

ENVI/HIST 236

Consumer Nation

Twentieth-Century American Consumer Culture

Macalester College
Spring 2024
TR 3-4:30, OLRI 243
Phone: x6803
Email: wells@macalester.edu
Office Hours: Tue 1:20-2:50,
Thurs 11:20-11:50, and
by appointment

Prof. Chris Wells

Course Description

“Of all the strange beasts that have come slouching into the 20th century,” writes James Twitchell, “none has been more misunderstood, more criticized, and more important than materialism.” In this course, we will trace the various twists and turns of America’s vigorous consumer culture across the twentieth century, examining its growing influence on American life, its implications for the environmental health of the world, and the many debates it has inspired.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The following books are available for purchase at the college bookstore:



John Kasson, *Amusing the Million*

McDonough & Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle*

Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy*

Call me “Chris” (he/him/his)

Students are sometimes not sure what to call their professors. Like many others at Macalester, I invite you to use my first name, though if you are feeling formal Professor Wells or Dr. Wells are both fine. Please be sure to share what you would like to be called, as well!



Drop-In Hours



I will hold standing office hours (time I hold specifically to talk to students) this semester in my office, Olin-Rice 249c, on Tues 1:20-2:50, Thurs 11:20-11:50, and by appointment. You can reserve a time, if you'd like, [here](#), but you can also just show up! If these standing times don't work for you, plug my name into the 'Meet with' box in Google calendar, identify a few times that appear to work for both of us, and send those to me. I'll send you a calendar invitation for the one that works best for me. Talking to students is one of my

favorite things about being a professor. No question is too small, and no pretext to talk is too flimsy: if you want to talk, we can talk!

Challenging Times

These are challenging times, and this course engages difficult issues that can at times be actively discouraging. I've designed this course with a great deal of flexibility and with your success as a top priority. If things aren't working for you, whatever the reason, please let me know and I'll do what I can to help.



Our Moodle site (moodle.macalester.edu) is not just a crucial resource, but is also our primary point of contact for this class. In addition to hosting this syllabus, it is where you can find our [complete daily schedule](#), as well as links to all of our readings, discussions, activities, and assignments—in short, anything and everything related to the course. Please familiarize yourself with the Moodle site before doing anything else, and let me know promptly if you have any questions or run into any problems!



Attendance, Engagement, and Participation

The success of this class hinges on your active engagement with course texts and your participation in class discussions and activities. Our project in class meetings will be to explore connections between events, to answer questions, to clear up any confusion, to discuss the major themes of the course, and above all to engage with the big ideas in the assigned texts. Please remember that we are all in this together and we are all responsible for the success of the course. As eager as I am to share with you what I know, I expect that you will learn at least as much (and probably a lot more!) in conversation with one

another as you will from me. It is vital that we all respect one another's time, space, values, and ideas by coming to class on time and prepared to engage in respectful, intellectually challenging discussions. In practice, this means you should:

1. Read and engage with assigned texts before class, and show up ready to discuss the day's material and participate in class activities.
2. Attend class regularly. Since this is a discussion-based class, it is obviously important to be in class in order to discuss the material. COVID is still circulating, so if you are ill or are coming down with something, you **SHOULD NOT** come to class. Everyone may miss four classes without explanation or penalty. That is a lot! If you have missed three classes, however, please talk to me privately so that we can figure out how to accommodate any challenges you are facing and develop a plan for you to succeed in the class. If you miss a fourth class, talking to me is required.

Helpful Resources

Many wonderful resources exist that will help you with this class. To book an online appointment with a writing counselor at the **MAX Center**, visit [WOnline](#). You can find the center's guide to working remotely with a writing tutor [here](#). Our **research and instruction librarians** are also a great resource for many writing-related questions. You may book an online appointment with one of them [here](#).

Another useful resource is Macalester's [Write Well video series](#). **Please also spend some time** perusing Prof. Zachary Schrag's [helpful advice about doing well](#) in a history course.

Academic dishonesty



Academic dishonesty erodes the basic foundations of higher education: exchange, debate, and the thoughtful consideration of what we know, how we know it, and why it matters. It has no place at Macalester or in this course. Find Macalester's academic integrity policy [here](#). For help avoiding plagiarism, visit the Library's Academic Integrity materials [here](#). For the Quick Guide to the Chicago Manual of Style, the citation system used by historians, visit [here](#).

Accommodations

I am committed to supporting all students in my class. If course design ever poses barriers to your ability to access or to demonstrate mastery of course content, please let me know. I will make reasonable academic accommodations in such cases. If you have a known disability and think that you may need formal accommodations, [email](#), call 651-696-6748, or use the [online scheduler](#). Even if you do not need formal accommodations, you may find yourself needing things that you normally would not. In those cases, please let me know that you are struggling (though I don't need to know details about why). I may be able to make reasonable accommodations that will help.



Papers

You will have a great deal of flexibility to determine which papers you write, depending on the grade you wish to earn in the course. See [Specifications Grading](#), below, for how this works. The options include four short papers (4-5 pgs) and a longer Found Object paper (8-10 pgs). See Moodle for details.



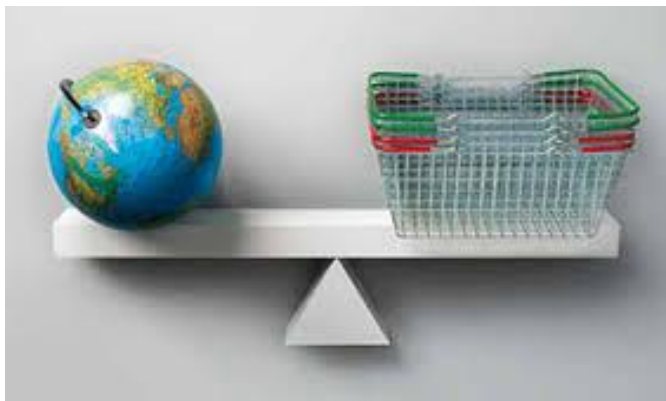
may be able to make reasonable accommodations.

Late Work Policy

For each of the four reflection papers, as long as you turn in a complete draft by the due date, you may request--and I will always grant--a penalty-free extension of 72 hours to work on it further. (This extension may not be used in combination with tokens.) Because there is a great deal of choice in reading engagement assignments, I will not accept overdue reading engagements without a token. If you find yourself in unusual circumstances, or find yourself needing extra time beyond what tokens provide to complete your work in a way that demonstrates what you are learning, talk to me. I

Grades, Grading Philosophy, and Grading System

My grading philosophy is that grades ideally ought to do a few things. First, they ought to **encourage learning**—that is, to give you reasons (whether carrots or sticks) to take advantage of the opportunities for learning that the course provides. Second, they should reflect how much work you have put into the class—that is, how much genuine **effort** you have made to learn the things I have asked you to learn and to do the things I have asked you to do. Third, they should measure how well you have demonstrated mastery of the course’s content—that is, your **performance** on high-stakes assignments that I have designed to measure your knowledge and skill relative to other students.



The problem is that there is often tension among these three things, which can generate a lot of angst and ambiguity for students and professors alike. If one student displays exceptional effort and improvement, should she get a higher grade in the course than her actual performance on high-stakes assessments says she should? What about the brilliant slackers? The ones who miss a bunch of class, rarely contribute to discussions, and make a habit of texting during class—yet somehow manage to perform well on

important tests and papers? Send me a quick email, subject line Easter Egg, and let me know you've read this!

Given all of this, **grading in this course** will be quite different in some ways—and very similar in others—from norms you have likely experienced in the past. I have structured the grading system, as best I can, to encourage serious learning, reward effort, and acknowledge achievement—while remaining as flexible as possible under the unusual circumstances that define the moment. In an effort to encourage experimentation, reward effort, and provide an honest assessment of your mastery of course content and goals, **I will determine your grade this semester using a system called “Specifications Grading.”**



Specifications Grading

In a nutshell, here's how it works:

- You will have tremendous flexibility to choose which assignments to do, as well as how many activities and assignments you would like to take on, depending on the ultimate grade you would like to earn in the class.
- In what is definitely the most unusual aspect of this system, everything that is graded--participation, reading engagements, papers, in-class activities--will be evaluated on a credit/no credit basis. "Credit" will be awarded for work that fulfills all of the specifications for an assignment according to a clear rubric ([here](#) and in Moodle). The specifications for all assignments are set at B+ quality work.
- Every time you earn credit for a graded course component by meeting its specifications, you will earn a point in the appropriate category. Your final grade will be determined by how many points you earn across each of the four main categories of the course:
 - Participation points (from attending and contributing to class discussions--26 possible points)
 - Reading Engagement assignments (26 possible points from assigned readings)
 - 4 Short Essays (4-5 pgs each), due in weeks 5, 7, 13, and 16 (1 point each)
 - 1 Found Object Paper (8-10 pages), due at the end of Finals Week (1 point)

* Remember that you have 4 participation tokens

Participation points	Reading engagement points	Short paper point	Found object paper point	Final course grade
26*	23	4	1	A
26*	22	3	1	A-
26*	21	4 2	0 1	B+
25*	20	3	0	B
25*	18	3	0	B-
25*	17	2	0	C
24*	16	2	0	D

Tokens

Sometimes we don't quite manage to do everything we intend to do, despite our best efforts. If this year is anything remotely like others since the pandemic began, I expect this to remain true. Tokens recognize this reality and give you additional flexibility to meet the goals you set for yourself. Everyone has 20 tokens, spread across three categories, for you to use as you wish without explanation or penalty. You can [track your token use](#) in Moodle.

- 4 participation tokens, each good for 1 class participation point. (BONUS: If you do not use your class participation tokens to miss class, you may exchange 3 class participation tokens to earn 1 short paper point at the end of the semester.)
- 5 reading engagement tokens, each good for a 1-day extension on a single reading engagement
- 10 reflection paper tokens, each good for a 1-day extension on a single reflection paper assignment, to be distributed as you wish (e.g. one paper 10 days late, or two papers 5 days late; *caveat*: you may only use a maximum of three tokens on the fourth reflection paper).

If you fall behind and find yourself needing to do extra work to catch back up to where you would like to be, be sure to talk to me. There may be a reasonable way to earn extra tokens to get back on track.