

**ENGL 254**  
**African American Literature**  
**Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00-2:15**  
**101 Chitwood Hall**

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Office Hours:  
Tuesday, 3:00-4:00  
Wednesday, 1:00-2:00

This course offers a broad introduction to African American literature in the context of a variety of cultural experiences; and it offers also an introduction to various aspects of culture from the perspectives one encounters in African American literature. In our attempt to re-envision the past and present, we will look for guidance from imaginative literature by African American writers from the eighteenth century to the present, viewing each text as a framework for asking questions about social, political, and historical issues. Among the many writers we will encounter are Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. We will use an anthology of African American literature, so we will be more concerned about broad coverage than about in-depth studies of specific periods or issues. However, our readings of poetry, autobiographical narratives, fiction, and drama will draw us into an extended study of U.S. cultural politics involving (among other things) concepts of race, power, and identity. Accordingly, we will also read a text that offers an overview of African American history.

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**Words of Wisdom to Guide Our Journey This Semester**

Truth, in my belief, is something which occurs when actions take place: not when phrases are contrived. Truth is not a word which represents correct response to an examination, nor a well-written piece of prose. Truth is not a “right word” which can be printed. It is (it is only) a “right deed” which can be done.

--Jonathan Kozol. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*

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Academic institutions offer myriad ways to protect ourselves from the threat of a live encounter. To avoid a live encounter with teachers, students can hide behind their notebooks and their silence. To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers can hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power. To avoid a live encounter with one another, faculty can hide behind their academic specialties.

To avoid a live encounter with subjects of study, teachers and students alike can hide

behind the pretense of objectivity: students can say, “Don’t ask me to think about this stuff--just give me the facts,” and faculty can say, “Here are the facts--don’t think about them, just get them straight.” To avoid a live encounter with ourselves, we can learn the art of self-alienation, of living a divided life.

This fear of the live encounter is actually a sequence of fears that begins in the fear of diversity. As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit otherness, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world--after all, there is no “other” to challenge us! But as soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that ours is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way, and the truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile.

If we embrace diversity, we find ourselves on the doorstep of our next fear: fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet. Because academic culture knows only one form of conflict, the win-lose form called competition, we fear the live encounter as a contest from which one party emerges victorious while the other leaves defeated and ashamed. To evade public engagement over our dangerous differences, we privatize them, only to find them growing larger and more diverse.

If we peel back our fear of conflict, we find a third layer of fear, the fear of losing identity. Many of us are so deeply identified with our ideas that when we have a competitive encounter, we risk losing more than the debate: we risk losing our sense of self.

Of course, there are forms of conflict more creative than the win-lose form called competition, forms that are vital if the self is to grow. But academic culture knows little of these alternative forms--such as consensual decision making--in which all can win and none need lose, in which “winning” means emerging from the encounter with a larger sense of self than one brought into it, in which we learn that the self is not a scrap of turf to be defended but a capacity to be enlarged.

If we embrace the promise of diversity, of creative conflict, and of “losing” in order to “win,” we still face one final fear--the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives. This is not paranoia: the world really is out to get us! Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives--and that is the most daunting threat of all.

--Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*

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The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as

true.

--Michel Foucault. "Truth and Power"

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The wealth, the intellect, the Legislation, (State and Federal,) the pulpit, and the science of America, have concentrated on no one point so heartily as in the endeavor to write down the negro as something less than a man.

--Thomas Hamilton. *The Anglo-African Magazine* (1859)

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James Harvey Robinson has reminded us that "history books are a poor place to look for history." They are an even poorer place to search for African-American history and African-American women's history.

--Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Politics of 'Silence': Dual-Sex Political Systems and Women's Traditions of Conflict in African-American Religion"

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For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word.

--Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel"

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One has the feeling that nights are becoming sleepless in some quarters, and it seems to me obvious that the recoil of traditional "humanists" and some postmodern theorists to this particular aspect of the debate [she's talking about the debate over the literary "canon"], the "race" aspect, is as severe as it is because the claims for attention come from that segment of scholarly and artistic labor in which the mention of "race" is either inevitable or elaborately, painstakingly masked; and if all of the ramifications that the term demands are taken seriously, the bases of Western civilization will require re-thinking. Thus, in spite of its implicit and explicit acknowledgment, "race" is still a virtually unspeakable thing, as can be seen in the apologies, notes of "special use" and circumscribed definitions that accompany it--not least of which is my own deference in surrounding it with quotation marks. Suddenly (for our purposes, suddenly) "race" does not exist. For three hundred years black Americans insisted that "race" was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted "race" was *the* determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as "race," biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it.

--Toni Morrison. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"

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They forget that underneath the black man's form and behavior there is the great bed-rock of humanity, the key to which is the same that unlocks every tribe and kindred of the nations of earth. Some have taken up the subject with a view to establishing evidences of ready formulated

theories and preconceptions; and, blinded by their prejudices and antipathies, have altogether abjured all candid and careful study. Others with flippant indifference have performed a few psychological experiments on their cooks and coachmen, and with astounding egotism, and powers of generalization positively bewildering, forthwith aspire to enlighten the world with dissertations on racial traits of the Negro. A few with really kind intentions and a sincere desire for information have approached the subject as a clumsy microscopist, not quite at home with his instrument, might study a new order of beetle or bug. Not having focused closely enough to obtain a clear-cut view, they begin by telling you that all colored people look exactly alike and end by noting down every chance contortion or idiosyncrasy as a race characteristic.

--Anna Julia Cooper. "The Negro as Presented in American Literature."

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In the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore and in the entertainment industry (which thrives on the exploitation and debasement of all folk materials), the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and unacceptable. As Constance Rourke has made us aware, the action of the early minstrel show--with its Negro-deprived choreography, its ringing of banjos and rattling of bones, its voices cackling jokes in pseudo-Negro dialect, with its nonsense songs, its bright costumes and sweating performers--constituted a ritual of exorcism. Other white cultures had their gollywogs and blackamoors but the fact of Negro slavery went to the moral heart of the American social drama and here the Negro was too real for easy fantasy, too serious to be dealt with in anything less than a national art. The mask was an inseparable part of the national iconography. Thus even when a Negro acted in an abstract role the national implications were unchanged. His costume made use of the "sacred" symbolism of the American flag--with red and white striped pants and coat and with stars set in a field of blue for a collar--but he could appear only with his hands gloved in white and his face blackened with burnt cork or greasepaint.

This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the "thing" in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.

--Ralph Ellison. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke."

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If you want to know how somebody feels or thinks, ask him. If he can't tell you in words you understand, ask someone else. Not anybody else, but someone else. A relative of the man. A close friend. Somebody who seems to you very similar. And when you resort to these sources of information, qualify the value of your data: call it secondhand or worse.

This may strike you as elementary. And yet, there is a man who exists as one of the most popular *objects* of leadership, legislation, and quasi-literature in the history of all men. There lives a man who is spoken for, imagined, feared, criticized, pitied, misrepresented, fought against, reviled, and *loved*, primarily on the basis of secondhand information, or much worse.

This man, that object of attention, attack, and vast activity, cannot make himself be heard, let alone be understood. *He has never been listened to.* He has almost never been asked: What do you want? What do you think? Coverage of a man screaming in crisis is not the way to hear him think.

That man is Black and alive in white America where the media of communication do not allow the delivery of his own voice, his own desires, his own rage. In fact, the definitely preferred form of communication, Black to white, is *through* a white intermediary--be he sociologist or William Styron.

--June Jordan. "On Listening: A Good Way to Hear"

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As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, . . . language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

--Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel"

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We stole words from the grudging lips of the Lords of the Land, who did not want us to know too many of them or their meaning. And we charged this meager horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had; we proceeded to build our language in inflections of voice, through tonal variety, by hurried speech, in honeyed drawls, by rolling our eyes, by flourishing our hands, by assigning to common, simple words new meanings, meanings which enabled us to speak of revolt in the actual presence of the Lords of the Land without their being aware! Our secret language extended our understanding of what slavery meant and gave us the freedom to speak to our brothers in captivity; we polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo, until, although they were the words of the Lords of the Land, they became *our* words, *our* language.

--Richard Wright. *12 Million Black Voices*

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There is one thing I would like to say to my white fellow countrymen, and especially to those who dabble in ink and affect to discuss the Negro; and yet I hesitate because I feel it is a fact which persons of the finer sensibilities and more delicate perceptions must know instinctively: namely, that it is an insult to humanity and a sin against God to publish any such sweeping generalizations of a race on such meager and superficial information. We meet it at every turn--this obtrusive and offensive vulgarity, this gratuitous sizing up of the Negro and conclusively writing down his equation, sometimes even among his ardent friends and bravest defenders.

Anna Julia Cooper. "The Negro as Presented in American Literature."

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Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural

products--products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless. . . .

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When seen as a set of symbolic devices for controlling behavior, extrasomatic sources of information, culture provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, in fact become. Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives. And the cultural patterns involved are not general but specific--not just "marriage" but a particular set of notions about what men and women are like, how spouses should treat one another, or who should properly marry whom; not just "religion" but belief in the wheel of karma, the observance of a month of fasting, or the practice of cattle sacrifice. . . .

--Clifford Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*

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How can we get the concept of culture to do more work for us? We might begin by reflecting on the fact that the concept gestures toward what appear to be opposite things: *constraint* and *mobility*. The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform. The limits need not be narrow--in certain societies, such as that of the United States, they can seem quite vast--but they are not infinite, and the consequences for straying beyond them can be severe. The most effective disciplinary techniques practiced against those who stray beyond the limits of a given culture are probably not the spectacular punishments reserved for serious offenders--exile, imprisonment in an insane asylum, penal servitude, or execution--but seemingly innocuous responses: a condescending smile, laughter poised between the genial and the sarcastic, a small dose of indulgent pity laced with contempt, cool silence. And we should add that a culture's boundaries are enforced more positively as well: through the system of rewards that range again from the spectacular (grand public honors, glittering prizes) to the apparently modest (a gaze of admiration, a respectful nod, a few words of gratitude).

--Stephen Greenblatt. "Culture"

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According to black theology, revelation must mean more than just divine self-disclosure. Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*. To know God is to know God's work of liberation in behalf of the oppressed. God's revelation means liberation, an emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation.

There is no revelation of God without a condition of oppression which develops into a situation of liberation. Revelation is only for the oppressed of the land. God comes to those who have been enslaved and abused and declares total identification with their situation, disclosing to them the right of their emancipation on their own terms.

--James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*

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Black theology of liberation is a systematic and constructive movement arising from the reality of God's liberation power existing in all parts of life. There is no separation of sacred and secular because God's love for the least of society has no boundaries. The spirit of God's

liberation is present in all aspects of black existence, especially that of the poor.

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The rhythm of black theology starts from faith in, commitment to, worship with, and work for the poor in the African American community. This is the first part of the rhythm. Because the spirit of comfort, hope, and liberation exists among the least in society even before the theologian works with them, the theologian has to be connected to this dynamic between the poor and a liberation spirituality.

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Moreover, each of the three beats of the rhythm requires interpretation consisting of context, content, construction, and commitment. What is the *context* of the community of faith involved in struggle on a daily basis? What are the structural, the routine, the cultural, and the language parts of that community? The poor are born into a given multilayered context. What is the *content* of this contextual framework? The context is filled with content--creative resources and new experiences at the service of the poor. What type of constructive activities are taking place? In other words, how has God called the poor to use this context and content to build something new? The poor's vocational act is the connection between context and content, thereby creating some type of different reality--a new *construction*. What unifies each step is the personal and collective *commitment* to the liberation of the poor. Do the context, content, and construction constitute commitments that are liberational or harmful? Black theology of liberation, then, is God's love for the least in society, and this love works to bring about each person's full humanity.

--Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*

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Society has other uses for us than those we have generally chosen. It uses schools and colleges to sort out young people for various kinds of work. English teachers must do that and use literature to help in the sorting. Society needs help from the schools to justify its present divisions, including much inequality. There is pressure--indirect but heavy--on teachers of literature to join in this effort. The ruling classes want a culture, including a literature and a criticism, that supports the social order and discourages rebellion, while it sanctions all kinds of nonthreatening nonconformity. If we want to teach literature, we had better adapt it to this task, too.

How do these urgencies get transmitted to teachers and students of literature? I think that people are most malleable when they are advancing from one station in life to a higher one and trying to do so. The ideas that play a part in rites of passage make more of an impression than those ideas of smaller practical consequence. The values that inhere in rites of passage will be influential values. And the styles that are rewarded at initiation tend to become the styles of the initiates.

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We train young people, and those who train young people, in the skills required by a society most of whose work is done on paper and through talk, not by physical labor. We also discipline the young to do assignments, on time, to follow instructions, to turn out uniform products, to observe the etiquette of verbal communication. And, in so doing, we eliminate the less adapted, the ill-trained, the city youth with bad verbal manners, blacks with the wrong dialect, Latinos with the wrong language, and the rebellious of all shapes and sizes, thus helping to maintain social and economic inequalities. Most of these are unwilled consequences, and, since they also

run counter to the egalitarian ideology of the larger culture, it is not surprising that the English department fails to point them out when justifying its pay.

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Quite aside from the use of the humanities--of high culture--within universities to harden class lines and teach the skills and habits of mind that will serve the industrial system, the humanities have a flourishing existence outside the universities. When Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, and Amoco spend millions of dollars in television advertising to cash in on their altruistic leadership in the war on pollution and the search for new forms of energy, they are using rhetoric, drama, and visual design to maintain their power over the future and proclaim the health of the free enterprise economy. Given the stakes, it seems fair to say that the oil companies' use of the humanities is the reverse of liberating. Think of other parts of our humanistic culture: music, in the romantic tradition of Engelbert Humperdinck (the younger), assuring entranced listeners that their basic needs are personal and erotic rather than social; fiction, in confession magazines, pornography, and many other profitable forms of literature, maintaining sexual and social stereotypes; history, available publicly in the form of myths about the white man's sovereign rights over darker people and their land, and of traditional American freedom threatened by the cold war enemy; architecture and design, in a thousand suburban developments, creating the illusion of independence (home, the electronic castle), denying the existence of the other half of society, and forcing complete dependence on cars, appliance, and other profit-yielding artifacts. What are the connections between these exploitative, well-financed uses of the humanities and our high culture? "Teaching literature in a discredited civilization," to repeat Grossman's title, we either teach politically with revolution as our end or we contribute to the mystification that so often in universities diverts and deadens the critical power of literature and encysts it in our safe corner of society.

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--Richard Ohmann. *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*

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In my belief, few books on education published in the past ten years are ethical books. They are not ethical because they are not invocations to lived visions. They *tell* of challenges, *refer* to agonies, *comment* on difficulties. They do not ask an answer in the form of action from the reader. Their power begins and ends within the world of words and paragraphs alone.

If the present book does not compel transformed behavior, in the life of its own author and in that of its authentic reader too, then it does not merit the expense of labor which it now commands and has commanded for the past five years; nor can it justify the pain and anguish I would wish it to provoke within the conscience of an undefended reader.

People who are looking for "a lot of interesting ideas," and hope to dabble her for little more, offend the author and degrade themselves. They would do well to stop right now. Those who read in order to take action on their consequent beliefs--these are the only readers I respect or look for. Atrocities, real and repeated, proliferate within this social order. The deepest of all lies in our will not to respond to what we see before us. When we declare that we are troubled by the lockstep life that has been charted for us by the men and women who now govern and control our public schools, what we are doing is to state our disavowal of an evil and unwanted patrimony. We are not living in an ordinary time, but in an hour of intense and unrelenting pain for many human beings. It is not good enough to favor justice in high literary flourish and to feel compassion for the victims of the very system that sustains our privileged position. We must be able to disown and disavow that privileged position. If we cannot we are not ethical

men and women, and do not lead lives worth living.

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Prison bars do not need to be made of steel and concrete. They can be fashioned also out of words and hesitations: an “interesting seminar on hunger,” “a reasonable exchange of views about despair.” The language that we learn in public school is one of ethical antiseptis and of political decontamination. It is the language of an intellectual cease-fire while the victims are still dying. It is also a language which, by failing to concede real oppositions, denies a child or adult right or power to make strong, risk-taking choices. The student learns to step back and to steer away from moral confrontations. He learns to ascertain the quickest highway and the best approach to middle places of inert compassion and dysfunctional concern: places where choice does not reside and anger does not threaten.

If the child studies hard, if he assimilates the language well, and if he should grow up by any chance to be a writer, teacher, commentator or a critic even of such areas as social justice in this nation, he will have learned by then the proper means by which to make himself provocative, but not unsettling: fashionable and delightful, but not feared. He will have become, by grotesque sequences of North American recirculation, a perfect item in the same machine that polished him to size. At worst he will be somebody like Moynihan. At best he may be somebody like Galbraith. There is no danger he will be Thoreau.

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There are these words in the Bible: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” In my view, it is the business of the school to neutralize the dream and to indemnify the child against the dangers that may otherwise be inherent in his future decency. To institutionalize ecstasy, universities channel poets into the explication of their metaphors. To rectify zeal and to contain the vision of a generous or impassioned child, we construct school systems. . . . We teach children to adjust to evil carried out in their own name. We teach children to look on at misery without rage. We teach children *not* to vomit up the lie that poisons their own soul. The first moment in all of this process is to plant in each of us a simple and straightforward bias against ethics.

Even in the Intellectual Left, a lifetime of indoctrination sinks in deeply. Few, if they can possibly avoid it, will admit to doing something out of motives of compassion. Instead, we try to fabricate a good, “hard-headed” reason for our actions. To do something because “it makes sense” is a more attractive reason than because someone is in great pain. The U.S. government, in much the same way, used to justify the Job Corps on the grounds that it is easier to “train” an eighteen-year-old black man than to pay for his electrocution or incarceration in a prison. This is the tough, no-nonsense logic that the U.S. Congress finds unsentimental. Well-indoctrinated students learn the lingo too.

In preference to the child who predates, by his rebellion, someone like John Brown or Malcolm X, we look for models of acceptable behavior to those who are prepared to understate their ethical intentions, imply a kind of quiet sense of decency that they do not like to boast of, and demonstrate instead a “realistic” capability for candid deprecation of their own worth. In intellectual terms, the highest goal is taken to be adept articulation. Cogency, even in the service of injustice, is granted more esteem than open advocacy of fair play. The ideal mix within the social setting is a certain quality of good intent, watered with realism, spiced with a drop of cynicism, stated with humor, believed in only with graceful reservation, and enacted only if absolutely necessary at pistol-point or in the full face of public desperation.

I suspect that many people who have had their education in the same time period as I, will recognize the sense of personal defeat I have in mind. We learn to tolerate, like a low flame on the fire or like a low fever in the body, a reasonable temperature-level of admitted cynicism. We learn to feel that it is not intolerable to “be” self-compromised if one is open and amusing in discussion of the matter; or, again, that cynicism, charmingly admitted-to and interestingly described, in some sense cancels itself out. It is not corrupt to “be” corrupt as long as a person is perceptive and articulate concerning his corruption. At this point, as we know, the word itself becomes a distant and quite bearable designation, one scarcely having to do with our own being any longer, but a label identified rather with some interesting character of our late-at-night imagination.

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There is, in 1975, a standard form of this postponement tactic. Weeks of research into that large area of human desperation, still so timidly referred to as “The Racial Situation,” lead out, after all the obstacles have been transcended, into a “class report” which states that “some black people seem to favor integration, while others favor separatist development under community control.” It is, in all respects, a serviceable conclusion; one which grants entire amnesty to those who, if they had been told which option of the two the largest numbers of black people choose, would still not dream of turning their own day-to-day existence upside down to *act* upon it.

“White people,” says the final paper, “now must gather further information from all sources to determine which of these directions will receive the best acceptance in the black community . . .” In such a manner, child or adult (for it is done in very much the same way at both levels) is spared the anguish of a direct confrontation with the painful fact that either option, put into immediate effect, would make a massive difference in the lives of millions of black children and that the only thing white people ought to dare to “research” in this day and age is how best to raise enough Hell to bring *either* of these options into operation.

The purpose of research, however, as we know too well, is not to teach young people how to raise Hell. The purpose is to teach them how to sit still in their places, how to be “good children,” how to be benign, inactive, terrified, respectable. The purpose is to teach them how to gather information, not in order to take action but in order to increase the body of material that they possess already. The goal of research in this context is not ethical action based upon reflection, but a self-perpetuating process of delay.

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In high schools, as in university circles, there is far more talk right now of “how we learn what we perceive”--still worse, of “how we learn to find out what we think we feel when we perceive”--than of the real thing which is somehow still there, at the long, long end of the extended telescope of our disjointed and neutralized perception. “Interesting things about the state of being known as RADICAL, LIBERATED, FREE” become far more important than those things that we are radical *about*, or liberated *for*. Little by little, we learn to remove ourselves from the immediate field of forces, actions, options or intentions, on which we have briefly stood, but always and forever at its indecisive margin, and situate ourselves instead upon a safe and sober ledge from which to look down on the action. It is as if the explication of the text were to precede the composition of the poem: still worse, as if *we* were to be the explicators. When we end up at the point of explication of the poem we have not written, and no longer dare to write, we have come to that point of ideal alienation at which we qualify for academic tenure,

intellectual respectability and decent income.

--Jonathan Kozol. *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*

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The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. And this network of references is not the same in the case of a mathematical treatise, a textual commentary, a historical account, and an episode in a novel cycle; the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.

--Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge*

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Thus an active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. It is precisely such an understanding that the speaker counts on. Therefore his orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another. The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background.

--Mikhail Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel"

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*White power uses white English as a calculated, political display of power to control and eliminate the powerless.* In America, that power belongs to white power. School, compulsory public school education, is the process whereby Black children first encounter the punishing force of this white power. "First grade" equals first contact with the politics of white language, and its incalculably destructive consequences for Black lives. This is what I mean, exactly: both Black and white youngsters are compelled to attend school. Once inside this system, the white child is rewarded for mastery of his standard, white English: the language he learned at his mother's white and standard knee. But the Black child is punished for mastery of his nonstandard, Black English; for the ruling elite of America have decided that *non-standard* is *sub-standard*, and even dangerous, and must be eradicated. Moreover, the white child receives formal instruction in his standard English, and endless opportunities for the exercise and creative display of his language. But where is the elementary school course in Afro-American language, and where are the opportunities for the *accredited* exercise, and creative exploration, of Black language?

The two languages are not interchangeable. They cannot, nor do they attempt to communicate equal or identical thoughts, or feelings. And, since the experience to be conveyed

is quite different, Black from white, these lingual dissimilarities should not surprise or worry anyone. However, they are both communication systems with regularities, exceptions, and values governing their word designs. Both are equally liable to poor, good, better, and creative use. In short, they are both accessible to critical criteria such as clarity, force, message, tone, and imagination. Besides this, standard English is comprehensible to Black children, even as Black language is comprehensible to white teachers--supposing that the teachers are willing to make half the effort they demand of Black students.

Then what is the difficulty? The problem is that we are saying *language*, but really dealing with power. The word "standard" is just not the same as the word "technical" or "rural" or "straight." *Standard* means the rule, the norm. Anyone deviating from the standard is therefore "wrong." As a result, literally millions of Black children are "wrong" from the moment they begin to absorb and imitate the language of their Black lives. Is that an acceptable idea?

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--June Jordan. "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation"

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Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their white skin; the red gums were their own.

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--thoughts of Stamp Paid, in Morrison, *Beloved*

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It may have been this contact [with white women active in the feminist movement] or contact with fellow white English professors who want very much to have "a" black person in "their" department as long as that person thinks and acts like them, shares their values and beliefs, is in no way different, that first compelled me to use the term "white supremacy" to identify the ideology that most determines how white people in this society (irrespective of their political leanings to the right or left) perceive and relate to black people and other people of color. It is the very small but highly visible liberal movement away from the perpetuation of overtly racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of black people which often masks how all-pervasive white supremacy is in this society, both as ideology and as behavior. When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.

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--bell hooks. "Overcoming White Supremacy: A Comment"

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We are living in one of the most frightening moments in the history of this country. Democracies are quite rare and usually short-lived in the human adventure. The precious notion

of ordinary people living lives of decency and dignity--owing to their participation in the basic decision making in those fundamental institutions that affect their life chances--is difficult to sustain over space and time. And every historic effort to forge a democratic project has been undermined by two fundamental realities: *poverty* and *paranoia*. The persistence of poverty generates levels of *despair* that deepen social conflict; the escalation of paranoia produces levels of *distrust* that reinforce cultural division. Race is the most explosive issue in American life precisely because it forces us to confront the tragic facts of poverty and paranoia, despair and distrust. In short, a candid examination of *race matters* takes us to the core of the crisis of American democracy. And the degree to which race *matters* in the plight and predicament of fellow citizens is a crucial measure of whether we can keep alive the best of this democratic experiment we call America.

--Cornel West. *Race Matters*

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We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly, though in the estimation of some mere trifles; for though there are many in society who exercise towards us benevolent feelings; still (with sorrow we confess it) there are others who make it their business to enlarge upon the least trifle, which tends to the discredit of any person of color; and pronounce anathemas and denounce our whole body for the misconduct of this guilty one.

--editorial from the first edition of *Freedom's Journal* (1827)

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I did not and I would not presume to impose my urgencies upon white poets writing in America. But the miracle of Black poetry in America, the *difficult* miracle of Black poetry in America, is that we have been rejected and we are frequently dismissed as “political” or “topical” or “sloganeering” and “crude” and “insignificant” because, like Phillis Wheatley, we have persisted for freedom. We will write against South Africa and we will seldom pen a poem about wild geese flying over Prague, or grizzlies at the rain barrel under the dwarf willow trees. We will write, published or not, however we may, like Phillis Wheatley, of the terror and the hungering and the quandaries of our African lives on this North American soil. And as long as we study white literature, as long as we assimilate the English language and its implicit English values, as long as we allude and defer to gods we “neither sought nor knew,” as long as we, Black poets in America, remain the children of slavery, as long as we do not come of age and attempt, then, to speak the truth of our difficult maturity in an alien place, then we will be beloved and sheltered, and published.

But not otherwise. And yet we persist.

--June Jordan. “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America, or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley”

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To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society--flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as black people are viewed as a “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do all the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American--and the rest must simply “fit in.”

. . . schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined.

--from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

. . . . .

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what our white fathers told us were precious. . . . But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, noneuropean consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

. . . . .

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean--in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

. . . . .

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

. . . . .

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us--the poet--whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

. . . . .

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves--along with the renewed courage to try them out.

. . . . .

In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

. . . . .

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive.

. . . . .

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core--the fountain--of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

--Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

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I used to think that I talked to the reader and in a sense perhaps that was true but it is really the work that talks to the reader as it was the work that talked to the writer. The work and the artist say each other as I think lovers do and, in later contact, it is the work and the reader that say each other. Or the work may be mute and the reader stone deaf.

Insofar as there can be anything about me worth writing about it would have to be the work and the importance of the work can only be to the reader who has entered into a relation with it. This is at variance with the generally--not only academically--held idea that works of art can be examined, described and assessed as though they were precious stones. Or houses. But the importance of houses is lost in their selling price. We live in them. Or we don't.

--William Bronk

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The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are--until the poem--nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

--Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

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## Policies

**1. If you fail to fulfill any of the course requirements, you will fail the course.**

**2. Attendance.** Much of the work we need to do requires in-class lectures and discussions, and those discussions require a range of perspectives. In other words, your attendance is essential to the success of the course, and it would be difficult for me to say that you have actually taken the course (that you have done the work of the course) if you miss more than two weeks of classes. Accordingly, you are allowed four absences. Each absence that follows will result in a full grade reduction for the final course grade (from A to B, from B to C, and from C to D). In other words, *even if your grades are otherwise perfect*, you will fail the course if you miss eight classes. ***These numbers include all absences.***

If you have four absences, then even with a doctor's excuse, a death in the family, or any other situation, a fifth absence will mean a full grade reduction for the course. Accordingly, you should not miss class unless absolutely necessary, if only to prepare for the unexpected later in the semester.

I will make exceptions only to honor the responsibilities of religious observations or of military service--but for these you should notify me ahead of time.

If there are unusual circumstances that require special consideration of your individual situation, then you should talk with me, and you should be prepared to explain why you have used up your available absences when you should have saved them for just such emergencies.

**3. Social Justice.** West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

**4. If your writing suffers from serious grammatical errors, the best grade I will be able to give to you for the paper, exams, and for the course is a “C-”.** If you would like help with grammar or with your writing in general, or if you want to build on your strengths, please visit the WVU Writing Center in Colson Hall. For an appointment, call 304-293-5788, or stop by the Center to see if tutors are available.

Please note that for your course paper you are also required to read and follow the guidance of the “Guide for Papers” attached to this syllabus.

**5. Revisions:** You are allowed to revise your essays. If you decide to revise, your grade will be the average of the two versions of the paper. You must hand in the original with the revision. Please note that I will be happy to help you plan, revise, and refine your paper before the original due date, making significant revisions unnecessary. Please note that if you decide to revise your second essay, you must hand it in by Monday, December 14. I will not accept any revisions after that day.

**6. I will subtract one-third of a grade for each calendar day that your paper is late.**

**7. Expectations Concerning Plagiarism:** You are required to read the following statement on plagiarism--but here's the short version:

If you claim (explicitly or implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally) as your own something written in whole or in part by someone else, or if you claim as your own someone else's ideas or observations, or if you claim as your own someone else's line of thought or of argument, then you are guilty of plagiarism. If you have been influenced by someone else's ideas, cite your source. If you present information--biographical, historical, scientific, etc., cite your sources. If you discuss the work of another scholar or writer, be sure to use quotation marks to identify significant words and phrases taken from that source--and, of course, cite the source. If you draw any information, ideas, phrases, or inspiration from the internet, cite your sources. In short, identify the authorities you are drawing from at all times--and when in doubt, cite your source. It is always better to be overly cautious in this regard.

Multiple submissions will be treated as plagiarized papers. That is, you cannot submit work in this course that you have submitted in another course.

Confirmed plagiarists will fail this course.

## Plagiarism<sup>1</sup>

*Plagiarism is the act of passing off someone else's work as your own.* Sometimes plagiarism is simple dishonesty. People who buy, borrow, or steal a paper to turn in as their own work know they are plagiarizing. Those who copy word-for-word--or who change a word here and there while copying--without enclosing the copied passage in quotation marks and identifying the author should know that they are plagiarizing.

*But plagiarism can be more complicated in act and intent.* Paraphrasing, which is stating someone else's ideas, can be a useful way to support your own ideas, but it can lead to unintentional plagiarism. Jotting down notes and ideas from sources and thoughtlessly using them without proper attributions to the authors or titles of those sources may result in a paper that is only a mosaic of your words and those of others that appear, nonetheless, to be yours.

Another innocent way to plagiarize is to allow your fellow students and friends--those outside your peer-review group--to give you too much rhetorical help or do too much editing and proofreading of your work. If you think you have received substantial help in any way from people whose names will not appear as authors of the paper, acknowledge that help in a short sentence at the end of the paper or in your list of works cited. If you are not sure how much help is too much, talk with me, so that we can decide what kind of outside-of-class help (and how much) is proper, and how to give credit where credit is due.

As they are drafting their work, conscientious writers keep careful track of when they use ideas and or words from sources. They diligently try to distinguish between their own ideas, those of others, and common knowledge. They try to identify which part of their work comes from an identifiable source and then document their use of that source in accordance with established academic or professional conventions, such as a parenthetical citation and a works cited list. If you are in doubt about what needs documenting, talk with your instructor.

When thinking about plagiarism, it is hard to avoid talking about ideas as if they were objects like tables and chairs. Of course they are not. You should not feel that you are under pressure to invent new ideas--which is probably impossible. So-called original writing consists of thinking through ideas and expressing them in your own way. The result may not be new, but if honestly done, it may well be interesting and worthwhile reading. Print or electronic sources, as well as other people, may add good ideas to your own thoughts. When they do so in identifiable and specific ways, give them the credit they deserve.

The following examples should clarify the difference between dishonest and proper uses of sources:

### **Original Source:**

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<sup>1</sup> This Plagiarism Statement was prepared by Professor Jessica Enoch (University of Pittsburgh), who has given me permission to reprint it on my syllabus.

It is not generally recognized that at the same time when women are making their way into every corner of our work world, only one percent of the professional engineers in the nation are female. A generation ago this statistic would have raised no eyebrows, but today it is hard to believe. The engineering schools, reacting to social and governmental pressures, have opened wide their gates and are recruiting women with zeal. The major corporations, reacting to even more intense pressures, are offering attractive employment opportunities to practically all women engineering graduates.

From Samuel C. Florman, "Engineering and the Female Mind"  
Copyright by *Harper's Magazine*

### **Word-for-Word Plagiarizing:**

In the following example, the writer devises part of the first sentence in hopes the reader won't notice that the rest of the paragraph is simply copied from the source. The plagiarized words are italicized.

Because women seem to be taking jobs of all kinds, *few people realize that only 1 percent of the professional engineers in the nation are female. A generation ago this statistic would have raised no eyebrows, but today it is hard to believe. The engineering schools, reacting to social and governmental pressures, have opened wide their gates and are recruiting women with zeal. The major corporations, reacting to even more intense pressures, are offering attractive employment opportunities to practically all women engineering graduates.*

Quotation marks around all the copied text, followed by a parenthetical citation, would avoid plagiarism. But even if that were done, a reader might well wonder why so much was quoted from Florman. Beyond that, a reader will wonder why the writer chose to quote instead of paraphrase this passage (which would then require an endnote or footnote, citing Florman as the source of this information). Furthermore, a paper consisting largely of quoted passages would be relatively worthless.

### **Plagiarizing by Paraphrasing:**

In this case the writer follows the progression of ideas in the source very closely-too closely-by substituting his or her own words and sentences for those of the original.

Original	Paraphrase
<p>It is not generally recognized that at the same time when women are making their way into every corner of our work-world, only 1 percent of the professional engineers in the nation are female.</p>	<p>Few people realize, now that women are finding jobs in all fields, that a tiny percentage of the country's engineers are women</p>
<p>A generation ago this statistic would have raised no eyebrows, but today it is hard to believe.</p>	<p>Years ago this would have surprised no one but no it seems incredible.</p>
<p>The engineering schools, reacting to societal and governmental pressures, have opened wide their gates and are recruiting women with zeal. The major corporations, reacting to even more intense pressure, are offering attractive employment opportunities to practically all women engineering graduates.</p>	<p>Under great pressure, engineering schools are searching out women, and big companies are offering good jobs to practically all women who graduate with engineering degrees.</p>

The writer appears to be generating his or her own ideas. In fact, they are Florman's ideas presented in the writer's words without acknowledgment. The writer could avoid plagiarism here by introducing the paraphrase with an attribution to Florman and following them with a parenthetical citation. Such an introduction is underlined here:

Samuel Florman points out that few people realize...(page number).

Properly used, paraphrase is a valuable technique. You should use it to simplify or summarize so that the ideas or information, properly attributed in the introduction and documented in a parenthetical citation, may be woven into the pattern of your own ideas. You should not use paraphrase simply to avoid quotation; you should use it to express another's ideas in your own words when those ideas are not worth quoting verbatim.

### **Mosaic Plagiarism:**

With this more sophisticated kind of plagiarism, the writer lifts phrases and terms from the source and embeds them into his or her own prose. Words and phrases that the writer lifts verbatim or with slight changes are italicized:

The pressure is on to get more women into engineering. *The engineering schools and major corporations have opened wide their gates and are recruiting women zealously. Practically all women engineering graduates* can find attractive jobs. Nevertheless, at the moment, *only 1 percent of the professional engineers in the country are female.*

Even though mosaic plagiarism may be caused by sloppy note taking, *it always looks thoroughly dishonest* and will be judged as such. In the example above, just adding an introduction and a

parenthetical citation will not eliminate the plagiarism since quotation marks are not used where required. But adding them would raise the question of why the writer thinks those short phrases and basic statements of fact and opinion are worth quoting. The best solution, then, is to paraphrase everything: recast the plagiarized parts in your own words, introduce the passage properly, and add a parenthetical citation.

### **Summary**

Using quotation marks around original wording avoids the charge of plagiarism, but when overdone, makes for a patchwork paper. When most of what you want to say comes from a source, either quote directly or paraphrase. In both cases, introduce your borrowed words or ideas by attributing them to the author and follow them with a parenthetical citation.

The secret to using sources productively is to make them work to support and amplify your ideas. If you find, as you work at paraphrasing, quoting, and citing, that you are only pasting sources together with a few of your own words and ideas--that too much of your paper comes from your sources and not enough from your own mind--then go back to the drawing board. Try redrafting the paper without looking at your sources, using your own ideas. Only after completing a draft should you add the specific words and ideas from your sources to support what you want to say. *If you have any doubts, talk with me asap.*

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## **Course Requirements:**

### **1. Oral Presentation: Keeping It Real (5% of final grade)**

We cannot afford to allow literary history to be locked in the past, and it is important to think about how this literature can help us read and understand our world today--both how the world got this way (good and bad) and where we can go from here. Moreover, literature is a dynamic art, one that requires your active participation in mind, heart, and spirit. Through the dynamic activities of literary expression, artistic creation, and social observation--activities both private and social, both individual and communal--one learns how to envision and negotiate one's way through a complex world in which identity is always a work in progress, and in which hope for the future depends upon a liberating but difficult understanding of the past and present. Culture shapes our lives; art is an attempt to define and reconstitute the forces of culture so as to assert control over our lives.

Your assignment for the oral presentation is to bring your own perspective, your own voice, and perhaps even your own creative spirit to class. You can read a poem (your own or someone else's); you can testify to the truth as you see it; you can simply state your views on current events; you can even sing, act, or dance if you feel so moved. There are many ways to respond to and apply what you've learned to see and understand through literature, and all are welcome for this assignment. Regardless of what you do, though, **your presentation should deal with issues related to our readings and/or discussions, and you should be prepared to explain how your presentation deals with those issues, and what the issues are.**

Because your voice is important in this process, I do not want you to play recorded music or show films or videos for this presentation--that is, unless the recorded music or the film is

your own creation.

**Your presentation should last no more than 10 minutes.** As with other things in life, timing is essential, and you should practice your presentation to be sure that you stay within the allotted time.

The grading for this assignment is simple. If you do it, you will receive an A. If you don't do it, you will receive an F.

## **2. A Presentation on an Historical Event, Cultural Movement, or Activist Forum (15%)**

We are looking at a body of writing that was part of a very complex, divisive, hopeful, and (in many ways) incoherent culture. Accordingly, we will want to know something about relevant newspapers and magazines (*Freedom's Journal* and other early newspapers, or *Fire!!* and other twentieth-century literary and/or political or cultural magazines), details about the history of publishing and distributing African American literature, significant moments (like Richard Wright's entrance into the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1949), ways in which editors and publishers changed or otherwise influenced African American texts (which again brings us to Wright's Book-of-the-Month Club selection, but also other concerns examined by John Young in *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*), and important publishing houses established specifically by and/or for African American writers (Broadside Press, the Third World Press, and the Black Classic Press, among others). We will want to know something as well about certain significant events, governmental policies, and people. Since time is short, we will share the labor on this. These presentations will provide us with an opportunity to address not only significant events and community forums but also misrepresentations of African American history, literary and otherwise.

The multi-volume *Dictionary of Literary Biography* might be a useful source for some of the publishers and literary figures, and the reference section of the library should have other sources that can help you find a topic and help you get started on your research for the presentation. It can be useful, for example, to leaf through a time-line of African American history, and it is very useful to consult specialized encyclopedias--for example, those devoted to African American history and culture. It's good to always begin your research in the reference section--not just for this presentation but even for more ambitious projects.

Again, you should prepare a one-page handout for the class with basic information--and, again, this report should last about 10 minutes.

## **3. Daily Responses . . .**

**OR, Literary Analysis on the Installment Plan: the Lay-Away "A"**

**OR, How to Dig Deeply into the Fields of Literature and Culture in the Comfort of Your Own Home (15% of final grade)**

Before each class (or right after you read the assignment), jot down your observations and reflections about that day's readings. I will collect these observations **at the beginning of each class** and read them before the next class.

Your responses should be *at least* 1 page long, handwritten (assuming that your handwriting is not as large as the page or is not spaced too generously). This is only the minimum requirement, though; you are welcome to write very long responses if you like.

**Place the due date (as listed on the syllabus) at the top of each response, and note the title of the text or texts to which you are responding.** I need to keep an accurate record of

the responses, and you can help me on this by being clear about the assignment date at the top of each response.

What if you get it wrong? That's the beauty of this assignment: *You can't get it wrong!* You do not have to worry about whether you are "right" or "wrong" in these observations. Just pay attention to detail and write down what you observe. In fact, you do not have to worry about grammar or style or argumentation or anything. Just jot things down in the grammar-free zone of your choice. Just notice things, notice more things, play with ideas, speculate, and respond. Don't spend too much time on this; just get it down. Intellectual, ethical, and cultural exploration is the point here.

I will read all the responses carefully. Unfortunately, I will not be able to comment on them, though I wish I could--and I would welcome the opportunity to talk with you about your responses. I will read all the responses and take general notes on what everyone in the class has to say, and I'll report on the responses at the beginning of each class. The responses can also provide the basis for your papers, for you will find yourself writing your way into ideas and insights that you will want to explore more fully in an essay.

This assignment is particularly important to me, as I hope will be clear throughout the semester. I recommend that you come to talk with me about your responses every now and again (perhaps at least once each month?). If this is inconvenient for you, you can also check in with me on e-mail or on the phone (at my office or at home--I'd love to hear from you, and I'd welcome the opportunity to talk with you).

### **Evaluation of Daily Responses**

If you turn in all of the responses, you will receive an "A" for this portion of the course (15% of the final grade).

Responses are not due when your essays are due.

**If you enter the course late, you must make up the responses you've missed. You are allowed to miss only 3 responses over the course of the semester. For each missing response beyond those three, your grade for the responses will be lowered slightly, from an "A" to an "A-" to a "B+," etc. (depending on the quality of the responses), up to 6 responses; beyond that (if you miss 7 or more responses), you will receive an "F" for this assignment.**

### **4. Two 5-Page Meditative Essays (30% and 35% respectively). Due Thursday, October 1 and Thursday, December 3**

I am asking you to enter into a complex field of study, and one with which you might not be familiar. Accordingly, I want to use this assignment to facilitate your development as scholars in this field. This means that instead placing a great deal of weight on a formal essay early in the semester, we need to attend to the *process* of scholarship by way of a writing assignment that gives us the opportunity to talk about the process, and to consider together what we find along the way. I want you to use the meditative essay to think about the material we have discussed, our approach to that material, and what this means in terms of your own literary scholarship. I want you to bring things together, identify patterns and concerns, or take things apart, looking for the underlying questions that we need to ask. Look for recurring concerns, for persistent questions, and then use the essay to try to put together a basic framework for addressing those questions. What should we think about? What information do we need? What

methods should we use? Are there, say, conventions or assumptions in literary scholarship (or in our conceptions of literary history, and our approach to determining the significance of individual texts) that keep us from addressing our course texts adequately or responsibly? How do the various writers we are studying help us to adopt a different cultural perspective on the issues we face? Why does any of this matter?

The voice of the essay can be informal, even autobiographical, for you should think of this as part of a series of scholarly reflections--the stage of research in which the scholar steps back, examines and integrates the material, and plans for the next step . . . often in search of a thesis that, to this point, resists expression and defies one's attempts to achieve clarity and coherence. This is not to say, however, that you should not present an argument of some sort in these essays, or that your essay shouldn't have a thesis. But your argument needn't be conclusive. Instead of a conclusive thesis, think in terms of a working hypothesis--and you can present it and discuss it in this way in your essay. Please consult the Guide for Papers for guidance.

You might devote your essay to a single text. What is the author trying to achieve, and how does she or he craft the text so as to work towards those goals? Are there significant contradictions or other tensions in the text that undermine the coherence of the author's argument? What is the author's central point, and how is the text designed to get readers to understand that point?

You might devote your essay to a larger cultural concern. What is race, for example, and why do our definitions of this concept matter? How does a careful study of African American literary history change our understanding of U.S. history? How does literature guide us (or misguide us) as citizens in a republic? What is African American about African American literature, history, or culture, and what are the problems and possibilities of thinking in these terms?

As you explore literary and cultural history, it is good to remember that what *and how* you see can depend significantly on what you know. You will need some historical and cultural background. I expect you to support any assertion you make about the past.

Each essay must be at least 5 full pages long, not counting the title or the Works Cited pages. **Shorter papers will receive lower grades**, since those papers will either lack a sufficiently ambitious thesis or will lack the support and explanation required for a persuasive argument. For specific requirements concerning your presentation of this essay, see the Guide for Papers included in this syllabus.

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### Required Texts

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. ISBN: 0-393-97778-1

James Oliver Horton & Lois E. Horton, eds. *A History of the African American People*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997. ISBN: 978-0814326978

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## Reading Assignments

- 8/25: Introductions
- 8/27: *A History of the African American People*, David C. Littlefield, “Africans in America” (pp. 8-23)
- 9/1: 1. “The Vernacular Tradition” (pp. 3-8)  
2. *A History of the African American People*, Gary B. Nash, “The Bittersweet Cup of Freedom” (pp. 24-41)
- 9/3: 1. “The Literature of Slavery and Freedom, 1746-1865” (pp. 151-162)  
2. Phillis Wheatley, “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England” and “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (pp. 219-220)  
3. George Moses Horton, “On Hearing of the Intention of a Gentleman to Purchase the Poet’s Freedom” and “George Moses Horton, Myself” (pp. 241-242 & p. 244)
- 9/8: 1. David Walker, all selections (pp. 227-238)  
2. *A History of the African American People*, Ira Berlin, “The Slaves’ Changing World” (pp. 42-59)
- 9/10: 1. Harriet Jacobs, the following selections from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:  
a. “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life” (pp. 289-293)  
b. “The Confession” (pp. 306-307)  
c. “Free at Last” (pp. 310-315)  
2. William Wells Brown, “The Negro Sale” from *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (pp. 325-330)
- 9/15: 1. Henry Highland Garnet, “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (pp. 345-352)  
2. Frederick Douglass, selection from “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (pp. 462-473)
- 9/17: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Preface through Chapter VIII (pp. 387-417)
- 9/22: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Chapter IX to end (pp. 417-452)
- 9/24: 1. James M. Whitfield, “America” (pp. 483-487)  
2. Frances E. W. Harper, “The Slave Mother,” “Learning to Read,” “A Double Standard,” and “Our Greatest Want” (pp. 496-497, 501-503, 513-514)

3. James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and "O Black and Unknown Bards" (pp. 794--795)
  4. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "An Ante-bellum Sermon," "We Wear the Mask," and "Sympathy" (912-914, 918, 922)
  5. *A History of the African American People*, Leslie M. Harris, "A Limited Freedom" (pp. 60-73)
- 9/29: 1. "Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919" (pp. 541-554)
2. *A History of the African American People*, David W. Blight, "The Age of Emancipation" (pp. 74-93)
- 10/1: **First Meditative Essay Due**
- Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Passing of Grandison" and "The Wife of His Youth" (pp. 613-632)
- 10/6: 1. Booker T. Washington, The Atlanta Exposition Address (pp. 594-602)
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, the following selections from *The Souls of Black Folk*
- a. "The Forethought" (pp. 692-693)
  - b. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" (pp. 693-699)
  - c. "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" (pp. 699-708)
3. *A History of the African American People*, James R. Grossman, "A Certain Kind of Soul" (pp. 94-117)
- 10/8: "Harlem Renaissance, 1919-1940" (pp. 953-962)
1. Alain Locke, "The New Negro" (pp. 983-993)
  2. Angelina Weld Grimké, all poems (pp. 969-970)
  3. Claude McKay, "Harlem Shadows," "If We Must Die," and "To the White Fiends" (pp. 1006-1007)
  4. Marita Bonner, "On Being Young--a Woman--and Colored" (pp. 1244-1247)
  5. Sterling A. Brown, "Strong Men" (pp. 1252-1254)
  6. Gwendolyn B. Bennett, all poems (pp. 1266-1269)
  7. Arna Bontemps, "Southern Mansion" and "Miracles" (pp. 1281-1282)
- 10/13: 1. Zora Neale Hurston, "Sweat" (pp. 1019-1030)
2. Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem" (pp. 1236-1243)
- 10/15: 1. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Mother to Son," "The Weary Blues," "I, Too," "Letter to the Academy," "Ballad of the Landlord," and "Theme for English B" (1295, 1302-1303, 1309-1310)
2. Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," "Incident," "Heritage," and "From the Dark Tower" (pp. 1341, 1342, 1347-1350, 1351)
3. Helene Johnson, "Poem" and "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" (pp. 1352-1353)
4. *A History of the African American People*, Joe William Trotter, Jr., "From Hard Times to Hope" (pp. 118-151)

- 10/20: 1. "Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, 1940-1960" (pp. 1355-1368)  
 2. Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage" and "Frederick Douglass" (pp. 1520-1524, 1528)
- 10/22: Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch" and "The Man Who Lived Underground" (pp. 1411-1419, 1436-1470)
- 10/27: 1. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (pp. 1570-1578)  
 2. Margaret Walker, all poems (pp. 1617-1623)  
 3. *A History of the African American People*, Clayborne Carson, "A Season of Struggle" (pp. 152-177)
- 10/29: James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son" and "Sonny's Blues" (pp. 1713-1749)
- 11/3: 1. Ann Petry, "Like a Winding Sheet" (pp. 1497-1504)  
 2. Gwendolyn Brooks, "kitchenette building," "the mother," "a song in the front yard," "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon," "The Children of the Poor," "The Lovers of the Poor," "We Real Cool" (pp. 1625-1626, 1628, 1633-1638)
- 11/5: 1. "The Black Arts Era, 1960-1975" (pp. 1850)  
 2. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" (pp. 107-109)  
 3. El-Jajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X), "The Ballot or the Bullet" (pp. 116-128)
- 11/10: 1. Addison Gayle, Jr., Introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* (pp. 1912-1918)  
 2. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (pp. 1924-1926)  
 3. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" (pp. 2039-2050)  
 4. Maulana Karenga, "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function" (pp. 2086-2090)
- 11/12: 1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (pp. 1896--1908)  
 2. Etheridge Knight, all selections (pp. 1908-1911)
- 11/17: 1. Mari Evans, all selections (pp. 1851-1852)  
 2. Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" (pp. 1923-1924)  
 3. Amiri Baraka, "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note," "A Poem for Black Hearts," "Black Art," (pp. 1939, 1940-1941, 1943-1944)  
 4. *A History of the African American People*, Roger Williams, "Race, Culture, and Conservatism" (pp. 178-199)
- 11/19: 1. Sonia Sanchez, all selections (pp. 1964-1967)  
 2. June Jordan, "In Memoriam: Martin Luther King, Jr." and "Poem about My Rights" (pp. 2017-2021)  
 3. Lucille Clifton, "malcolm," "homage to my hips," "wishes for sons," and "move" (pp. 2033-2035)  
 4. Jayne Cortez, "How Long Has Trane Been Gone" (pp. 2036-2038)
- 11/24 & 11/26: Thanksgiving Recess

- 12/1: 1. Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" (pp. 2071-2072)  
2. Haki R. Madhubuti, "a poem to complement other poems"  
3. Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa" (p. 2098)  
4. James Alan McPherson, "A Solo Song: For Doc" (pp. 2101-2117)

12/3: **Second Meditative Essay Due**

1. "Literature since 1975" (pp. 2127-2139)
2. Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" (pp. 2156-2157)
3. Michelle Cliff, "Within the Veil" (pp. 2505-2508)
4. Rita Dove, "David Walker" (pp. 2613-2614)

- 12/8: Ernest J. Gaines, "The Sky is Gray" (pp. 2324-2344)

- 12/10: 1. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (pp. 2430-2437)  
2. Alice Walker, "Everyday Use" (pp. 2437-2442)

Professor John Ernest's  
Handy  
**GUIDE FOR PAPERS**

**Part 1: Evaluation**

I will evaluate your performance in three basic categories of concern: structure, content, and presentation. Each category will count for approximately one third of your grade for the paper—though, of course, poor performance in one category inevitably will affect the success of the others. That is, don't assume that I can or will "just read for the ideas" in a poorly presented or illogically constructed essay. I am particularly dismayed when I see errors that are repeated from one draft to the next, so make a special effort to apply criticisms of earlier drafts to later writing assignments in the class. Please remember that I would love to talk with you about your paper at any and all stages of its development.

I've indicated throughout this Guide my standards for evaluation, but I will summarize a few points here, which I've adapted from similar summaries put together by friends and colleagues.

**An"A" essay:**

- (1) has a clearly indicated thesis (or working hypothesis) to which all elements of the essay are relevant;
- (2) has focused topic sentences that announce the central argument of each paragraph, connecting this new stage of the analysis to that of the previous paragraph;
- (3) supports its argumentative claim with evidence from the text, and avoids being simply mechanical in citing evidence;

- (4) attends to the implications of the central argument;
- (5) is thoughtful and deliberate in its use of language, essay structure, and evidence;
- (6) considers, if only implicitly, the evidence and arguments that might undermine or challenge the essay's argument, and doesn't ignore important evidence or complications;
- (7) is free of recurring surface errors or errors of fact;
- (8) is professional in its presentation—including the title of the essay, page numbers, works-cited format, and other issues of manuscript form;
- (9) makes no unsupported claims about history, and demonstrates that the essay's author is aware of larger cultural and ideological concerns that might distort her or his judgment;
- (10) is equally attentive to detail and to the big picture;
- (11) is compelling in its intellectual and ethical commitment to the essay's subject.

Here is another way to think about these concerns—this time with greater emphasis on your responsibilities as a scholar:

- 1. Focus.** You should narrow down your concerns to a reasonably focused set of questions and/or concerns, and then use the essay to explore those concerns.
- 2. Specificity.** You should be as specific as you can about the questions you have. If you have questions about religion, for example, you should focus on specific historical periods, specific situations, and perhaps even specific denominations or manifestations of religion. If you have questions about the system of slavery, push yourself to look beyond the abstract level and at specific issues within the system.
- 3. Literary Skill.** You should include in your paper a discussion of at least one (and, depending on the length and complexity of the work, perhaps more) work of literature. We are reading literature as part of our effort to “read” U.S. history and culture. Present examples of literature that pertain to questions you raise about history and culture, and think about how the author's handling of the work of literature provides insights into, for example, how to interpret the workings of culture.
- 4. Use of Information.** The various texts we are reading provide a great deal of useful information. I expect you to make use of this information in your papers. Moreover, when you raise questions that can be answered by a quick look at an encyclopedia (especially specialized ones—for example, the *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*), I expect you to look at that encyclopedia. In other words, I expect you to do basic research on matters of simple information (people and events in history, for example)
- 5. Complexity.** These papers should be challenging, for we are reading about and discussing challenging issues. I expect to encounter a certain intensity of thought in your essays, and I will be critical of any tendency to simplify the issues.
- 6. Grammar and Style.** Your writing should be clear and correct, and I should be able to follow your line of thought without using a map.

**7. Presentation.** Remember to cite your sources, both in the body of the essay and in the bibliography or “works cited” page. For essays on literature, scholars generally use the Modern Language Association (MLA) or the Chicago format for citing sources.

## **Part 2: Manuscript Form and Presentation (and other important details)**

Your paper *must* meet the grammatical and formal standards of academic prose. Leave yourself time to revise, and revise with a grammar handbook close by. Type carefully, and double-space the lines. For conventions concerning the proper handling of quotations, the presentation of titles of works, and the documentation of sources, see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. A copy should be available in the library, or you could borrow mine. If you are an English major (or planning to be one) and do not yet own a copy of this book, buy one.

Remember also that academic conventions of clarity and formality are important. Avoid hazy generalizations and other forms of vagueness. A good way to check for this problem is to look at the main verbs and nouns in your sentences: do they tend to be abstract and general, or specific? If the former, change the noun or verb to something more specific rather than adding adjectives or adverbs. One source of ambiguity can be pronouns: make sure that your reader clearly knows what “this” and “that” refer to or, better yet, include clarifying nouns along with the pronouns (“this idea,” “that action”). “This” or “that” should not be the subject of any sentence in your essay.

Avoid also clichés, jargon, reductive expressions, and hollow modifiers like “interesting,” “positive,” “negative,” or “successful.” Please use gender-neutral language: he or she, hers or his, etc. Remember that there is nothing that warms a professor’s heart so much as the carefully, memorably turned phrase or well-written passage. Good writing simply gives your argument more authority and weight and demonstrates your care as an scholar (as well as stylist). All the elements that make for good creative writing also make for good academic writing, so show some creativity and care in your prose. Working within the formal conventions of academic writing does not need to be restrictive; working with and against those conventions—fulfilling them, following the rules (and knowing when, how, and why to break the rules at times), while also speaking with an individual voice—can be a very creative process.

You are required to follow MLA format for citing your sources. I have used this format in this guide so that you will have a model to follow. At the end of this guide is a sample “Works Cited” page.

The following are special instructions or reminders—which means that ignoring them might have a special effect on your grade. **If you do not follow these guidelines concerning spacing, citation, and/or page numbering, then the best grade you can get on your paper is an “A-”.**

1. Your essay must be typed, and double-spaced. You should have standard 1-inch margins on the top, bottom, and sides.
2. Note the proper form of parenthetical citation demonstrated in this guide. Remember to indent long quotations. Remember also to provide page numbers for all quotations.

3. Your essay should have a title. An intriguing title can actually add to the power of an argument.
4. Number the pages of your paper (upper right-hand corner; include your last name).
5. Please do not present your paper in a plastic cover. Simply staple the pages once, on the upper left-hand corner.
6. Keep a copy of your paper. I've never lost a paper, but you are required keep a copy just in case. Even if I lose your paper, you are still responsible for it.
7. **Proofread your paper before you submit it.** Correct errors before you hand in the paper. If you spot some at the last minute, when it is too late to print a new copy of the paper, please correct the errors neatly with a pen. Spelling and grammar count.
8. Use brackets when you insert something into or change something in a quotation.

**example:** At first, Douglass seems optimistic, for his “new mistress [proves] to be all she appeared when [he] first met her at the door . . .” (77). In this case, I use brackets to indicate changes I have made to fit the quotation to the grammatical structure of *my* sentence.

### Part 3: Assignment

You are required to write an analytical essay, not an informal discussion of or response to literature. An analytical essay presents an argument about how and why an author does certain things in his or her work; it examines the work's thematic, conceptual, or rhetorical infrastructure (infrastructure means “the basic, underlying framework or features of a system”). Textual analysis is not limited to discovering “what the author intended”; often, the purpose of textual analysis is to explore the cultural, historical, and/or philosophical implications of the text's apparent or implicit design—the patterns of ideas, images, language, and/or themes in the text, and the gaps or breaks in those patterns. In this way, reading a text is a way to learn how to be a better reader of one's world, of the cultural forces that shape one's thinking, one's personality, even one's adopted role in life. Textual analysis can make one conscious of all those things that one sees and does unconsciously on a daily basis; it can help us defamiliarize and thereby *see* and think about our familiar customs and surroundings.

I expect you to write a formal analytical essay even if you have not done so before. If you have never written this kind of paper, and if you have no experience reading texts analytically, I recommend that you look at Mortimer J. Adler's and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*, an excellent book (and not as simplistic as its title suggests). If you are an experienced analytical reader, and if you would like to develop your skills by thinking about theoretical approaches to literary criticism, I recommend that you look at *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Finally, if you would like to increase your critical vocabulary, develop your understanding of terms that I mention in class, familiarize yourself with literary genres and periods, and read introductions to various critical theories, look through M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (especially the sixth edition). All of these books are listed in the Works Cited at the end of this guide, and all should be available at our library, or you could order your own copies.

Remember that textual analysis is a formal academic discipline and that every paper you write will test your mastery of its principles. Let me stress that point: the papers *are* tests. When you write, then, your task is to demonstrate your ability to present a persuasive analysis, as well

as to present your analysis in a coherent and grammatically correct format.

If you are not sure that you know how to write the kind of paper I am requiring, please don't hesitate to ask for advice or help. I will be happy to help you with each stage of the writing process.

#### **Part 4: The Introduction**

Your introductory paragraph should have three stages (three stages but only one paragraph). In a longer essay (20 pages or more), you would cover these same stages but in three or more paragraphs. The three stages are as follows:

- 1) **Subject.** In the first stage, you introduce your subject—the text itself. In a few (2-4) sentences, you should present the author and title of the work, along with a general overview of the work's plot, outstanding themes, or general achievement. The shorter the paper, the shorter this introductory passage should be; and in a very long essay (25-30 pages), the first few pages might well be devoted to this introductory passage.
- 2) **Topic.** In the next stage, you present your topic—the interpretive issue to which your paper is devoted. In a sense, you need to show that there is cause for confusion and misunderstanding, or that there is a dimension of the work that is not clear unless one looks at it a certain way (for example, by viewing it within its historical context). You might establish the interpretive problem or issue in a number of ways:
  - \* explain the problem or issue for the reader.
  - \* open with a question which you develop in the opening paragraph.
  - \* use a passage from the work to illustrate the problem or issue.
- 3) In the third stage, you present your thesis—your answer to the questions or issues you raise in stage 2. Your thesis should be explicit and specific. Consider carefully the following discussion of the thesis.

Do not begin your essay from the beginning of time. Postpone your comments about your personal feelings or response to the work, and postpone also your comments on the twentieth century when writing on literature from previous centuries. Usually, you can present material like this in your concluding paragraph, as you indicate the implications of the argument you have just presented. Get to the point elegantly, gracefully, directly, and quickly.

#### **Part 5: The Thesis**

An argument demonstrates the justice, value, and logical coherence of a *thesis*. Remember that a thesis is different from a subject or topic. The subject is the text you are analyzing. The topic is the interpretive issue you are trying to address. **The thesis is the stand you take on that issue.** A subject is what you are talking about; a topic is why you are talking about it; a thesis is what you are trying to say about that topic. A thesis is debatable; a topic is

not, for a topic simply identifies—notes the existence of—grounds for debate or cause for confusion. A topic is something you can mention to a professor without feeling nervous; a thesis keeps you up at night.

This is not a thesis: “Melville uses symbolism in *Moby-Dick*.” What kind of symbolism? How does he use it? To what purpose? Will you examine *all* examples of symbolism in the novel? Again, this is not a thesis: “Hawthorne examines history in *The Marble Faun*.” You might develop this observation into a thesis by establishing the specific issue and taking a clear stand. Consider, for example, this statement from a published essay:

When Hawthorne says that those who object to the unresolved mysteries of *The Marble Faun*'s ending do “not know how to read a Romance,” he means, as his work itself shows, that insofar as they expect definite answers to their questions or an unambiguous moral to the story, they do not know how to read history either. (Michael 150)

True, this is a *long* thesis; and, true, it makes the idea behind it sound more complicated than it actually is. Still, this scholar's purpose is clear, and one can anticipate what he will argue in the rest of the essay, and why.

\* If you present your topic in the form of a question, your topic and thesis might look like this:  
What are we to make of Melville's emphasis on “The Whiteness of the Whale” in *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*? Although it is tempting to assert that this “whiteness” has nothing to do the complex and contested racial landscape of the nineteenth-century United States, the novel offers significant evidence that race is indeed the issue to which all other concerns in this novel must be related.

\* If you present your topic by quoting a sentence from the text, your topic and thesis might look like this:

In his appendix to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass seems to worry about the implications of his comments on religion throughout the body of this text. “I have,” he notes, “in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion.” But as he explains his distinction between “the Christianity of this land” and “the Christianity of Christ,” Douglass reapplies his concerns and suggests that the white Christian reader is actually the one who should worry about being considered an opponent of all religion.

## Part 6: Structure

Academic writing is very basic and straightforward. It is designed to allow one to read subtle arguments quickly. Accordingly, the structure of your argument is very important. Each paragraph should present a unified block of thought, a clear and significant stage of your argument. You should therefore avoid paragraphs that are too long (in a short essay, page-long paragraphs are too long, often a sign of unfocused thinking) or too short. As a general rule, each paragraph should have at least five sentences. Paragraphs with fewer sentences often indicate undeveloped or unsubstantiated thought. Each paragraph should build on what you have done in

the previous paragraph, and should prepare your reader for what you will argue in the next paragraph. If you can move your paragraphs around without disturbing the nature of your argument, then you have not paid sufficient attention to the structure of your argument or have simply repeated yourself in the course of your paper.

My term for the structure of an academic essay is the “intellectual matrix” of the essay. The “intellectual matrix” is what you get when you read only the thesis statement and the topic sentence of each of your paragraphs (normally the first sentence of the paragraph). Just as your thesis indicates clearly the argumentative purpose of your paper, so should the first sentence of each paragraph, the topic sentence, indicate the argumentative purpose of that paragraph. I should be able to read only these sentences to determine the logical design of your argument. In other words, I should be able to summarize your argument from those sentences alone. Roughly one third of your grade will be based on the extent to which the “intellectual matrix” of your paper provides me with an accurate overview of your argument, and also on your ability to construct a systematic, unified argument that builds from one stage (one paragraph) to the next.

## **Part 7: Content**

Remember that your assignment is textual, historical, and/or cultural analysis, not plot summary, and not simply general or subjective historical commentary. In textual analysis, your task is to show the connections between *what* the author says and *how* she or he says it—in other words, to identify and examine the implications of the author’s strategies (style, themes, images, patterns of thought and of argument, etc.).

Remember that your reader has read and thought about the text to which your paper is devoted, and therefore does not need to be reminded of the plot. **Do not simply summarize the plot.**

Historical commentary is useful, usually even necessary (in small doses), but use it wisely, make sure you know what you are talking about, and do not allow it to distract you from your main task: informed analysis. Typically, the more general and abstract the historical context, the less useful it will be. Keep in mind that all people in a given time period did not think the same way, even if there are issues and ideas that did preoccupy many. Be attentive, in other words, to conflicts, differences, and changes among groups within a period, and never claim that “nineteenth-century Americans believed that . . .”. Even more important, if you introduce historical commentary, you must take care that you provide some evidence for your historical claims and that you establish your historical context efficiently and succinctly. If you are using elements from an author’s biography, for example, choose those elements that are relevant to your thesis and make sure that you establish why those elements are important *for understanding the work*.

**Grades for papers based primarily on plot summary or on general historical commentary will begin somewhere in the area of a “C”—and they will go down from there.**

You must present your argument carefully, methodically. In the early part of your paper, explain carefully the interpretive problem you intend to solve, and then proceed to solve it in stages. At each point of your paper, think about what your reader needs to know if he or she is to understand what is coming up in the next stage of your paper. At each stage, quote from your sources or from your primary text to show the basis for your interpretation. Show your reader

that you are analyzing your topic or text and not just talking about it.

**Focus** is the key to success. You cannot hope to analyze an entire book, an entire century, or an entire social movement in a short paper. Therefore, you must isolate a representative portion of your topic. If you are writing about a literary text, for example, you might focus on a character, a scene, a rhetorical or ideological pattern, a pattern of allusions, or some other aspect of the author's techniques and strategies. Find something you can examine in detail and explain your interpretation carefully. Justify your choice at the beginning of your essay; at the end of your essay, indicate how your conclusions can enable readers to understand other aspects of the work.

## **Part 8: Research and Support—A Reminder**

**It is important to remember that you must support your claims, and that you must not make any claims that you are unable or unwilling to support.** When you present an interpretation of a sentence or passage or episode in a text, you must explain carefully how the text supports that interpretation. If you make a point about history, then you must do the necessary historical research, and you must refer to that research in your essay (see me on how to do this if you have not done this before). If you say something about an author, then you must support that point with biographical research. If you say something about how critics have viewed a certain text, then you must support that with research. Avoid making claims about how readers respond to a certain text, for you cannot support such claims.

## **Part 9: Using Quotations**

To present a persuasive argument, you must quote from the text you are analyzing, and you must explain carefully how the evidence you present leads to and supports your interpretation of the work. This is not to say that you should be blatant about this. That is, you shouldn't lead into a quotation by saying, "This interpretation is supported by the following quotation." Consider the following guidelines:

1. I should be convinced of the significance of the textual evidence (quotations from and allusions to the works) you present. In other words, don't just quote. Prepare your reader for the textual evidence you will present; present that evidence briefly (avoid long quotations); and then explicate, analyze, or otherwise explain the significance of that evidence. Never assume that a passage is self-explanatory.

2. Don't just present a quotation without introduction. I shouldn't suddenly encounter a quotation at the beginning of a new sentence, and you should never present a free-standing quotation (that is, a sentence that contains nothing but a quotation); always lead into the quotation in your own words, and then follow it with commentary.

3. Never end a paragraph with a quotation. Always follow with commentary, so that you conclude each of *your* paragraphs with *your* own words.

4. Avoid long quotations. Whenever possible, integrate (with quotation marks) significant phrases from the text in your own sentences as you present and explain your interpretation.

5. Whenever you use a significant word or phrase from the text, use quotation marks to indicate that you are in fact using someone else's words.

The following is taken from one of my essays, "From Mysteries to Histories: Cultural Pedagogy in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*." I present this so that you can have a model for using quotations, but I do not expect you to simply imitate my style. Indeed, I wish you the good fortune of avoiding my overly complex style. Still, I hope you will find it useful to examine (and, perhaps, question) my use of textual evidence.

**From the essay:**

Harper establishes the terms of this argument, and begins the novel, by confronting her white readers with their inability to interpret culturally-familiar discourse. In the first pages of the first chapter, Harper draws readers into a "shadow" culture—that of the slaves—and introduces her readers to the discursive network of that culture, the "mystery of market speech." Her depiction of slaves talking enthusiastically about "splendid" fish, and about butter "just as fresh, as fresh can be" (7-8) invokes images of the stereotypical Black characters who inhabited the pages of white supremacist fiction gaining popularity at the time. On the novel's second page, though, the narrator wonders at this "unusual interest manifested by these men in the state of the produce market," and raises the question that many readers might well have forgotten to ask: "What did it mean?" (8). The answer is that, during the war, "when the bondman was turning his eyes to the American flag," "some of the shrewder slaves . . . invented a phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle-field" (8-9). The "mystery of market speech" is thus solved by learning this phraseology, this cultural discourse that appropriates authorized, and in that sense, legal language for illegal but moral ends.

The primary point here is not that this particular mystery is now clear, nor is it merely that the slaves had to formulate their own language to circumvent the will of the dominant race; rather, the point lies in the discursive nature of the mystery itself, the extent to which one's ability to understand is controlled by one's cultural training. As one reads, one encounters other such mysteries, each of which reveals the cognitive and moral limitations inherent in and enforced by the dominant cultural system. Consider, for example, Dr. Gresham, whom the reader first meets in a field hospital, and who is clearly attracted to Iola Leroy, whom he believes to be a white lady generously lowering herself to serve the needs of the Northern soldiers. Initially, Dr. Gresham cannot understand how Iola can bring herself to kiss a black patient; and as he explains this to Col. Robinson, the reader discovers the terms of his confusion:

I cannot understand how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds. It is a mystery I cannot solve. (57)

This description is essentially a circular equation of cultural identity. If one is a Southern lady, then one must have the advantages of education and good breeding which provide the manners and fine culture that are, by definition, the qualities of a Southern lady. The perfect circle of

definition represents the cognitive closure that is the *raison d'être* of any culture system. When this closure leads to culturally exotic behavior, those within the cultural circle are faced with a mystery they cannot solve. When Col. Robinson provides the essential information, that “Miss Leroy was a slave,” Dr. Gresham can relocate her in the cultural formula, and he says revealingly, “What you tell me changes the whole complexion of affairs” (58). Dr. Gresham, in other words, is able to relocate Iola according to existing cultural categories and stereotypes.

**Note on using quotations:** In the example from my own writing, note how the material from the work is integrated with my own words, and how I combine both block quotations and in-text quotations to incorporate the evidence into the prose. The idea is to make sure that yours is the dominant voice in your writing, that you prepare your reader for the quotations, and that your essay is as smooth as possible. Try these techniques in your own work.

### **Part 10: A Sample Works Cited Page (MLA format)**

Note: Different academic disciplines (Literature, History, etc.) require different approaches to documentation; most do not use the MLA format. Always check your syllabus, or check with your professor, to determine what form you should use.

#### **Works Cited**

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