

## Some Notes on ENGL 1011: Writing Through Literature

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**\*ENGL 1011 remains an important part of the FYW Program.** Although we are running fewer sections than in previous years (and no longer running as many 1011s as 1010s), the course will still be offered. It is not on its way out.

**\*The boundary between ENGL 1010 and 1011 is porous.** Despite the two course names and numbers, they are designed to meet the very same general education requirement; they are both, equally, seminars in academic writing. Traditionally, the 1011 courses are built around the reading of literary texts whereas 1010 courses use non-fiction texts, but even this distinction breaks down quite readily. Most 1010 courses have a “literary” component, even if this means only that they assign essays and/or examine texts from the popular culture. And most 1011 sections now include argument-driven texts that complement or inform the reading of literary texts in various ways, often in the form of historical or critical texts. And, of course, the question of what exactly constitutes “literature” only muddies the waters. It seems fair to say that in today’s English departments literature connotes less an exact content (a list of certain approved texts) than a way of reading that is open to interpretation, opportunity, and play. We are doing “literary” work when we consider texts as more than conduits of meaning. And even this is a limited and only provisional description.

**\*The two courses nevertheless co-exist at present in a productive relationship.** The 1010 course may provide a more familiar and expected FYW course, often with readings from writers who use evidence and reference to other texts to build arguments, much like what the students themselves do in their own writing for the course. It is, on its surface, similar to FYW courses at many or most universities, and the readings often serve as models for student writers. But, unlike many FYW courses, our 1010 course does not teach argument as a specific form or set of requirements.<sup>1</sup> In our courses, the form the essay takes will be in dialogue with conventional forms, but it is more important that students see writing as purposeful and directed toward an end that compels them to write. What 1011 enables is an approach to reading that is more dynamic and more open-ended than conventional appeals to evidence. Consequently, the argument-driven writing in a 1011 course may tend toward riskier and more exploratory projects. 1010, on the other hand, often provides more models for the logic-driven, evidence-based texts our students produce in these courses.

**\*ENGL 1011 is not a literature course or an introduction to literature.** “Writing Through Literature” has always meant much more than writing about literature. Whereas writing about literature makes the literary text the object of study, in 1011, the literary texts (and the work of coming to terms with them) foster an outwardly directed energy. Reading through literature means making use of literary texts to generate and support projects that extend beyond the occasion of this particular literary text. For example, one might read an Alice Munro short story in a 1011 section with a course topic of community (in conjunction with other texts, including an Arlie Hochschild study of family life). In a standard literature course, students might write papers that analyze and interpret the short story; the papers would be *about*

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<sup>1</sup> That a FYW course could adequately provide students with a universal template for writing academic papers has long been questioned. Students will need to learn the particular discursive moves of their field in the courses they take within that field. Our course is more experiential than informational—more about *doing writing* than in learning “how to write”—and it therefore emphasizes the activity of writing alongside other writers.

the short story or *about* Munro. In a 1011 course, however, it is never enough to merely demonstrate productive reading of literary texts. The goal of the student essay should be directed toward a more specific contribution to a problem or question set up by the course readings. The crisis at the heart of a Munro story may effectively enact or portray a tension about community that a thesis from a sociologist like Hochschild can only incompletely render. But Hochschild may introduce a terminology or a historical frame that helps students see something in the Munro story. The 1011 writer, having access to *both* texts, may interrogate the sociologist's conceptual frame with material from the story. The fictional text is not a "proof" of something—it is, after all, fictional—but its portrait of a community or its detailed rendering of a particular family can be set in a productive, dialectical relationship with these concepts. The students' back-and-forthing with these two texts becomes something more than just the application of a concept or the fulfilling of a readymade thesis.

Reading appears, indeed, to be a dynamic of attraction and response: books bring singular configurations, each implying potential "paths" to our attention, our perception, and our capacities for action. The forms they contain are not inert paintings placed before a reader's eyes (though paintings are not inert either), but rather *traced-out* possibilities of existence. The activity of reading makes us feel these forces within ourselves, as possible directions of our mental, social, or practical life, presenting us with opportunities to reappropriate, imitate, or dismantle them.  
—Marielle Macé

**\*As in 1010, most student writing works with more than one text (often two) but not as a simple comparison.** ENGL 1011 assignments generally pose a question or problem that the assigned reading makes more visible or concrete. But readings won't usually serve as simple demonstrations or examples, and, quite often, the texts will be used in various and diverse ways. As in ENGL 1010 or 1004, instructors should consider the *roles* these texts are being asked to play in the course and the essay assignment. What work do you want students to perform with these texts? What tools or contexts will they need to succeed in this work?

**\*Students may perform "close reading" of texts, but this work is usually more of a *component* than a goal of a 1011 essay.** That is, the careful working through of a close analysis of a piece of text—still a primary methodological tool of the English major—can really help 1011 students. We might describe this as a horizontal slowing down of the argument that enriches and complicates by investigating language and precise, local materials. (I sometimes describe the deliberate analysis of a quoted passage as happening in "bullet time"—where time is nearly stopped and the "camera" pans around a scene, revealing details that had gone unnoticed.) But whereas some literary assignments stop here, asking students to "provide a reading" as the chief task of the assignment, a 1011 assignment must ask students to take this reading somewhere or use it in some way.

**\*The tools of literary analysis may still on occasion be needed.** A 1011 course has very little time to spend on introducing the elements of literary analysis, but sometimes a brief review of a few terms or concepts can help students. We are not suggesting that literary texts are transparent containers of meaning. Students may struggle with texts that require some familiarity with literary traditions or reading methods. Instructors sometimes bring in terms like *satire* or *adaptation* or provide a thumbnail description of *romance* to support the work of analysis, interpretation, and use. This is perhaps most evident in the use of film. Students can describe scenes and quote characters, but we would like them, too,

to consider camera work, sound, and genre issues. When needed, we can provide such context, but often the best way to accomplish this is to assign a critical text that performs some of this work. If the texts you've assigned seem to require an introduction to dithyrambs, a discussion of translating Italian, a digression into Biblical scholarship, and at least some familiarity with late Borges, I would recommend assigning other texts.

**\*The literary trace of ENGL 1011.** UConn students were once required to take two semesters of first-year writing, and the two three-credit courses that existed, ENGL 105 and 109, were, respectively, an expository writing course and an introduction to literature. Our two four-credit FYW courses that replaced this model were at that time often mistaken as legacy variations of the 105 and 109 courses. But this is not the case. Both of our FYW courses meet the same requirements, and students rarely take both 1010 and 1011.

[I]n real life people talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information...Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words....of all words uttered in everyday life, no less than half belong to someone else.

— M.M. Bakhtin

**\*A general rule.** There is no need to downplay your training or your interests. You are likely a very good reader with some historical knowledge and a humanities-trained skepticism of static knowledge claims. It is perfectly reasonable to build your course around things you feel comfortable discussing and thinking about. But remember that the course is for academic writers in all fields, and the goal should be to help all students feel supported as writers and as thinkers. ENGL 1011 will ask students to think about and make use of literary texts, but it is not a student's introduction to the field of English.