Good reading is slow, careful reading, not speed reading.

Slow reading is an encounter with the materiality of a text, its words and sounds, figures and forms, echoes and borrowings. In the words of one writer, careful reading requires one "to go aside, to take time, to become still" and "to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and after, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers."

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Course content and goals:

English 251A is a course on the method and craft of careful reading as practised in an academic setting: "an introduction to strategies of reading, interpretation, and analysis of literary and non-literary texts..." as the calendar puts it. The course provides students with formal training and practice in textual analysis, and in the canons of acceptable evidence for critical writing on literary and non-literary texts.

Fundamental to textual analysis is knowledge of the building blocks of texts. Texts are structures of words or images used to communicate; and the aim and purpose of analysis is to understand the composition of these structures (and their role in what a text communicates). Some of the building blocks to be studied in English 251A may already be familiar to students (such as rhyme, metaphor, and point of view), while others are likely to be new (such as intertextuality, metonymy, and addressee).

The course has three main goals. On successful completion the course, students should be able to:

--identify and name the building blocks of texts (using accepted critical vocabulary)

--analyze the role of these elements in the composition or patterning of a text (using accepted critical strategies)

--formulate and demonstrate (in an essay) a thesis on the meaning or significance communicated by a text, based on analysis of how it communicates (using accepted critical evidence)

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Class organization and format:

In this class we will work together to explore the method and art of textual analysis. We will do this by examining a number of poems and short stories. We will also examine some non-literary texts—including ads and perhaps some videos—for the elements that literature shares with other, even non-linguistic, forms of communication. According to the romantic writer Percy Shelley, poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Shelley meant that the metaphors created by poets exert a powerful—yet invisible—influence over us in our ordinary talk, even becoming part of our common sense. From this perspective the techniques of criticism can help us to understand the texts and representations we encounter in everyday life.

This course is required of all English majors and honours students because the methods of reading and analysis it teaches are foundational for the other English courses students will take over the next two or three years. Probably the best way to meet the goals of this course is as an independent learner, someone who practises the analytic strategies introduced without continual prompting from the instructor. That is one reason why the class will function as a seminar—to offer students an opportunity in self-directed learning. Think of the class as a workshop in which everyone has the opportunity to hone their reading skills and to contribute to the team reading effort.

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Logistics:

Required Texts:
Robert Scholes, et al., Text Book, 2nd ed. (St. Martin’s)
M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 6th ed. (HBJ)

Recommended Texts:
Joseph Gibaldi, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 4th ed. (MLA)

Schedule:

Since this is a seminar and not a lecture course, it will address the interests and abilities of the class as a unique group of learners. Topics are set for each of the four sections of the course (as are readings from Text Book); supporting selections of poetry, short fiction, and other texts will be assigned weekly (a list of core selections will be provided in the third week of classes).