

Why Is There Poverty?

Introductory Composition Section 125.077
Fall, 1999 Mon./Weds. 11:30-1
A FIGS (First Year Interest Group) COURSE
Dr. Helen Fox

Required Texts:

Coursepack (Available at Dollar Bill)

The Little, Brown Essential Handbook for Writers. (at Shaman Drum)

Introduction

Why does anyone in the richest country in the world have to be (want to be? can't help being?) poor? What does being poor really mean, anyway? How can people lift themselves -- and others -- out of poverty? What can we do to help eliminate inequalities? These questions have been on my mind since I was a child growing up in the 1950s on Chicago's South Side. I had seen poverty in my own neighborhood: African American families living in crowded, segregated apartments with frozen pipes in winter and cockroaches all year round; Polish and Irish immigrants who crammed a dozen kids into small, tacky houses. My own family was struggling -- my mother was a single mom, and our bank account was often empty at the end of the month.

But these living conditions were nothing compared to ones I saw later. As a Peace Corps Volunteer in India in the 1960s I saw children whose bellies were swollen from protein deficiency and internal parasites, people with horrible deformities who survived by begging in railroad stations, people with rags for clothes. And recently, in our own nation's capital, I saw Americans reduced to living in ways that still haunt me: A Vietnam vet who had been living on the street for thirty years, raving mad, one filthy sleeping bag his only shelter. A mother with her baby daughter sitting outside a bank, begging, while people stepped over them on their way to withdraw cash.

I feel passionately that no one should have to live under the conditions of "absolute poverty" that one billion human beings endure on this planet -- the lack of enough food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to survive. But how to create a world without the misery of poverty is a complicated business. That's why I want you to explore different causes and solutions to poverty in this course rather than learn the "right way to think" about these difficult questions.

You all have some ideas about this issue, some information, some personal experiences, and some moral sense of what eliminating poverty is about. The challenge will be to ask yourselves, "How far can I generalize from my own experiences or the experiences of people I know?" "To what extent are my views based on facts?" "Where can I find facts and examples to support my views?" "Do I have the courage and character to change my views if I find out things I didn't know before?" That's a big challenge for a first year writing course, but that's what writing is about: connecting abstract ideas and real life examples, finding good, convincing reasons and facts to support your views, and exploring the opposition -- even when it makes you mad.

FIGS Sessions

In addition to reading, research and writing, you need to learn more about how to listen to people whose views and experiences are different from your own. This is why our course is connected to the FIGS (First Year Interest Groups) program, led by a dynamic consortium of instructors who teach about identity, race, class, and poverty. We have planned four sessions where you will meet and interact with students in other FIGS classes on various themes that have to do with interpersonal and intercultural awareness. Not all these sessions will focus on our topic: poverty. But they all will help you develop the kind of listening and critical thinking skills that are so important in this course -- and in life.

These sessions are:

Mon. Sept. 13 7-10 PM

PLACES TO BE ANNOUNCED

Weds. Oct. 6 11:30-1 PM

Thurs. Nov. 11, 7-10 PM

Weds. Dec. 1 11:30-1 PM

You'll notice that two of these sessions replace our usual 11:30 to 1PM class time and two of them are longer evening meetings. **You must arrange your schedule to be able to attend both evening meetings. Attendance will be taken at all FIGS events. A 2-3 page reaction paper must be written and handed in after each FIGS event (See: Writing Assignments).**

Attendance Policies

Each class period and each FIGS session is an important learning experience that will affect how you write and think about these issues. I expect you to be there for every class, except for religious holidays, on time and ready to engage with the issues. If you must be absent, I would appreciate an e-mail message beforehand. **If you are absent for any reason it is your responsibility to find out from another student what happened in class and what assignments were given.**

Group Research and Presentations

In October, we will set up small groups to research some aspect of poverty from the point of view of the impoverished person. I would like you to conduct INTERVIEWS with the people affected and/or their advocates (that is, someone who knows their situation intimately and can speak in their interest) and combine these with background facts from current articles. Each group will give a thirty minute presentation of their findings to the class in some creative, interesting way. Some possibilities are:

A day in the life of an impoverished single mom.

Could you make it on a minimum wage?

What's it like to sleep under a bridge?

Streets paved with gold? An immigrant's story.

Poverty through the eyes of a child or teenager.

Poverty and disability: two difficult challenges

Being poor at a rich university.

etc.

Some of you will have good contacts for interviews; I also have some contacts. If you need help with this, please see me.

Groups will present their findings on these dates:

Mon. Oct. 18 Groups A and B

Weds. Oct. 20 Groups C and D

Mon. Oct. 25 Group E

Writing Assignments

Note: Papers one, two, and three are to be done in three drafts. You will get feedback from your peers and/or from me on drafts one and two. All drafts should appear in your final portfolio (See: Grading Policies, below).

1. Reading Journal. For each of the articles in the course pack, I'd like you to comment on specific passages that interest you. Draw a line down the center of a piece of regular notebook paper. On one side of the page, write the quote, exactly as written in the text. On the other side, write your comments. If you want to do this on the computer, don't bother with the vertical format. Just quote, respond, quote respond.

This is an opportunity to exclaim, to question, to doubt, to wonder, to remember other things you've read or heard or seen. **Comment on three to five quotes per article, unless the piece is very short. In that case, you might write longer comments on fewer quotes.**

2. "One reason for poverty." *Argumentative paper: 6-8 typed, double-spaced pages.*

This assignment will give you a chance to delve into a single aspect of poverty like poor education, single motherhood, lack of jobs, high cost of housing, racism, globalization, etc. Choose a topic (or an aspect of the topic) that is somewhat controversial.

For example, it is pretty easy to say that lack of education contributes to poverty. You won't find many people disagreeing with that. But saying that the lack of a good preschool education contributes to poverty later in life is more controversial -- and more interesting. Do studies confirm this is true? How can that be when 100 years ago, nobody had any preschool education?

To organize your paper, briefly describe the problem, then give the reasons you believe the problem causes or exacerbates poverty, backed up with evidence. You also need to show how others might argue against you and what you would say in response. This paper must be correctly referenced with at least six CURRENT sources.

3. "Why is there poverty?" *Analysis paper 10-15 typed, double-spaced pages.* This paper should pull together at least five of the most important reasons YOU think poverty exists, backed up by evidence and showing the interconnections between the different causes you have identified. You do not need to deal explicitly with the opposition; just give enough evidence to show why you are convinced these causes are central to the problem. Organize the paper so that the most important reasons come first. Start with a short introduction (maybe with statistics, maybe with a pertinent human interest story) and finish with a conclusion. This paper must be correctly referenced with at least ten CURRENT sources.

4. "What should we do about poverty?" *Policy paper. 1 or 2 typed, double-spaced pages.* This paper should be written in the form of a letter to the editor or to your

Congress person, briefly stating your views about what you would like to see done about some aspect of poverty and why. Sometimes the shortest paper is the hardest one to write. You need to be crystal clear, provide up-to-date information, and suggest a reasonable action for the public or policy makers to take.

5. FIGS Reaction papers. 2-3 typed, double-spaced pages. After each FIGS meeting you should write several pages about the most interesting things you learned from the event. What was new to you? What didn't you agree with? What made you think? Please do not evaluate the event itself or any of the presenters (i.e. "Jason was awesome!" or "The exercise was really boring and badly facilitated"). This kind of information is helpful for me to know, but I will provide you with other opportunities to make these kinds of judgments. This paper is a chance to really ask yourself what you learned, and to show your ability to question and reflect in depth.

6 In-class writing (to be announced). Every once in awhile we will all write during class time, maybe a reaction to a video we see together, maybe a reflection on a discussion, maybe a creative piece. All this writing must appear in your portfolio.

Portfolios

All drafts of all your writing should appear in a portfolio on the last day of the course. A portfolio is an inexpensive cardboard binder that holds your papers securely (by metal clasps rather than in pockets). It should be carefully organized with all drafts labeled (Draft #1, #2, #3, etc.). Your name and student number should appear on the outside of the portfolio.

Grading Policies

While your work is in progress I will not grade it, but I will comment on it and let you know how I think it can be improved. I strongly advise coming to see me with each of your papers so we can work on making them your best possible effort.

Your course grade will be determined by the following:

- The amount of work you put into writing, revising, and editing.
- The accuracy of facts and depth of thought your final drafts show.
- The careful editing of your final drafts.
- The contributions you make to your group presentation.
- The contributions you make to class discussion.
- Your attendance and attentiveness in class.

Notice that you do not need to *already* be a superior writer to get a good grade. I am interested in the *improvement* of your writing and the amount you engage your mind with the course material.

How To Improve Your Writing

I love to work with students one-on-one on their writing. Just e-mail me or see me after class to make an appointment in my office: 1128 Angell Hall (Sweetland Writing Center). Bring whatever you're working on and we'll go over it together.

Other opportunities:

1) make an appointment for Writing Workshop at the Sweetland Writing Center in Angell Hall, first floor at the end of the hall on the right as you enter the building. Or call 764-0433 to schedule your appointment. You can have a half hour appointment each week if you like. 2) Drop in to the Peer Tutor center in 444C Mason Hall (just at the entrance to the Angell Hall Computer Center). First come, first served. 3) Send your draft over UM's OWL (On-line Writing Lab) and a peer tutor will respond to it within about 48 hours. Check it out on the Web at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/ecb/help/owl.html>

Calendar

Weds. Sept. 8 Introduction to the course and to each other
Mon. Sept. 13 norms; in class writing and sharing
Mon. Sept. 13 FIGS Evening Meeting: 7-10 PM
Weds. Sept. 15 FIGS Reflection Paper due
Mon. Sept. 20
Weds. Sept. 22
Mon. Sept. 27 Paper #1 Draft 1 *One Reason for Poverty*. Peer review
Weds. Sept. 29
Mon. Oct. 4
Weds. Oct. 6 FIGS 11:30-1
Mon. Oct. 11 FIGS Reflection paper due.
Weds. Oct. 13 Paper #1 Draft 2 due
Mon. Oct. 18 Groups A and B STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
Weds. Oct. 20 Groups C and D STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
Mon. Oct. 25 Group E STUDENT PRESENTATIONS
Weds. Oct. 27
Mon. Nov. 1 Paper #2 *Why Is There Poverty?* Draft 1 Peer review
Weds. Nov. 3
Mon. Nov. 8
Weds. Nov. 10
Thurs. Nov. 11 FIGS Evening Meeting
Mon. Nov. 15 FIGS Reflection paper due. Paper #2 Draft 2 due
Weds. Nov. 17 Paper #3 *What Should We Do About Poverty?* Draft 1
Peer Review
Mon. Nov. 22
Weds. Nov. 24 NO CLASS (Enjoy your holiday.)
THANKSGIVING BREAK
Mon. Nov. 29
Weds. Dec. 1 FIGS 11:30-1
Mon. Dec. 6 FIGS Reflection paper due.
Weds. Dec. 8 Paper #3 Draft 2 due.
Mon. Dec. 13 Celebration! Portfolios Due