



University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Department of English

Writing Inquiry Group for “ENGL 180 - Introduction to Literature”

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The following course description and sample activities are the work of a Writing Inquiry Group working under the auspices of the Faculty Leadership in Writing Initiative. We were charged with revising the curriculum for ENGL180 (Introduction to Literature), a task which entailed formulating coherent course aims and developing writing activities appropriate to achieving those aims. Our work was guided by our commitment to both the standards of the field of literary criticism and to the needs of students for whom this might be the sole literature course in their university career.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course encourages students to become life-long, ardent readers of literature by introducing them to the aesthetic, cultural, personal, and historical value of literary texts. It addresses the questions of why we read, what we read, and how we read. The course will examine how and why certain texts are given the designation "literature," consider how literature functions, and explore literature's place in society. By taking this class, students will grow more aware of their current reading practices and become increasingly critical, thoughtful, and engaged readers.

COURSE AIM #1: *To Understand How Literature Functions*

- **Form:** Students should be given vocabulary for formal and rhetorical analysis, and have such analyses modeled in class.
- **Genre:** Students should understand literary texts as constructed predominantly within the conventions of evolving genres, such as today's novel, poem, and play, as well as the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction.
- **Representation:** Students should consider how form and genre work together to enable and constrain the representation of the world outside the text.

COURSE AIM #2: *To Understand How Literature is Used*

- **Canons and Literary History:** Students should be encouraged to consider how literature functions as a social institution, a provisional collection of currently privileged texts that have helped various readers understand, appreciate, question, organize, and engage their world, as well as the process by which canons evolve through time and the reasons some texts endure and others don't.
- **Material Culture:** Students should become aware of the processes by which texts are produced, published, disseminated, read, critiqued, canonized, archived, anthologized, taught, and forgotten.
- **Context:** Students should, at an appropriate level, apply various critical lenses (biographical, historicist, materialist, psychological, feminist, linguistic, etc.) that place the text back into its world in various ways and seek to understand that world through it.

WRITING

Students must complete at least ten pages of formal graded writing in this course, including at least one close reading exercise and one argumentative paper. The course should also include additional informal writing assignments, such as journals, response papers, in-class writing, discussion boards/posting, blogs, etc. in order to give students multiple opportunities to think and write about literature. Neither formal nor informal assignments should pre-suppose any existing competency with the conventions of literary culture or criticism; both should contribute to developing that competency. For each assignment, instructors should take time to frame the goals of the assignment in terms of larger course goals, provide successful examples, and model in class the process by which students should approach the assignment.

Writing Activities for Course Aim #1

Sample Course Units That Analyze How Literature Functions

1. UNDERSTANDING FORM (Poetics)

WEEK ONE

READ: Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz"

TOPIC: meter, rhyme, alliteration, diction

Begin by having students write what they remember of the poem without looking at it. Discuss the details recalled and the interpretations students offer. This often splits between those who see it as a mostly fond childhood memory and those who see it as a painful memory of abuse. Looking at the poem, ask students to defend their interpretations. As appropriate, point out use of alliteration, diction, rhyme (and slant rhyme). To introduce meter, teach a few students to waltz (simple box step) and read the poem aloud while they do it. Alternatively, show a "how to waltz" video from YouTube as class begins. Consider the way Roethke reworks the waltz's 3/4 time in iambic trimeter quatrains. Note the trochaic substitution when the pans fall from the shelf and also the extra stress the line after the missed step.

READ: Bishop, "The Fish"

TOPIC: simile, assonance, tone, symbol, irony

WEEK TWO

READ: Plath, "Metaphors"; Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider"; Yeats, "Second Coming"

TOPIC: metaphor

READ: Keats "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; Auden, "As I Walked Out one Evening"; Fulton, "You Can't Rhumboogie in a Ball and Chain"; Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"; Bishop "One Art"

TOPIC: form (ballad, sestina, villanelle)

Look up definitions for the poetic forms terms before reading the poems.

WEEK THREE

READ: Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"; Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow"; Coleridge, "Kubla Khan"; Hopkins, "Pied Beauty"; Walcott, "Sea Grapes"

TOPIC: image and allusion

TOPIC: Student-led discussion of selected poems from Close Reading assignment

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Close Reading of a Poem

Choose a poem from the list provided. Read the poem carefully, looking up unfamiliar words and references to things you are not familiar with. Use a glossary of poetic terms to help you describe how the poet is expressing ideas, emotions, and images. The poet could have used any words he or she chose but made a deliberate decision to use these – why? To complete this assignment, do the following:

1. Identify at least eight choices the poet made (for example, meter, rhythm, alliteration or assonance, allusions, metaphors, word order inversions, metonyms, etc.).
2. Choose 4 of those and explain the effect of this choice on the poem. In other words, describe how the way the idea was expressed reinforces or links to what was expressed.
3. Write a final paragraph in which you draw some conclusions about the poem.

This assignment should be at least 3 double-spaced pages.

2. UNDERSTANDING GENRE (Digital Prose and Poetry)

TOPICS & READINGS

This activity is from a course whose theme is “sense of place,” but can, of course, be adjusted to fit whatever theme the course is using. By this stage in the class we will have read a selection of poems, fiction, and non-fiction prose from a variety of cultures and historical periods that cultivate, or seek to represent, or can be interpreted as fostering, what we are referring to as a “sense of place.” Writers have recently begun to produce digital forms of the same genres. We will look at the work of one author who is working in this new medium, Joel Weishaus, and examine two of his place-oriented online works.

“The Way North” <<http://web.pdx.edu/~pdx00282/North/Intro.htm>>

“Forest Park: A Journal” <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/weishaus/Forest/Intro/Intro.htm>>

We will also engage with the author via digital media (email, skype, instant messaging, or other) as can be arranged.

QUESTIONS AT ISSUE

Students should be asked to consider the following sorts of questions:

1. In what ways do digital forms of poetry and non-fiction prose seem continuous with the previous traditions of place-oriented prose and poetry?
2. In what ways do they seem disruptive of or challenging to that tradition?
3. Do these digital projects simply reproduce the work in prior genres, or do they present something truly innovative?
4. In what ways is the addition of images, hypertext linkages, and the physical nature of digital interface helpful to or distracting from the reading experience?
5. Are you more or less likely to read literary works produced digitally?
6. Is there any irony or conflict in using cyberspace to represent physical places?
7. In what ways can cyberspace be considered a new kind of “place.”

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Students will write a 2-3 page essay responding to one or more of the previous questions.

OR

Students will write a 2-3 page essay comparing/contrasting the digital works and the experience of reading them to one or two previous works.

3. UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION 1 (Novelistic World-making)

WEEK ONE

READ: *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad (Norton Critical Edition)

TOPIC: narrator, plot vs. story

The goal of the first week is to: 1) clarify the story since the novel is plotted as an extended flashback (constructing a timeline of events as they must have happened in sequential order on the board is very useful) –and– 2) coming to terms with how the deep irony of the narrator, Marlow, impedes some readers' ability to understand the people, places, and situations he describes thus emphasizing how there is no direct access to the story of the novel since there is a narrator/plotter shaping our interaction with it.

WEEK TWO

TOPIC: *Heart of Darkness* as realism

With the story and plot clear, consider the ways in which the novel presents itself as "realist." Make lists of places, people, events, dates, etc. that are mentioned in the novel. Display a map of the world and a chronology of the turn of the century Belgian Congo and discuss the ways which the novel can be situated precisely within known history and geography.

ACTIVITY: Afterwards, have students at home create a map of the world using only details found in the novel, citing the page numbers from which they draw information.

TOPIC: *Heart of Darkness* as allegory/romance

Using the work students did at home, jointly draw on the board a map of the world using only details from the novel (require specific textual support). Discuss how that map differs from a typical atlas map, namely what's missing. Consider the kinds of striking contrasts apparent on the novel's "map" (Thames vs. Congo; Outer Station – Central Station – Inner Station; metropolis vs. open sea). Discuss possible reasons for and meanings of what the author includes and what the author leaves out. It's worthwhile to bring up here how few characters have names and the almost metaphysical register in which the final encounter with Kurtz is phrased.

WEEK THREE

READ: George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to his Serene Majesty Leopold II"

Sir Roger Casement, *The Congo Report*

TOPIC: representation

*Read and discuss the historical documents simply to establish in rough terms the scale and extent of the atrocities in the Congo (require specific textual support). Focus on concrete differences between what actually happened (as far as can be determined from the two historical documents) and what we would think happened if we had only read the novel. Leave students with a clear sense of *Heart of Darkness* not as realistic reportage, but as an artistic representation which – even if clearly based on the Belgian Congo – is a calculated assemblage of words in which we are given a world that is a reduction and reshaping of what we might call the "real world" or what "really happened." Discuss why anyone would or should read *Heart of Darkness* instead of *The Congo Report*, which is unarguably a valuable and enlightening document.*

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Representation & Reality

Given what you know from the two historical documents we've read, select an aspect of *Heart of Darkness* which correlates to a real event, practice, person, or place from the Belgian Congo. Write a 4-page double-spaced essay in which you:

1. Establish, through careful and accurate citations from the historical documents or other sources, what the reality was.
2. Establish, through careful and accurate citations from *Heart of Darkness*, how Conrad represents that particular aspect of reality.
3. Discuss the effects of Conrad's representational decisions. What advantages and disadvantages does fictionalization provide in relation to the journalistic report? How does your

understanding of the meaning or significance of the events of the Congo change?
Your writing process will include thinking deeply about the questions posed in #3, thoughtfully weighing all the textual evidence, writing a few draft paragraphs, and settling on a coherent position on Conrad's representational decisions. Finally, write an introduction which introduces this position and prepared the reader for the essay that follows which will defend it.

3. UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION 2 (Transgression)

WEEK ONE

Spend the week reading a play that is clearly within the genre of comedy (e.g. *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare). Try to pick something that includes behavior not generally practiced in the society which produced it (e.g. cross-dressing). You could also consider using a shorter "non-literary" text or sit-com episode, and shorten the unit appropriately. Ask during class discussion how the students expect the story to end, note down responses.

WEEK TWO

If necessary continue to work through the text of the play. Present a film version of at least some of the scenes from the text or if possible, arrange for students to attend a live production of the play. Discuss the accuracy of student expectations for the end of the story and ask them why they got it right—how did they know? Consider as a class whether the play/episode represented anything society might find disturbing or unacceptable if practiced outside the realm of the theatre/television. What is the connection between these things and how comedies end?

WEEK THREE

Have students form groups and spend a class brainstorming how they would rewrite the ending of the play/episode to validate or continue the behavior included in the middle of the story, or how they would rewrite the play/episode so that it ended in another genre besides comedy. Have students share the results with the class.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Students should write up their proposed new ending for the play/episode and the reasons the changes that they made to plot, character, setting, etc. Students need not write the lines of the new ending (but can if they wish to), they just need to describe the basic outline of their changes and their reasons for them. Note: this assignment requires students to understand the basic expectations governing endings in the genre they select. Instructors may wish to spend time in class discussing some basic patterns in the genres students choose.

Writing Activities for Course Aim #2

Sample Course Units That Analyze How Literature is Used

1. UNDERSTANDING CANONS & LITERARY HISTORY 1 (canonization)

WEEK ONE

READ: *Passing*, Nella Larsen (Norton Critical Edition)

TOPIC: narrator, plot vs. story

The goal of the first week is to: 1) clarify the story since significant portions of the novel are plotted as a flashback and in other portions the plot catches up with the story (constructing a timeline of events as they must have happened in sequential order on the board is very useful) –and– 2) coming to terms with how the conflicted psychology of the character through whom the narration is focalized, Irene, impedes readers' ability to understand the people, places, and situations described.

WEEK TWO

TOPIC: *Passing* in the 1920s

*Bring in historical materials about the Harlem Renaissance and discuss the context in which *Passing* was first published and discuss Nella Larsen's biography (for both purposes, short readings should be assigned over the prior weekend).*

ACTIVITY: Afterwards, have students at home use library catalogs (WorldCat, Love Library, etc.) to make a list of all published editions of *Passing*. Have them sign out as many editions as they can from public and academic libraries or to visit bookstores and take photos of the covers of all editions they see.

TOPIC: *Passing* as Forgotten Novel

*Compile a timeline of *Passing*'s publication history. Discuss and define terms and concepts such as "new edition," "reprint," "in print," "out of print," "publisher," "editor," "university press," "commercial press," "scholarly edition," "trade paperback," etc. There's no reason not to include Quicksand in this activity.*

WEEK THREE

SCAN: The titles and dates of the articles in the "Reviews" and "Criticism" section of the Norton Critical Edition.

BRING IN: The Rutgers University Press edition (whose introduction is excerpted in the NCE)

TOPIC: canonization

*Discuss and attempt to explain – using the timeline of editions from Week 2 and the timeline of initial and revived critical interest from Week 3 – the fate of *Passing* (its initial critical success, its disappearance, its slow rediscovery, and the current proliferation of editions). Talk about the role of the Rutgers edition.*

*Discuss the relationship between scholarship, teaching, and publishers. Contemplate the future of *Passing*.*

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: Canonization

Using all the raw materials collected during the unit's explorations (and hopefully archived on Blackboard), students should compile a single, accurate, properly-formatted annotated bibliography of editions of *Passing* (allowing out of class group work would be fine for this part of the assignment). The annotations should comment on the appearance and significance of each edition. Each student should then write a 2-page single-spaced, properly-formatted business letter to a publisher (Penguin or Norton will do) arguing whether the publisher should keep a reprint of *Passing* in their active backlist. The argument should deploy concrete evidence about the factors that led to the canonization of *Passing* in the 1970s and onwards and provide reasons why those factors would or would not suggest – deploying evidence about the contemporary world – the continuing relevance and interest of the novel for general readers, students, and scholars. Provide models of business letters to encourage fidelity to the genre.

1. UNDERSTANDING CANONS & LITERARY HISTORY 2 (sonnets)

WEEK ONE

Close read Francesco Petrarch's sonnet 190 from *Rima Sparse* and use it to discuss basic sonnet form [14 lines, Italianate rhyme scheme] and subject tradition [male speaks of love for beautiful, virtuous, and unattainable woman]. Close read Thomas Wyatt's sonnet "Whoso list to hunt" and compare it with the Petrarch; discuss the changes Wyatt makes in his "translation" and their implications. Have students find basic details of Wyatt's biography, including his place at court, the scandal of his purported affair with Anne Boleyn, and his imprisonment. When did Wyatt write this sonnet? How was it presented to people around him? In what form [printed, manuscript, read aloud, etc.]? What would the poem communicate to the readers/audience about Wyatt? What social function is the sonnet playing in this historical context?

WEEK TWO

Close read Edmund Spenser's sonnet 64 from *Amoretti* and discuss what sonnet conventions Spenser is following and which he has changed (based on what we know from Petrarch and Wyatt). Discuss what a blazon is, and read a few examples of it from other *Amoretti* or Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Close read Shakespeare's sonnet 130 from his *Sonnets*, and discuss what Shakespeare has done to the blazon and to the rhyme scheme/ syntactic structure of the sonnet. Consider how changing conventions in obvious ways allows the poet to comment on poetry and poetic tradition while still writing within it. Consider how effective Shakespeare's intervention in this sonnet is – ask which sonnet the students like better, the Spenser (and Sidney) or the Shakespeare? Which poet comes off as the better poet?

WEEK THREE

Close read Shakespeare's sonnet 20 and discuss the implications of a male speaker writing a rather bawdy sonnet to a man. What has changed in the tradition? What has stayed the same? Read Mary Wroth's Sonnet 68 and Song 74 from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in order to discuss implications of a woman writing a sonnet. What happens to the sonnet tradition when the speaker of the poem is implicitly female? What changes and what stays the same? Read some of Wroth's biography and the publication history of these sonnets. What social function are these poems serving? Read Billy Collins's "Sonnet" and discuss whether this counts as a sonnet and why it is so self-referential. What kind of comment is Collins making on the sonnet tradition?

Note: Feel free to substitute your favorite sonnets for some of these. The basic ideas will work with just about any combination of sonnets from across the last four centuries. Neruda has some beautiful ones, which allows for translation discussions, Donne changes the kind of love addressed in his "Holy Sonnets" (although in often disturbing ways), and the form continues to thrive, as the Collins parody shows.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Have students find a sonnet, written in any time period. (Provide anthologies for students to use; allow computer use.) Have students write an informal paper answering the following questions: 1) why do you think this is a sonnet? 2) Which original conventions of the sonnet in either form or content, does this sonnet follow? Which does it break? *Alternate assignment:* Allow adventurous students to write a sonnet, accompanied by an explanation of what conventions they kept/broke and why.

2. UNDERSTANDING MATERIAL CULTURE (Publication Process)

TOPICS & READINGS

This activity is from a course whose theme is “sense of place,” but can, of course, be adjusted to fit whatever theme the course is using. This unit traces the creation of a book from author's conception through the publication process, including issues of book title, packaging, publicity, marketing, blurbing, reviewing, etc. through to the act of consumer purchase.

ACTIVITIES

Step 1: Choose a University of Nebraska Press book by a local author, such as Ted Kooser's *Local Wonders*. (Many other options are possible.) Read the book. Then, invite author to class to discuss the experience of and processes involved in writing the book.

Step 2: Invite an editor from the Press to class, or perhaps take a field trip to the Press, to discuss the many stages of the editorial and production process. Issues regarding challenges in the publishing industry can be raised; distinctions between types of presses (commercial, university, etc.) can be emphasized.

Step 3: Send students to a bookstore to choose a book they would like to purchase. (Note, they don't actually have to make the purchase.) Have students assess the layout of the bookstore, the choices they made as they navigated the store, and why they chose the book they did.

Step 4: Have students look up their chosen book at Amazon.com. Have them read and comment on the various apparatuses of that site. Have them consider how this information might alter the purchasing decision they made at the bookstore.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

At each step in this process, students should write a description of, and their response to, the experience. Issues such as these might be raised: What does one gain by discussing a book with its author? How useful is knowledge about the publication process for a book to one's understanding of and appreciation for literature? It's said “never judge a book by its cover,” but when making a purchase, most people do. Why? How do publishers deal with this fact? How does visiting a site such as Amazon.com differ from the experience of visiting a physical bookstore? What information do they provide at Amazon.com that is not available in a physical bookstore? Is this information helpful, potentially misleading?

3. UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT 1 (Gender)

TOPIC

In this unit students learn how to apply various critical lenses to literature. I've structured the assignments so that students first perform a reading as a class, then as part of a small group, and finally as individuals, leading up to a critical essay. I've focused on gender in this unit, but this could work just as well for class, race, sexuality.

WEEK ONE

READ: "No Name Woman" by Maxine Hong Kingston

In class, introduce the idea of gender as an analytical category and as a class map out various "markers" of gender in the story and analyze the function/significance of such markers.

READ: "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" by Lorna Dee Cervantes

In class, have students in groups perform what we did as a class earlier in the week.

WEEK TWO

READ: "Recitatif" by Toni Morrison

Students read and as a homework assignment turn in a 1 page analysis of gender in the story.

READ: "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" by Lorna Dee Cervantes

In class, have students in groups perform what we did as a class earlier in the week.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Draft of essay due.

3. UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT 2 (Biography)

WEEK ONE

Close read Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus." End with asking the class what they would like to know about the person that wrote this poem. Then ask them to prepare for the following class by finding answers to these questions in Sylvia Plath's biography. During the following class, review their findings and return to the poem to consider whether this information changes the way the group reads any aspect of the poem. Discuss the boundaries of biography and art: is the poem just a coded piece of her biography? Or is it something more/other than that? How should we understand the discrepancies between biography and details in the poem? Does the fact that this is a poem make a difference to how we approach these questions? What role does genre play in this situation?

WEEK TWO

Present the accusations against Ted Hughes regarding the suppression and/or destruction of some of Plath's work. Given the confessional nature of her poetry and some of her feelings towards him, would this have been a fair thing for him to do? What side do the students take in this literary controversy? If possible, have students group together based on their responses and brainstorm reasons why they feel the way they do. Bring the class back together and have the two sides debate. Ask students why Hughes was given control of her work in the first place, and if they felt this was fair. Have them investigate for the following class the legal conditions that governed marriage at this time in Britain: what rights/obligations did husbands have? What rights/obligations did wives have? Discuss in class and consider how social conditions affect authorship. In what other ways did Plath's gender (and class) affect her writing? Avenues of exploration could include material conditions that affected time/ money/ location/ process, as well as the form and content of her works.

WEEK THREE

Send students to library for a research day to investigate what rights women (and men) had over the literature that they wrote (copyright, intellectual property, money from sales, ability to inherit, etc.) over the course of several hundred years of 1) European and American history, or 2) in another country or region. Have students sign up for time periods/ cultures on a list you draw up in order to ensure coverage. Arrange if possible to have reference librarians in these areas available to help students, and make sure to introduce students to these invaluable individuals. Have students give reports when they return for the following class.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

- 1) Have students write an organized report on their library findings regarding the rights of authors (and also post it on Blackboard so everyone can read it).
- 2) Have students choose a book from a composite list of banned books and 1) investigate where it was banned and why, writing up a several page summary of the case(s); and 2) argue for or against the legitimacy of this decision to suppress the text. (You can also have students choose a book that they have not read, write the paper, then read the book and write a follow up on whether their position has changed and why, or how their position was strengthened by reading the book.)