ENGL 251A: Criticism 1

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Welcome to English 251A, Criticism 1!

Please feel free to contact me with any concerns or questions you have about the class, the readings, or the assignments. I will be in my office during the hours noted, and I’m always very happy to have students drop by during these times, or by appointment at other times. Beyond office hours, contact is probably best initiated via email. I will read your emails within one day, and will try to respond within two business days.

Course description:

The undergraduate calendar describes this course as “an introduction to strategies of reading, interpretation, and analysis of literary and non-literary texts, focusing on narrative, poetics, discourse, and rhetoric, and the acquisition of critical vocabulary.” Which is exactly what we’ll do here.

More specifically, we’ll be learning and practicing established formal practices of reading appropriate to the discipline of literary studies: obviously, you all already know how to read pretty well — this course is about reading in a professional way according to methods and standards established within the field of English Language and Literature. Don’t worry: this isn’t as boring or rigid as you might think. Literary studies has a rich methodological history, and by learning to practice various reading and interpretive skills developed by others, you will not only gain the wealth of prior knowledge and practice but also be spurred to new creative interpretations of your own.

This course will challenge you to think in multiple ways about any given piece of text: moving beyond the individual or emotive reaction to a text (“I don’t really like bugs, so this is a crappy book”), we will aim for critical interpretation of it (“Bugs in this text operate as symbols representing the undifferentiatedness of urban ‘hive’ life”). In this way you will be empowered to participate in an interpretive community of scholars as you pursue the rest of your studies in language and literature.

Course meeting times

The course meets twice weekly, Mondays and Wednesdays from 2:30-3:50, in Arts Lecture Hall 105.
Required texts

The following texts are required for this course. They are available at the University Bookstore now. Please buy them, and bring them to class as the assigned readings dictate.


Additionally, everybody needs a good dictionary at their elbow at all times. I always keep an online one and a print one handy. I look stuff up constantly, and so should you. Be prepared for random vocabulary questions from me in class.

Assignments and Mark Distribution

The following are the graded components of the course:

- Participation: 10%
- Mid-term exam 1: October 18 25%
- Mid-term exam 2: November 20 25%
- Final exam (exam period): 40%

**Participation:** This mark is based on your diligent attendance in and preparation for class. It is possible to score a perfect ten here. You will lose one half percentage point for each unexplained absence from class (you get one freebie—hey, I was a student once, too). You may also lose a half-point if you are obviously unprepared for class when called upon to participate in group work or question-and-answer sessions.

**Mid-term exams:** These will feature short-answer definition questions as well as longer-format interpretive questions. Mid-term 1 will cover material from the beginning of the course to that point, and mid-term 2 will cover material studied after mid-term 1.

**Final exam:** Structured similarly to the mid-term exams, the final exam covers material studied over the course of the entire semester. The exam will be scheduled during the exam period, so do not make any travel plans for that time until you know when the exam will be held.

Absence from class requires advance permission: excused absences are granted only in circumstances both dire and legitimate: "I'm really busy with assignments in all my other courses" is not a legitimate excuse, for example. Medical absences must be documented by a doctor's note. Missing class on the date of a mid-term is very serious and must be supported by very strong evidence indeed.
Special note: What you get out of this course will, in large measure, reflect what you put into it: it is among the best-kept secrets on campus that your future employers care very little for your grades, but very much for the quality of skills and knowledge you will exhibit upon graduation. So please be free to learn: don’t worry so much about your grades—paradoxically, giving up on grade-chasing and just trying to learn something is a strategy likely to reward you with the higher grades you were worried about in the first place.

Rights and Responsibilities

Every member of this class— instructors as well as students—has rights and responsibilities to ensure a pleasant and productive experience for all. We are all answerable to University policies governing ethical behaviour (Policy 33) and academic integrity (Policy 71), as well as to those outlining grievance or dispute procedures (Policy 70). Here are some more specific expectations for this course:

You will:

- be familiar with the university policies that govern your behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
- arrive prepared: with assigned reading and writing completed, and with the textbook in hand
- be an active participant in your own learning, while respecting the rights of others to learn as well
- give thoughtful consideration to instructor feedback on written and oral work

I will:

- be familiar with the university policies that govern my behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
- be available for consultation in person and over email as per stated policies
- return all assignments within two weeks
- provide helpful and respectful feedback on student work

The Faculty of Arts, which administers this course and is responsible to ensure adherence to codes of academic conduct, requires that the following paragraphs appear in this syllabus:

"Note on avoidance of academic offences: All students registered in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes an academic offence, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their academic actions. When the commission of an offence is established, disciplinary penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students are directed to consult the summary of Policy #71 which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar (section 1; on the Web at http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infoucal/UW/policy_71.html)."
“If you need help in learning how to avoid offences such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your TA or course instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean.

“Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.html.”

Students seeking guidance on academic honesty are urged to discuss the issue with their tutorial leader, or to consult the following page of the Arts Faculty Web site, "How to Avoid Plagiarism and Other Written Offences: A Guide for Students and Instructors" (http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~sager/plagiarism.html)

**A final word**

Once more, welcome to the course! I hope you find as valuable as it will be challenging. I am looking forward to a productive and exciting semester, and to getting to know all of you.
Class Schedule

Basic Techniques and Problem Solving

13 September  Introduction: The work of English literary studies

15 September  Getting from Stop to Start: finding questions and finding answers
read: WOR Units 1, 2

20 September  Form, Structure, Grammar: basic units of meaning
read: WOR Unit 3

Dimensions of Language Variation

22 September  The word nerd in all of us: language as system
read: WOR Units 4, 5

27 September  Register: Place? Time? Gender? Social?
read: WOR Unit 6

29 September  “Oh, so that’s what political correctness is!”
read: WOR Units 7, 8

Analysing Poetic Form

4 October    Poetic analysis basics: rhyme, pattern, verse, metre
read: WOR Units 9, 10

6 October    Trickier poetic analysis: parallelism, deviation
read: WOR Unit 11, 12

11 October   Thanksgiving: University Holiday

13 October   Review, analysing poetic form

18 October   MID-TERM NUMBER ONE

Hey Wait! We Forgot About the Book!

20 October   History of the book: material forms
read: GLT “Format of a Book”

Reading Figures of Speech

25 October   What you mean to say or don’t: Metaphor and Irony
read: WOR, Units 13, 14

27 October Meaning what you haven’t said: Juxtaposition and Allusion
read: WOR, Units 15, 16

1 November Review, reading figures of speech

Aspects of Narrative

3 November Longer pieces: genre and narrative
read: WOR Units 17, 18

8 November Deliberate form: narration and point of view
read: WOR Units 19, 20

10 November Realism and beyond: analysing narrative
read: WOR Units 21, 22

15 November Review, aspects of narrative

17 November MID-TERM NUMBER TWO

Beyond the Literary Text

22 November Where and why: locating the ‘reader’ and the ‘writer’
read: WOR Units 23, 24

24 November The interpretive part of critique: canonicity and cultural capital
read: WOR Unit 25

29 November Beyond the written text: performance, film, multimedia
read: WOR Units 26, 27

1 December Film clip analysis: The Matrix

6 December Review: class-directed session