

ENG 411 – English Senior Seminar: Investigating the Humanities
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Overview

In true seminar fashion, we will together investigate the definition and history of *The Humanities*. The popular press has focused in recent years on the Humanities as an academic area in crisis, superseded in funding, interest among the public, and intellectual and social relevance by the Natural Sciences. Defenders of the Humanities have made their cases on multiple grounds, though not everyone is persuaded, either by the suggestion of crisis or by the defensive statements of value. We will begin by reading examples from recent press sources. Recognizing that the Humanities have, even at their inception, prompted debates about value, we will go on to investigate its history and even its definition, first through a study of historical debates around the Humanities by literary scholar Helen Small, then through an attempted comprehensive history of the Humanities by linguist Bod Rens. Finally, we will consider the future of literary studies.

Unlike most undergraduate literature courses, this one prominently features nonfiction and, beginning in week two, works written for professional, academic readers. As informed but nonprofessional readers, you should not expect to grasp the details and implications immediately, and should be prepared to return to the basics of how to read challenging material critically: first, get an overview of the piece's structure by reading the introduction and skimming subheadings where they exist; "talk back" to the author in the margins as you read – recording surprises, questions, doubts, counter-arguments, interesting ideas, etc.; circle unfamiliar words and look them up when they impede your understanding; pause to do close readings of knotty passages that seem important; try to summarize the main piece's argument in your own words, and bring this summary, along with a list of ideas and questions, to class daily. As Newman says in *The Idea of a University*, "to be capable of easy translation is no test of the excellence of a composition." Keep this in mind when you become frustrated. Be prepared to reread, and to "translate" difficult material without assuming that its meaning is one you're already familiar with.

This said, you nonetheless have critically important experience as an English major, and as a liberal arts student, to bring to these questions. Your assignments will include analysis of our readings in the form of a blog, but will also require reflection on the value of your English major to you personally, a portfolio of your academic writing with an assessment of your progress as a learner over the last several years, and a prospectus for an independent project that you will complete next term. Overall, this course will encourage and enable you to reflect productively on your time as a Cornell English major, to capitalize on your time remaining with us as a student, and to look ahead to this major's role in your post-college creative, intellectual, and professional life.

Contacting Me

Do not hesitate to contact me if I can be helpful. The quickest way to reach me is by email. If you wish to set up a meeting, however, the best thing to do is simply to show

up to my office hours, which I have set aside to meet exclusively with class members. These are on a first-come, first-serve basis, so there's no need to set up an appointment. In weeks 1 and 2, I will hold office hours in the House on weekdays from 1:30-2:30. (You are welcome to use the house as an afternoon study space as well.) In week 3, I plan to hold these same office hours in the library but will confirm the change in class.

Required Texts

Rens, Bod. *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010.

Small, Helen. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

Essays, various, available through Moodle or as handouts.

Schedule

Unless specified otherwise below, we will meet daily from 8:30-11:30 in the Van-Etten-Lacey House. Keep afternoons free from 1:00-3:00 for conferences and to enable participation in (optional) writing workshops.

Week 1

- M Introductions.
1:00 – Brooke Bergantzel will introduce and help you to set up blogs. Please bring a laptop or tablet (or smartphone) to class if possible.
- T Nussbaum, Chs. 1-4.
- W Nussbaum, Chs. 5-end
Report on The State of Graduate Education, MLA, 2014, on Moodle.
- Th Op Ed Pieces, Moodle. (You may read and bring online versions, but also bring written notes summarizing and commenting upon each piece so that you can keep them straight during discussion.)
DUE: Why I'm an English Major, First Draft
- F Small, Introduction.
DUE (5PM): Why I'm an English Major, Final Draft

Week 2

- M Small, Ch. 1, "Distinctions from Other Disciplines"
Snow, "The Rede Lecture, 1959" in *The Two Cultures* (available as e-book through Cole Library's card catalogue)
- T Small, Ch. 2, "Use and Usefulness"
DUE (in class): Rough draft of English Major Portfolio, including Introduction and

Brainstorming notes.

- W Small, Ch. 3, "Socrates Dissatisfied"
Mill, from *Autobiography*, Ch. 5, pars. 1-12 through "distinction between beauty and ugliness"; skim topic sentences of entire *Autobiography* (link on Moodle)
- Th Small, Ch. 4, "Democracy Needs Us"
Excerpt from George Eliot, *Felix Holt* (handout)
- F Small, Ch. 5, "For Its Own Sake" and Conclusion
Newman, "Knowledge its Own End," *Idea of a University* (link on Moodle)
- Su **DUE** (noon): English Major Portfolio with Overview, Final Draft

Week 3

- M Bod: I. Introduction
- T Bod: 3. The Middle Ages; 3.1, 3.3, 3.7, Con.
- W Bod: 4. Early Modern; 4.1, 4.3, 4.6, 4.7, Con.
- Th Bod: 5. Modern; 5.2, 5.3, 5.6, 5.7, Con.
Due (5 PM): Prospectus, Draft 1.
- F Bod: Conclusion.

Week 4

- M Articles, Moodle
- T Drucker, "Overview," pp. 138-160; 176-179.
Due: Prospectus, Final Draft
- W **DUE**: Blog Entry Portfolio

Course Requirements

Note: The completion and timely submission of all assignments is required to pass this course; *beyond* this basic requirement, assignments will be weighted in the final course grade as follows.

- 50% I. Contributions to Collaborative Learning: Blogging and In-Class Participation
10% II. Blogging Portfolio, with Introduction and Final (Exam) Post
10% III. Letter: Why I'm an English Major
15% IV. Portfolio of College Work, with Introduction
15% V. Prospectus for Independent Project

I. Contributions: HUMANITIES BLOGS and IN-CLASS PARTICIPATION

In the spirit of the Public Humanities, you will keep an online blog about the course readings and matters under discussion, and engage meaningfully and fully with your classmates' blogs. This is not simply a place to air uninformed opinions, but rather to construct short essays that engage with the course materials in a thoughtful and productive way. It can also be a place to pose provocative discussion questions. Your imagined readers are your classmates, but also include any person interested in debates about the Humanities.

On-going Blog Expectations:

- Post essays 5 days per week (around 5-6 pars. per entry, at minimum).
- Post at least 2 of these per week by 10 PM on the evening before class discussion of the key material.
- Respond daily to others' posts in a meaningful way.
- Respect Cornell's community values: the purpose of the blogs is to engage in a social learning process, and everyone should feel safe in this online space. Dissention, interpretive disagreements, and provocative ideas are all welcome. However, bloggers should avoid superfluous obscenities, biased language, and *ad hominem* arguments.
- The writing should be crafted and edited – not slipshod and rushed.
- Avoid plagiarism and maintain integrity by crediting others' ideas. Use in-text attributions, referring to authors, titles and dates, and provide links where possible. (E.g., *In her 2010 book, Not for Profit: Why the Democracy Needs the Humanities, Martha C. Nussbaum makes the now familiar claim that the Humanities teach critical thinking, but do the Humanities really have a stronghold on this? Are science majors who neglect the Humanities unable to read closely, make broad connections, and to empathize with others? ...*) This expectation regarding attribution applies not only to our course texts but also to essays you might read on the web, including your classmates' blogs. (E.g., *Blogger A. T. Trollope, in a recent posting about being an English major, suggests that empathy may be overrated as a skill learned from reading literature....* The author's name, or the word "posting," should link to the blog mentioned.)
- Feel free to incorporate relevant material you locate outside of required class readings.
- Include personal information only when, and as, relevant to the essay's argument, if at all.
- Use an appropriate "voice" and style, avoiding grammatical errors.
- Use images and sound to forward your argument if desired, but these should never overpower your text. Any image used must be from the public domain (see, for example, [creativecommons.com](https://creativecommons.org/)), or must be your original image. Keep in mind that just because an image has been used repeatedly on the web, it is not necessarily in the public domain, and we are not creating memes. If you must use someone else's original image, embed a link to the website where it exists and give credit, rather than downloading and re-uploading it to your page. In general, original content is best.
- Be thoughtful and creative!

Expectations for in-class participation are standard: □complete readings prior to class, including blog posts, □come to class promptly and with written notes and questions, □demonstrate deep listening, □contribute ideas, and do so with respect for all individuals, even when disagreeing with someone's stated viewpoint, □and be ready to defend your own views with textual evidence and sound reasoning, and to change your views when it becomes reasonable to do so. We are responsible together for creating and maintaining a productive place of learning.

Attendance policy: We have a small group and typically meet only once per day, so even one absence may disrupt continuity. An absence will be excused only in the case of an emergency, and if you get my approval before class begins. More than 3 absences may disqualify you from passing the course. Perfect attendance will work in your favor should your final course grade be borderline.

II. BLOG PORTFOLIO

At the end of the course, you will submit a blog portfolio consisting of 10 posts (and comments made in response to those posts), along with several comments you made on others' blogs. Include an introduction that demonstrates critical thinking about your work, and point your reader to what's important in the blog posts that follow. Address, for example: What progress did you make over the course of the block in your understanding of the Humanities, as reflected in these entries? What posts are you happiest with and why? What pieces would you change and how? How does your "voice" develop as a blogger? How do your posts demonstrate your engagement in meaningful conversation? If you were to write a longer paper on the Humanities, how would you proceed and what would you argue? What further research would you do? What do you expect to tell people, post-college, about the value of the Humanities? What other questions has this course opened up for you to explore in the future? My goal is not to assess your blog posts once again, but rather to assess the quality of your critical self-assessment, and to have a stronger sense of your learning over the course of the term.

III. LETTER: Why I'm an English Major

Write a letter to the English Department Faculty on what it means for you to be an English major. What drew you to this field of study? What are your own strengths and weaknesses in relation to this field? What do you hope to get out of this major, and what did you actually attain? What relationship do you anticipate having to books, reading, doing critical analysis, writing and other core elements from the English major in future? Your narrative should go beyond clichéd statements ("I always liked to read") and engage deeply with critical issues such as autobiography, identity formation, reading and book history/theory, or professionalism. The letter may be creative as well as critical in its approach and reflections. You will submit this early for feedback and revise it in week one.

IV. PORTFOLIO of College Work, with Introductory Essay

This essay requires you to assess your development as a writer and critical thinker, by taking a longitudinal look at the work you've done as a Cornell English major.

Begin by gathering and reviewing *all* of the papers that you've written and projects you've completed in English classes, or as an English major outside of classes (e.g., poems submitted to *Open Field*), including the assignments you were given. If you are a transfer student, you should include relevant material from classes prior to Cornell. Arrange these in chronological order. Read and Brainstorm: What kinds of writing are demonstrated in this collection? Where are your strengths demonstrated? Where do you see evidence of progress? Where do you see the need for further progress? What skills have you developed that are not evident in this work, and why? Be as specific and comprehensive as possible, both in your description of strengths and weaknesses (e.g., *improved ability to construct a thesis*), and in your reliance upon evidence for your claims (e.g., *see first paragraph of papers 1 and 7; the first is a statement of fact, whereas the latter is debatable*). **Note** that you will submit this brainstorming along with your completed portfolio, so do not discard it.

Shape these observations into a cohesive essay that explains the ways that your English major has prepared you for what lies beyond college. Your goal is to produce an honest (i.e., persuasive) assessment of strengths and weaknesses, while also explaining the value of your major to an outsider. Imagine as your reader, for example, a potential future employer who values writing and critical thinking skills, or a graduate school admissions officer, or parents or guardians who may be interested in what you have learned. Your final portfolio need not include every assignment, but nor should it be so selective that it misrepresents your college career. In your discussion of improvements still needed, discuss how you will attempt to address shortfalls.

Feel free to refer to our readings, or to other materials, as you consider what strengths employers and/or graduate programs are seeking, or as you consider the value of a college education in the Humanities.

IV. PROSPECTUS for Independent Project

In term 6, you will complete an original, independent project, working with a small group of researchers and writers. This project must be in your declared area of concentration – Literary Studies, Creative Writing, or Film Studies – and should engage with advanced work in the field. You'll get started this term by preparing a prospectus, a project proposal, so that you can hit the ground running. Begin by identifying one or more projects that you began or completed in a previous class that you would like to take to another level. While you may wish to take on a topic altogether new to you, and this is not strictly forbidden, be aware that if you are overly ambitious, given your time constraints, you risk producing something superficial or unfinished.

Your "ideal reader" (or imagined reader) is a panel of professionals who have the ability to approve or deny necessary access to materials and guidance for your completing this project. The objective is to persuade readers that the project is worthy of their support, that it will make an original contribution, and that you will be able to complete the

project successfully within the time allowed (one block). This assignment not only will help you to begin your capstone project, but also mirrors the real-world process whereby academics, artists, and others obtain financial and other kinds of support for professional projects through grant writing.

Guidelines: the prospectus will include

- A 3-4 page single-spaced project description (please double-space between paragraphs);
- A substantial annotated bibliography of preparatory materials you plan to use; the annotations should justify that work's inclusion, explaining the anticipated relevance to your project.

Students concentrating in Creative Writing should address the following, not necessarily in this order:

What creative work do you expect to produce (e.g., a sonnet sequence, a novel, a short story), in addition to a critical artist's statement? What central idea/question do you want to engage with through your creative work? What do you hope this project will contribute – why is it significant?

Where did your interest in this project emerge? If you are beginning with work you produced for another class, explain how this project differs. What reading, or other preparation, do you intend to do, and how will these further your goals? What is your projected timetable for completing this work in one term, and with the resources available to you? What do you expect to gain personally by completing this project?

Students in the Literature or Film tracks should address the following, not necessarily in this order:

What do you expect to produce (e.g., a publishable-quality paper of about 25 pages? a 12-page, close reading to give as a public presentation? a theoretical essay?) What central idea/question do you plan to explore? What critical methodology will you use? What contribution do you expect this project to make – why is it significant?

Where did your interest in this project emerge? If you are beginning with a paper you wrote for another class, explain how this project differs. What reading, or other preparation, do you intend to do? What is your timetable for completing this project in one term, and with the resources available to you? What do you expect to gain personally by completing this project?

As with any formal English paper, the project description should cite sources referred to parenthetically, in MLA style.

Note on Departmental Honors: Eligibility for departmental honors requires a departmental GPA of 3.7 or higher, along with exceptionally strong work produced in the senior workshop, as determined by, first, a reading committee made up of department faculty members and, second, a successful, public, oral defense of the project. Projects completed by students who could have a 3.7 departmental GPA or

higher at the time of graduation will be automatically considered. See the English Department website (Student Resources, Guidelines for Earning Departmental Honors) for further detail, and speak with your advisor if you may be interested.

ADDITIONAL POLICIES

Technology: No cell phone use in the classroom. Unless I state otherwise, you may bring tablets and laptops and use these during discussions to access course-related materials.

Professionalism: While class discussion may seem relatively informal at times, please maintain a professional standard. Come well-prepared for class daily. No talking over one another, dominating conversation, or letting other do the heavy lifting while you wait for answers. No pajamas and slippers, yawning, and bringing in and eating a delicious breakfast while everyone else salivates, etc.

Accessibility: I will work to provide appropriate accommodations for students with documented learning disabilities, but you must speak with me about this within three days of the start of the block and your documentation should be on file with the registrar. Feel free to speak with me about any learning challenge you may have, if I can be helpful. Here is Cornell's official policy:

"Students who need accommodations for learning disabilities must provide documentation from a professional qualified to diagnose learning disabilities. For more information see cornellcollege.edu/disabilities/documentation/index.shtml

"Students requesting services may schedule a meeting with the disabilities services coordinator as early as possible to discuss their needs and develop an individualized accommodation plan. Ideally, this meeting would take place well before the start of classes.

"At the beginning of each course, the student must notify the instructor within the first three days of the term of any accommodations needed for the duration of the course."

Coordinating Co-Curricular Activities and Religious Observances: If you have a sports or other co-curricular activity scheduled that could interfere with your ability to attend class, or plan to observe a religious holiday, please notify me at the beginning of the term and provide me with a schedule of events, and these will be excused. You should consult others in the class about what you may have missed, and then speak with me if you have additional questions.

Deadlines: Because getting behind on the block plan can be fatal for later assignments, I typically will not accept late work, and I do not grant extensions except for true emergencies. If you find yourself falling behind, talk with me about it as soon as possible, and I will help you to strategize.

Academic Integrity: If you plagiarize or cheat, whether it is intentional or not, you'll receive an F as your final course grade and I will document the incident with the registrar. Feel free to ask me questions any time about properly documenting sources, or the distinction between collaboration and cheating. Here is Cornell's official policy:

"Cornell College expects all members of the Cornell community to act with academic integrity. An important aspect of academic integrity is respecting the work of others. A student is expected to explicitly acknowledge ideas, claims, observations, or data of others, unless generally known. When a piece of work is submitted for credit, a student is asserting that the submission is her or his work unless there is a citation of a specific source. If there is no appropriate acknowledgement of sources, whether intended or not, this may constitute a violation of the College's requirement for honesty in academic work and may be treated as a case of academic dishonesty. The procedures regarding how the College deals with cases of academic dishonesty appear in the Cornell student handbook, under the heading 'Academic Policies – Honesty in Academic Work.'"

Writing Studio: The Writing Studio is part of Cornell's Center for Teaching and Learning and is housed on the first floor of Cole Library. Peer tutors and professional writing instructors are available to meet with you throughout your writing process – whether to talk through ideas or to respond to drafts. They will not *edit* your work for you, but rather provide consultation and feedback as you write and revise. They accept walk-ins when there's room, but also schedule appointments. Appointments are recommended, particularly toward the end of term. Phone: x4462.