ENGLISH 244-12113
INTRODUCTION TO NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Professor Kirby Brown
Office: 330 PLC
Office Hours: T, 1-3pm; W, 11am-12pm, & by email appt.
kbrown@uoregon.edu

Class Meetings
T/R 10-11:20am
ESL 107

COURSE DESCRIPTION
In 1968, Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for American literature. Momaday's award signaled for many the “arrival” of Native authors to the American literary scene and ushered in an unprecedented era of Native literary production widely known as the Native American Renaissance. While the explosion of Native writing and the critical tradition that emerged from it carved out much needed cultural and institutional spaces for Native self-representation and Native American Studies, it had the unintended effect of privileging contemporary Native novels over writing from other periods and across a variety of genres and forms. This introductory survey of Native American literature widens the net to include an array of contemporary Native self-representation across genres, forms, media, regions, and tribal nations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
- Situate conventional literary texts alongside other cultural forms in which Native peoples exercise self-representation.
- Locate writers and texts within their appropriate historical, cultural, and literary contexts.
- Gain a more complicated understanding of and appreciation for the diversity and complexity of Native American intellectual and cultural productions.
- Develop a historically-nuanced grasp of some of the major issues, questions, and concerns that run throughout Indian Country today, specifically the relationship between cultural production, federal policy, and sovereignty and self-determination movements.
- Develop capacities to engage in thoughtful debate around questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, citizenship, and belonging.
- Develop skills in critical reasoning/argumentation and literary/cultural analysis

REQUIRED TEXTS
- Thomas King (Cherokee descent), *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (TTAS; print)
- Monique Mojica (Kuna/Rappahannock), *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (PP&eBS; digital)
- Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay Nation), *Nature Poem* (NP; print)
- Tommy Orange (Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma), *There, There* (TT; print)
- Cherie Dimaline (Georgian Bay Metis Nation), *The Marrow Thieves* (TMT; print)
- Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe) et al., *Deer Woman: An Anthology* (DW; print)
- Additional readings, videos, music and other media via Canvas

**NOTE:** While I don’t ban the use of digital texts in class, I highly recommend that you get printed
versions if possible. Research shows that comprehension and retention of information increases substantially when students “read actively” (see appendix below) from printed materials.

PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE
You are expected to attend class regularly, remain current with reading assignments, bring assigned texts and writing materials to class, and make substantive contributions to in-class activities and discussions.

Though I don’t enforce an attendance policy—and therefore don’t need for you to inform me of an impending absence, illness, etc.—be aware that missing class regularly will severely impact your grade due to missed in-class activities, group work, free writing assignments, and class discussions/lectures, all of which you’ll be responsible for on exams. If you miss class, it is your responsibility entirely to approach your fellow classmates to get notes for that day and catch up on any material you missed. Do not email me before you’ve made these initial inquiries and have developed specific questions/concerns about the material.

Students who observe religious holidays, who are involved in university sanctioned activities, or who have other commitments or circumstances that conflict with the academic requirements of this course must inform me and make compensatory arrangements in person in advance of the conflict.

ASSIGNMENTS, ASSESSMENT, LABOR, AND “GRADING”
This course employs an evaluation scheme that rewards the labor, effort, and energy you put toward achieving the course objectives rather than a specific final product. It is designed to remove as much subjective judgement on my part as possible. For each assignment or category, you will be given an explicit set of labor expectations which roughly correlate to a letter grade for that assignment. At the end of the course, your final evaluation will be determined as a function of your averages for a specific assignment category weighted according to the scale below.

ASSIGNMENT CATEGORIES: PROCESS, ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS
This course provides multiple avenues through which to assess your command of the materials and the labor you’re investing in the course. Assignments are organized into three learning categories—process, analysis, and synthesis—which are each equally weighted in your final assessment. This means that the labor you do actively reading the texts, reflecting on your readings in your journals, assessing your understanding of materials via quizzes, and participating in in-class activities and Canvas discussion forums will count equally with the midterm and final exams.

- Process-Oriented Exercises (1/3 of final evaluation)
  - Reflection Essay (RE)
  - In-Class Assignments/Activities (ICA)
  - Active Reading Journal (ARJ)

- Analysis-Oriented Exercises (graded; 1/3 of final evaluation)
  - Canvas Quizzes (CQ)
  - Discussion Posts/Responses (DP, DR)

- Synthesis-Oriented Exercises (graded; 1/3 of final evaluation)
  - Midterm Exam (ME)
• Final Exam (FE)

You will also have opportunities to participate in enrichment exercises (EE) to make up for any missed or underperformed in-class assignments, quizzes, journal submissions, and discussion forums.

LABOR and EVALUATION “STEPS”
Under the labor-based model, the baseline grade for the course as well as for individual assignments and assignment groups correlates to a “B” on the letter grade scale. Evaluation of course work will thus look like this:

• If you meet the “minimum expectations” for a given assignment or assignment category, you will automatically be awarded a B, no questions asked.
• Labor that exceeds or fails to meet “minimum expectations” will result in a +1/-1 evaluation equivalent to 1/3 of a grade point.
  o For example, +1 on an assignment will bump you from a B to a B+, +2 to an A-, +3 to an A, and so on. Conversely, a -1 will take you from a B to a B-, a -2 to a C+, a -3 to a C, etc.
• Students who fail to meet all the minimum expectations for a given assignment will receive no credit (i.e. an “F”).
• To receive credit for exceeding expectations, students must first meet all the minimum labor expectations.
• Not all assignments or assignment criteria will have opportunities for exceeding expectations. You either meet them or you don’t. I will clearly mark these criteria for each exercise.

So what does this look like in practice? Consider this evaluation rubric for Discussion Posts (DP) for students A and B:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum Expectations (B)</th>
<th>Meets (-1)</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Exceeds (+1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributes a literary-critical analysis of a <strong>minimum of 500 words</strong> (roughly 2 double-spaced pages)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A/B (+1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contains an <strong>original title</strong> that indicates something about the topic and argument (cr/no cr)</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is organized by a <strong>clearly articulated thesis</strong> that includes both an observation <strong>and</strong> an interpretive claim (cr/no cr)</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents a <strong>minimum of 2 pieces of direct textual evidence</strong> supporting that claim</td>
<td>A (-1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>B (+1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempts to explain how each piece of evidence illustrates the claim(s) you’re making</td>
<td>A (-1)</td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ends with a <strong>concluding statement</strong> on the significance, or stakes, of the argument—i.e. the “who cares” question (cr/no cr)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The evaluation for “student A” would be a -2, equating to a 2/3 grade point deduction, or a C+. Because the student didn’t meet the minimum expectations for each criterion, they are not eligible for exceeding expectations for assignment length. Because “student B” met each of the minimum labor expectations and exceeded assignment length and minimum evidence, they would earn a +2
evaluation (1 for each criteria), resulting in a 1.0 grade point increase, or an A. Though each assignment will have slightly different minimum labor criteria, they will all be evaluated according to this universal schematic.

For a complete list assignment descriptions, rubrics, and labor expectations, see Appendix I at the back of the syllabus.

**COURSE CONTENT AND INTELLECTUAL DISCUSSION**

Due to the ongoing histories/experiences of settler-colonial violence, institutional and individual racism, dispossession, and genocide that frame both the colonization of the Americas and Indigenous responses to it, this course will openly engage these and related issues without censorship. If content makes attendance and participation difficult, please see me to make alternative arrangements.

**CLASS COMMUNICATION**

Get in the habit of checking your UO email account and our course Canvas page regularly (i.e. daily) as these platforms will be our primary means of communication outside of class. Please be aware that I will not respond to emails sent after 5pm or on the weekend until after 8am on the next weekday.

**CONVENTIONS OF ADDRESS**

Speaking to a professor, instructor, administrator, staff member, employer, manager, or colleague is different (at least initially) from speaking/texting with a friend, family member, or other familiar relation. In a professional, intellectual context like the University, it is conventional to refer to faculty, administrators, staff, GTFs, and others by their titles (Doctor, Professor, Instructor, Coach, preferred gender/gender neutral titles, etc.) unless explicitly instructed otherwise. You should also get into the habit of including greetings, salutations, and language appropriate to such contexts in your communications. I will always respectfully refer to you according to your stated preferences and the appropriate context; I expect that you’ll reciprocate in kind to me and to your colleagues.

**INCLEMENT WEATHER**

In the case of inclement weather, please check the UO homepage, UO Alerts Blog, and local weather stations for information on travel, closures and cancellations. If inclement weather makes traveling to campus difficult, I will notify you by email about whether we are holding class. Whether or not I decide to hold class, you should use your own judgment about the safety of traveling to campus.

**INCLUSION & ACCESSIBILITY ACCOMMODATIONS**

If you have a documented need that necessitates accommodations in this course, please arrange to meet with me as soon as possible and request that a counselor at the Accessible Education Center send a letter verifying your requests and outlining an accommodation plan.

**TITLE IX POLICY AND REPORTING RESPONSIBILITIES**

The UO is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender-based harassment, bullying, and stalking. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, know that help and support are available. UO has staff members trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, helping with legal protective orders, and more.
Please be aware that **all UO employees are required to report** to appropriate authorities (supervisor or Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity) when they have **reasonable cause** to believe that discrimination, harassment, or abuse of any kind has taken, or is taking, place. Employees are NOT required to reveal the names of survivors, however. We are also required to report instances of child abuse or endangerment.

If you wish to speak to someone confidentially — i.e. those not required to report — you can call 541-346-SAFE, UO’s 24-hour hotline to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options, as confidential counselors are not required reporters. You can also visit the SAFE website at [https://safe.uoregon.edu/services](https://safe.uoregon.edu/services) for more information. Each resource is clearly labeled as either “required reporter,” “confidential UO employee,” or “off-campus,” to allow you to select your desired level of confidentiality.

**ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT**

The [University Student Conduct Code](https://safety.uoregon.edu/Conduct-Code) defines academic misconduct. Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. Additional information about a common form of academic misconduct, plagiarism, is available [here](https://safety.uoregon.edu/Conduct-Code).

**RESOURCES**

I strongly encourage you to take advantage of every resource available to you to improve your research, writing, and critical reasoning skills.

- Located in the newly-opened Tykeson Hall, The Writing Associates Program offers free, one-on-one peer tutoring for students in 100- and 200-level English, Composition, and Honors College classes. Writing Associate tutors are advanced English majors who have been trained to tutor writing. They are available to help students with any aspect of their writing for this course, from learning how to write about literature and media to crafting clearer and more effective arguments. Click [here](https://safety.uoregon.edu/Conduct-Code) to make an appointment with a Writing Associate.

- Located in the “Sky Studio” on the 4th floor of the Knight Library, the Teaching and Learning Center Writing Tutors offer “drop-in” sessions to discuss assignments and receive feedback on class writing before handing it in. They also periodically offer workshops in grammar, argument, and other popular topics. Stop by the Sky Studio and work with a tutor beginning week two each term. Click [here](https://safety.uoregon.edu/Conduct-Code) for more information.

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**COURSE SCHEDULE**: Assignments listed below are due on the date/time indicated on the syllabus. All reading assignments and viewings should thus be completed **prior** to coming to class on a given day. Other assignments, **set off in red**, are due on the days/times indicated.

**Week 1**

**Oct. 1**

**Introductions, Logistics, & the Stories We Tell**
READ: Syllabus and Course Schedule, including Appendix I and II
REVIEW: Assignment Instructions, “Biographical Introduction and Reflection Freewrite” (Canvas)

**Oct. 3**

READ: King, *TTAS*, Ch. 1
QUIZ #1 (before class)
Oct. 4  RE DUE, by 5pm

Week 2  
Oct. 8  Unit 1: Race, Gender, Representation, and Popular Culture  
READ: King, TTAS Ch. 3; Mojica, PP&BS (Introduction-Trans. 3) 
REVIEW: PP&BS: Structure and Timeline (Canvas) 
QUIZ #2 (before class)

Oct. 10  READ: PP&BS (Trans. 5-8)

Oct. 11  DP1 (Group 1), by 5pm

Week 3  
Oct. 14  DR1 (Group 2), by 5pm

Oct. 15  READ: PP&BS (Trans. 9-13) 
QUIZ #3 (before class)

Oct. 17  Unit 2: Queer/Two Spirit Indigeneity and the Refusal of Expectation  
READ: King, TTAS, Ch. 2  
VIEW: Pico, “How Not to be One with Nature” (YouTube)

Oct. 18  DP1 (Group 2), by 5pm

Week 4  
Oct. 21  DR1 (Group 1), by 5pm

Oct. 22  READ: Pico, NP, pp. 1-44  
REVIEW: Assignment Instructions, “Midterm Exam” (Canvas) 
QUIZ #4 (before class)

Oct. 24  READ: Pico, NP, pp. 45-75

Week 5  
Oct. 28  MIDTERM EXAM, by midnight

READ: King, TTAS, Ch. 5  
VIEW: “Urban Rez” (YouTube)  
ARJ #1 DUE

Oct. 31  READ: Orange, TT, 3-78  
QUIZ #5 (before class)

Nov. 1  DP2 (Group 1), by 5pm
**Week 6**

Nov. 4  
DR2 (Group 2), by 5pm

Nov. 5  
READ: Orange, *TT*, 79-156

Nov. 7  
READ: Orange, *TT*, 157-226  
QUIZ #6 (before class)

Nov. 8  
DP2 (Group 2), by 5pm

**Week 7**

Nov. 11  
DR2 (Group 1), by 5pm

Nov. 12  
READ: Orange, *TT*, 227-294

Nov. 14  
**Unit 4: Gender Violence, Resilience, and Justice in Indigenous Women’s Comics**  
VIEW: Sarah Deer (Mvskokee/Creek), “*Historical Resilience: The Story of Violence Against Native Women*” (YouTube)  
READ: LaPensée, *DW*, beginning—“Wives”  
QUIZ #7 (before class)

Nov. 15  
DP3 (Group 1), by 5pm

**Week 8**

Nov. 18  
DR3 (Group 2), by 5pm

Nov. 19  
READ: LaPensée, *DW*, “Las Aunties”—“Red is Missing”  
QUIZ #8 (before class)

Nov. 21  
READ: LaPensée, *DW*, “Asdzáá/Changing”—“The Arming Sisters”

Nov. 22  
DP3 (Group 2), by 5pm

**Week 9**

Nov. 25  
DR3 (Group 1), by 5pm

Nov. 26  
**Unit 5: Dystopic Presents, Resurgent Futures in Indigenous Speculative Fiction**  
READ: King, Ch. 4; Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa/Yurok/Karuk), “*Why I Teach the Walking Dead in My Native Studies Classes*”  
VIEW: “*Reclaiming Lost Dreams in Cherie Dimaline’s The Marrow Thieves*” (YouTube)  
QUIZ #9 (before class)

Nov. 28  
**HOLIDAY: NO CLASS ... but still:**  
READ: Dimaline, *TMT*, pp. 1-79
Week 10
Dec. 3  READ: Dimaline, TMT, pp. 80-160
QUIZ #10 (before class)
ARJ DUE

Dec. 5  READ: Dimaline, TMT, pp. 161-231
REVIEW: Assignment Instructions, Final Exam (Canvas)

Week 11
Dec. 9  TAKE HOME FINAL EXAM DUE ON CANVAS BY MIDNIGHT
Appendix I: Assignment Descriptions and Labor Criteria/Expectations

This course offers a variety of mechanisms by which your labor and investment will be assessed. Detailed instructions for individual assignments can be found via the Assignments and Modules pages on Canvas.

**Process Oriented Exercises (1/3 of your final assessment)**

**Biographical/Reflection Free Write (RE):** This free writing assignment asks you to provide a short introduction of yourself to me and to the rest of the class (1-2 paragraphs), reflect on what you think you know about American Indians and where that knowledge comes from (2 paragraphs), and outline 2-3 personal goals you’d like to set for the class. You will post these on the “Introduce Yourself!” Discussion Board located in the Modules tab on Canvas by the date indicated on the syllabus.

Labor Expectations: Participation exercise. Full credit (A) awarded for those who meet all of the minimum criteria of the assignment. No credit awarded for failing to meet any of the minimum criteria.

**In-Class Assignments/Activities:** We will conduct weekly in-class assignments/activities individually and in groups which include individual free write exercises, submission of question cards, group work, and other exercises.

Minimum Labor Expectations (B): Participates in and submits at least 85% of assigned in-class assignments/activities (ICAs).

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<th>Rubric</th>
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<th>-3</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>Minimum Expectations (B)</th>
<th>+1</th>
<th>+2</th>
<th>+3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turns in &gt;60% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 60% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 70% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 75% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 80% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 85% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 90% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 95% ICA</td>
<td>Turns in 100% ICA</td>
<td></td>
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**Active Reading Journal:** You are required to keep an active reading journal (“Decomposition Books” @ DuckStore) for this course in which to take notes, ask questions, make observations, and sketch out preliminary and ongoing thoughts about the readings for the week. How you choose to engage the texts or use the journal is entirely up to you. Examples of substantive journal entries are available via the assignment instructions on Canvas. I strongly suggest that you use the “Strategies for Close Reading” handout in Appendix II at the back of the syllabus as a guide for your journaling. These journals will be evaluated twice per term per the criteria below. Failure to meet either of the listed criteria will default to a lower evaluation.

Minimum Labor Expectations (B): Contributes a minimum of 2-3 full, single-spaced pages of freewriting, outlining, bullet-pointing, drawing, or other active reading practices (see Appendix II below) for greater than or equal to 80% (16/20) of reading assignments throughout the term.
Analytic-Oriented Exercises (1/3 of final assessment)

**Quizzes:** There will be roughly 10 weekly quizzes throughout the term administered via Canvas consisting of both comprehension (who, what, when, where) and short analytic/interpretive (how, why) components. Successful performance on these quizzes will require that you give careful attention to the assigned readings, lectures, and class discussions/activities.

Minimum Labor/Performance Expectations: Quizzes will be evaluated according to a traditional “average” rubric wherein labor is captured in the number of submissions made, performance, and whether you avail yourselves of the opportunity to take them again to improve your score. NOTE: Quizzes may be taken up to 2 times without penalty and to improve your previous score; you will NEVER receive a LOWER grade on the 2nd attempt; you MUST take the entire quiz again for the second attempt.

**Discussion Posts (DP) and Responses (DR):** Each student is required to contribute 3 sets of posts/responses to the course Discussion Forum on Canvas throughout the term by the dates indicated on the syllabus. These assignments ask you to engage critically with a primary text, essay, concept, idea, or problem and to respond thoughtfully to the thoughts, arguments, and analyses of your peers. You can choose to respond to one of the discussion questions from the short context lectures, quizzes, or class discussions, or write about something else entirely. I will make group assignments that will indicate when you’re responsible for substantive posts (DP1, Group 1) or for responses (DR1, Group 2) on the course schedule by the middle of week 2. Detailed instructions, sample discussion threads, and critical analysis activities are available on Canvas.

**Rubric for Discussants**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Minimum Expectations (B)</th>
<th>Meet (-1)</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Exceeds (+1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributes a literary-critical analysis of a minimum of 500 words (roughly 2 double-spaced pages)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contains an original title that indicates something about the topic and argument (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is organized by a clearly articulated thesis that includes both an observation and an interpretive claim (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presents a minimum of 2 pieces of direct textual evidence supporting that claim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attempts to explain how each piece of evidence illustrates the claim(s) you’re making (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ends with a concluding statement on the significance, or</td>
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The rubric for quizzes is as follows:

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<th>Rubric</th>
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<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>Min. Exp.</th>
<th>+1</th>
<th>+2</th>
<th>+3</th>
<th>+4</th>
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</thead>
</table>
stages, of the argument—i.e. the “who cares” question (cr/no cr)

Contains few typographical or other errors.

Rubric for Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum Expectations (B)</th>
<th>Meet (-1)</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Exceeds (+1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributes two, 150-word substantive responses to discussion posts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identifies and discusses 1 thing that is interesting, compelling, or strong about the argument</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identifies and discusses 1 thing that might help to strengthen, nuance, or complicate the argument</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focuses exclusively on substantive issues (thesis, structure, evidence, explanation, conclusion), leaving line-level and stylistic concerns to the instructor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contains few typographical or other errors</td>
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Synthesis-Oriented Exercises

Midterm and Final Exams: Both exams will be essay in format, comprehensive in scope, and will ask you to synthesize information from across the term. They will incorporate both primary and secondary materials, information from context lectures, and relevant topics gleaned from class discussions and the discussion forum.

Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimum Expectations (B)</th>
<th>Meet (-1)</th>
<th>Meets</th>
<th>Exceeds (+1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates familiarity with most of the material covered in the class, including lectures, in-class discussions, and readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provides largely complete, if not always comprehensive, responses to the exam prompts (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advances an interpretive argument driven by an explicitly articulated thesis statement and an identifiable line of reasoning anchored to at least 2 minor/supporting claims</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presents a minimum of 2 pieces of textual evidence—either direct quotations or gestures to specific moments in a text—to support the thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attempts to explain how each piece of evidence illustrates the claim(s) you’re making (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gestures to the larger significance, or stakes, of the argument—i.e. the “who cares” question (cr/no cr)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contains few typographical or other errors. (cr/no cr)</td>
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Enrichment/Extra-Credit Exercises: At various points throughout the term, you will have multiple opportunities to draw connections between campus/community events (speakers, film screenings, art exhibits, readings, symposia, conferences, lectures, etc.) and the content/central questions driving this course. Write ups should be 1 page, single spaced, with 1” margins, and composed of 2 paragraphs of ~250 words each—one that describes the event in detail and another that connects the event to specific texts, discussions, ideas, or issues that we’ve engaged throughout the term. Submissions that fail to meet all assignment criteria will not be considered.

Labor Expectations: You are eligible to submit a hard copy write-up of as many events as you’d like to replace the following missed or underperformed assignments:

- 1 write up fully replaces 1 quiz, 1 missed in-class assignment/activity, or 1 discussion forum response of your choosing.
- 2 write ups replace a missed substantive post from the discussion forum or count for a 1.0 grade point bump for the active reading journals (limit one per cycle).
- 4 write ups are good for a 1.0 grade point bump for the midterm or final exam. (limit one per exam)
Appendix II: Thoughts and Strategies for Performing Literary Analyses and Close Readings

To do a close reading of literature, you choose a specific passage and analyze it in fine detail, as if with a magnifying glass. You then comment on points of style and on your reactions as a reader, always using direct evidence from the text to support your claims. Close reading is important because it is the building block for larger analysis. Your thoughts evolve not from someone else’s truth about the reading, but from your own observations. The more closely and actively you can observe, the more original and exact your ideas will be. The following are some thoughts, strategies, and potential questions you might consider as you think about how to respond closely, actively, and critically to a text.

Be Patient!
Close, critical, active reading—what David Mikics calls “Slow Reading”—demands patience and time, two things which many of us find ourselves possessing less and less of. It is different from other kinds of reading (and writing!) that we typically do today, much of which is designed to provide quick, easily-consumable snibbets of information seemingly about everything but that often leave us with only a superficial understanding of anything that we’ve read. Mikics writes:

Patience means a lot of things. We must be patient not to be overwhelmed by a book’s difficulties. We must be patient to let ourselves be perplexed; to figure out, by trial and error, how to ask the right questions of a book. We must be patient to put in the time and effort needed to read [and write!] well. [We must possess] a happy, and somewhat obsessive, desire for details … [anchoring] our sense of a book’s characters and its argument in small, significant moments … We must not rush to meaning, or demand that an author deliver the point in an easy, palatable way … we have to remember that struggling with a book’s meanings is the whole point of reading, if reading is going to be worthwhile. (54-55, emphasis added)

For this class, I’m going to ask you to commit to slowing down, allowing yourself as much time and attention as your schedules will allow to actively immerse yourself in the texts we’ll read this term. On some days you’ll have to make strategic decisions about where to invest your time, and you won’t be able to slowly, closely and actively engage each text. That’s okay! Just committing to making this a habitual practice will yield great rewards, a ton of pleasure, and a genuine sense of knowledge about and familiarity with the materials we cover.

Read Actively and Write It Down!
Whether reading for pleasure or in preparation for an assignment, prepare yourself to read actively. Don’t read a text simply to get its information or skim it to get a sense of the main ideas and points (at least don’t confine your reading to these practices!). This method of reading is passive: you "receive" the text as you read, and you hold off making any intellectual response to it until after you’ve finished reading. This way of reading doesn’t get you very far and doesn’t allow you to fully explore the pleasures gained by becoming “intimate” with a text.

Break the Linear Tradition
Maybe you believe that the most efficient way to write a paper is to read first, think later, and write last of all. To become an active reader, you should throw that idea in the garbage and strive to think and write—or think by writing—as you read. When you read, stop to ask questions, challenge the writer, search your soul for what you really believe about the topic at hand, etc. This is where the mutually-reinforcing practices of underlining, highlighting, annotating, and keeping a daily reading journal all come in handy. And once you’ve begun writing, go back to the text not simply to find a piece of evidence that will support your claims, but also to continually reconsider the text and your own positions about it!
Use the Margins

Maybe the best practical advice I can give you about reading more actively is to make use of the margins. An unmarked book is an unread book!! Marking a text as you read it ensures that you are reading actively. Even the simple act of underlining a passage requires you to ask yourself what is most important in a text. The act of weighing importance is one way of breaking the habit of passive reading. But you can do much more in the margins than simply make note of important passages. You can ask questions in the margins. You can draw arrows, establishing obscure connections in the text. You can note patterns of imagery or language as you see them. You can locate contradictions. You can get feisty, even, and call the writer out for a debate. Remember, neither I nor any of the writers that we’ll read have the last word on any subject. **NOTE: Please DO NOT annotate library materials.**

Enter the Conversation

When writers compose a book, short story, poem, play, etc., they are, in a sense, inviting you into an ongoing conversation. They are taking a position in some debate and asking you to take yours. When you read actively, intellectually engage the text, and write critically about it, you are entering this conversation. However, in order to enter the conversation fully as a writer/speaker, you must first enter the conversation fully as a reader/listener. Mikics says, “The give-and-take between author and reader takes place on a two-way street. In this imaginary but essential conversation, the reader has a responsibility to keep the author interested. You will refine your perceptions, and become a better interpreter, the more time you spend trying to do justice to a [text], rather than too quickly making it into something of your own. The [text] has something to say, and you are obliged to listen carefully before talking back” (157). Pay attention to the text, underline key passages, mark up the margins with your own thoughts, and collect, organize, and expand on those ideas in longer journal entries. This will better enable you to contribute to the conversation in a way that is relevant, thoughtful, and interesting.

Ask the Right Questions

All critical inquiry, regardless of discipline or form, is driven by the questions we ask about our objects of study. Indeed, the questions we ask determine the conditions of possibility for how we’ll read and understand a text. Thus, to “get from perplexity to engagement” we need to identify useful questions. For literary and cultural analyses, “Useful questions connect elements of a book [or other media] together: What does the beginning have to do with the ending? How do the characters balance or argue against one another? What does a particularly striking passage sum up about the book as a whole … How does the title comment on the work it introduces” (62)? A good indication that you’re asking the right questions is if they consistently lead you back to the text rather than away from it.

Identify the Voice

Who is speaking? Is the narrator a participant in the action? If so, how invested are they in the narrative? If not, do they possess comprehensive knowledge of events, characters, time and place, or is their story limited to (or focalized through) one or two perspectives? Does the narrator simply describe events or do they comment upon and evaluate characters and events (i.e. editorialize)? Does one voice or perspective dominate the narrative, or are there competing/complementary voices vying for narrative authority and claims to “truth”? In what ways do the answers to these questions inform our reading and understanding of the text’s main ideas and arguments—i.e., it’s “basic thought(s)”

Pay attention to beginnings and endings

According to Mikics, structure “tells you something about the way [a text] thinks; openings and conclusions are the irreplaceable backbone of structure” (101). How does the story/poem/play open? What does this opening suggest about the action, characters, and events to come? How does the text
end? What does the ending suggest about the text’s main argument or idea? Does the ending reinforce, revise or refute the beginning? If so, how, why and to what effect?

Find the Parts
This rule draws your attention to the structure of a text and how mapping that structure can lend formal insight into the text's “basic thought.” Here you’re looking particularly for “the significant changes in a work: transformations of topic, time, place, atmosphere,” narrative voice, character, etc. “that announce such a change or that herald the beginning of a new part of the [text]” (145).

Look Out for Signposts
“A book’s signposts tell you what to pay attention to, where to direct yourself in your journey through its pages. Signposts can take the form of key words, key images, key sentences or passages,” echoes and reflections, as well as shifts in location and time. “Think of reading,” Mikics suggests, “as a kind of travel; signposts help you map out your itinerary” (101). Be on the lookout, however. Signposts won’t always provide you the most direct route; sometimes they’ll force you to double-back, take a circuitous route, or forge a new path entirely. If you’ve ever chosen the longer route in a Google itinerary, such detours, while at times tedious and time-consuming, often provide the most beauty and pleasure.

Find the Author’s Basic Thought
The question, “What is this book (or poem, play, movie, television series, song, etc.) about,” can be answered in any number of ways. You might describe basic events and characters (plot summary), elements of style, or some of the text’s main conflicts, positions or arguments. None of these responses, however, adequately capture “the deepest and most rewarding answer to the question,” though they are crucial avenues through which to arrive there (127). When trying to find the “basic thought(s)” of a text, think in terms of its “most essential truth(s)” as you understand it and the means (i.e. strategies) through which it advances this position. We won’t always agree, but that’s okay. In fact, reasoned argument and informed disagreement are the backbones of literary and cultural analysis and of the construction of meaning itself.

Be Suspicious
Cultivating a healthy skepticism (which is not the same thing as despondent cynicism!) is a good thing, especially when it comes to literary and cultural analysis. Note where and how a text moves your sympathies toward a particular character or situation, but don’t go “all in” right away. As with signposts and key terms, texts will often lead you in one direction only to pull the rug out from under you in subsequent pages, challenging you to question your own motivations, investments, values and beliefs as its moral center gets progressively more messy, ambiguous, absurd, or confounding. Heroes and villains are often more complicated than they would at first appear!

Explore Different Paths
“Revision, the writer’s most basic tool, is also important for the reader. It’s always a useful exercise to imagine how the author might have begun or ended a work differently, or changed a crucial moment in its plot. Develop a sense of the decisions a writer makes by practicing thought experiments:” What would the work you’re reading be like without a key character? What difference would it make if lacked this or that scene, this or that action? What if it ended earlier or later than it does? What if it was told through a different narrative voice, or presented non-linearly rather than linearly (or vice versa)? In what ways would any or all the above “revisions” impact “the basic thought” of the text? As Mikics points out, by considering such questions “you will gain a new knowledge of [and appreciation for!] how writers work, the choices they make” (168).