GOTHIC FICTION
ENG 205: Genre Topic
Spring 2022
CRN: 35660
Meeting Time/Location: 1600-1720 Tuesdays and Thursdays / 253 STB
(the course meets in person)

Instructor: Prof. Stefanie Lethbridge (she/her/hers)
Office: PLC 347
Email: stefleth@uoregon.edu
Office Hours: Wednesday 10:30-12:00 in my office, Thursday 10:30-12:00 on Zoom
(https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/93556174748?pwd=WVFNT1NIYjYvZ2RySm5ESnY2QzNBQT09)

COURSE DESCRIPTION
The gothic is a form which turns the forbidden into fictions of terror; it enables societies to talk about the taboo. Throughout its history, the gothic has explored the terrors of religious excess, the fears of scientific invention, the fascination with the exotic, nightmares of domestic violence and anxieties over sexual desire and changing gender roles. In this course, we will trace the typical and very adaptable conventions and strategies of the gothic from its invention in the late 18th century into the 21st century. We will start with some short tales that illustrate the typical features of the genre as it started in the late 18th century. The class focus will then be on some seminal texts of the form throughout the nineteenth century: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla (1872), and R.L. Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886). In the last weeks of term, we will investigate how the genre developed into the 20th century.
This class will give you opportunity to practice close reading and analysis skills, and to consider your observations in the context of a public intellectual context.

DEGREE CRITERIA:
ENG 205 is open to all students. This course satisfies requirements for the English Major and Minor.
LEARNING OUTCOMES
The English Department’s assessment procedure is built around six desired learning outcomes: 1) read literary and cultural texts with discernment and comprehension and with an understanding of their conventions; 2) draw on relevant cultural and/or historical information to situate texts within their cultural, political, and historical contexts; 3) perform critical, formal analyses of literary, cinematic, and other cultural texts; 4) write focused, analytical essays in clear, grammatical prose; 5) employ logic, creativity, and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments; 6) employ primary and/or secondary sources, with proper acknowledgment and citation, as they contribute to a critical essay’s thesis.

REQUIRED TEXTS
- Regular access to Canvas: all short texts are available on Canvas
- Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (make sure you have access to the 1818 version)
- Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla
- R.L. Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

All short texts (see class schedule) are available on Canvas. Please bring the texts (either in digital format, as printout or in print format) to class for the relevant sessions. The longer texts listed above are available online (links below) or as print versions through online purchase (Oxford World Classics editions recommended).

- Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (make sure you have access to the 1818 version) (http://www.online-literature.com/shelley_mary/frankenstein/ or Oxford World’s Classics print version, ed. Nick Groom)
- Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10007/10007-h/10007-h.htm or in the story collection In a Glass Darkly, Oxford World’s Classics, ed. Robert Tracy)

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN
Class preparation and participation 20%
Three reading response essays (ca 500 words each) 30% (10% each)
Mid-term exam 20%
Final analysis essay (6-7 pages double-spaced, ca. 1500-2000 words) 30%

CLASS PREPARATION AND PARTICIPATION 20%
You are expected to attend class sessions regularly and do the required reading for each session. In addition, I will set a specific set of focus questions as preparation task for each session in the session before it (also posted on Canvas). There will be oral and written components to individual sessions and preparation tasks, so participation does not necessarily depend on contributions to oral discussions. Regular attendance (maximum of four absences for the term) and persistent evidence of preparation will earn you a B for the 20% of your final grade. High quality contributions (oral or written) will improve your grade, evidence of poor preparation and lack of interest in class proceedings will lower your grade.
THREE READING RESPONSE ESSAYS (ca 500 words each) 30% (10% each)
Throughout the term, you should respond to three of the assigned readings (for deadlines see class schedule). You can choose whichever texts appeal to you. These responses should record your critical engagement with any given text and they should be structured like a short essay (with thesis claim, argument, conclusion). For this assignment you can choose to develop your thoughts on one of the class preparation tasks or you can comment on something else entirely that strikes you as important. For suggestions how to engage with the texts and what questions to ask, see Appendix II. We will also develop some approach questions during class sessions. These essays should:

• Contribute a literary-critical analysis of a minimum of 500 words (roughly 2 double-spaced pages)
• Contain an original title that indicates something about the topic and argument
• Be organized by a clearly articulated thesis that includes both an observation and an interpretive claim
• Present a minimum of 2 pieces of direct textual evidence supporting that claim
• Attempt to explain how each piece of evidence illustrates the claim(s) you’re making
• End with a concluding statement on the significance, or stakes, of the argument—i.e. the “so what?” question

For details of assessment and grading, please refer to Appendix I.

MID-TERM EXAM 20%
This is an in-class exam with short-answer questions (2-3 sentences) and slightly longer short-answer questions (4-6 sentences). The questions will be about genre conventions and texts discussed in class up to this date. Knowledge questions will be based entirely on class material (no additional research required). In addition, the exam will ask you to critically engage with one or two aspects of the texts we discussed (your own engagement, not a repetition of class material).

FINAL ANALYSIS ESSAY (6-7 pages, 1500-2000 words) 30%
For this essay I will provide some prompts for you to focus on. These prompts will draw on the texts and concepts discussed in class. Some of the prompts will also offer the option to expand your text focus on texts you think relate to the class topic. The essay should be structured like the shorter response essays you wrote throughout the term (only longer and thus more detailed in the analysis). You should not, however, repeat the argument you made in short response essays. No secondary sources required. If you do use secondary material, make sure to reference these appropriately. Essays are due in finals week.

ABSENCES AND LATE ASSIGNMENTS
To get the most out of this class, I invite you 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. Because I’m not your parent and we’re all adults here, I don’t require detailed explanations of why you are absent. My one requirement is that you should stay below four absences for the term. Be aware, however, that chronic absences will severely impact your grade due to missed in-class group exercises, free writing assignments, class discussions, and other markers of attendance and participation which I’ll collect throughout the term.
If you miss class, it is your responsibility entirely to approach your fellow classmates to get notes for that day and to catch up on any material you missed. Please make these initial inquiries and develop specific questions/concerns about the material before emailing me or scheduling an appointment.
Students who observe religious holidays, who are involved in university sanctioned activities, or who have other commitments or circumstances that conflict with academic requirements must inform me and make compensatory arrangements well in advance of the absence.

**NOTE:** Missing class for Covid-related reasons is an excused absence. Remember that you help yourself and everyone around you when you stay home if you have symptoms of contagious illness or when someone you live with must quarantine. Thank you for taking care of others in and beyond our community. If you need to stay home (e.g. you have symptoms of contagious illness, you are waiting for a test result per the Covid policies below, etc.), please email me if you are affected and we will try and work out accommodations to deal with the situation.

**Late assignments** (Reading Response Essays) will have parts of their grade deducted according to the following schedule:

- A few days late: 1/3 of a grade deducted for each day the assignment is late, up to one full grade
- Up to 1 week late: 1 full grade deducted (an A becomes a B)
- Up to 2 weeks late: 2 full grades (an A becomes a C)
- Up to 3 weeks late: 3 full grades deducted (an A becomes a D)
- More than 3 weeks late: the assignment counts as failed

**ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT**
The University Student Conduct Code and Community Standards 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](#). I will report all instances of academic misconduct to the appropriate offices and those found to have violated the student conduct code and academic misconduct policies will receive a failing grade for the course. Put simply: don't do it.

**STUDENT SUCCESS:**
Here are some “Insider Pro-Tips” as the most important things you can do to ensure success this term:

- Read the syllabus carefully, review it regularly, and coordinate your assignments and responsibilities for the term accordingly.
- Make sure that you have access to all required course texts as soon as possible. Reach out to me immediately if you’re having difficulty securing any of the texts.
- Read the assigned texts actively and closely (see Appendix II for suggestions).
- Review your class notes and try to apply concepts established in class to your own reading.
- Remain as current as possible with all readings and assignments.
- Reach out and communicate any questions or concerns with me throughout the term. I will be as responsive as possible. I recommend checking your email and our course Canvas page at least once a day for the duration of the term.
- Try and make the most of learning opportunities. This includes making mistakes (because that is how we learn).
COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Basic Parameters
March 29  Introductions, reviewing the course syllabus, some thoughts on the gothic
REVIEW: British Library Video on ‘The Gothic’, by Prof. John Bowen
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNohDegnaOQ&t=75s)
March 31  READ: Anna Laetitia Aikin: “Sir Bertrand: A Fragment” (on Canvas)
PREPARE: Focus questions Bertrand

Week 2: 18th-century starting points
April 5    READ: Anon, “The Friar’s Tale” (on Canvas)
PREPARE: Focus questions Friar
April 7    READ: Isaac Crookenden, “The Vindictive Monk, or, The Fatal Ring” (on Canvas)
PREPARE: Focus questions Monk
ASSIGNMENT DUE: Reading response essay 1 (submitted as print-out during class)

Week 3: Frankenstein
April 12   READ: Shelley, Frankenstein Vol. I, ch. 1-5 (get your own copy)
PREPARE: Focus questions Frankenstein 1
April 14   READ: Shelley, Frankenstein Vol. I, ch. 6-8
PREPARE: Focus questions Frankenstein 2

Week 4: Frankenstein (cont.)
April 19   READ: Shelley, Frankenstein Vol. II, ch. 1-9 (ch. 9-17 in online version)
PREPARE: Focus questions Frankenstein 3
April 21   READ: Shelley, Frankenstein Vol. III, ch. 1-3 (ch. 18-21 in online version)
PREPARE: Focus questions Frankenstein 4

Week 5: Frankenstein (cont.)
April 26   READ: Shelley, Frankenstein Vol. III ch. 4-7 (ch. 22-24+Walton in online version)
PREPARE: Focus questions Frankenstein 5
April 28   MID-TERM EXAM

Week 6: Carmilla
May 3      READ: LeFanu, Carmilla, ch. 1-9
PREPARE: Focus questions Carmilla 1
May 5      READ: LeFanu, Carmilla, ch. 10-16
PREPARE: Focus questions Carmilla 2

Week 7: Jekyll and Hyde
May 10     READ: Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde ch. 1-9 (get your own copy)
PREPARE: Focus questions Jekyll and Hyde 1
May 12     READ: Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde ch. 10
PREPARE: Focus questions Jekyll and Hyde 2
ASSIGNMENT DUE: Reading response essay 2 (submitted as print-out during class)
Week 8: The foreign uncanny

May 17  READ: Poe, “Ligeia” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Poe

May 19  READ: Kipling, “The Mark of the Beast” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Kipling

Week 9: Fin de siècle

May 24  READ: Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Speckled Band” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Conan Doyle

May 26  READ: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Gilman

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Reading response essay 3 (submitted as print-out during class)

Week 10: Into the 20th century

May 31  READ: Fay Weldon, “Angel, All Innocence” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Weldon

June 2   READ: Gibson, “The Gernsback Continuum” (on Canvas)
        PREPARE: Focus questions Gibson

Finals Week

FINAL ESSAY due on Canvas by midnight Tuesday

COURSE POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS

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. Students may also reach Professor Lethbridge via email and during open office hours in person or via Zoom. I will try and respond to all queries within 24 hours. Please be aware that I won’t respond to emails sent after 5pm on weekdays or those sent over the weekend until after 8am on the following business day.

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, GEs, 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.

Course Content and Intellectual Discussion
The gothic is a genre that habitually addresses taboo topics and deliberately tries to create extreme emotional responses. Accordingly, the texts read in this course will make explicit or implicit references to
violence, rape and forms of oppression. This course will openly engage these and related issues respectfully but also critically and without censorship.

**Covid policy:**
Please refer to the university website for current Covid policies: [https://coronavirus.uoregon.edu/covid-19-regulations](https://coronavirus.uoregon.edu/covid-19-regulations)

**Good Classroom Citizenship**
- Wear your **mask** and make sure it fits you well
- **Stay home** if you’re sick
- **Get to know your neighbors** in class, and let them know if you test positive
- **Get tested** regularly
- **Watch for signs and symptoms** with the daily symptom self-check
- **Wash your hands** frequently or use hand sanitizer

**Discussion and Engagement Guidelines**
Because we each come to this material and to this course from different social locations, geographies, cultures, communities, and experiences, it is important that we each buy into a shared set of values and protocols to engage critically with course materials and with each other. I offer the following as a baseline which we can discuss further in class and review together as the term moves along:

1. **Practice kindness, reciprocity and generosity** when engaging with others. This does not mean you can never question what anyone says or offer a contrary view. But do so with kindness and respect.

2. **Expect and respect diversity:** All classes at the University of Oregon welcome and respect diverse experiences, perspectives, and approaches. What is not welcome are behaviors or contributions that undermine, demean, or marginalize others based on race, ethnicity, gender, sex, age, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or socioeconomic status. We will value differences and communicate disagreements with respect.

3. **Help everyone learn:** Our goal is to learn together by learning from one another. As we move forward learning during this challenging time, it is important that we work together and build on our strengths. Not everyone is savvy in the use of various digital learning procedures (including your instructors!) and this means we need to be patient with each other, identify ways we can assist others, be open-minded to receiving help and advice from others, and remaining as flexible as possible.

4. **Interact appropriately:** Our learning environment provides an opportunity to practice being authentic, respectful, and rigorous in our contributions. Use discussions and activities as opportunities to practice the kind and quality of work expected for assignments and to seize the chance to learn from others and develop your interpersonal skills, such as mindful listening, self-reflection, and awareness of one’s own tendencies (e.g. Do I contribute too much? Too little?).
COMMITMENTS AND RESOURCES

Inclusive and Accessible Education
The University of Oregon is committed to fostering inclusive learning environments. Please notify me if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in any barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center in 360 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu to set up any necessary accommodations for the course.

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 discrimination, 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 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.

Health, Wellness, and Counseling Services
Life at college can be very complicated. Students (and faculty!) often feel overwhelmed or stressed, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationships, or just need help navigating challenges in their life. If you're facing such challenges, you don't need to handle them on your own--there's help and support on campus. As your instructors, if we believe you may need additional support, we will express our concerns, the reasons for them, and refer you to resources that might be helpful. It is not our intention to know the details of what might be bothering you, but simply to let you know we care and that help is available. Getting help is a courageous thing to do—for yourself and those you care about. University Health Services help students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. If you need general resources on coping with stress or want to talk with another student who has been in the same place as you, visit the Duck Nest (located in the EMU on the ground floor) and get help from one of the specially trained Peer Wellness Advocates. Find out more at health.uoregon.edu/ducknest. University Counseling Services (UCS) has a team of dedicated staff members to support you with your concerns, many of whom can provide identity-based support. All clinical services are free and confidential. Find out more at counseling.uoregon.edu or by calling 541-346-3227 (anytime UCS is closed, the After-Hours Support and Crisis Line is available by calling this same number).

Food Security
Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students Office (346-3216, 164 Oregon Hall) for support. This UO webpage includes resources for food, housing, healthcare, childcare, transportation, technology, finances, and
legal support: https://blogs.uoregon.edu/basicneeds/food/. Additional resources related to food security on campus, in the City of Eugene, and across Lane County can be found at https://foodsecurity.uoregon.edu. The availability and operation of these programs remain fluid and subject to change without notice. The Student Sustainability Center (@uo_ssc) will try to aggregate changes and information for all programs via Facebook and Instagram. For food security specific resources, follow @feedtheflockuo. Please follow for the most up to date information regarding program changes.

Writing Associates
I strongly encourage you to take advantage of every resource available to you to improve your research, writing, and critical thinking skills. One of those resources is the English Writing Associates Program, a cohort of upper-division English majors who have been trained to assist you with any aspect of your writing for this course. To schedule a session, visit https://writingassociates.uoregon.edu/ and follow the instructions.
Appendix I: Assessment
This course uses the following assessment 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. This means that if you meet the minimum expectations for a given assignment or assignment category, you will be awarded an assessment of “B”. You can gain or lose ground in the following ways:
• Efforts that exceed or fail to meet “minimum expectations” will result in a +1/-1 assessment, equivalent to 1/3 of a grade point. For example, +1 on an assignment will bump you from a B to a B+, +2 to an A-, +3 to an A. Conversely, a -1 will take you from a B to a B-, a -2 to a C+, a -3 to a C, etc.
• Those who fail to meet all the minimum expectations for a given assignment will receive no credit for that assignment.
• Not all assignments or assignment criteria will have opportunities for exceeding expectations. You either meet them (B) or you don’t (-1).

So, what does this look like in practice? Consider this evaluation rubric for a Reading Response Essay for students X and Y:

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

As you can see, Student X exceeded 1 assessment criteria (+1) while failing to meet minimum expectations for 2 others (-2). The assessment for Student X would thus be a -1, equating to a 1/3 grade point deduction, or a B-. Because Student Y met each of the minimum expectations and exceeded assignment length and minimum evidence, they would earn a +2 assessment (+1 for each criteria), resulting in a 2/3 grade point increase, or an A-.
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 demands patience and time, two things which many of us find ourselves possessing less and less of. Don’t try to rush meaning. Read the text several times if it is difficult. Ask yourself at what point you have particular difficulties: those might be the most interesting places. 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 gaining an intimate knowledge of the details of 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 away 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, each building upon and reinforcing the other. 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! Knowledge is never final; rather, it is built recursively by continually revising and reevaluating what we previously thought about what we knew/know about a text (or anything else).

• 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; draw arrows, establishing obscure connections in the text; note patterns of imagery or language as you see them; locate contradictions and ambiguities; 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 rented or 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. There is a conversation between readers and writers that goes both ways. 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: How does it start and end and how do these elements relate to each other? Which central topics are addressed and how? How is information given and when (or is the reader kept in the dark about important aspects)? How do characters relate to each other and to the main theme(s)? What are important moments in the text and why? Are there any significant changes either for characters or in the way the story is narrated? Are there obvious (or less obvious) attempts to influence readers? etc. 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?

- Pay attention to details
How do authors employ language to achieve certain effects? Are there elements that are repeated, maybe even with the same words? Are there certain motifs that are used? Do they change?

- 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?