

## The Blank Syllabus

### I. Overview

Well, not entirely blank. Certain things have to be on the syllabus, of course: contact info, office hours, a course description, and so on. What is left blank are the assigned readings for some of the class sessions. The students fill them in by completing the first writing assignment, which requires them to choose a reading from the course anthology and to write a paper that advocates for making their selection required reading for the class. Versions of this assignment appear below under **II**.

Sometimes, depending on the size of the class, every student's selection gets added to the syllabus; sometimes the class votes for selections. I then distribute a revised schedule with the selections listed, usually accompanied by the name of the student (or students) who selected it, who are required to help me lead the discussion of the text that day. For an example of what a blank syllabus reading schedule would look like for spring 2013, and of what a revised schedule—one with the blanks filled in—from a previous class looked like, see below under **III**.

I have used this approach in surveys of American and African literature, a contemporary American novel course, and in composition classes. It presents some special challenges (What about “coverage”? What if students choose badly—only the short or easy or familiar stuff—or stuff that strikes you as unteachable? What if I have eighty students?) which I will be glad to discuss, but I have found that the benefits of this approach outweigh the costs. It energizes and engages students by encouraging them to “own” the material and the course itself. They discover things independently and report back to their peers and me with enthusiasm. More selfishly speaking, they challenge me to be nimble; they renew my appreciation for texts that had become stale and make me look at ones that I had altogether avoided. The blank syllabus has for me been the difference between teaching a survey and leading an expedition, between reading a map and actually exploring the territory.

### II. Versions of the Key Assignment

#### A. Survey of American Literature I: Colonial Period to the Civil War

In a 4-page essay, discuss a selection of your own choosing (one *not* already listed on the syllabus) from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volume B. Present your discussion as an argument about the suitability of the piece for class reading. As you write, think about the questions you would want have about a classmate's selection, and answer them about your own. What is the piece about? What genre is it? Who wrote it and why? What does it tell us about American history? Does it have anything to say about our own era? How does the piece connect to reading we have already done, or to themes discussed in class or in the themes in the editors' introductions to the period? You don't have to answer all of these questions, but your essay should tell us about both the

substance and style of the selection and about why it will be worth our time. Your selection will be added to the syllabus (though I reserve the right to either excerpt it or supplement it). Writing your essay will help prepare you to help me lead discussion on the day your selection is assigned.

#### B. The Contemporary American Novel

In this graduate survey several years ago, I asked students to write a three-page essay making a case for adding a contemporary American novel to the syllabus. These essays were due October 3, and that day each student made a presentation based on their essay; then the class voted, and the winner—it was Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*—was added to the syllabus. (Looking back on this, I regret that I left only one spot blank. Selecting eleven novels myself [we read a book a week] might have been justified were the gap in my expertise and the students’ larger, if this were a course in Augustan Poetry, say, or even nineteenth century literature, but surely a roomful of contemporary Americans interested in literature might have been trusted to play a larger role in choosing contemporary American novels.)

#### C. Composition Class focused on “The Poetry of War”

In a 4-page essay, discuss a selection of your own choosing (one *not* already listed on the syllabus) from the *Oxford Book of War Poetry*. Present your discussion as an argument about the suitability of the piece for class reading. This essay requires you to argue a claim based upon an explication of a poem and something beyond the poem itself: some aspect of its historical or biographical context, for example. This poem will be added to the syllabus, and on the day it appears you will recite at least 80 words of it for the class, and you will help me lead discussion of it. Your essay should include an explication of the poem and some exploration of the poem’s historical context. The working claim for this essay may well be an answer to the question, “Why should we as a class read this poem?”

#### D. Advanced Essay Writing (for a mix of undergrads and grad students)

Write a *five-page essay* (~1500 words) of analysis and appreciation about an essay of your choosing from Danticat, Lopate, or Wallace. For your first draft, it might help to think of your reader as the class, and to convey to us why you think we will benefit from reading the essay you’ve chosen. What is the essay about? What does this essay *do*? How does it do it? What made you choose this essay for yourself, what did you learn from it, in content, shape, and style, and what can the class learn from it? Here’s a bit of space to note further questions we come up with discussing this assignment in class:

In drafting, your central claim can take the form, “I recommend that we read this essay because....”

E. For a composition course, “Africa and the West”

In a 3-4-page essay, discuss the selection you made from Collins’ *Documents from the African Past*. Present your discussion as an argument about the suitability of the piece for class reading. Your thesis will capture this argument in a sentence—probably at the end of your introduction. The essay should tell us about both the substance and style of the selection. You might also include a paragraph about the source from which Collins took the document. In general try to paraphrase rather than quote, but in order to give us a taste of the selection, quote at least one passage, and cite your quotation properly. In making your case for adding (or not) the selection to the syllabus, remember what this course is. First, it is a writing seminar. Will the piece you selected serve as a model of good prose (or of bad prose, as an example of what not to do)? Give supporting evidence. Second, this is a course on Africa and the West. In what way is the selection you have made relevant (or not) to this theme? A few questions to get you going: Who wrote the piece, when and why? What happens in it? Do you think Collins did a good job making the selection?

**III. Sample Reading Schedules**

A. Reading Schedule for American Literature I, fall 2012 with the Blanks Filled In

Revised Reading Schedule: On the day your name appears, you should be prepared to help me lead discussion of the piece you selected for the class. [All the readings through October 11 were chosen by the teacher.]

Thurs. Sept. 6

Columbus, “letter” (A: 35)  
 De las Casas, “A Brief History” (A: 38-42)  
 Native American creation stories (A: 21-25)

Thurs. Sept. 13

Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (A: 121; 122-148)  
 Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (A: 165-168; 175-177)  
 Taylor, selected (A: 278-285)

Thurs. Sept. 20

Bradstreet, selected poems (A: 188, 204, 207, 212)  
 Rowlandson, “A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson” (A: 235-266)

Thurs. Sept. 27 – Essay #1 draft due

Adams, *The Letters of John and Abigail Adams* (A: 616-628)  
 Jefferson, “Declaration” (A: 651-656)

Thurs. Oct. 4 – **Essay #1 due**

Paine from “Common Sense” (A: 629-636) and “The Crisis, No. 1” (A: 637-642)  
Murray “On the Equality of the Sexes” (A: 726-732)

Thurs. Oct. 11

Franklin, “Remarks Concerning the Savages” (A: 468-472) and *Autobiography*  
(A: 472-503 and 577-586)  
Red Jacket, “Speech to the U.S. Senate” (A: 445-447)  
Tecumseh, “Speech to the Osages” (A: 447-448)

Thurs. Oct 18

Irving, “Rip Van Winkle” (B: 980-991; Tess and Oscar)  
Bryant, “Thanatopsis” (B: 1072-1074; Jenn)  
Poe, “The Raven” (B: 1518-1521; Bill) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (B: 1592-  
1597; Dale)

Thurs. Oct. 25

Thoreau, *Walden* (B: 1807-1823; Gary and Sinyee/B: 1965-1981; Fernando) and  
“Resistance to Civil Government” (B: 1792-1806; Melinda, John M., John T.)

Thurs. Nov. 1

Stowe, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (B: 1673-1696)  
Emerson “Self-Reliance” (B: 1160-1176; Kyle, Kim, and Sarah)  
Thorpe, “The Big Bear of Arkansas” (B: 1780-1788; Nick)

Thurs. Nov. 8 – **Essay #2 due**

Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown” (B: 1263-1273; Christine) and  
“Rappaccini’s Daughter” (B: 1313-1332)  
Clapp, “Letter 12 (January 27, 1852)” (B: 2276-2280; Stephen)

Thurs. Nov. 15

Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (B: 2330-2354; Tom and Sylvie)  
Lincoln, “Address... at Gettysburg” (B: 1616; Tim, Sandra)  
Jacobs, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” (B: 1759-1778; Simone)

**Thursday, Nov. 22: Thanksgiving Holiday – No Class Meeting**

Thurs. Nov. 29

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass I* (B: 2032-2097)  
Fern, “Male Criticism on Ladies’ Books” (B: 1748; Kandice)

Thurs. Dec. 6

Whitman, “Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)” (B: 2131-2145), “As I Lay with  
My Head in Your Lap Camerado” (B: 2225; Marcus), and “Out of the Cradle  
Endlessly Rocking” (B: 2212-2216; Tina)

Dickinson, “Wild Nights—Wild Nights!” (B: 2508; Luis), “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” (B: 2515; Yasmine) and “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—” (B: 2525; Crystal)

Thurs. Dec. 13 – **Final Essay due**

B. Blank Reading Schedule for American Literature II, Spring 2013

Note to Student: Writing and reading assignments should be completed by the beginning of class on the day noted. You will notice some blank spots on the schedule below. These will be filled in with your names and the titles of the selections you write about for the first essay. On the day your name appears, you will speak briefly (for roughly three minutes), noting why you chose the selection, pointing out one or two quotations, and concluding with questions or comments to spark discussion.

**January 25:** Course Introduction; video excerpt from *American Visions*  
Whitman and Dickinson, Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address”; Crane, “War is Kind”

**February 1:** Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (chapters 1-14)

**February 8:** Twain, Huckleberry Finn (chapters 15- 28)

**February 15:** Twain, Huckleberry Finn (chapters 29-end)

**February 22:** Hamlin Garland, “Under the Lion’s Paw” (C: 752-762)  
Charles Chesnutt, “The Wife of His Youth” (C: 696-704)  
***First Essay Due***

**February 29:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**March 7:** Henry James “The Beast in the Jungle” (Vol. C: 447-475)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**March 14:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**March 21:** **Spring Break – No Class Meeting**

**March 28:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**April 4:** *Second Essay Due*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**April 11:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**April 18:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sherwood Anderson, "Winesburg, Ohio" (Vol. D: 1421-4136)  
John Cheever, "The Swimmer" (Vol. E: 2248-2257)

**April 25:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**May 2:** David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (E: 3040-3075) and film

**May 9:** *Third (and Final) Essay Due*