"Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow." - Oliver Wendell Holmes

Course Description:
How did the human capacity for language evolve? In what ways does language shape our world view? Does it restrict or enhance our capacity for abstract thought? Because the language shared by mathematicians is particularly adept at describing abstract concepts, mathematics provides a robust paradigm through which to study how language works. In this colloquium we will read and discuss recent and controversial theories on the origins and dynamics of language and mathematical thought. Our readings will be drawn from the work of Steven Pinker, Noam Chomsky, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and others. Our discussions will address questions related to the role of language in human development, the nature of mathematics, and the creation of new knowledge.

Course Themes:
Evolution of Language
Relationship between language, mankind, and our capacity for abstract thought
Dichotomy between clarity and ambiguity in language
Symbiotic relationship between language and world view
Creation of new knowledge through language (poetry and mathematical proof)
Function, form, and limitations of certain norms of language (in particular, we’ll contrast English literature, science and mathematical writing)

Class Objectives
As part of the College Colloquium, this course is designed to strengthen your academic discourse skills. Your grade will be based on your level of achievement in each of the following four areas of academic discourse:
• Identifying interesting and thought provoking questions

The worth of a question is measured more by the subsequent questions it generates, than by its answer. Identifying interesting questions is fundamental to every academic discipline. In this course you will practice the art of effective questioning through the development of intriguing and well argued theses, paper prompts, and discussion topics.

• Critically analyzing resources (often through close and critical reading)
• Engaging in thoughtful, persuasive, reflective, and collegial discussion
• Using well organized, well supported, and effective writing to argue your point.

Course Grades:

Grades are based on 3 components

• Contributions to class discussion, discussion topics, paper prompts, etc. (20%)
• Intermediate writing assignments such as story boards, rough drafts, personal responses, section summaries, etc. (15%)
• 2 formal essays (65%)

More information about each of these assignments will be posted on the class WISE site.

Late Assignments and Missed Classes:

I expect everyone to attend all classes and turn in all assignments. If for some reason you are unable to attend class or turn in an assignment, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably before the missed class or assignment.

Cell Phone/Screen Policy:

No laptops, iPads, or other devices which take your eyes off your fellow classmates and the class discussion. Electronic devices such as cell phones, pagers, iPods, etc. must be turned off during class meetings. If your cell phone goes off, or you are otherwise distracted by such electronic devices during class, you will be responsible for bringing treats for the entire class at the next class meeting. Papers should not be read during class, though I applaud your efforts to stay abreast of current events and tackle the latest crossword or sodoku puzzle.

Academic Integrity:

In accordance with Willamette University CLA catalog: “Plagiarism and cheating are offenses against the integrity of the courses in which they occur and against the College community as a whole... Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism shall not be considered a valid defense. If students are uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism for a particular assignment, they should consult the instructor for clarification.” Cheating is unethical and I take it very seriously. The Deans Office and Honor Council will be notified if anyone is found cheating and appropriate sanctions will be given. If you are unsure of what constitutes cheating, please ask me.

Students Requiring Accomodations:

In accordance with University policy, if you have a documented disability and require accommodations to obtain equal access to this class, please contact me at the beginning of the semester or when given an assignment for which an accommodation is required. Students must verify their eligibility though the University in order to receive accommodations.
Course WISE Site:

The course schedule including reading assignments, due dates, and other important information will be posted on the Home page of the course WISE site under Assignments. Most assignments will be turned in electronically using WISE, and graded work (including comments) will be returned using WISE. Please check the WISE site often (at least several times each week).