

# Welcome to the Conversation!

## An Introduction to Fundamentals of Communication

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Imagine that a friend you made at your after-school job stopped by to touch base and invited you to join her at a gathering being held at a nearby meeting center. “You’ll love it. There are some great people you can meet there and you’ll likely get a chance to be a part of some exciting new local projects. Who knows, maybe you’ll even get a job out of it,” she says. While you don’t know quite what to make of this invitation, you trust your friend and decide to go. Upon arriving at the gathering you look across a large meeting room and discover the individuals in attendance represent a wide range of types of people, most of them talking intensely in small groups. You turn to ask your friend what’s going on but she has left you on your own and so you have to cope by yourself. A nearby group seems to be talking with a great deal of animation so you drift over to them and start to join in. Several people your own age appear to be trying to figure out some sort of problem but it’s not clear what the problem is or why an older member of the group keeps asking questions and mentioning what seem to you to be random facts. Two of the members of the group are disagreeing over the best solution to the problem. They seem quite friendly so you aren’t sure why they are arguing. What would you do in a situation like this?

In some ways arriving at college, especially a liberal arts college like Monmouth, is a little bit like going to the gathering described above. You know there is potential value to be had by participating in and out of class with others at college but before you can join in, you need to figure out what’s going on. The purpose of this reading is to give you an overview of how the courses you take in your first year can help you join the conversations on which college life is built. (Yes, a good way to think of college is to imagine it as a big, on-going conversation that you are joining.)

**We think it is important for you to understand the liberal arts experience you will have at Monmouth, the goals of this course, and how it all fits together to help you become the successful college graduate you hope to be.**

If you are a first-year student you are likely taking Fundamentals of Communication in your first or second semester here. This class and ENGL 110, Composition and Argument, are part of what we call Foundation Studies, a portion of the general education program at Monmouth. Let's start by talking about the goals of liberal arts colleges like Monmouth College, telling you a bit about how Monmouth's "gen. ed." courses are organized and explaining why the Foundation Studies classes are among the first and most important courses you take in college.

The term "liberal arts college" is a common one. Many small colleges, including our sister schools in the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM), consider themselves to be liberal arts schools. But the term can be confusing. The idea of studying a set of "liberal arts" originated in the educational systems of classical Greece over 2000 years ago (West). In this context "liberal" does not have a meaning connected to politics (as in liberal vs conservative). And "arts" does not refer only to the study of music, theatre, painting or other artistic pursuits. The root of the word "liberal" as used by liberal arts colleges comes from the Latin, *liber*, meaning free. "Arts" refers to an entire range of traditional disciplines<sup>1</sup> that require knowledge and skill for mastery, including sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, kinesiology), social sciences (psychology, sociology, political science, economics), and the arts/humanities (English, Classics, foreign languages and literature, history, philosophy, religion, art, music, theatre, Communication Studies).<sup>2</sup> President Wyatt likes to refer to this as "the liberating arts," a way of reminding us that the real meaning of the term liberal arts is in reference to the sorts of study suitable for free people who seek to be capable of participating in civic life.

In this day and age college is frequently thought of as simply a form of career preparation, an elaborate (and expensive) job training system. At Monmouth we take a different view. The founders of Monmouth College were no doubt influenced by the particularly American view of Higher Education we now call the liberal arts. "The Yale Report of 1828" captures this idea in saying, "Our object is not to teach what is peculiar to any one of the professions, but to lay the foundation which is common to them all." (Jacob) The liberal arts disciplines themselves are sometimes inaccurately described as less worthy because it isn't always clear what job you will get by studying them. CNN's Fareed Zakaria makes the opposing case well in his recent book, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. In a world where people change jobs frequently and often move into entire new careers during their lives, an education that consists of teaching students the skills appropriate for a starting job is likely to become quickly outdated, well before the student loans are paid (Zakaria). While Monmouth does a good job of preparing students for careers in fields related to their majors and helps you get ready for that first job, the totality

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<sup>1</sup> The original seven liberal arts come from the classical Greek period of Plato and Aristotle: the three arts of the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the four sciences of the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music).

<sup>2</sup> Pre-professional programs such as Accounting, Business, or Education have not been thought of as traditional liberal arts disciplines, although these majors are found at many liberal arts college like Monmouth.

of a Monmouth education is pointed toward more enduring kinds of knowledge. Monmouth students develop knowledge that will continue to be valuable long into the future regardless of your original career choice.

**We seek to provide a traditional liberal arts experience that gives students the abilities needed to engage in life-long learning – to think critically, acquire information, work with others effectively, solve problems, make ethical personal and professional decisions, communicate effectively and contribute to one’s community.** The journey toward those goals begins in the courses of the first-year experience: ILA, ENGL 110 and COMM 101.

## Joining the Conversation

Starting your career at Monmouth College involves a host of significant life experiences. You are meeting new people, engaging in more independent living, participating in wide range of social and co-curricular activities and, most importantly, beginning to pursue a college-level academic program that includes a major and a range of required general education courses designed to broaden your knowledge. It’s easy to think of academics as a set of requirements to meet, boxes to check, hoops to jump through. And at the beginning, it’s hard to see that the Monmouth experience is more than a set of disconnected courses to “get out of the way.” But it is much more than that. In the paragraphs below we will present you with the **college’s vision of how our curriculum ties together to develop the kind of enduring knowledge that we expect will serve you well in life ahead -- in your personal life, your professional life and your life as a member of the communities you live in.**

College is different from high school. You’ve likely already noticed that or soon will. The courses are more challenging, the learning involves greater depth and higher levels of mastery and you are more responsible for figuring things out on your own – just like the world you will live in after graduation. It is not unusual for first-year students to find the expectations of college courses and teachers mysterious. Questions may arise for you: “What is the point this assignment?” “Why is work that got me an A in high school only getting a C (or worse) here?” “Why can’t I seem to understand what the professor wants?” Not only have you moved to a new school, but the kind of learning you are confronting is different as well. It may help to think of **coming to a liberal arts college as really a matter of joining a conversation, one that, while possibly unfamiliar to you, has been going on for some long time before you arrived.**

Quite literally, for several thousand years thoughtful people in educational settings have been thinking about (and talking about, writing about, problem-solving about) many of the issues you will encounter at Monmouth College. For example, nearly 2500 years ago the ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote *The Symposium*, which is a dialogue about the nature of love. Conversations about love have gone on ever since with contributions by the authors of the Bible and many philosophers, poets, playwrights, psychologists and others including figures like St. Augustine, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Judy Bloom, Masters and Johnson, and countless Hollywood directors. Perhaps you as well will join this conversation about the nature of love while at Monmouth in a literature class or a Psych class or maybe in an INTG course. Almost certainly you will discuss romance and relationships with your fellow students outside of class. In a sense, you are joining a conversation not only with the people you are with face to face but with Plato (and the others) as well.

It may seem strange to think that you are “having a conversation” with the authors you read at college but that is, in fact, very much what we think a good liberal arts experience should be. What’s most important about the words and ideas you read is not just remembering them; rather, it’s the response you have to what you are reading – just like in a good conversation. Most of the topics of academic discussion at liberal arts colleges involve discussions that have been going on for a long time. Are you studying calculus? That conversation began with Isaac Newton in the 17<sup>th</sup> century but Newton was joining a conversation about mathematics that depended on previous contributions from the Muslim world. The conversation about what constitutes the best form of government (a topic very current during the coming presidential campaign) has roots in Plato’s *Republic* and the writings of Confucius, the *Magna Carta*, and early Americans like Roger Williams, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. But it is also informed for those whose conversational background includes discussion of the African concept of *Ubuntu*. In sum, nearly everything you will be asked to discuss and write about in college involves joining a conversation that has preceded you and will continue here at Monmouth and in your personal life long after you graduate. We hope you will come to experience the ideas encountered at Monmouth (whether in lectures, discussions or readings) as conversations you are a participant in now and throughout your life after college.

Much of what we ask students to do in Monmouth courses involves effectively communicating, formally in written assignments and oral presentations, less formally in class discussions, group projects or with your professors and classmates outside of class. These communication experiences are representations of **your contribution** to the conversation of the liberal arts and your major discipline. It’s an academic conversation that has been going on since well before you arrived in Monmouth, for many, many years.

## Steps for Joining the Conversation

As you seek to understand what this liberal arts college experience is all about, you may find that some of the same steps you would use in joining any on-going conversation will help you navigate the Monmouth College curriculum.

Graff, Birkenstein and Durst introduced this idea of college as joining a conversation in their wonderful writing textbook, *They Say, I Say* (2006). If you are going to be comfortable and successful in participating in the conversation, there are some steps you should take to get to know what's happening in the conversations of academic life, who the participants are and what they are trying to accomplish. This Fundamentals of Communication course, along with ILA and ENGL 110, will help you take those steps.

So let's go back to that strange reception described at the beginning of this reading. What would you do to get into the conversation with that group of strangers you joined? You could simply wait quietly and see if things become clearer but that will make it a slow process for getting involved with the group and making the connections your friend described. A better course of action may be to find some individuals (a teacher, an advisor, an experienced friend) who can answer your questions and help you get into the flow of things. Perhaps you have had an experience like this of trying to join a group having an on-going conversation about a topic you don't know much about. Maybe it was about a sport you don't follow, a video game you haven't played or a Netflix series you haven't seen. Let's consider what you will need to know if you are going to contribute to the group and build some connections with these people – much like you will want to do at college. To join in you'll have to understand the context, the people involved in the conversation, and your role in the conversation.

**First**, you'll need to understand the **CONTEXT** (background) of the discussion so you will have some common ground with the others. What is the background information others in the group have about the topic and what kinds of things have members of the group been saying? True story, last summer I was in a conversation like this with a faculty colleague and several students who were discussing the Netflix series *Daredevil*, a series I hadn't yet seen. The participants were making references to scenes I couldn't really envision and plot twists I didn't get. Two of them were in disagreement about the quality of the show and its representation of the original comic version. Two kinds of information usually are needed for getting up to speed on the background of a conversation: **1) discovering what came before you arrived; and 2) learning the vocabulary and concepts the participants in the discussion use**. In the discussion of *Daredevil*, what came before this conversation was viewing the series itself, something the others had done but I hadn't. However, I did have in common with my friends some familiarity with other Marvel Comics stories that have been turned into

movies and television series. My friends in this conversation were good enough to fill me in on the plot details when I asked so, while I didn't have all the vocabulary of those who had seen the series (I didn't know the names of the characters or the locale of the action), I was familiar with the key concept that my friends were discussing -- whether or not the series was a good and accurate representation of the original version of the title character's story. That led me to realize that, if I were to get involved in this conversation, I would need to ask additional questions to find out what my friends thought were the good features of the graphic version of the *Daredevil* story and how they did or did not show up in the Netflix version. I asked those kinds of questions, listened a lot, and ended up deciding that I wanted to watch the series. In fact, I think I enjoyed the series much more because of what I learned in this conversation.

What does all this have to do with "joining the conversation that is college?" The courses you take in general education requirements at Monmouth and the introductory courses in your major and minor are like my conversation about *Daredevil*. They are about learning the *context* of an academic subject whether the purpose of the class is to broaden your knowledge of the world, as in general education, or to begin the process of developing in-depth knowledge, as in a major or minor. You need to discover what has come before (background information), learn the vocabulary (the terms and concepts that experts use in discussing the subject) and find a role (determine how and why you are going to use this knowledge and how you can participate in the class/subject now and in the future.

The Foundation Course requirements of COMM 101 and ENGL 110 (along with ILA) provide you with a way to discover the nature of college courses generally and, especially, how students and faculty have been engaging in college-level communication (reading, speaking and writing) over the years. **COMM 101 and ENGL 110 both emphasize developing and supporting a thesis and main-points, choosing the appropriate arguments and information to use, and expressing your ideas in an organized, logical and fluent manner.** These skills form a foundation (and some of the context) for the kinds of communication that occur in most of the rest of your college courses but they also form the basis for effective communication after college in your professional life and as a member of the communities you will be a part of. The Foundation courses also provide you with a vocabulary for good communication that you will use throughout college. In fact, we have included some of that vocabulary, shared by COMM 101 and ENGL 110, at the end of this essay.

**Second**, in order to join "the conversation" you will need to know who the other participants are [**Understanding OTHERS** who are different from you]. At the reception (mentioned in the beginning of this reading) where the group seems to be trying to solve a problem you will be able to understand and join the conversation more easily if you know a bit about the people in the conversation. What are their background experiences

and knowledge? How do they think about the topic (as a scientist, an artist, an historian, a local leader)? Do they have a particular role in the conversation or a point of view on the topic discussed? What do they want to get out of the conversation? Or contribute? You will find it easier to join the conversation at the reception if you can figure out the answers to some of these questions. In my conversation about *Daredevil*, I had the advantage of already knowing the participants. One of them was a faculty friend who has been a long-time fan of “graphic novels;” he is a media professional and the teacher of a course on superheroes. The other participants included a couple of senior Communication majors who I knew were thoughtful, good critics and who loved film and video. That awareness of who the participants were made it easy for me to know what questions to ask to learn more about the series and to have confidence that I could trust the opinions these friends offered.

**Third**, you will need to determine **what ROLE you will take when you participate in the conversation**. Determining your role, in this case, means deciding for yourself what purpose you have in joining the conversation, what kind of contributions you will make (if any) and how you want to function in relation to the other participants (friend? supporter? critic? advocate? companion?). Are you joining in to learn more about the topic under consideration, like I was in discussing *Daredevil*? Do you have knowledge to share or an interest in collaborating with the others to come to a conclusion? Do you have a point of view that you want to convince others is the right way to think about the topic? Are you ready to be an active speaker or do you want to listen and wait until you know what role you want to play?

You have likely heard that Monmouth College intends for students to become leaders and engaged members of their communities. That goal is one that goes back to the founding of this college and has been a part of the reason for studying at liberal arts colleges throughout the years. But engaging and leading in your community involves making decisions as to your role, how you will role the use of your knowledge and talents in your life after college. Will it be through volunteer work or social activism or holding political office or affecting change through religious and educational organizations? Or a combination of several of these? Will you work as a leader, a resource person or a giver of time and money? Just as you play a role (or perhaps multiple roles) in your family and in your classes and out-of-class activities, we imagine you will play an important role in life after college. Helping you to have options for how to role your participation with community (see the definitions at the end of this essay) begins in COMM 101 with our course role on civic engagement and continues through the Monmouth curriculum culminating with the INTG senior year requirement of a citizenship class.

In terms of your role for participating in the conversation that is COMM 101, we encourage you to think of this class not only as one that develops oral communication and listening skills that you will use in most college courses and your career. Importantly Fundamentals of Communication is also as a beginning step in becoming an effective communicator and

taking on the role of one who will be a contributor to your community – and a civically engaged member of your society.

When you join the conversation that is Monmouth College, it is important to remember that you need to get to know the participants: your professors with their personal and professional backgrounds and expectations and your classmates with their own backgrounds and goals. At a place like Monmouth that is much easier to do than at a huge university. While it may not be obvious in many cases, a good deal of general education at Monmouth is about coming to understand other participants in the conversation and how those others may be different from you in ways you may not have expected. In the Foundation courses, but especially in COMM 101, learning to know the audience you are communicating with is an important goal of the class. When you join the conversation – at that reception your summer friend took you to, as a student at Monmouth College, or as a contributing member of your community – the skills and knowledge you develop in the Foundation courses should provide a basis for you to be able to better contribute to the conversations you will be a part of in the future. These conversations will certainly include later college courses but will also be essential in having a successful career (or multiple careers), having a rich personal life outside of work, and being a contributing member of your communities.

## **Civic Engagement as a Role for your Liberal Arts Education**

Earlier in this essay I mentioned that it has become common to think of a college education as almost exclusively a form of job training or career preparation. However, that view of college is relatively recent. Going back to the founding days of our American republic, education, especially higher education, was understood to be essential in maintaining a democracy. Education was required for the nation to have leaders and education was vital to insuring that voters could make wise decisions. As Thomas Jefferson noted, “It is safer to have the whole people respectably enlightened than a few in a high state of science and the many in ignorance.” (The National Park Service) In the 1850s Monmouth College itself was founded in order to provide educated citizens and clergy to serve as leaders for the (then) western frontier. (Urban). We remain committed to a vision of college as a place where students not only prepare for careers but also as a place where the educational experience prepares students to live richer personal lives that include engagement with the larger communities they will live in. We expect Monmouth graduates to be capable of service to their local community, state, and nation and even beyond the borders of our country to the wider and ever more interconnected world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Understood this way, civic engagement (that is, “working to make a difference in the life of our communities”) is a focal point for the liberal arts curriculum we offer through the four years you spend at Monmouth. Our curriculum begins that process with the courses students take in the freshman year and culminates with the Citizenship requirement seniors complete in their final

year at Monmouth. Let's look at how civic engagement focuses and ties together the curriculum of Monmouth College.

**"The First Year Experience"** includes the courses that most students take in their first-year at Monmouth: COMM 101 - Fundamentals of Communication, ENGL 110 – Composition and Argument, and INTG 101 – Introduction to the Liberal Arts. These courses are directed toward helping you get to know the context for the conversations of college. All three of these courses are designed to allow you to develop the communication skills that are necessary to be successful in the rest of your college courses both in your major and in the other general education courses you will take. Some of the tools needed art of the context for participating in the conversation (that is, part of the context) at college are the skills of critical reading at the college level, cogent writing, formal oral communication, and effective speaking to and discussing with others. Additionally the First Year Experience classes will provide you with skills and experience in how to acquire and evaluate knowledge on a wide range of topics and issues that characterize how educated people discuss and contribute to the wider society we live in and will give you experience in working with groups of other students to hone your abilities to collaborate effectively. These communication, research and collaboration skills are also ones that are essential to successful engagement with and leadership in your communities after college.

**"The Second Year"** is a time when students become significantly involved with their majors but also continue to expand their liberal arts experience through INTG 200 – Global Perspectives classes. Often second year students will find themselves taking general education courses in foreign language, the arts and the sciences. While these courses serve to help broaden the knowledge base of Monmouth students and contribute to understanding the context of our world, these courses play a particularly important role in helping you come to understand others who are different from you in their experiences, their values, their cultures or their ways of thinking. Global Perspectives classes and foreign language classes quite directly address the differences that exist between people who speak different languages and live in different societies around the world. Global Perspectives classes provide some of the tools for understanding enough about others unlike ourselves that we can communicate and collaborate with them in our modern global community. Study of the arts and sciences also provide a broadening knowledge of the world around us and the context of the educational conversation. What is often not seen is that these courses also provide insights into "the mind of the other," letting students experience how scientists and artists see the world in ways we may not have previously understood.

**"The Third Year"** is a time when students begin to develop more advanced knowledge in their majors and take INTG 300 – Reflections. In the first two years, general education at Monmouth seeks to engage students in the conversation that is college by emphasizing a broader understanding of the context of knowledge and greater insight into the nature of the others we may meet and converse with. In the third year the

Reflections course asks students to turn inward, to reflect on what place you see for yourself as you move forward to complete college and become an autonomous member of society. As students consider their personal goals, values, needs and life-interests, the third year becomes a time to choose a role for how you will participate in the conversations that go on after college. How will you define yourself and your values throughout your career? What role will you take in serving your community, nation and world? How will you construct a meaningful personal life?

**“The Fourth Year”** is a time when Monmouth students look beyond their years here, search for jobs or graduate schools, and consider how to structure an independent life as an adult. INTG 400 – Citizenship provides ways for students to explore the role they will choose for engaging the wider community as a citizen. At this point we hope that students come to realize that the range of courses and experiences they have had at Monmouth provides a solid base of skills and knowledge allowing engagement with the wider world as a contributing citizen as well as a career professional with a meaningful personal life.

## **How Does COMM 101 Help You Start the Conversation that Forms a Liberal Arts Education?**

While general education at Monmouth culminates with the Citizenship course in your senior year, it begins here in Fundamentals of Communication as well as in ENGL 110 and ILA. Recently the faculty who teach COMM 101 made the decision to give this course a role on civic engagement. While the course maintains its emphasis on effective oral communication through formal and informal speaking, we want this course to encourage students to understand the communication skills they learn in the first year as ways to become engaged with the communities (see the definitions at the end of this essay) we belong to. We see COMM 101 as a first step in a process that leads Monmouth students toward the college’s expectation for them to become contributing citizens of their classes, campus, local community, state, nation, and the world beyond.

In beginning that process we set the context for how effective communication is a requirement for a functioning democracy like ours. Among the first readings in this course is a chapter that illustrates the role speaking (rhetoric) played at the very beginning of democracy in ancient Greece. For the people to govern themselves in a democracy, good communication skills are essential for citizens. Having a voice in the operation of your local, state or national government involves more than just voting. Citizens need to be able to understand the issues that affect their lives by acquiring reliable information (the **vocabulary** of civic engagement) so that they can form opinions and develop positions on what should and should not be done by government and how community

life can be improved by collaborative projects outside of government activity. While the positions we come to endorse may help us decide which candidates to vote for, what side to take on tax votes, or what volunteer activities to support, at Monmouth we hope our students will also take on roles of influence and leadership when their interests and abilities permit (choosing a **role** for participation). Democracy depends on people who not only vote knowledgeably but who can argue for what will be effective in furthering the public good. And that requires articulate speaking and writing – the central goal of COMM 101. Success in the workplace requires similar skill.

To be a truly effective, civically engaged citizen requires more than understanding issues and becoming articulate in advocating your positions. Good citizens work to **understand the views of others** who participate in the conversations about civic life - even those with whom we disagree. It is hard to influence someone we don't know or understand and so in COMM 101 we emphasize understanding those you speak to through **audience analysis and interpersonal sensitivity**. Perhaps most importantly, if we are to argue for the public good we must understand the views and experiences of our fellow community members in order to know just what the "public good"<sup>3</sup> is and not simply to argue for our own selfish interests because we haven't come to understand those whose lives are substantially different from our own.

With this background I hope you are beginning to see that COMM 101 (along with English 110 and ILA) is designed to help you gain the skills that will allow you to become a successful participant in the on-going conversation that is college. The **specific skills emphasized in COMM 101** are detailed in the course goals that appear at the end of this essay. We believe that these skills are not only vital to your development as a college student engaged in the conversation of your major and of the liberal arts more generally - these skills are also valuable to your career success and are at the heart of your ability to become an engaged member of the communities you will inhabit.

In COMM 101 we address the need to **understand the context** of issues important to you and your communities in several ways. You will be asked to acquire information (research) on a topic of significance you select as your role for the semester using library and other resources (getting beyond only using Google). We will expect you to hone your skills for determining what information is reliable, fair and comprehensive before you use it in the presentations you make. At times you may be asked to grapple with multiple points of view on the research topic you selected, learning to accurately understand and fairly describe views that may be different from your own. Learning to acquire background/context when dealing with issues at a liberal arts college should help you avoid

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<sup>3</sup> "The public good" refers to the best interests of the community and the people in general. Utilitarian philosophers like John Stuart Mill explained this as creating the greatest benefit for the greatest possible number of people. Spock in *The Wrath of Khan* observed that the needs of the one must yield to the needs of the many.

the “silo problem.”<sup>4</sup> You may also find that understanding complex issues from multiple points of view can be challenging and uncomfortable at times but it can open new doors and help you discover new ways of understanding your world that make you both smarter and more broadly informed. The research skills you learn in COMM 101 should be of value to you in acquiring information and learning the context of topics in other general education courses at Monmouth, IF you make the effort to continue using them in understanding subjects outside your major area of expertise.

We deal with knowing the “other” (participants in college and civic conversation) during COMM 101 in several ways. The research process should allow you to recognize the variety of viewpoints others hold that typically exist for any serious topic. We also will ask you to engage in audience analysis as you prepare the speeches that form major assignments in the class so that you can develop your messages in ways that will connect with the listeners, even those who may hold views different from your own. Much of coming to know others will happen through class activities and collaborations as you interact with your classmates and your instructor, some of whom are likely to have views and experiences surprisingly different from your own.

To help you choose a role for how you will participate in the college conversation and in your communities after college, we have created a variety of kinds of assignments that parallel forms of effective communication you will encounter in other classes and in life after college. We will ask you to discover and express claims you wish to make to others through constructing thesis statements and supporting points. We will ask you to speak to others sharing personal experiences, providing information on your research topic and persuading your classmates or others of a position you believe they should adopt. [The standard writing assignments in English 110, the rhetorical analysis, the evaluative essay, the position argument, the proposal and the sourced essay, represent similar effective communication forms that allow you ways to choose a role for your participation in conversations yet to come.]

The final skill needed for you to be an effective and valued participant in the conversations that are college and civic (and professional) life after college is civility. Civility in its simplest sense means interacting with others in ways that are polite, respectful and productive. It involves avoiding insults and derogatory language, making sure that others have their views fairly represented and seeking the truth rather than manipulatively getting one’s own way. Civility as we define it at Monmouth is quite different from the sort of communication that occurs on political and social topics in political campaigns and in the media these days. Name calling, distorting your opponent’s views, trying to make it

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<sup>4</sup> The “silo problem” refers to the tendency many people have to accept only information from sources that simply reinforce their previously held views – that is staying with a narrow silo of comfortable reassuring opinion. For example, conservatives tend to watch Fox News but not MSNBC. Liberals tend to do the reverse. Both groups can be surprisingly unaware to the actual views of those with whom they disagree.

appear those with whom you disagree are evil, irrational or stupid, unfortunately, are common forms of incivility that we see regularly these days as the business of democracy is conducted. We hope you will stand against such behavior. For us, an effective COMM 101 class requires students to engage in communication with each other that is civil and that imposes ethical responsibilities on all members of the class – responsibilities that we believe should extend well beyond this class and ultimately into your professional and civic life after college.

You will likely find specific comments about civil conduct for class in your instructor’s syllabus but there are four elements of civility that underlie COMM 101 and the Monmouth College curriculum generally. 1) At Monmouth we treat each other with respect and care when we interact in class and beyond. 2) We recognize that serious academic discussion will likely involve controversy at times and civility requires we accept the fact that none of us has the right to silence dissenting views or take offense that others are unlike ourselves. 3) In the academic conversation, everyone has a responsibility to advance the conversation in some way, to have and support reasonable and thoughtful points. 4) We respect the nature of the conversation and engage the subjects we discuss and our fellow participants with fairness and honesty.

I hope the observations in this essay will help you make sense of the educational experience at Monmouth College, our general education requirements and COMM 101.

## **Welcome to the college, the course and the conversation!**

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### **Key Terms and Concepts:**

Assertion	Citizenship Requirement	Civility
Civic Engagement	Community	Context
“The Conversation”	Foundation Studies	Global Perspectives
Liberal Arts	Plato	Quadrivium
Reflections Requirement	Rhetoric	Role
Support Material	Thesis	Trivium
Understanding Others	Vocabulary	

## Discussion Questions

1. What did you think studying the “Liberal Arts” meant before you arrived at Monmouth? Has this essay changed or clarified your views?
2. Do you agree with Fareed Zakariah’s conclusion about the value of a liberal arts education?
3. The author suggests that college is like joining a conversation. What do you think that means? How is that different from your education before coming to college?
4. Can you think of some subjects that have come up so far this semester in classes you are taking that people have been discussing in colleges for many, many years and that will continue to be topics of conversation in the future? What are those topics and why do you think they remain important?
5. What does the term “context” mean as the author uses it? (Background? Vocabulary?) At Monmouth what are some good ways you can learn the context of material included in classes you are taking?
6. What does the term “community mean in COMM 101?
7. What is your usual “role” in class discussions and in social groups you belong to? Is that something you may want to change in college? Can you imagine yourself in a role serving your communities? How so?
8. Can you think of some ways you have already been “civically engaged” in your home community (or other community)?
9. Do you have questions about the General Education requirements at Monmouth?
10. Do you have questions about the goals of COMM 101?

## Works Cited

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## *Appendix – COMM 101, Fundamentals of Communication, Course Goals*

### **By the end of the course, students should be able to:**

- Reveal understanding of the communication field by way of:
  - Articulating the role communication plays in democracies and in the lives of engaged citizens
  - Understanding and using disciplinary vocabulary
- Perform effective citizenship by way of:
  - employing civil discourse
  - collaborating
  - respecting others
  - participating in deliberations or dialogues
  - honoring diverse viewpoints
  - providing and receiving constructive feedback
  - expressing knowledge about local, regional, national, or global issues
  - confidently sharing their own informed positions about a significant social issue with an audience
- Consume messages effectively by way of:
  - receiving messages with an open mind
  - critically evaluating information from mediated and non-mediated sources
- Craft and present effective oral messages by way of:
  - developing strong, ethical arguments
  - adapting content and delivery of messages to people, including those unlike yourselves, who comprise the public within the classroom space
  - using authoritative evidence
  - employing good speech construction practices as revealed by topic selection, development of thesis, outlining and drafting, source citation, use of visual aids, rehearsing, etc.
- Consider how the knowledge and skills gained in the course will transfer to other contexts and other courses – particularly the Global Perspectives, Reflections, and Citizenship courses, ENG110, and courses demanding presentations and small group collaboration.

## *Appendix – Definitions*

**Community** - In COMM 101 we use the term “community” broadly to include all of those connections we have with groups of others who we influence and who are influenced by us. Community can refer to groups as small as a friendship circle or the neighborhood or town we live in. But community also means larger groups of associated people including our state and our nation and even the “global community” that involves us with others beyond the borders of our nation.

**Context** – As used in this reading, “context” refers to the background of topics and issues that people communicate about. In particular, it involves what has been talked about previously concerning any specific issue. Context can include facts already known, controversies that relate to a topic, questions people wish to have answered, the specialized knowledge and skills required to understand old and new information, what experts past and present have said about the issue, and more.

**Civic Engagement** - Civic Engagement is “... working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (Ehrlich vi)

**Civility** – A characteristic of communication that involves being polite and respectful of others and listening to understand differences while speaking honestly of one’s own views and sharing one’s own experiences even in the face of substantial disagreement.

**Deliberation** – Working collaboratively with others in order to carefully make good decisions through the use of civic skills including thoughtful acquisition of information, critical listening, sharing of values and experiences, and cooperative argumentation and planning.

**Deliberative Democracy** – The use of deliberation by democratic organizations and governments in order to make hard choices among competing plans and proposals.

**Role** – As used in this reading, “role” refers to the choices and individual makes concerning how he or she will interact with others - what function does the person play for those with whom he or she communicates, what goal does the person have and what manner of communicating does the person choose in any particular “conversation.”

**Understanding Others** – As used in this reading, “understanding others” means coming to understand, at least partially, the way other people with backgrounds and experiences different than your own think about topics and issues under discussion. It also involves the ability to empathize with others to recognize something of why they see the world the way they do as well as how they think. It involves acceptance of the reality that everyone is NOT fundamentally the same.

## *Appendix – Shared Vocabulary for COMM 101 and ENGL 110*

### ARGUMENTATION

**Critical Reading:** the practice of careful, analytical reading whereby a reader strives to understand what a text means and how it operates. In other words, reading slowly and purposefully, using active reading techniques to understand the meaning of a text.

**Annotation:** a central part of close reading whereby a reader engages with a text by taking notes in the margins, underlining or highlighting key important words, sentences, or passages, or summarizing sections.

**Thesis:** an arguable assertion that is the central idea of an essay and which often ends with a because-clause, an assertion which also needs to be supported/demonstrated. In other words, a statement that previews the position of your paper, that others may dispute, and that you will defend with support.

**Assertion:** a declaration or claim that requires support in order to be convincing.

**Evidence:** material used to support claims or assertions, often in the form of facts, statistics, examples, testimony/expert opinions, etc.

**Support:** the combination of evidence and explanation used to strengthen an assertion.

## CRITICAL THINKING

**Analysis:** A form of critical thinking whereby an object (text, problem, or phenomenon, etc.) is broken into its constituent parts and the relationships among the parts are explained.

**Synthesis:** A form of critical thinking in which parts of an object that may have been analyzed are put back together with other materials to create something new.

**Evaluation:** A form of critical thinking in which an object (text, problem, phenomenon, etc.) is argued to have merit or not based on a set of reasonable standards, called criteria.

## THE WRITING PROCESS

**Prewriting:** Also known as invention, this preliminary step for writing an essay is comprised of strategies such as brainstorming, mapping, listing, clustering, researching, annotating target texts, free writing, etc. In this step, students generate ideas in free form, learn more about their topics, think about issues in advance of drafting, and generate preliminary theses. Spending time thinking about their topics in advance of writing will often prevent writer's block and lead to well-developed essays. *Brainstorm your paper:* read the prompt; list multiple ideas; collect notes and research; begin thinking about a thesis.

**Planning:** Also known as organizing, this step includes strategies such as reviewing the assignment, forming a preliminary thesis, sketching a plan, and outlining. In this step, students take the ideas that they have generated and begin to shape them to address the goals of the writing assignment. Forming a tentative thesis is essential to successful planning because the thesis articulates their argument in miniature. *Organize your paper:* review the assignment, narrow your topic, gather evidence or support, clarify your thesis, and outline your paper.

**Drafting:** For many students, drafting is the one-step process for writing an essay. They think that writing an essay in one sitting will lead to an effective essay. Drafting is essentially translating ideas into written, essay form. Effective drafting usually comes only after students have spent time pre-writing and planning. *Write your paper:* put your outline into sentences and paragraphs, expand your ideas and support, and clarify your thesis and assertions.

**Revising:** Drafting and revising go hand-in-hand. After students produce a draft for a formal essay, they will need to revise the draft. Revising is re-seeing their work with fresh eyes to understand its strengths and weaknesses. Revision is concerned with substantive issues (thesis, development, organization, etc.) and not sentence-level issues (see editing below). Strategies for effective revision include: critical re-reading of the draft and annotating the draft by the writer; peer review by a classmate using a peer response sheet; conferencing on the draft with the professor; and visiting the writing center for feedback. After students receive feedback, they return to the drafting step to produce another version of their draft and should then go through revision again. *Re-read your paper:* look for strengths and weaknesses in the content, get feedback from others, and make sure your evidence effectively supports your thesis.

**Editing:** Sometimes students equate editing with revising; however, revision is concerned with substantive/content/organizational issues while editing relates to sentence-level and formatting issues—mechanics, grammar, spelling, style, documentation, and document design. Proofreading is the primary strategy we teach here. We encourage students to edit near the end of creating their essays because they sometimes obsess over these details at the expense of content. *Polish your paper:* look for errors in grammar, mechanics, syntax, verb tense, spelling, style, formatting, and documentation.

*Please note: this process is recursive. For example, students may reach the drafting stage and decide they do not have enough information to develop an argument, so they return to the pre-writing stage to gather more evidence or ideas. Students may also revise a draft and decide they need to re-organize the paper and go back to the planning stage to create a formal outline.*