# Language Politics (FSEM)

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**The Assignment Situation**

This assignment is from my Language Politics FSEM. The prompt asks students to write a low-stakes reading response, which is then posted to our FSEM's shared blog page. Students completed six of these blog responses throughout the quarter, beginning in Week 1 and ending in Week 7. Some of the responses had a particular theme I asked students to address, and others were more open-ended. The student examples I've listed below were written in week two, and students weren't given a theme to address.

We used these blog responses in a number of ways throughout the quarter. Sometimes I would select a response that I found particularly insightful, and read it aloud to the class. Sometimes I had students spend five minutes at the start of class finding their favorite passages from among their classmates' posts, which they'd then read aloud and we'd discuss what made the writing compelling. Sometimes I had them work in small groups and find connections or complications among their posts. Sometimes I asked students to come back to their responses after class discussion and add something to them informed by what we've just talked about. Sometimes we just began our whole-class discussion by having a volunteer pose the question they posted in their response. Really, there are an endless supply of interactive, student-centered activities that can spring from this response assignment.

Ultimately, many students use their responses as the seeds for a larger research project at the end of the quarter. One blog response asks students to find a peer-reviewed article to read and respond to, based on their research interests, and I'd estimate that 75% of students ended up researching the same topic that they responded to. For example, a student interested in the way politicians talk about Islam read an article that rhetorically analyzed post-9/11 speeches. She then ended up creating a magazine for her final project that was a "special issue" of *Time* magazine about Muslim Americans and language. Another student read about gender bias in video gaming, and used his response to form the basis for an interview he conducted with a gaming friend.

As I state on the assignment sheet, I see these blog posts as having multiple purposes:

- They spur class discussion and give us good ideas before we come to class so that we can use our time most efficiently.
- They provide a way for me to see students are both doing the reading and understanding it.
- They are building blocks on which students can create other assignments for our class.
- They allow engaging ideas to be rewarded publicly.

I like the blog medium, specifically, for this assignment because it lets students come to class already having read and responded to their peers' ideas on a particular reading. I've found this really spurs class discussion and allows us to jump right into the meaty issues. I also have found that the accessibility of the blog medium is helpful for students when they're brainstorming for longer, formal projects near the end of the quarter. Students can easily go back and look at what they and others have posted.

I also like the blog medium for its social element. Though I require students to make a certain number of comments on their classmates' writing, they often make more comments than required, and respond to responses – continuing a conversation chain outside of the parameters of the assignment. These conversations will spill into small-group or whole-class discussions the next day, as well. The blog allows student writing to be written to the whole class, rather than just to me, further encouraging discussion and connection.

This assignment is LONG, especially for a blog prompt, but I'm happy with the way it seemed to really help students figure out how to write about readings effectively. I didn't want a book report, and I didn't want a personal narrative. By providing such specific guidelines, even though the assignment was meant to be generative for class discussion and future project brainstorming, students were able to more quickly and efficiently figure out how to respond to the readings, developing the particular skills of summary, analysis, and synthesis. Did the assignment write-up feel a little prescriptive for me? Yes. But I don't think it felt that way to the students. At the end of the quarter, when we discuss how the class went and what we liked/didn't like, many students stated that the blog response assignment was both enjoyable and helpful for them.

Students struggle with close reading and analysis. In their experience, they equate analysis with "literary analysis" and have a hard time figuring out how to apply that prior knowledge to an academic text. I provide comments on their blog posts for the first response, and after that I only give feedback to students when their work is falling below the accepted standards of the class. (There'd be no human way to keep up with the workload of responding to 100 blog posts on top of responding to other written assignments). The assignment is low stakes in that each individual response isn't worth a whole lot of the course grade, and I am looking almost entirely for high-order concerns such as the quality and complexity of their ideas, rather than low-order concerns like sentence structure or punctuation.

I respond orally in class to their blogs ("David and Amanda both had questions about the ways in which we equate language use with nationalism…" or "Anna, can you talk more about the study you mentioned in your post?") so they know I'm reading their entries, and I tell students I'm always available to meet with them individually if they'd like to talk about

their response grades. I only mention this because I don't want any instructor to feel like they'd need to respond to hundreds of additional pages in order to effectively use this blogging assignment.

I've used blogs in my classrooms for years, and I do think it's important to give students pretty specific guidelines, even for a low-stakes blogging assignment like this one. Otherwise, I've found that the quality and nature of responses will be wildly different from one student to the next. I do think this response assignment would work on a platform like Canvas, perhaps more like a discussion thread, but the benefit of the blog is the ease, accessibility, and central nature of these blog entries (our whole class is centered on the blog, where students can find their syllabus, schedule, assignment sheets, readings, and class updates). Every time a student goes to look at the schedule, they also see the latest blog responses from their peers, and I think such a presence is important for giving these responses weight and significance in the course.

The two student examples I've chosen are in response to two short articles and an NPR segment on uptalk and vocal fry. Students were very taken with the idea that voice itself can be politicized, and they really caught hold of the concept of policing language (who polices, who is policed). The first example is strong in its personal connection – the student makes compelling connections to his own life. But the second, while perhaps no more compelling, is strong because the student is attempting, albeit in a clumsy and unpracticed way, to interrogate something larger with the readings rather than just react to them. I want students, even if they aren't terribly successful, to move towards this second work, as a way of beginning to engage with the academic community, rather than just as a personal response. This is not to say that a personal response is in any way less desirable, but I've found that students are pretty comfortable with personal responses already, and need much more work on finding larger themes, patterns, critiques, or connections. In class, I would ask the second student to talk through some of his ideas in class, and then I may have the class, in small groups, investigate just what kind of other research does exist about this topic, and decide, as a class, whether the interviewee had enough basis for her statements or not.

**The Assignment: Response Pages**
You'll complete a response page for about half of the readings we do in this course (for the other half, you'll post discussion questions). These pages are meant to work in a few ways:
- They spur class discussion and give us good ideas before we come to class so that we can use our time most efficiently.
- They provide a way for me to see you're both doing the reading and understanding it.
- They are building blocks on which you'll create other assignments for our class.
- They allow engaging ideas to be rewarded publicly.

Each response will be posted to our shared blog at least 24 hours before class. For example, if we're reading an article for Thursday's class, you'll need to post your response for that reading by Wednesday at 8am. This means you'll need to plan ahead a bit, and won't be able to cram the reading for the night before class – but it's better that way, I promise!

In the 24 hours between when you post your blog and when we meet for class, you should comment on at least two of your classmate's posts. Please make your comments substantive – only comments that further the conversation in some way will count (so saying "nice job!" won't cut it). Of course, it's nice to say, "Hey, friend! Great job! Loved this!" but that kind of comment really just ends a conversation rather than continuing it. The author will be responding to your comments, so doing things like asking questions, expanding points, posing scenarios, synthesizing with your own ideas, addressing a question the author asks, etc. will make the conversation more useful.

You should write your response in Microsoft Word so you can accurately measure its length and it doesn't get lost in the ether if Pioneer Net goes down (you'll all know this fear not long after you arrive on campus :)). Your post should be about one, single-spaced page in length – that's about 600 words. More is not better in this case (I'm looking at all you overachievers out there) and if your post is overly long, that will be as bad as being overly short. You don't need to have exactly 600 words, but you should be close-ish.

You should be sure to have a creative, catchy **title** for your response, and to select or create **tags** before you publish your post.

If there is more than one reading covered, you may choose to talk about just one, or to discuss both/all. However, if you choose to talk about only one, it will be clear to me you didn't do the *rest* of the reading if you neglect to bring in an obvious point from the other reading(s) in your synthesis. Be sure to do *all* the readings before you write your response, even if you're only responding to one.

Your response should have the following sections, with **one line of space** between each:

1.    The first line of your post should be information that helps us identify which reading this response is for. (Example: Okrent pgs. 14-57). That way it will be easy to tell which response goes with which reading.
2.    On the next line, list the most interesting or important question you had while doing this reading.
3.    Your next section will be a summary of the pages read: this section should be NO MORE than 5 sentences. Summarize the main thrust of the author's arguments/points in the covered reading – do NOT insert your opinion or analysis in this section. This section should demonstrate to me that you've not only done the reading, but you are able to identify key elements of the reading (in other words, you understand what is MOST important, and that you're able to distill this into 5 or fewer sentences). A summary isn't just a re-telling of every little thing that happens – it's a repackaging of the important points so that someone who hasn't read the section will understand what it's about. You've all probably had experience summarizing fiction, and you know how to hit the main plot points while leaving out small details that don't need to be included. This is the same thing you do for non-fiction, though it might be more difficult to discern what those main points are at first. Don't worry – you'll get better at this the more you practice it.
4.    Your next section will be a close reading of a very small section of

the text – a sentence or two. Provide a quotation of the sentence(s) in question, and then do some analysis. What does your chosen passage mean? What work is it doing for the author's argument? The sentence(s) drew you to it for a reason – why? What's powerful, profound, confusing, infuriating, etc. about this small section of text, and why is it worth discussing? You don't need to answer all these questions (and you probably don't have the space, anyway), but think of them as springboards for your own thoughts.

5. Your final section will be a synthesis. This is where you can build connections. Are there other texts, current events, media, discussions, experiences, etc. that you can connect to what you've just read? Provide something specific here – don't just say "a lot of movies have characters with accents." Instead, provide a specific example of a movie, and perhaps provide a video clip, to illustrate the connection you're building. You can also synthesize with other things we've read for class, or with discussions we've previously had in class.

Again, because you only have one single-spaced page for all of the above, you'll need to be judicious in your choices – make sure your writing is tight and to the point. Response Pages will be evaluated in the following way:

- 3: strong, unique ideas and solid execution
- 2: average ideas and average execution
- 1: weak or obvious ideas and poor execution, OR may be missing elements of assignment

**Student Response #1**

*Damaging or Destroying the Voice?*

Reading from Uptalk and Vocal Fry, Fresh Air podcast segment "From Upspeak To Vocal Fry: Are We 'Policing' Young Women's Voices?"

Some questions I had while researching these pieces: are our voices a true reflection of ourselves until outside forces pressure our tone to conform in situations? Is this tone more of an oppressive mask or alternative growth for our voices?

Speech varies by location and different factors play into how a voice will sound. With Vocal Fry and Uptalk, women are being targeted by heavy criticism for the way they speak in professionally set jobs. Some argue a sense of insecurity is shown in their tone of voice, but it is more determined by location and nurture, with sexism being a factor for criticism as women are being targeted more than men that use the same speech. Medical damage to the vocal cords is also used as an argument against vocal fry, but there is little proof of this. Different speech patterns

are spread out all over the world, through religions and culture, until there is more research, these patterns are an expression of a person/people. "For me, the way I spoke was not - I didn't think reflected who I was. It also interfered with my ability to professionally do what I wanted to do." (Grose, Fresh Air min.33). After hearing this, I thought if changing your voice helps you survive, then the cause must be with reason. But with the way our society is, conformity is highly useful for acceptance and many people change themselves for that acceptance. It does help you survive, but we are in a new era of humankind with the ability to make changes that ripple in the world. If you want to use your natural voice, then you should use it, but also keep an open mind to see the perception of voice from others. Instead of bluntly using your voice, educate yourself more on the different types of factors involved with voice. Then you could use a blend of voices to serenade your audience into perceiving you as professional while also breaking ground for others to do the same.

This segment connects a lot with me and where I am from. In the Lakota language, we use guttural in our voices very heavily. It has affected my voice with the diverse accent I picked up in the last 18 years of my life. I don't destroy my natural voice, but instead I learn to train my voice for matching different situations. If there are problems in the way of oral presentations, I learn why they exist and how to fix them. I have failed a lot with the use of my voice especially with how fast my thoughts are and how hard it is to keep up with them without falling behind, stumbling, or going too fast. However, these failures helped me grow and develop. If I see criticizers, I work to fix whatever parts they perceive as broken without affecting the whole system of my true voice.

**Analysis of Student #1 Response**
Student #1 has provided an adequate response to the assignment. For context, Student #1 is very enthusiastic and engaged in class – he speaks up often and always is able to make relevant and interesting connections, particularly to his multilingual background. However, he often rushes assignments (by his own admission) and generally performs written work at a level below what I know he's capable of.

Student #1 struggled to fully address the assignment, though he's getting there. This writing comes from the second week of class, so I wouldn't expect the analysis and synthesis to necessarily be sophisticated at this point. Student #1 falls back on what many students do, especially early in the course, which is personal connections and response phrases such as "this made me think of…"

Student #1 also treated the source material (the assigned reading) in the way that most students do – by randomly dropping in a quotation and then addressing it, rather than integrating the quotation into his writing:

> ```
> "'For me, the way I spoke was not- I didn't think
> reflected who I was. It also interfered with my
> ability to professionally do what I wanted to
> do.' (Grose, Fresh Air min.33). After hearing
> this, I thought if changing your voice helps you
> survive, then the cause must be with reason."
> ```

For this assignment, I might comment generally to the whole class on strategies for integrating quotations. However, I didn't dock Student #1's grade for source integration, not only because it's not something I'd yet addressed with the class, but also because this is a low-stakes assignment – I'm more concerned with the ideas the student articulates (though, of course, form can aid or hinder the accessibility of content).

I do think Student #1 exhibits an awareness of his audience (especially his peers) by relying on personal evidence. As I mentioned earlier, Student #1 was passionate about the course content, though it didn't always come through his writing, and got a lot of positive feedback from his classmates when he'd relate course content to his experiences with native languages.

Student #1 also demonstrates an awareness of the importance of audience in general. He connects the assigned material to the idea of rhetorical flexibility or code switching/meshing, though he doesn't (yet) know those terms:

> ```
> "This segment connects a lot with me and where I
> am from. In the Lakota language, we use guttural
> in our voices very heavily. It has affected my
> voice with the diverse accent I picked up in the
> last 18 years of my life. I don't destroy my
> natural voice, but instead I learn to train my
> voice for matching different situations."
> ```

And

> ```
> "Instead of bluntly using your voice, educate
> yourself more on the different types of factors
> involved with voice. Then you could use a blend
> of voices to serenade your audience into
> perceiving you as professional while also
> breaking ground for others to do the same."
> ```

Though roughly articulated, these two passages hold a lot of potential for class discussion and further development into researched writing. After having Student #1 read this portion of his response to the class, I could ask the class to consider what it means to change your voice to meet particular situations. This question, in turn, could lead to a discussion of rhetoric, code meshing, and the political/social implications of linguistic dexterity.

**Student Response #2**
*Where's Like, the Hard Evidence, You Know?*

This post regards the articles "Uptalk Anxiety," "Vocal
Fry: 'creeping in' or 'still here?'" and podcast "From
Upspeak To Vocal Fry: Are We 'Policing' Young Women's
Voices?"

How seriously should we be taking this issue when so little
noteworthy research has been done on it? Do we run the risk
of jumping to conclusions before we have a chance to review
a body of evidence about speech patterns?

These sources discuss two vocal phenomena (vocal fry and
uptalk) and examine their social implications. A case is
made among the three resources that both vocal fry and
uptalk are being seen as a negative quirk in modern speech,
and some preliminary research shows that using these speech
patterns might make one seem less credible and hire-able.
Opinions vary, some suggesting a generational bias is to
blame for this perception, others seeing it as an
implicitly sexist viewpoint against women to dissect their
use of vocal fry. On the whole, all three sources agree
that these speech patterns are pervasive in our everyday
speech and that they can have a significant impact on the
speaker and the listener, depending on their personal
biases and opinions.

Around the twenty-eighth minute of the Fresh Air podcast,
Jessica Grose, who was criticized for her use of vocal fry
and uptalk, makes an interesting statement. When listening
to a beer commercial, she admits that she finds the female
speaker's voice annoying due to her vocal fry. I think this
is an extremely important moment in the podcast that has
major implications for our discussion. Grose says she feels
"like a traitor" for having such an opinion, and that's
because a case is being made that women are being attacked
in a sexist way for their voices, yet Grose's observation
seems to undermine that contention. The fact that she
simply finds the commercial-narrator's voice annoying,
outside of any sexist or generational bias, seems to open
the discussion up for closer scrutiny. It enables one to
turn a speculative eye toward the podcast speakers and ask
"who are they to know why or why not these speech patterns
are being criticized?" There's an incongruity between
Grose's argument and her observations, and that shows that
no one is yet qualified to "say what's right" when

considering social issues around speech patterns. A body of
evidence hasn't been amassed yet, and this can help remind
us that no single viewpoint, be it generational or feminist
or sexist or anything else, should be able to shape an
argument along their terms simply based on opinions and
anecdotal evidence.

Last week we discussed three broad relationship types as
described in Steven Pinker's lecture, and how what is
permissible in one relationship type often isn't
permissible in the others. I think phenomena like vocal fry
and uptalk can further illustrate this. In this week's
readings we are pointed to evidence from a sorority
leader's speech that she used uptalk as a method of
pointing out her dominance and compelling her subordinates
to listen to her. On the other hand, people in positions of
power considering hiring someone were said to have disliked
uptalk, considering it a sign of weakness or insecurity.
While this evidence is far from comprehensive or
convincing, I think it might be showing that just like all
types of communication, what's acceptable in one type of
relationship can have a completely different connotation in
another.

**Analysis of Student #2 Response**
Student #2 demonstrates a stronger response than Student #1 because he's actively working
to make larger connections, both to his audience and to our academic community at large.
Though these rhetorical moves are clumsy, they show a willingness to engage beyond the
safe scope of "what does this mean to me personally" or "here's how I felt when I read
this."

We see these moves as early as the discussion questions:

> "How seriously should we be taking this issue
> when so little noteworthy research has been done
> on it? Do we run the risk of jumping to
> conclusions before we have a chance to review a
> body of evidence about speech patterns?"

The consideration of academic convention is an important one. In class, this might lead us
into a discussion of genre, and give me the opportunity to discuss misperceptions about
academic writing (it's always boring and dry; it has no stories to tell) as well as best practices
in research (find the narrative, etc.). Rather than simply addressing the content, Student #2
has taken a step back and considered the context, and that's a move that I'd praise in class
and encourage other students to work toward.

Like Student #1, Student #2 shows an awareness of audience, though Student #2 does so
explicitly:

> "I think this is an extremely important moment in the podcast that has major implications for our discussion."

Student one has not only identified an important point in the material, but has signaled that this point is important to not only himself but the whole class. He goes on to integrate the source material as evidence of the moment's importance:

> "Grose says she feels "like a traitor" for having such an opinion, and that's because a case is being made that women are being attacked in a sexist way for their voices, yet Grose's observation seems to undermine that contention. The fact that she simply finds the commercial-narrator's voice annoying, outside of any sexist or generational bias, seems to open the discussion up for closer scrutiny."

Here we see Student #2 not only identifying an important point to discuss with the class, but we again see that move toward contextualizing – to considering convention, academic community, and thoughtful critique – and to questioning what's *not* in the material.

In our class discussion, Student #2 repeated his concerns about the reliability of the scientific evidence the authors and speakers used. This allowed the class to have a productive conversation about genre – in what forms of communication is it vital to provide all your sources and be transparent about where each of your conclusions come from? In what other forms is this less important? What's the job of the reader or listener in each situation? What research could we find (or conduct ourselves) in order to better understand the topic? These questions are fruitful not only for our understanding of one set of class readings, but for understanding how one navigates language generally – an important consideration for freshmen just entering the world of academe.