

Assignment Snapshot

Disability & Open Letters: Speaking Back When Others Speak For You

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I conceived this unit for an upper-level undergraduate/graduate course entitled “Rhetoric and the Body.” I taught this sequence after an introductory unit on narrative and disability, and followed it with a unit focused on argumentation in audio and visual modes.

This unit asks students to consider the ways that we speak for others’ bodies, how others speak for our bodies, and how these spoken-for bodies can respond. I ask students to engage a series of readings, blogs, and short videos, and these texts represent moments where (typically abled) others speak for disabled people, and moments where disabled people speak back in the form of “open letters” that are publicly published. These letters appear in high-profile newspapers, non-profit websites, and private blogs, and the style of writing is a mix of serious argument and sarcastic commentary.

I ask students to write open letters because I feel my courses have often taught students to be critical of disability representations, but have not equipped them with ways to operationalize their critiques. Students are asked to write to an organization or person they feel misrepresents their body in some way, with some writing to disability organizations and some writing to others groups. As a rhetorician, I believe the open letter is an important assignment because it asks students to simultaneously write to two audiences, as students must write a convincing letter to a specific person or organization, while at the same time writing the letter to inform a broader public. The assignment also emphasizes some of the complicated issues surrounding bodily disclosure, as I ask students to write about themselves.

Below is a reading list and the assignment.

Governing Disability

readings/audio

- [“Analyzing’ Bush’s Grey Matter.”](#) *Businessweek*. 11 March 2004. Web.
- Baynton, Douglas. “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. Eds. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 33-57. Print. ([collection preview](#))
- Garland-Thompson, Rosemarie. “The FDR Memorial: Who Speaks from the Wheelchair?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 26 January 2001. Web. ([article preview](#))
- [“Unfit For Work: The Startling Rise Of Disability In America.”](#) *NPR Special Series*. March 2013. Web.

open letters

- Coelho, Tony and Tom Ridge. "[Open letter to Sen. Bob Corker \(R-Tenn.\) on Disabilities Treaty vote.](#)" *TheHill*. 22 January 2014. Web.
- Schmidt, Erin. "[Open Letter to NPR from Former SSA commissioners.](#)" *Social Security, Disability & You*. 4 April 2013. Web.

MDA and Poster Children

reading/film

- Richardson, Kerry. [The Kids Are Alright](#). Chicago Filmmakers; The Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, 2005. Film.
- Whaley, Kayla. "[Being a Poster Child.](#)" *Disability in Kidlit*. 9 July 2013. Web.

open letters

- Matlin, Ben. "[An Open Letter to Jerry Lewis: The Disabled Need Dignity, Not Pity.](#)" *Los Angeles Times*. 1 September 1991. Web.
- Rajani, Harshada. "[Open Letter to Kanye West, From a Kid Who Gets 'Special Parking and S**t.'](#)" *Huffington Post*. 27 September 2014. Web.
- Shriver, Tim. "[An Open Letter to Ann Coulter.](#)" *Special Olympics*. 23 October 2012. Web.

Censoring/Gendering Helen Keller

readings

- Heideman, Elizabeth. "[#YesAllWomen, but Not Really: How Feminism Leaves the Disabled Behind.](#)" *The Daily Beast*. 24 Nov 2014. Web.
- Kleege, Georgina. "Helen Keller and 'The Empire of the Normal.'" *American Quarterly* 52.2 (2000): 322–325. Print. ([article preview](#))

open letters

- Ambrosino, Brandon. "[Open Letters: An Open Letter to Straight Men.](#)" *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. Web.
- Fee, Rob. "[An Open Letter To All Men Concerning #YesAllWomen.](#)" *ThoughtCatalog.com*. 28 May 2014.
- Holland, Jamie Cooper. "[An Open Letter to Kate Pierson, From a Trans Woman and Fan, About Your New 'Trans Anthem' Attempt.](#)" *The Huffington Post*. 4 December 2014.
- Kleege, Georgina. "Blind Rage: An Open Letter to Helen Keller." *Sign Language Studies* 7.2 (2007): 186–194. Print. ([article preview](#))

Autistics Respond to Autism Speaks

readings

- Lewiecki-Wilson, Cynthia. "Rethinking Rhetoric through Mental Disabilities." *Rhetoric Review* 22.2 (2003): 156–66. Print. ([article preview](#))
- Yergeau, Melanie. "[Circle Wars: Reshaping the Typical Autism Essay.](#)" *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30.1 (2009). Web.

video/film

- Baggs, Amanda. [In My Language](#). Web.
- "[Neurotypical.](#)" PBS: Point of View. Film.
- Yergeau, Melanie. "[Shiny Identities.](#)" *Kairos* 18.1 Topoi text. Film. Web.

open letters

- "[2014 Joint Letter to the Sponsors of Autism Speaks.](#)" *Autistic Self-Advocacy Network*. 6 January 2014. Web.

- Lassiter, Zachary. "[Open Letter to Judge Sentencing Kelli Stapleton.](#)" *Disability and Me*. 30 September 2014. Web.
- Robison, John Elder. "[I Resign My Role at Autism Speaks.](#)" *JohnElderRobison*. 13 November 2013. Web.

Selling/Treating Depression

readings/blogs

- Brosh, Allie. "[Adventures in Depression](#)" *Hyperbole and a Half*. 27 October 2011. Web.
- Brosh, Allie. "[Depression Part Two.](#)" *Hyperbole and a Half*. 9 May 2013. Web.
- Metzl, Jonathan. *Prozac on the Couch: Prescribing Gender in the Era of Wonder Drugs*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. (excerpt) Print. ([book preview](#))
- Oldani, Michael. "The Pharmaceuticalized 'Good Mother.'" *Atrium*. Issue 10. Medical Humanities & Bioethics Program, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. Print. ([issue preview](#))
- Prendergast, Catherine. "On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability." *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*. Eds. James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2001. 45-60. Print. ([collection preview](#))

open letters

- Buchanan, Ricky. "[Open Letter To Those Without an Invisible Disability or Chronic Illness.](#)" *Not Done Living*. 2014. Web.
- Thomas, Chazz. "[An Open Letter to The NHS From a Young Mother with Depression.](#)" *Huffington Post UK*. 14 December 2014. Web.

Speaking Back: Open Letter Assignment

In this unit, we've considered how people speak "on behalf" of disabled people, and how disabled people respond, particularly in the form of open letters. For this assignment, I ask you to write your own open letter to an organization or specific, high-profile person that you feel misrepresents your body.

Who should I write my letter to?

I'm asking that you choose an organization, group, or person that you feel misrepresents you, though it may be that this organization also sometimes "gets it right" in speaking for you. It's fine to mention both the good and the bad, but overall, I am asking for a critical letter – as is the case with most open letters – so consider this in picking who to write to. You may also choose to write to a specific, high-profile person who has spoken on your behalf. The organization and/or person needs to be specific, not "people who say X or Y." Finally, you will need to take some time to get better acquainted with the organization or person by reading and researching, even if you are already familiar.

As noted in class, the open letter has two audiences: one is an organization/group/person, while the other is a broader audience you hope to speak to. After selecting your specific organization/group/person, you'll need to determine your broader public (which won't be as effective if it is simply "everybody else"). Finally, you'll want to make careful choices about what you feel comfortable sharing with me, the class, and a larger public (if you publish the letter online). Please talk to me if you are having concerns about what to write about.

→ How do I write my letter?

As discussed in class, you will need to write to the organization/person, as well as a broader public you want to inform, at the same time. You'll be constantly balancing the needs of these **two audiences**.

There is no set **length for the letter**. As we've seen in class, very short open letters are not effective (as they tend to fail at informing a larger public about your issue), nor are long-winded letters effective (as they end up feeling like editorials). You'll need to decide what length is best, and I suggest that you write it long, and then focus on "cutting it down" in our class workshop.

As we've discussed and modeled in class, you'll want to include some **personal details** in your letter, as well as **researched information** such as statistics, news stories, critiques similar to yours, etc. In class, I will model how you can **use hyperlinks** to include sources (without distracting your reader with MLA- or APA-style references). There is no set number of sources to include, and we'll talk about this more while workshoping the letters.

→ What happens to my letter when I'm done with it?

I would like you to select a venue to publish your letter (such as Reddit, your personal blog, etc.) and decide whether you would publish with your name or anonymously. After you have completed a full draft of the letter (at workshop), we will have a discussion about whether we will publish them, but either way, you should write them with your specific publication venue in mind.

→ What will you be grading on?

I will be grading your ability to write an effective open letter, which means:

- selecting a relevant organization/group/person that speaks for your body;
- constructing an effective and engaging letter that reaches both your audiences;
- using an appropriate "letter" tone (instead of falling into student-essay tone);
- adopting a clear authorial stance and voice;
- including relevant references in hyperlinks;
- clearly engaging the rhetorical strategies/features you selected;
- and presenting a polished final product.