate those skills into an organic capacity to build knowledge, skills, and insights.

Better questions. More crucially, this seminar will grow students' capacity to create and craft excellent *questions*. Seminars generate knowledge by focusing the group's attention on questions—sorting them, combining them, refining them, *improving* them. In the seminar context, answers and information are generated as a kind of by-product. Students will absorb a great deal of historical information in this seminar, but they will primarily emerge will much better questions about the core topic of creativity. Because we will

self-consciously pay attention to the process of developing these questions, students will improve this skill generically: they will learn how to improve questions in almost *any* context.

Instructional Methods

In this course, students will be expected to (1) closely read and collectively annotate the assigned texts, (2) participate activity in group discussion (on Zoom), (3) pass an oral midterm exam, and (4) complete three essays (one mini, one short, one long). Each of these methods is detailed below. We will organize as much of the course as possible through MyCourses.

Reading and annotating. The assigned readings are the foundation of our seminar, and students are expected to read each text attentively and critically before we come together to discuss them. To facilitate engagement with the readings, we will use the online tool Perusall, which is an online social reading platform in which we will all annotate texts collaboratively.

To access Perusall through MyCourses, navigate to Content > Perusall (readings) > Perusall, and then click the "Open Link" button. This will take you to the Perusall site and automatically register you as a member of the course. If you are having any trouble accessing the readings through Perusall contact me right away. Readings will be graded as either complete (1 point) or incomplete (0 points). Student engagement must demonstrate a thoughtful and thorough reading of the entire assignment to receive credit. Each student's *worst five grades will be dropped* when determining the final grade for reading and annotating.

Group discussions. The core of our course is our ongoing shared conversation. We will meet twice weekly on Zoom during our scheduled slot (T/Th 10:05 AM – 11:20 AM). Students should make every effort to attend each of these meetings, as the meetings will comprise a great deal of open, spontaneous conversation. To facilitate a rich, open exchange, students are encouraged to turn their video on during these meetings. We will record each session for review and for the convenience of those unable to attend.

Each course meeting comprises 75 minutes. Most of the time will be devoted to our ongoing conversation about the topic(s) of the course, though we may set aside time to build our community, deal with administrative matters, etc. I may also provide mini lectures when occasion demands it. Also, we will generally reserve a few minutes at the end of each meeting as "chalkboard" time, during which no evaluative standards for participation will apply—students will be free to leave the meeting, stay and chat, ask any kind of question, etc.

We will make only sporadic and deliberate use of Zoom's chat feature. It is typically distracting during a focused conversation, so we will avoid using it generally.

Oral midterm. The midterm in this course will be a 15-minute oral exam. The exams will take place on Zoom. Each student will be invited to schedule the exam at a convenient time during the week that precedes McGill's study break. Further details on the exam will be provided closer to the week that exams will be held. (Preliminary notes on the evaluation standards can be found below.)

Pedagogically, the purpose of the oral exam is to prompt a focused attempt to synthesize the information, concepts, and questions presented and developed in the course. The particular questions in the exam will thus be motivated by overarching questions such as: "How do the big ideas we have discussed connect with one another?" "How does what we have learned and discussed bear on current events?" "How have your own ideas shifted in response to our readings and discussions?" And so on.

Essays. Students will be expected compose three essays during this course: one mini essay near the beginning, a short essay near the middle, and more substantial research essay at the end. The main pedagogical purpose of the two smaller essays is to prompt thoughtful analysis of the course materials. The purpose of the term essay is to afford each student an opportunity to explore one of courses themes more deeply and reflectively. Students are encouraged to consult with me for guidance and support as they write. The grading rubric for written work in the class is provided as a separate document (available in MyCourses). Remarks on the course policy for deadline extensions and rewrites are in the "Evaluation" section below.

Expectations for Student Participation

Outside of our discussions, and apart from course readings, students are expected to participate in the course by:

- Logging into MyCourses to check in on the course about once per workday.
- Checking email for course-specific messages about once per workday.
- Meeting with me one-on-one during the term.

While half of the participation grade that concerns our course discussions, the other half depends on our one-on-one meetings. Meet with me once for a passing grade (60%) and two or more times for full credit (100%). There are no evaluation standards for our meetings. It is critical that we meet in order to cultivate a healthy culture in the course and build sound relationships between the students and the instructor.

I welcome emails from students; they have no bearing on students' participation grades.

Recordings of Sessions

In line with McGill's recommendation, we will record all of seminar meetings. All meetings will be recorded automatically, and each recording will be made available in MyCourses within 24 hours of the meeting's end. You will be notified through a 'pop-up' box in Zoom if a meeting is being recorded. By remaining in sessions that are recorded, you agree to the recording, and you understand that your image, voice, and name may be disclosed to classmates. You also understand that recordings will be made available in myCourses to students registered in the course.

Required Course Materials

Course readings. Almost all course readings will be provided as individual PDFs, but there is one exception: we will be reading the whole of Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The ebook will be available for purchase on

Perusall. If you would like to purchase a physical copy for your reading (then annotating in Perusall), the ISBN for the paperback version is 0872209199.

IT hardware. To participate fully in our seminar meetings, you will need a reasonable webcam, computer microphone, and speakers (or headphones). McGill's IT team has developed equipment recommendations to help students make better informed decisions about hardware.

Optional Course Materials

Not applicable.

Course Content

The Renaissance origins of the modern discourse of creativity. This year (winter 2021), the course will address a primary source of the modern discourse of creativity. More particularly, we will study a book on architecture composed between 1460 and 1464 by the Florentine sculptor and architect Antonio di Piero Averlino (1400 – c. 1469), whose nickname "Filarete" can be translated as "lover" or "friend" of "excellence" or "virtuosity." Far from being a dry, theoretical text, Filarete's *Libro architettonico* (as he calls it) mainly comprises a rambling dialogic narrative in which is recounted the founding and bricks-and-mortar construction of a fictional city named Sforzinda. The primary goal of the *Libro* appears to be teaching its princely reader how to be a better patron of architecture.

We will examine selected excerpts from Filarete's *Libro* with an eye to understanding how he explains the process of architectural invention to a potential patron. By studying the resources he musters and his approach in deploying them, we will be able to perceive—faintly and in outline—some crucial early moments in the development of our own epoch's discourse of creativity.

Thematic sequence. After an introduction that gives some background Filarete, Renaissance Humanism, and the discourse of creativity, we look at the following themes, in order: the imagination, especially in artistic contexts; *Disegno* ("drawing"); rhetorical invention (the discovery and development of a subject matter); the *topoi* of invention (the techniques used by orators to train the faculty of creativity; *ingegno* ("ingeniousness" or inborn talent); and *virtú* ("virtue," but also "excellence").

Course Schedule

The Course Schedule is available as a standalone document on MyCourses.

Evaluation

The details of each assignment—apart from the regular readings, which are discussed below—will be communicated to students in a dedicated prompt, each of which will be published in MyCourses. The assignment prompts will provide instructions, pedagogical intent, expectations, weighting vis-à-vis the final grade, evaluation standards, etc. Weightings for each evaluation tool are detailed in the table below.

Reading and annotating. Persuall will automatically grade each student's annotations. [Perusall's standards](#) comprise use of analogy, synthesis of multiple concepts, deployment of substantiated claims supported by concrete examples, posing profound questions, and explanation of the relationship between concepts. We will be using [threshold scoring](#) on Persuall's default scale of 0-3: students who receive a 2 or 3 for their annotations will receive full credit (1 point) for that session, while students who receive a 0 or 1 will receive no credit (0 points).

Note that the *three lowest reading grades will be dropped* from the assessment.

Group discussions. Half of each student's participation grade will be based on their contributions to our group discussions. (See the section on "Expectations for Student Participation," above, for a discussion of the other half.) During our meetings, students are encouraged shape their contributions—whether a question, insight, proposal, etc.—with a view to cultivating a **spirit of shared inquiry** in the group.

Regular interventions are important, although quality is more important than quantity, and active, generous listening is essential. Especially appreciated are interventions that build on the contributions of others. Students will be given regular, ongoing feedback on the discussion at large; they are encouraged to seek individual feedback during office hours.

Oral midterm. A detailed prompt providing will be provided as the exam week draws closer. Broadly speaking, students will be expected to show familiarity with the assigned readings and the concepts developed the most important evaluative criterion will be the quality of the student's synthesis. Evidence of reflection, connective thinking, and synthesis will weigh more heavily than specific knowledge. Students will be able to seek feedback on their performance in office hours after all the students have taken their exam.

Essays. A grading rubric concerning written work is provided in MyCourses as a standalone document. Students should expect both specific and high-level feedback on their writing. All essays will be submitted through MyCourses (students are encouraged to review McGill's [FAQs for students using myCourses: Assignments](#)). Students should also be aware that their work will be reviewed by McGill's text-matching software. Student work will not be made available to a private company—McGill may use student work anonymously for text-matching purposes, and copyright remains with the student. Students with questions on this subject should address them to the instructor.

Extensions for assignments. Students may request a deadline extension for almost any assignment (not for readings or for exams). Students should request extensions in writing (email is fine), preferably at least 48 hours in advance. In each request, students should provide the honest reason for the request—while maintaining a professional level of openness—and propose a new date. Extensions meeting these conditions will generally be granted. The instructor has discretion to refuse a late submission if shared expectations have not been established.

Unlimited requests are permitted, but *no extensions will be granted beyond Thursday 22 April 2021 @ 5PM*. Unsubmitted assignments receive a zero.

Rewrites for essays. Any essay except the final essay may be rewritten one time. Rewrites may be submitted any time before the final submission deadline of *Thursday 22 April 2021 @ 5PM,* although I do appreciate being notified. In general, the student will receive the average of the two grades received for the assignment. However, if the student earns an A- or better (≥ 85%) on either version (original or rewrite), the student will receive the higher of the two grades for the assignment.

Students are encouraged to rewrite their essays, as responding constructively to criticism and effective rewriting are two of the most important skills in both academic and professional contexts.

Means of evaluation. Weightings, due dates, and estimated time requirements.

Name of Assignment or Exam	Estimated time to complete	Due Date	% of Final Grade
Readings / annotations (Perusall)	2.5 hrs / session	Rolling	20%
Mini essay (300 – 400 words)	3 hrs	19 Jan.	5%
Short essay (1,000 – 1,250 words)	6 hrs	18 Feb.	15%
Oral midterm	6 hrs.	22 Feb. – 26 Feb.	15%
Research prep for term essay	5 hrs.	1 Apr.	5%
Term essay (2,500 words)	15 hrs.	15 Apr.	30%
Participation – in-class	N/A	Rolling	5%
Participation – out-of-class (office hour meetings)	N/A	Rolling	5%

McGill Policy Statements

Language of Submission
In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives. (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

Academic Integrity
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see McGill's guide to academic honesty for more information). (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

Text Matching
Work submitted for evaluation as part of this course may be checked with text matching software within myCourses.

Accessibility

As the instructor of this course, I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, (514) 398-6009.

Pandemic Contingency

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.