

English 353: American Literature 1825-1865: 'To Write Like an American' Fall 2008
TTh 1:30 – 2:45 PM in King 237

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Course description:

Melville's phrase captures a major concern of American writers during the antebellum period: the creation of a distinctly American literature. Directly or indirectly, many writers of the era engaged with “writing like an American”—Melville, Emerson, Whitman, Douglass, Jacobs among them—while a few, notably Poe, repudiated the very idea. We'll read works by a variety of writers as we consider what "writing like an American" entailed during this formative era in American culture and history.

If writing like an “American” was an important issue in this era, so was reading like one. A central focus of this course will be what “Americans,” broadly defined, were reading in the nineteenth century: well-known works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also speeches, elegies, religious tracts, political pamphlets, and dime novels. Thinking about popular reading practices will help us to better understand how the written word defined what it meant to be “American” in the nineteenth century.

As an upper-division course, English 353 will allow you to refine the interpretive skills you acquired in the department's gateway courses. The course's final paper project will ask you to connect your reading of one of our course texts to the broader scholarly dialogue in Americanist literary study. This course will also offer a framework within which you can devote sustained attention to your writing, and will encourage you to undertake a significant revision of at least one of your papers.

Course format:

English 353 is a discussion-intensive course. Though I may lecture periodically, the majority of our class time will be spent in thoughtful collective analysis of the course texts in question. We will spend time discussing because the give and take of an informed, intelligent conversation most accurately models the way in which sound scholarship builds on the insights of others. Because this course is discussion-intensive, its success will depend on your consistent preparation for and engagement with class discussion. I encourage you to think of your contributions to class discussion as a dialogue with your fellow readers first, and with me second. I hope that you will take our class sessions as an opportunity to sharpen your ability to engage with, respond to, and build upon your peers' insights.

Schedule:

All of the course texts, except for *Veil of Fear* and David Walker's *Appeal*, are currently available at the Campus Store. **You do not need to purchase *Veil of Fear*, as it is currently out of print. The Library is obtaining print copies for us to use instead.** Please purchase the editions ordered, so that we can all stay literally and figuratively on the same page. The password for our eReserves page is **engl 353**.

All of the readings listed below are required. Throughout the semester, I may ask you to read short critical pieces in addition to the texts listed below; these will be available through Blackboard. (Don't worry, I will give you advance warning). Except for the Stowe, Sedgwick, and Bird, please plan to finish each text by the first day we will discuss it. For these three longer novels, read as far as you can, and at least halfway through the text, by the first discussion day.

9/2 first day

Sentiment and Social Change

9/4 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

9/9 Stowe continued
Q

9/11 Stowe continued

9/16 Stowe continued
Close reading #1 (2 pages, on Stowe)

9/18 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

9/23 Jacobs continued
Q

Cultivating "Americanness"

9/25 Emerson, "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar" (eRes)

9/30 Hawthorne, "The Celestial Railroad" (eRes); Bunyan, selections from *The Pilgrim's Progress* (eRes)
Q

10/2 Class on writing

10/7 Antebellum elegies (eRes)

10/9 Yom Kippur (no class)

10/14 Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Nations*
Paper #1 (5-6 pages, on any of the texts we have discussed to this point)

10/16 TBA

10/21 and 23: Fall Break

Locating America: Race, Religion, Region, Removal

10/28 Avellanada, *Sab*

10/30 Avellanada continued
Close reading #2 (2 pages; on Hawthorne, elegies, Walker, or Avellanada)

11/4 Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (in *Veil of Fear*; three copies of this book are on reserve at Mudd).

11/6 Monk continued
Q

11/11 George Lippard, *Bel of Prairie Eden* (in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*)

11/13 Lippard continued
Q

11/18 Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*

11/20 Sedgwick continued
Q

11/25 Sedgwick continued
Prospectus and annotated bibliography for final paper

11/27 Thanksgiving (no class)

Americanness and the (In)Stability of the Self

12/2 Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee*
Close reading #3 (2 pages; on Monk, Lippard, or Sedgwick)

12/4 Bird continued

12/9 Bird continued
Q

Final paper (12-15 pages) due by email to Toni.Jaudon@oberlin.edu on Wednesday, December 17th by 4 PM.

Written work:

Questions: About once a week, I will ask you to post a developed, well-thought out question to our Blackboard site. These dates are indicated by a “Q”. You should begin your post by quoting a selection from the reading, which you will then formulate into a question that you would like to see us address in class discussion. (Here, you’ll want to avoid factual questions—I am very happy to address these if you send them to me separately, but they offer limited resources for class discussion). **Post your question to our Blackboard site by 7 PM on the evening before the class indicated.**

Close Readings: These short, two-page papers offer you the chance to refine your interpretive skills and to work out some of your thoughts on our course texts. In this assignment, you will analyze **one sentence** from one of our course texts, attending to the interplay between its content and its form. Brevity is integral to the assignment—please keep your readings to two pages, or at most two and a half. These papers are meant to be selective, not comprehensive. If you find that you have more to say about the text (as I hope you will), you should consider developing your close reading into the root of one of your longer papers. **Please come to talk with me first, though, if you choose this option.**

Papers, prospectus, and annotated bibliography: These longer, formal papers and allied assignments will allow you to develop a thesis about one of our course texts in some detail. We will discuss these assignments in class as they approach.

Course policies, requirements, and information:

Getting in touch with me: I’m very happy to confer with you in office hours about your written work (both before and after you submit it), and to talk generally about the course texts, about the nineteenth century, or about your interests. If you send me email, please give me 24 hours to respond.

Reading must be done before class. Should it become apparent that a majority of the class is not keeping up with the readings, I may institute short reading quizzes (which will contribute to your course discussion grade).

Participation is likewise a requirement of this course. I’m not so much interested in the quantity of your contributions as I am in their quality. To my mind, quality participation involves thoughtful engagement with the course texts and, more importantly, with the other members of the course. Often, the most productive comments build on or draw together what the others around you are saying. Essential to participating well is not just your willingness to talk, but also your willingness to listen to those around you, to take others’ comments seriously, and to actively work to synthesize major points or lines of inquiry.

Because active engagement on everyone's part is so important, I strongly discourage the use of laptops in the classroom, especially for notetaking. I do this because I recognize that the siren call of email and Facebook can be impossible for even the most conscientious of us to resist. Should you find it necessary to use your laptop in class, please keep your wifi turned off. I'll happily "borrow" your laptop for the remainder of any class session in which The Internet makes an uninvited appearance.

Attendance at all course meetings is mandatory. Attendance includes not just your physical presence, but also your careful, consistent preparation for class. More than two unexcused absences will negatively affect your final grade; **more than six absences for any reason** will cause you to fail the course.

Tardiness is exceptionally disruptive in a discussion-intensive course. Chronic lateness will cause me to mark you absent for the day.

Papers: Papers should be formatted according to the guidelines in the MLA Style Manual. Your paper should be double-spaced, in Times New Roman or an equivalent 12 point font, with one-inch margins on each side. Please give your paper a title, number and staple your pages, and spell-check and proofread your text. You **must** cite all of your sources, your primary text, in MLA format. If you have any questions about citations or formatting, please come to see me in office hours. The library also maintains a list of helpful links to citation guides at <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/research/reference.html#citation> .

Late papers and close readings will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (for example, A- becomes B+) for each day past the due date, unless there are extenuating circumstances documented by medical staff or the class deans. Should you find yourself in need of an extension, you should ask at least 24 hours before your paper is due. I will not accept any work over two weeks late, no matter the reason. Late "Q"s will not be accepted.

Grading: Papers will count for 60 % of your grade, close readings for 20 %, and class participation (including discussion questions) for 20 %.

You cannot pass this course unless you attend class regularly, submit all of the written assignments listed on the syllabus, and participate in our class discussions. If at any time you are curious (or concerned) about your progress in the course, please don't hesitate to come talk to me in office hours. Likewise, if there are family or personal difficulties that are interfering with your ability to complete your assignments or otherwise work to your potential in this course, please get in touch with me, as well as with the class deans.

If you have a physical, psychiatric, or learning disability that affects your ability to access course materials or complete course work, please let me know early in the semester. You'll also want to contact the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28. I am committed to making this course fully accessible to all its members. If you are having any difficulties accessing course materials or resources, or if other barriers to your full and effective participation in this course arise, please contact me as soon as possible so that we can work things out.

Honor code: I take potential violations of the honor code, especially plagiarism, very seriously. It goes without saying that all of the written work you submit for this course must be your own. If you are inspired or influenced by a particular text or conversation, as I hope you will be, you are responsible for appropriately crediting that source. If you have questions about how to do this, don't hesitate to ask. Please take the time, if you haven't already, to review the honor code, which is available at:

<http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/honorcode.html>

Please write and sign the honor code pledge (“I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment”) on each of your assignments, including your Blackboard postings. If you do not include the honor code pledge, I will return the assignment to you ungraded.