

ROBOT STORIES
PROF. BOVILSKY**Course Description**

This course will survey the history of stories about the creation of artificial humans, while thinking about conventions of the genre, its particular uses and adaptations, and how it intersects with other genres. We'll look at the desires expressed by this genre, most of all, the desire to perfect or eliminate what is most human. Familiar questions – can robots feel? can we tell who is a robot? – will be considered alongside the traditional use of robots to understand or emblemize justice, sin, labor, progress and modernity, self-awareness or simplicity, gender, emotion and indifference, skill, invention, and art itself. Examples will be drawn from both real and fictional robots in literature and in film.

ENG 205 is open to all students. This course (in any of its versions) is required for the English major. It is a pre- or corequisite of the Foundations of the English Major series (ENG 303-305).

Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes of ENG 205 relate to building key skills and concepts in English as well as acquaintance with a wide range of issues related to robots. The core skills and concepts are valuable in many academic disciplines and build critical thinking and expressive skills that are highly sought after among college graduates and will be useful to you in a wide variety of careers and in civic, ethical, social, and many other contexts.

ENG 205 will familiarize you (1) with the length and breadth of the cultural history of the robot and (2) with the kinds of questions robots have been used to raise and answer. Meanwhile, the course will (3) teach you about how genres operate, especially how they accumulate, modify, and improvise on formal and thematic conventions – i.e. conventions relating to *how* a story is told (its form) and to the *content* of a story (its thematics). You will (4) practice analytic reading within and across genres and forms and (5) work on analytic writing, particularly close reading and argumentation.

The course is REMOTE and meets MW from 2:15-3:45.

“Remote” means that, unlike WEB courses, we will meet during scheduled class meeting times. We'll use these live, synchronous sessions to build community as well as skills at a challenging time, though I can accommodate students who are unable to attend synchronously. Sessions will also be recorded so that they can be reviewed later by all students. (Note: these recordings are *only* available to other students in our course.)

Contact information for Prof. Bovilsky:

Email: bovilsky@uoregon.edu Email is the best way to reach me. I check it at least twice daily.

Office hours (i.e. time for us to meet via Zoom, the phone, or chat):

Mondays, 11:00-12:15 [except 1/11 and 1/18] and Wednesdays, 11-12:15 and by appointment. “Appointment” means that I am planning to meet with students outside of the weekly Mon/Wed times. If you can’t meet on Monday or Wednesday mornings, email me so that we can find a good time to meet. (If you can meet Mon/Wed am, it is helpful to do so, to ensure my other times are free for students who can’t.)

Link to office hours signup sheet: sign up [here](#).

Why should we meet?

I meet with students for many reasons. I’m here to talk about anything that is exciting or confusing in the course material, to clarify and help you plan your approach to assignments, and to explain how the skills and ideas we work on in class relate to real-world issues and translate to life after college. I also help when students are struggling: remote learning + pandemic + many other challenges we are all facing make this a particularly difficult time for nearly everyone. I can help find resources and suggest new ideas when things aren’t working. In general, I recommend that all students meet with me at least once a term. I look forward to getting to know you better!

Communication

All course announcements and general emails will be made via Canvas. These will be automatically forwarded to your UO email. (Check and adjust your Canvas settings under Account > Notifications if you would also like to receive announcements via text.)

Required Texts

(available by mail from the Duckstore and online)

Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.* (Penguin, ISBN 9780141182087)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford, ISBN 9780192833662)

Other readings will be made available in files on our course Canvas site. You will be expected to have access to course readings during class.

Film Screenings

We will discuss 6 films in the class. The pandemic means that we can’t watch these together. All the films are streamable. Three are available for free; three require a rental fee (\$4 or less). You are expected to arrange to see each film before we discuss it in class and to take some notes on it while watching, as with the texts we read. You must include films in your commonplace book (see below).

How to access our class

Log into canvas.uoregon.edu using your DuckID to access our class. If you have questions about accessing and using Canvas, visit the [Canvas support page](#). Canvas and Technology Support also is available by phone or live chat: 541-346-4357 | livehelp.uoregon.edu

If you face Internet access challenges: companies continue to offer free access during this challenging time. To learn more about options visit UO Information Services' [web page on going remote](#).

Students experiencing low connectivity during Zoom meetings should consider turning their video off or might consider selecting “phone call” rather than “computer audio” when joining a meeting (dial in using the number that appears, with passcode and participant ID; it will link your audio and video seamlessly, but you'll be using your cell network for audio rather than your internet bandwidth).

Course Schedule

- January 4** Introduction; Orientation with early texts (Hesiod, Homer, Virgil)
January 6 Genre + robots
Read early texts if you haven't yet
Watch: *Metropolis* (1927, dir. Lang, 153 minutes, available free on Kanopy through the Knight Library website, uoregon.kanopy.com)
For Jan. 6 discussion, watch at least first hour
- January 11** Complete: *Metropolis*; Read *R.U.R* Act I
January 13 Complete *R.U.R.*
Discussion: *R.U.R.* + *Metropolis*
- January 18** **MLK, Jr. Day – no class meeting**
January 20 Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, selections [+ use Bovilsky, “Help reading Spenser”]
January 21 • **Close reading 1 due**
- January 25** *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Wise, 92 minutes, streamable on Vudu/YouTube/Amazon etc., \$4) [do not watch the remake by mistake!]
Discussion: Spenser, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*
- January 27** Riskin, “Eighteenth-Century Wetware”; Robert-Houdin, *Memoirs*, chapters 9 and 10 (read 8 if you have time).
- February 1** Read: Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”
Discussion: catch-up + Turing
- February 3** Watch: *Blade Runner* (dir. Scott, approx. 2 hours, streamable on Amazon, \$4)
Discussion of Turing, *Blade Runner*
• **Submit Commonplace Book by email**

- February 8** Hoffmann, “The Sand-Man”
- February 10** Watch: *The Stepford Wives* (1975; dir. Forbes, 116 minutes, streamable free on Tubi)
Discussion of *The Stepford Wives*, robots and gender
- February 11** • **Close reading 2 due**
- February 15** Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Volume 1: pp. 5-68
- February 17** Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Volume 2: pp. 69-123
- February 22** Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Volume 3: pp. 124-191 • **Final paper prospectus due**
- February 24** Watch: *Terminator 2* (1991, dir. Cameron, 156 minutes, streamable on Amazon, \$4)
Discussion of *Terminator 2*
- March 1** *Ghost in the Shell* (1995, dir. Oshii, 85 minutes, streamable free on Tubi or YouTube, free) ****please** screen in Japanese with subtitles, dubbed English version has different, inaccurate, and inferior dialogue**
Discussion of *Ghost in the Shell*
- March 3** Read: Lem, *Cyberiad*, pp. 3-102 (in Part 1)
- March 8** *Cyberiad*, pp. 103-295 (in Parts 1 and 2) • **Submit Commonplace Book by email**
- March 10** Robots + genre • **Final paper due (5-6 pp.)**

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation

Participation in class is required. You are expected to bring and ask questions or comments about the reading/viewing or to respond to those of your classmates. You can ask questions and/or speak live, type in our Zoom chat, or submit questions or thoughts to a weekly discussion thread in Canvas.

Students are expected to contribute to class discussion in one or more of the above formats at least once a week. (Formats = live in class, in class chat, or weekly Canvas discussion threads.) During class, please pay attention to the class conversation. If possible, please keep your video on (see Zoom guideline 3 below), and generally be present and focused in class. If your camera needs to be off, you must be able to respond via audio. Active participation can raise your final grade (see grade breakdown below).

This is such a hard time. I hope that active engagement can help everyone feel included in the community of our class. The issues we’ll discuss are often presented fancifully, but they include important considerations of our own moment about treatment of the vulnerable, what is necessary to be fully human, how we think about the full range of variable human traits and abilities, and whether we take others seriously. Thinking about these issues together can help us flourish as much as possible in an intellectual, ethical, and friendly learning community.

Zoom participation

Specific guidelines for best practices using Zoom:

1. Please test your video and audio prior to joining a live class session. You can learn more about testing your audio and video by visiting the [UO Service Portal](#).
2. Try to be on time when the meeting starts.
3. All of us occasionally need to hide video, but know that seeing each other's faces helps us connect and learn from each other. As a teacher, being able to see you helps me ensure I am communicating to the best of my ability, partly by seeing when I have not been clear. I love teaching and working with students, Zoom or not, but it is harder to teach well talking to a wall of rectangles. (Indeed, the content of this course will suggest some reasons for this!) When you can, please keep your video on. Note: in recordings, only the speaker shows up.
4. That said, please be mindful that others can see you and your surroundings when your video is on. Try to find a quiet setting without lots of noise or busy activities in the background. Please minimize distractions like eating or multitasking.
5. Use a microphone or speak closely to your computer microphone so that others can hear you. If you have video on, try to look at your camera, not the screen, when you are contributing.
6. Mute your audio when you are not actively contributing. When contributing, avoid making other noises such as typing or eating or having side conversations with others who might be present with you.
7. Use chat to pose questions or offer your thoughts while others are contributing. The chat can be read by all and should reflect respect for our class community.
8. For help and troubleshooting with Zoom, visit the [UO Service Portal](#).

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory; more than three unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered as follows. Four unexcused absences will lower your grade two-thirds of a full letter grade (A- becomes B); five will lower your grade one full letter grade (A- becomes B-). Six or more unexcused absences will mean a failing grade. **NOTE:** If you need to miss synchronous classes b/c of time differences, technical difficulties, or family obligations, you will not be penalized if you watch the class video or do make-up work as directed by me. You must get in touch with me about any of these situations, ideally before class takes place.

Documented illness and personal emergencies are excused absences: you will not be penalized for an excused absence. If you are ill or need to offer care or help to others, contact me in advance of any missed class to touch base and find out what you will need to make up before next class.

Reading/Screening/Writing

Students taking the class should expect to spend roughly 8 hours/week on class work outside of class meetings (reading, watching films, taking notes, and writing/revising papers – time will be

more in some weeks, less in others). This number is the number UO policy requires me to program (2 hours/week of work per credit hour of the course).

Assignments

This course includes several assignments: production of a **commonplace book** to help develop your sense of your interests in the course areas and to synthesize readings; **2 close readings** (2-3 pp. each); and a **final essay** (5-6 pp.), preceded by a **prospectus**.

Assignments must be typed in 12-point font, be double spaced, and have reasonable margins (1 inch is generally standard; greater than 1.25 inch will not be accepted). You may work from MLA or Chicago format: just be consistent.

Please proofread and revise your written work. Extensive sloppiness and mechanical errors will result in a lower grade.

Late papers will be penalized one third of a letter grade per day. However, you may ask for an extension if the due date is more than 72 hours (3 days) later, and the earlier the better. In case of a looming or unexpected disaster, consideration will be given if you keep me in the loop and communicate in advance. Stay in touch.

Note: it will always help if you hand in assigned work, even if it is quite late. I can give significant credit for almost any late paper, but I can't give credit for no paper.

No incompletes will be granted except in case of documented emergency.

GRADES

A final grade of **C or better** in the course is required for English major credit.

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

Participation	10%	
Close reading 1	10%	due Jan 21
Close reading 2	15%	due Feb 11
Commonplace book	25%	due Feb 3 and March 8
Final paper prospectus	5%	due Feb 22
Final paper	35%	due March 10

PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING

In accord with English Department policy, academic dishonesty (plagiarism or cheating) will minimally result in an automatic failing grade for this course. In addition, all incidents of plagiarism will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct, as required by the University.

Plagiarism is the use of another person's words or ideas without due acknowledgment. It may be intentional or unintentional. To make sure you have avoided plagiarism in your work, you should:

- Accurately quote the original author's words if you are quoting.
- Enclose the quotation within quotation marks.
- Follow the quotation with an in-text citation.
- Introduce quotations with a phrase that includes the author's name (Turing argues that...)
- If you are paraphrasing someone else's ideas or words rather than quoting, you must still cite the source with in-text citation, footnote, or a phrase that includes the author's name.
- Provide a list of references with full citation information at the end of the paper.

The bottom line is that all work submitted in this course must be your own, and written exclusively for this course. The use of all external sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented, and you are not allowed to cut and paste from Internet sites into your paper. (Note: Most internet essays aimed at students are not written at the college level. Stealing from this work, even in the case that you are not caught, often results in a lower grade.)

For further guidance, see the UO library website (under "How-To Guides" on the library homepage) for more on citation practices. If you remain uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism, definitions are available in the "Student Conduct Code" section of the Student Life website (<http://studentlife.uoregon.edu>). Additional information is available at <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism>. You are welcome to contact me if you have any questions about these definitions.

Finally, if you are having trouble writing a paper or understanding what we are looking for, please let me know. I do not expect that you already know how to do what I am teaching you. Extra help is always available. There's nothing wrong with getting something wrong; often it takes mistakes to learn, and this is not something to panic about. However, if you take ideas from elsewhere and pass them off as your own, you learn nothing—so the next paper will therefore be no easier—and risk incurring significant academic penalties.

COURSE CONTENT ADVISORY

The texts we will read and watch this term deal with adult themes and subject matter and will often contain beliefs and opinions that are very different from our own and sometimes include upsetting or offensive depictions. The ability to encounter unfamiliar and even disturbing ideas with an attitude of critical distance is fundamental to academic work and to forming arguments supporting your own beliefs. Not everything we read or watch will be likable. Indeed, many of these texts contain disturbing representations with the goal that their reader or viewer will think hard about them and their meanings and impacts; others are not as self-aware but offer important depictions for us to consider as we think about the full history of robot stories. Cultivating such hard thinking is good practice not merely for us as students of literature and media; it can also help prepare us to have empathy, to build resilience, to think about the consequences of beliefs, and to live as ethical members of a diverse and inclusive society.

ACCOMMODATIONS

The University of Oregon is working to create inclusive learning environments. Please notify me if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu or visit <https://aec.uoregon.edu/>.

WRITING ASSOCIATES

The Writing Associates Program offers free, one-on-one peer tutoring for students in 100- and 200-level English and Composition 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. To make an appointment with a Writing Associate, go to <https://writingassociates.uoregon.edu>.