The purpose of this seminar is to study the ways people use and interact with writing. We will spend the first semester investigating the relationship between reading and writing as subjects of school instruction and as activities that people do in their everyday lives in settings outside of school. Through our readings and discussions we will try to answer: What does it mean to be literate in America? Who decides? What do definitions of literacy suggest about the values of our culture? What alternative means do people take to pursue literacy on their own terms? We will examine how the history and politics of public schooling have fostered the myth of a free society where the opportunity to succeed is equally available to all. We will then turn to community studies, which explore non-academic venues where people practice literacy, such as community centers, libraries, churches, kitchens, living rooms, and prisons; and the purposes people have for becoming more literate and for using their literacy to enact social change. We will also consider examples of the kinds of writing produced by community organizations and agencies and the goals of such texts.

Throughout the course, we will interrogate our own practices as schooled individuals. The major project for the spring semester will be a literacy autobiography in which we “read” our own literacies as subjects for critical analysis. The critical and ethnographic studies we read will prepare us to propose the mini community studies that we will conduct during the fall semester. Our overarching goal will be to better understand how and why people use writing when they choose it.