



## ENGL 124: Contemporary Literature

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### General Introduction

Welcome to the online version of English 124, Contemporary American Literature. I am excited about this conversion from the traditional correspondence course. As excellent as the correspondence version is, the addition of computer resources will make the online version a more enriching learning experience for you.

I am writing these words in an informal, conversational style. Though it is true that we will not personally meet in a traditional classroom, we do have an electronic meeting place. Accordingly, I will address you as much as possible as if we were together in a physical classroom, because in a real sense our class is a community of people with a common interest—the enjoyment and appreciation of contemporary American literature.

As you will soon discover, we will access materials online to help place assigned works in a context affording greater understanding of them. Each genre section (poetry, essay, short story, play, novel) has links to websites that you can access for information and perspective on the writers and their works. You will be able to hear some of the poets in our syllabus read some of their works. If you like, you will be able to read criticism on poems that particularly interest you or, conversely, find explications of poems you may find challenging. Essays are by nature topical, and for some of our selections, you can find background material that will make you more familiar with the topic and help you to evaluate the essay's content and point of view. Our short story anthology includes author comments specific to their selection, and you will often find links to background material and other works by specific authors.

The two playwrights we will read are quite different, and each has very interesting background material specific to their play. Dipping into these resources will deepen your understanding (and, I hope, appreciation) of the plays, especially if it has been a while since you read one. Finally, as is the case with all excellent literature, the assigned novels are rich in content and raise issues that are as vital and timely today as they were when each novel was written. I am confident that as you consider the themes of the novels and examine some of the supporting materials for each, you will be drawn into the stories to a degree that may pleasantly surprise you.

Those are the benefits of taking this online course. And now, here are some of the responsibilities you will have. Self-paced study frees you from the constraint of a fifteen-week semester schedule. But it also requires you to maintain a degree of self-discipline so that you can finish the course in the time you have planned for it. It is up to you to do the readings, check the online resources, make regular journal entries, and submit your written assignments. Though each student comes to this course with a unique set of educational, occupational, and family circumstances, everyone can have

a fulfilling and interesting experience with English 124. A key to success is for you to budget regular time during each week for this course and to be willing to invest some effort in participation.

I think that this is an excellent way to study contemporary literature, and I hope that before you finish, you will be in agreement with me.

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## Course Goals

For our purposes, contemporary literature refers to the literature of the present generation. This time span of thirty years or so presents us with a large quantity of what is considered “literature.” The quantity of contemporary literature as well as its very newness makes it difficult to know how what we read today may be regarded tomorrow. Though opinions may likely change in the future, you can be sure that your course materials all reflect important trends in thinking and in writing. Taken together, they should help you develop a sense of what contemporary literature is and does, so that when you have finished the course you will be able to form your own opinions about what you read.

English 124 offers you an opportunity to read several contemporary poems, plays, essays, stories, and novels and to confront these works in terms of their own characteristics as well as in terms of your responses to them. Many of the writers represented here believe no general truths exist unless a single writer or reader perceives them. Thus, truth lies not in the general but in the particular. To apprehend and experience the world in a way that yields knowledge, individuals must begin with themselves and work from themselves outward. If we want to read contemporary literature, we must begin by accepting that the personal reaction of each writer, as well as of each reader, is vital.

In keeping with this personal stance of contemporary literature, the assignments will ask you to express your own reactions, as well as to couple those reactions to some specific literary analysis. There are four goals for you to achieve:

- become familiar with the styles and concerns of contemporary literature
  - learn critical ideas and vocabulary so that your appreciation and understanding of what you read is increased
  - gain confidence in your own perceptions and ability to enjoy reading literature on your own
  - develop confidence in your ability to express your critical evaluations of the literature in a clear and persuasive written format.
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## Materials

See course description for an up-to-date list of materials.

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## Using Your Computer in ENGL 124

A major advantage of online instruction is your ability to access what can seem to be an overwhelming amount of information. In part, this flood of data is due to the democratic nature of the Internet; whoever has a computer and an ISP connection can put anything they want on the

Internet. This fact should serve to warn you that in using the Internet for research purposes, you must exercise caution and discretion in weighing an argument or the legitimacy of one site over another.

One way to be confident that a site is what it claims to be is to access it through a reputable database, generally an academic database (though certainly not always) accessed through a university library. Not only will you have peace of mind that what you are reading is basically considered to be a serious (and supposedly knowledgeable) treatment of your subject of interest, but you will save untold hours and frustrating moments by going to the right place in the first place, if you'll pardon the expression.

Self-paced courses are popular among many types of students—those looking for extra credits, those working toward a degree, or those taking the class for personal enrichment. Naturally, there is not a uniform computer familiarity or competence among all of these students, so some of what follows will be obvious to some of you. If so, good—move along to the next part. But for those who are unfamiliar with search procedures, it may be helpful to have some basic information.

Let's take, for example, Toni Morrison and her novel *Sula*, one of the novels you will read for this course. Since you are required to read and evaluate one critical article each for the two plays and four novels on the reading list, you will want to head for an academic database, and since you are considered a UNC-Chapel Hill student, you will want to take advantage of the off-campus access to the electronic journals and databases hosted by the Davis Library reference department.

I am assuming that you have the basic technical requirements: a computer or access to one, a connection to an Internet Service Provider (ISP), and the understanding of how to access a given URL (Universal Resource Locator) you wish to browse. Given that, here is how you can query the UNC-Chapel Hill library databases from off-campus:

First, you need to reach the home page of the UNC-Chapel Hill libraries. You might want to consider bookmarking this page for easy future reference.

Under the heading "Books and More," find "UNC-Chapel Hill catalog" and click on it. From here you will be taken to a screen labeled "Basic Catalog Search." In the "Select a Quick Link" dropdown window select "E-indexes and Databases," and then click "Go" to the right of that field. You should now be at "Article Databases and More." If you look to the right for "General Databases," you will see a column with database names underlined so you can click on the names for instant linking. The second listing is "Expanded Academic ASAP," click on that. The next page is NC LIVE and will send you to the database. That page is "Expanded Academic ASAP" with a search terms box, and in it you can enter "Toni Morrison and Sula."

Notice that you have a choice of searching for your key words in title, citation, and abstract. If you look just under that, you will see some options for how the database will retrieve and present articles. Since you are looking for an article to read and comment on for your journal, you will need the entire article, so click on the "articles with text" button. Click "search," and the result is fourteen citations, among them articles from *The Explicator*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, *Journal of Black Studies*, and *African-American Review* for a good sampling of academic, mostly refereed journals. (A refereed journal is one that prints articles only after they have been read and evaluated by generally two or more reviewers unknown to the author of the article and experts in

the subject matter. Articles published in refereed journals thus have more authority and prestige than those published in non-refereed journals.)

This search probably took about fifteen minutes. Now this is but a single database, and there are more out there, but once you get the gist of the search, they are all more or less the same. More importantly, perhaps, is the amount of time you have saved over scrolling through the many sites that mention Toni Morrison and *Sula* (which is the only qualification to make the list on these engines).

As you will see in our course sections on poetry, the essay, and short stories there are databases for specific genres, and I have listed some major ones for you. Also, some of the serious magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* often have excellent information on writers; *The Atlantic* has an excellent series of interviews available. As this is a literature class and not one on library science, there is only a sliver of potential source bases that I will mention to you. But once you learn how to look for these resources, you shouldn't need any help. If you do, however, the UNC-Chapel Hill libraries page has an online and email help option. The library staff who maintain these pages are knowledgeable (and *patient*) and I will do what I can to help as well.

Good luck, and good hunting!

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## Course Plan

Based on the nine books, there are thirteen readings in the course. The course Web pages will introduce each reading and guide your thinking. Your first written assignment, or pre-assignment, follows the first reading. While you will not be graded on this, you will be required to prepare and submit it. Then, there are seven written assignments that ask you to write about one or more of the works of literature you've read. You must complete these assignments and send them in to your instructor for evaluation. Your grade will be based on these general criteria:

- how thoroughly you do what the assignment calls for
  - how insightfully you relate what you already know and have learned in the course to the readings under discussion
  - how clearly you express your points and how fully you support and illustrate them.
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## Your Reading Journal

You will be assisted in the preparation of your assignments by keeping a **reading journal** where you will record your observations, thoughts, and questions. Special sections called "Questions for Your Journal" will prompt your thinking and writing about the works in your reading journal. Many of the questions and suggestions are intended to help you come to significant observations on your own. You are not required to write answers to these questions; you are free to use them as you will. However, you are required to write in your journal, and you will profit by considering at least some of the questions as you write. Ideally, your reading journal explorations will stimulate you to synthesize what you've learned and will help you prepare to write your assignments. I hope this questioning and analysis, as it alternates with answering and synthesis, will lead to an ongoing dialogue between you

and me.

You are required to use the UNC-Chapel Hill electronic databases and find one article for each of the two plays and the four novels we will read in this course. In your journal, you will provide the complete URL citation for the article so that I can read it and follow your discussion. Then you are to discuss the article—did you agree or disagree with the major premise? Why or why not?

Remember that when you search the database(s), one of the options for retrieved articles will be "full text," meaning that you will be given not only the citation and abstract, but the full text of the article. You will need the full text in order to read what you choose for your journal discussion on the plays and novels, so limiting your search to "full text" will save you time in the retrieval process, as every citation you are given will include the full text of the article. If you are unsure of how to access these resources, reread *Using Your Computer in ENGL 124*, which gives you an example of a literature search on a major database.

Your journal entries should be made in the course section relating to each work. As always, if you have any question concerning the suitability of a given article, or concerning navigation of the Internet, do not hesitate to email me and I will help as best I can.

Note that there are two basic ways to approach writing in your journal, and you'll need to do both. First, at least once a week (ideally more often), write down your impressions of what you've been reading in the course and how, in terms of your own life, you react and relate to what you've been reading. Second, use the journal as a place to make specific observations, prompted by the *Questions for Your Journal*, or to ask questions of your own about the meaning, structure, imagery, and technique of the works you are reading. Both approaches to journal writing are important, and they should allow you flexibility to create entries that are meaningful to you while also reflecting your efforts in the course.

No matter how you approach your journal, writing about what you've read will have several good results:

- It will help you remember details about what you've read—characters, events, and themes—and thereby help in studying for the final exam.
- It will help you recognize your weaknesses in understanding aspects of what you are reading.
- It will raise questions you might otherwise not think about.
- It will stimulate observations you might otherwise not have had.
- It will help provide ideas for your written assignments.
- It will help you connect your reading to the real world.

The length of time you spend on your reading journal and the degree to which you use it to stimulate thought will depend on you. After you finish *Reading 4*, you must submit your journal to me for my comments, though I will not grade it at that time. At the end of the course, you will submit your journal as an assignment for grading. Note that the "correctness" of your ideas is not a criterion for evaluation. When you finish the course, I will judge your journal on two criteria only: length and engagement.

**Length:** You should make journal entries for each of the thirteen readings assigned in the course. Try

to use complete sentences. Writing complete sentences will force you to have complete thoughts, or at least push you in that direction. I consider 250-300 words to be the minimum for a good journal entry.

**Engagement:** Engagement means the degree to which you interact with the material—carry the thoughts further, challenge your thinking, try to illustrate your ideas, or in some way deal with the readers so as to make them your own. What questions does the reading raise for you? How could you answer these questions? In short, your content should reflect what you, and you alone, could have written in reference to these readings.

Number your journal entries and date them, including a heading that identifies the work or works being discussed. Many word processing programs will automatically count your words, and you may do this as a guide for yourself; soon you will get a feel for how much you have written.

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## Grading and Final Exam

Your final grade will be determined by your performance in the following areas:

written assignments: 60 percent  
reading journal: 25 percent  
final exam: 15 percent.

Your **journal** will be evaluated as follows:

**A:** a total of more than 25 full page equivalencies, considering each reading, reflecting consistent engagement with the text.

**B:** a total of 20 page equivalencies or so, each reading considered, reflecting frequent engagement with the text.

**C:** a total of 15 page equivalencies or so, some observations about each reading, and genuine effort, though entries as a whole may be more technical than thoughtful.

**D:** fewer than 15 page equivalencies or failure to consider each reading in some way.

If you think about it, early and consistent attention to your journal will not only make the readings more interesting to you, it will also significantly help your grade. The criteria are listed above, and the journal will count for 25 percent of your final grade, so that's a pretty obvious way to influence your grade positively on a day-to-day basis.

## Final Exam

The final exam must be scheduled and supervised in accordance with Self-paced Courses policy. If you have a deadline for completing this course, make sure you schedule your final exam in advance of the deadline. See Scheduling Your Final Exam. The final exam will have two parts: an identification section that asks you to identify and comment on passages from the works you've read, and an essay section that asks you to write about some ideas, themes, and techniques you will have observed and learned about during the course. The identifications and essays can be drawn from the discussions in

this manual, including the Questions for Your Journal.

**Note that no matter how well you do on the reading journal and written assignments, you cannot pass the course without passing the final examination.**

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## Academic Policies

As a Self-paced Courses Online student, you are responsible for obeying and supporting an honor system that prohibits lying, cheating, or stealing in relation to the academic practices of constituent institutions of The University of North Carolina. The honor system also requires you to refrain from conduct that significantly impairs the welfare or the educational opportunities of others in the University community.

An especially serious Honor Code violation is plagiarism. The UNC-Chapel Hill Honor System has found that 90 percent of the cases brought to its attention involve plagiarism. Please take this Plagiarism Tutorial from UNC Libraries to help you understand how to avoid it.

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## Course Mechanics

### Email

Notify your instructor and Janice Durham at the Friday Center if your email address changes.

If you use a filter on your email account, you are responsible for ensuring that it does not prevent you from receiving messages from your instructor or Friday Center staff.

If you use an email service (hotmail.com, yahoo.com, or msn.com, for example), the email links in this course may not work for you.

It is extremely important for you to save copies of any work you send to your instructor via email. If your instructor doesn't receive your work, you must have a copy of the email with the attached file, indicating the date sent, to prove that you submitted the assignment. **It is your responsibility to maintain copies of your sent emails**, as there is no way to guarantee that any email message will be delivered.

Please check your email software to see how it manages sent and saved messages. Some software automatically deletes messages one month after they have been sent; others only save messages if they are filed in folders; others save messages received but not those sent. You may need to send yourself a copy of your emailed assignment at the same time you send it to your instructor, or you may need to print a copy of the email message and any attachments to keep in your paper files. No matter how your system works, make sure you know how to save a copy of all work that you submit to your instructor and that you save the copy for several months beyond the end of the course.

### Submitting work for this course

Your assignments should be typed using Microsoft Word (or Excel, if you wish, if that is more

appropriate for the particular assignment). If you use other software, please save your work in Rich Text Format (.rtf). Use a filename that includes your last name, such as "Assignment3-Smith.doc."

**You will send your assignments to be graded by clicking the "Submit Assignment" button**, which is provided for you in the Written Assignment sections. This button opens an email message that is pre-addressed to your instructor and the Self-paced Courses office (stuserv@unc.edu). Your assignment must be emailed to both addresses to make sure you get credit for the assignment. If the "Submit Assignment" buttons do not work on your computer, follow the instructions in each assignment for sending in your work via email.

Send your assignments as attachments. The subject line must contain the course name and number and the submission number, making it easier for your instructor and Student Services to track your progress and keep your work separate from that of other students. Please add your name to the subject line.

## Other Questions

Contact your instructor with questions regarding the content of the course and your progress. Please include "SPC ENGL 124" in the subject line of your email.

Contact the Instructional Designer at the Friday Center about problems with this website, including bad links. Please include "SPC ENGL 124" in the subject line of your email.

If you have any logistical questions as you work through the course (enrollment, credits, extensions, withdrawal, and so on), contact the Student Services staff at the Friday Center for Continuing Education (phone 919-962-1134 or 800-862-5669).

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## Course Outline

You have nine months to complete the work in this course. According to the policy of the University of North Carolina Self-paced Courses program, you may complete it no sooner than twelve weeks after I receive your first assignment. The list of lessons appears in the box below. Each lesson has a Web page, which you can reach by clicking on the appropriate link in the left-hand sidebar of the Sakai site. The lessons will include reading and writing assignments, as well as other important information.

Reading 1	Poetry: Snyder, Wright, Creeley
Reading 2	Poetry: Bly, Ginsberg, Stafford, Merwin
Reading 3	Poetry: Lowell, Plath, Sexton
Reading 4	The Essay: Gass, Sanders, McCann
Reading 5	The Essay: Schwartz, Berry, Singer, Sullivan
Reading 6	The Short Story: Barrett, Moss, Munro, Davis
Reading 7	The Short Story: Davies, Reisman, Sanford, Parvin, Trevanian

Reading 8	The Play: Stoppard
Reading 9	The Play: Edson
Reading 10	The Novel: Morrison
Reading 11	The Novel: Guterson
Reading 12	The Novel: Atwood
Reading 13	The Novel: Salzman
Schedule your final exam. It must be supervised.	
Course Evaluation	

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Send comments and questions to [fridaycenter@unc.edu](mailto:fridaycenter@unc.edu).