

## ENG 238: Academic Writing for English Majors: The Genre of Literary Criticism and the Practice of Rhetoric

Dr. Ira Allen, Fisk 227 (Office Hours Wednesday 1:00-4:00 and by appointment)  
Tuesday and Thursday 2:00-3:15p, in Fisk 337

### What is “Academic Writing for English Majors”?

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This is a course intended for English majors, focusing on the methods and practices of reading, writing, and research specific to the study of literature. Through critical reading of primary works and analysis of the genre of literary criticism, students hone their capacities for persuasive writing at an advanced level. For students who aren't English majors, the course is likely to be pretty difficult, perhaps forbiddingly so. For students who are English majors, the course represents your single best chance to figure out exactly what it is that people in the discipline are doing—what, by extension, *you* are doing. It will, however, still be difficult. *Prerequisite: English major status AND completion of ENGL 204.*

### What Does “The Genre of Literary Criticism” Mean? And Why “Rhetoric”?

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The aim of this course is to help you understand what people in your new discipline are up to. There are two basic ways of understanding something: (1) by studying it and (2) by doing it. In this course, you'll do both.

So, we begin by working together to understand literary criticism—the scholarship about texts that people in English departments produce—as a particular kind of *genre*. In that regard, literary criticism is not unlike its own objects of study (i.e., various genres of literature: the novel, short story, poem, film, etc.). A genre is not a fixed and final definition, but rather *a structure of expectation*. Genres are typified structures that both reflect and drive audience desires. We'll talk a lot more about what this means over the course of the semester. The general point is that, just like novels, poems, and so on, literary criticism, too, is a genre of writing. The first and primary objective of this course is to help you understand that genre: what literary criticism looks like, how it works, what people want from it, etc.

The second objective of this course is to help you produce original literary criticism. This is where the practice of rhetoric comes in. Literary criticism is not mathematics: there is no one right answer. And, yet, there are plenty of wrong answers; there are plenty of ways of reading a text and arguments about texts that *don't work*. Sometimes, a reading will work for one audience and not for others. Other times, a reading won't work for anybody. One cannot argue that *Hamlet* is implicitly a treatise on the importance of good housekeeping, or that *Wuthering Heights* is a story about robots and the zombie apocalypse. Not all arguments about texts are viable. You practice rhetoric when you work to discover which kinds of arguments, in which situations, for which audiences, under which conditions, *will* work. Rhetoric, in other words, is about discovering and making good arguments under conditions of uncertainty. Even though there is no one right argument about a given text, there are certainly more and less persuasive, better and worse arguments. The ultimate

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goal of this course is to help you practice making good arguments about texts, to help you produce literary criticism in your own right.

### Coursework

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Formal work for the course includes **(1) a short paper of 3-5 pages on the genre of literary criticism**, due in Week 9; **(2) a conference paper abstract (300-500 words)**, due in Week 13; and **(3) a final paper, 10-12 pages, of original literary criticism**, building on your conference paper abstract and due one week after the last day of class (due in a “Week 15” that falls after the end of our scheduled meetings). The first two-thirds of the semester will be devoted to understanding the concept and process of “genre analysis” and to examining literary criticism as a specific genre. The final third of the semester will be an iterative process of working to produce a conference-paper-quality piece of original literary criticism. For the latter, you will probably be working in thematic clusters with classmates (i.e., 18<sup>th</sup> century British, world and comparative literature, modern American, digital humanities, etc.), although your final paper will be a solo effort.

Informal work for the course takes four forms: **(a) interviews of two English professors (with transcription of the interviews)** in Weeks 4 and 5; **(b) presentation in class of what your interviews have helped you learn about the genre of literary criticism** in Week 6; **(c) two presentations of your small group’s work** in Weeks 10 through 13; and **(d) weekly Reddit responses to course readings** throughout the semester. **Completing all assigned readings is a vital part of the coursework**, and failure to do so will negatively impact your grade.

A final note on coursework: I fully expect you to write conference-quality pieces of original literary criticism by the end of the semester. I also hope very much that you will choose to submit your (revised and polished) abstracts to an actual conference, and that you will present (revised and polished) versions of your final papers at that conference. If you choose to do so, please feel free to contact me for help at any stage in the revision process.

### How the Readings All Fit Together

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This semester is divided into two basic parts: “Part I: The Genre of Literary Criticism” and “Part II: The Practice of Rhetoric.” Part I is divided into three subsections, while Part II stands alone.

In “Part I: The Genre of Literary Criticism,” we’ll talk first about (1) “Understanding Genre: *What Is It that We Read?*”, then about (2) “Sources of Literary Criticism: *What Is It that We Want?*”, and finally about (3) “Deciphering the Genre of Literary Criticism.” In all this, the *we* that reads and wants and deciphers is, in a sense, aspirational—students are not yet part of the discipline, part of the community of professional readers and writers that forms the field of English Studies. So, Part I of the semester is about helping you to develop a sense of what that community *does* and *wants* when it reads and writes. Part II of the semester is about helping you to more fully join that community—specifically, by working up a conference-paper-quality piece of original literary criticism.

For most class sessions, we will be reading from one key theoretical text and one primary text. Here, I break down the basic schemas our reading and writing will follow throughout the semester.

In the first two-thirds of the semester, all will share the same texts. Our key theoretical texts will be Anis Bawarshi on how genre works and Joshua Landy on what fiction is for, then Rita Felski on

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what literary criticism is about and Amy Anderson on styles of argument in contemporary literary theory. At the same time, our primary texts will be selections from several different genres of literary production and then, as we move to Felski and Anderson, selections of literary criticism from within different thematic clusters or subfields of English Studies. It's important to note that we will *not* be covering all of the many different genres of literature that are out there. Nor, for that matter, will we read literary criticism from all of English's subfields. The point is to practice thinking about genre in general, and then to think about the genre of literary criticism in particular. So, our readings will form a representative selection, rather than aiming for anything like exhaustive inclusion.

In the final third of the semester, you will split into small groups, thematic clusters defined by literary subfield. You will read and discuss the same primary texts and theoretical texts as your small group, and will take turns presenting your ongoing work to the class as a whole. Your small group will choose its own two primary texts and its own two theoretical texts. Together, your readings of these texts will form the foundations upon which each of you will build—in separate conversations with pieces of literary criticism that you will find for yourselves—your own original work of literary criticism. We'll talk more about how all this cashes out as the time approaches.

In general, we will be reading about a book's worth of material each week, a little less when the material is very dense. As noted, this will comprise a mixture of primary and theoretical texts. For Part I of the semester, what we will do with these texts is fairly straightforward: you will read them before class, and then we will talk about them together—we'll look at what the theoretical texts say about the world of texts and we'll look at how the primary texts are constructed or put together. Often, we'll talk about how well and to what extent the theoretical texts describe or help us understand what's going on in the primary texts. For Part II of the semester, this is also what we'll do, but our time in class will be a bit more intensely structured. Some notes on Part II of the semester follow the schedule.

All readings will be posted on Moodle as PDFs. I cannot stop you from printing out and having the full-length books bound. I actively encourage you to print everything out, including articles, and to read and take notes on hard copies. The assigned readings for each day **MUST** be brought to class.

### Semester Schedule

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#### PART I: THE GENRE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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##### 1) Understanding Genre: *What Is It that We Read?*

- \* Syllabus, Poetry (Erica Jong) and Bawarshi (Week 1: T 1/26; read Alexie and Bawarshi)
- \* The Short Story (Sherman Alexie) and Bawarshi (Week 1: R 1/28; read Albee and Bawarshi; RR1)
- \* Drama (Edward Albee) and Bawarshi (Week 2: T 2/2; read Atwood and Landy)
- \* The Novel (Margaret Atwood) and Landy (Week 2: R 2/4; read Atwood and Landy; RR2)
- \* **No Class: St. Maroun's Day (Week 3: T 2/9; read Atwood and Landy)**
- \* The Novel (Margaret Atwood) and Landy (Week 3: R 2/11; read Atwood and Landy; RR3)

##### 2) Sources of Literary Criticism: *What Is It that We Want?*

- \* Atwood and Landy (Week 4: T 2/16; read TBA and Felski)
- \* Literary Criticism (TBA), Felski, and Interview Strategies (Week 4: R 2/18; read TBA and Felski;

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RR4)

\* Literary Criticism (TBA), Felski, and Interview Strategies (Week 5: T 2/23; read Felski and do interviews)

\* **No Class: Holiday Compensation (Week 5: R 2/25; read Felski and prepare presentation)**

### 3) Deciphering the Genre of Literary Criticism

\* Felski and **Interview Presentations: Group 1** (Week 6: T 3/1; read Anderson and prepare presentation)

\* Anderson and **Interview Presentations: Group 2** (Week 6: R 3/3; read TBA and Anderson; RR5)

\* Literary Criticism (TBA) and Anderson (Week 7: T 3/8; read TBA and Anderson)

\* Literary Criticism (TBA) and Anderson (Week 7: R 3/10; read TBA and Anderson; RR6)

\* Literary Criticism (TBA) and Anderson (Week 8: T 3/15; read TBA and Anderson; begin Paper 1)

\* Literary Criticism (TBA) and Anderson (Week 8: R 3/17; complete Paper 1)

\* **Paper 1 Due** and Rubric Creation (Week 9: T 3/22; meet with small group to select four possible primary text readings, rank them for preference, and email me; begin reading primary text 1)

\* **No Class: Holiday Compensation (Week 9: R 3/24; complete primary text 1; RR7)**

## PART II: THE PRACTICE OF RHETORIC

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\* Discuss Primary Text 1 (Week 10: T 3/29; meet with small group to select two theoretical texts and email me; begin reading primary text 2)

\* Discuss Primary Texts 1 and 2, and **Group 1 Present** (Week 10: R 3/31; complete primary text 2 and read theoretical text 1; RR8)

\* Discuss Primary Texts 1 and 2, and **Group 2 Present** (Week 11: T 4/5; read theoretical text 1)

\* Practice Reading Primary Text 1 and **Group 3 Present** (Week 11: R 4/7; read theoretical text 2; RR9)

\* Practice Reading Primary Text 1 and **Group 1 Present** (Week 12: T 4/12; read theoretical text 2)

\* Practice Reading Primary Text 2 and **Group 2 Present** (Week 12: R 4/14; reread primary text 1; RR10)

\* Discuss Primary Text 1 and **Group 3 Present** (Week 13: T 4/19; reread primary text 2)

\* Discuss Primary Text 2 and Conference Paper Abstracts (Week 13: R 4/21; research final papers; RR11)

\* Outline Final Papers and Writing Trajectories (Week 14: T 4/26; write conference abstract)

\* **Conference Abstract Due** and Rubric Creation (Week 14: R 4/28)

\* **Final Paper Due (“Week 15”: Sunday 5/8)**

**There is no final exam in this course.**

You will note that Part II of the semester looks a little different, maybe even kind of weird. Class days in Part II involve three basic classroom activities: “Discuss,” “Practice reading,” and “Present.” Though the terms are all familiar enough, I mean something specific by each, so, it’s helpful to briefly characterize them here:

**DISCUSS:** explore themes, compare notes, brainstorm ideas, talk about what’s happening in a primary text, share experiences of reading, elaborate brief analyses;

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**PRACTICE READING:** sketch out as many fuller-scale analyses as possible, producing shared “readings” of primary texts through the lenses offered by key theoretical texts (note: this will first require discussion of theoretical texts and should build on previous discussion of primary texts) and trying to determine what will make which readings persuasive for which audiences, and why;

**PRESENT:** describe briefly (in 10 minutes or fewer) what your group has done so far—what you’re reading, how it seems like it’s fitting together, why it matters, what it all might mean (note: this will first require discussion and reflection as a group, to determine what’s important to share and what not as important)—making sure to share the work of presenting between all group members.

### **Grading of Coursework**

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Different course assignments are graded in different ways. Generally speaking, formal work is subject to a more intensive grading process. For both Paper 1 and the final Paper, we will develop 100-point rubrics in class together, which I will then use to score the papers. For the conference paper abstract, I will give you a 100-point rubric in the assignment sheet. For all three formal course assignments, you will receive fairly detailed assignment sheets; I encourage you to ask questions about these both in class and in office hours.

Informal work for the course is graded more informally.

Individual reddit responses can each receive one of three grades: 10 points for a solid effort or 5 for a half-ass effort; late responses will receive a 0, as will responses that display no effort at all.

Interview transcriptions will receive 5 points for existing and not being gobbledygook or in cases where only one of the two transcriptions is strong, and 10 points for recording with moderate clarity a thoughtful, interesting interview. Unreadable or extremely short interview transcriptions will receive a 0, as will a failure to hand these in on the day of your presentation.

For both interview and small-group presentations, three grades are once more possible, but they are now a slightly different set: 10 for a coherent, comprehensive, and engaging presentation; 7\* for an adequate but flawed presentation (\* the grade is a little higher for mid-quality work here to account for the fact that many people find presentations unusually stressful); and 0 for an incoherent presentation or no presentation at all.

I will respond in writing and with grades to all formal coursework. I will grade all informal coursework, and am very happy to meet during office hours or to make an appointment at another time to share more detailed responses and suggestions.

Grades for the different assignments break down as follows; on the left is the percentage of the course grade and on the right is the list of possible point values (for informal assignments) or the point-scale to be used in grading (for formal assignments):

#### **Informal**

- Reddit Responses = 10% of grade | (5 or 10 points each x 10)
- Interview Transcriptions = 10% of grade | (0, 5, or 10 points combined)
- Interview Presentation = 10% of grade | (0, 7, or 10 points)

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- Presentations of Small-Group Work = 10% of grade | (0, 7, or 10 points combined)

### Formal

- Paper 1: Short Paper on Genre of Literary Criticism = 20% of grade | (out of 100 points)
- Conference Paper Abstract = 10% of grade | (out of 100 points)
- Final Paper: Conference-Quality Literary Criticism = 30% of grade | (out of 100 points)

### For Students with Disabilities

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If you have documented special needs and anticipate difficulties with the content or format of the course due to a physical or learning disability, please contact me and/or your academic advisor, as well as the Counseling Center in the Office of Student Affairs (Ext. 3196), as soon as possible to discuss options for accommodations. Those seeking accommodations must submit the Special Needs Support Request Form along with the required documentation.

### Attendance and Plagiarism

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Respectively: Do and Don't. Do attend. Don't plagiarize.

If you have even the shadow of a suspicion of a confusion about what plagiarism means, ask me about the specific instance you have in mind. Don't send me an email about it: ask me. Like, in person. Either after class, in office hours, or in an appointment we'll make especially for that (I'm always happy to make appointments to meet with students outside of office hours, by the way). But seriously, if you think something you're writing has any possibility of being plagiarized, ask me before turning it in. **I'm genuinely happy to talk with students about what does and doesn't constitute plagiarism—before an assignment gets turned in. I'm never happy to talk about it afterwards, because if we do, it means you plagiarized and are getting a 0 for the assignment and, depending on the severity of the infraction, possibly an F for the course as a whole. So, if you're not sure what plagiarism is, or you're not sure if you might be doing it, come talk to me.** Same goes for “academic dishonesty,” sketchy sources, or anything else you're afraid you might be doing in a way that is, however unintentionally, untoward. It can be tricky to know what's right and what's wrong, as a writer, and so I really am glad to help talk you through any questions you have in this regard.

For attendance, really, just come to class. You're an adult. If you need to miss a class for some unexpected reason, get the notes and homework from one of your classmates. If you know you'll be missing a class ahead of time, feel free to see me in office hours or make an appointment to talk about how to stay in step with the rest of the class. Don't send me an email with a doctor's note or any of that; if you need to miss class, I assume that you're missing for what are good reasons in your own life. **This said, do expect your grade to suffer if you miss more than three classes. So, don't miss more than three classes (with or without excuses of any level of quality).**

There's not much more that I have to say about all this.