

# Assessing anti-racism in course descriptions

Department of Rhetoric and Language Curriculum and Assessment Committee (Jonathan Hunt, Chair)

## Introduction

The Department of Rhetoric and Language shares expectations about courses through multiple documents, including published course learning outcomes, course descriptions that may be found in the course catalog, and course descriptions that are required to be included in the syllabus of each class. The Department also shares information with instructors through Faculty Guidelines to each course and through sample syllabi (selected by the leadership team and available online).

Course descriptions can be powerful documents: they may shape both student and instructor expectations about a course, its goals, or its content. Reproduced on all syllabi, they powerfully shape the agenda for each course.

All of these documents are continually re-examined and periodically revised. This process involves continuous discussions among department faculty as well as input from outside the department (such as development in pedagogical research in the field and the external review process).

In 2020-21, the Department of Rhetoric and Language has elected to assess anti-racism in course descriptions. While we are confident that our course descriptions contain no explicitly racist content or policies, we are painfully mindful of our own disciplines' complicity with TKTK

In doing so we align, belatedly, with current scholarship in our field, which holds that "The necessity of acknowledging and resisting the historical forces of racism by teaching about racism and by developing pedagogical approaches that enact and model antiracist engagement remains pressing" (Condon and Young 10).

We also align with the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, whose new president, Rev. Michael J. Garanzini, S.J., has argued that "systemic racism built into all AJCU institutions from the beginning" and that "universities and colleges have been more open to looking at their own histories and accepting their own responsibility" (Frey).

## Anti-racism, Non-racism, and Racism

Department of Rhetoric and Language, like most elements of higher education in the US since the Civil Rights era, has moved to eliminate explicit racism from curricula and pedagogy. This has resulted in a "non-racist" curriculum.

The distinction between non-racism and anti-racism is sometimes understood as a distinction between passive and active stances. For example, a person with a non-racist stance disapproves of racist behaviors, avoids using racial slurs, avoids discriminating against others because of race, etc. A person with an anti-racist stance may share these non-racist views and behaviors, but also takes some rhetorical or physical action (such as fundraising, organizing, advocacy, activism, or protest).

Anti-racism is also understood not just as an active stance, but also as a particular way of thinking about racism. King and Chandler (2016) argue that an anti-racist understands the “*structural* and *institutional* aspects of race and racism.” A non-racist perspective understands racism as based in the ignorance, misunderstanding, or emotional pathology of individual people (racists), while an anti-racist sees the structural racism of institutions and society. A key consequence of these two understanding is that the non-racist can believe themselves innocent of racism, while an anti-racist understands that all members of society are shaped by its structures and institutions, and thus have a responsibility to address the toxic consequences of racism and racial inequality.

As Samira Abdur-Rahman (USF Department of English) and many others have observed, higher education is a deeply ambivalent space for African Americans—a space that promises an avenue for opportunity, but also represents hundreds of years of exclusion and discrimination. In the face of this history (and in the face of our present), a stance of non-racism is insufficient for USF to fulfill its mission.

## Methods

Curriculum and Assessment committee members collaborated on creating an assessment rubric for course documents, based in part of the Peralta Community College District Online Equity Rubric (Kelly) and other materials for supporting antiracist and equity-oriented course design and teaching.

Using our Antiracist Course Description Assessment Rubric (ARCDAR), committee members rated four (4) existing Department Course Descriptions: RHET 103, RHET 110/N, RHET 120, and RHET 130/131 (the courses taken by the vast majority of USF students to fulfill their Core A (“Foundations of Communication”) requirements. See Appendix 1 for ARCDAR.

## Results

The existing official course description for RHET 103 (Public Speaking) is the most antiracist (19%), the most nonracist (40%), and corresponding the least racist (40%) of the four course descriptions. RHET 130, a combined writing and speaking course, had a similar nonracism score (38%), but was lower in antiracism (6%) and higher in racism (56%) than 103.

The courses associated with Core A2 (Written Communication) had lower antiracism scores and correspondingly higher percentages of racism. Of the four courses, RHET 120 had lowest antiracism score (2%) and highest racism score (91%).

A clear trend emerges in the assessment of these course descriptions: a stronger association with Core A1 (Public Speaking) correlates with a less racist course description. Initial analysis indicates that Written Communication courses tend to emphasize various features of academic discourse, whereas Public Speaking courses tend to emphasize communication in a broader range of styles and contexts. Thus, Written Communication courses seem to enforce “standard language ideology” (Lippi-Green) more aggressively. This may account for the difference we see in the ratings.

ARCDAR rating results for each course description are noted below.

Overall Scores by Course

Course	antiracist	nonracist	racist	antiracist (%)	nonracist (%)	racist (%)
103	12	25	26	19%	40%	41%
110	4	11	48	6%	17%	76%
120	1	5	58	2%	8%	91%
130	4	24	36	6%	38%	56%
COMBINED	21	65	168	8%	25%	67%

## Conclusion

This initial assessment of evidence of antiracism, nonracism, and racism in Department of Rhetoric and Language official course descriptions strongly indicates that there is a pressing need to revise these descriptions (as well as other course documents, including course outcomes, faculty guidelines, syllabi, and assignments).

Watson (2018) observes that “Since standard language ideology works to uphold social and racial hierarchies, it seems essential that all instructors of writing, new and seasoned alike, examine the ways this harmful belief system permeates our field’s teaching practices.” The development of this rubric is a small step toward such an examination.

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## Appendix 1

	Anti-racist	Non-racist	Racist
<b>1. evidence of instruction in relationship of language and power</b>	explicitly centers/examines relationships between language and power	multicultural instruction; respects/includes diverse voices and language styles	codes/disguises racist understandings of language beneath terms such as “formal” “professional” or “academic” (all meaning <i>white</i> ) (Condon & Young 6)
<b>2. respect for students’ right to their own language</b>	supports linguistic justice; encourages pride in/exploration of varieties of English/other languages	does not state or imply that some varieties of English are superior to other (or some languages are superior to others); includes linguistic diversity	states or implies that some varieties of English are superior to other (or come languages are superior to others); adheres to myth of standard American dialect
<b>3. honoring student identities, cultures, knowledge, and experience*</b>	course activities/assignments invite students to connect course content to exploration of their own cultural or linguistic identities or the cultural or linguistic identities of others	course activities/assignments invite students to connect course content to their own lives and/or reflect on course content in relation to a variety of perspectives	no clear/explicit connection between course content/activities/assignments and student’s lives

This rubric is designed to measure anti-racism in officially adopted course descriptions (and may apply to other course documents). In pursuing a systematic investigation of our course documents, the Department of Rhetoric and Language seeks to understand and eliminate harmful biases and obstacles to equity in our curriculum and pedagogy.

Continued on the following page.

	Anti-racist	Non-racist	Racist
<b>4. evidence of anti-racist pedagogy and materials</b>	actively confronts racism and incorporates racism as an object of study in the course	some multicultural elements/diversity; absence of explicitly racist course policies	policies or content align against linguistic justice or with current or past racist practices
<b>4a. existence and definition of racism</b>	racism is understood as structural & institutional	racism is understood as an irrational and individual belief	existence of racism is not mentioned or is denied
<b>4b. representation of racism in course plans &amp; materials</b>	every text or project has a racial dimension	race is a “unit” (for example, when we study an MLK speech)	no linguistic diversity in texts/authors/topics; no explicit instruction about race and language
<b>4c. racism in human interaction</b>	everyone lives race in a racialized society	non-white people are “raced” (euphemisms= “multicultural,” “diverse,” etc.)	an implicit or explicit policy of “color-blindness”
<b>5. evidence of awareness of potential bias in human interaction*</b>	instructor demonstrates self-reflection; course materials/activities encourage ongoing learning about human biases	human biases are acknowledged; course includes information about mitigating, addressing, or handling bias	no acknowledgement of human bias or explicit denial of human bias

\* Rows 3 and 5 are adopted from the Peralta Community College District Online Equity Rubric. See companion doc “Assessing Anti-Racism in Course Descriptions” for other sources.