

February 6, 2024

Dear Students of ENG 300,

It was a pleasure meeting you in seminar today. Please allow me to introduce myself further. This year, I was eager to return to the classroom after a year-long research sabbatical leave in which I did a deep dive into several research projects. I often enjoy collaborating with other scholars who live in different countries or work in different fields and departments. After devoting a year to my research and publications, I'm energized to teach undergraduate courses once again.

As you know, my specialization is in nineteenth-century British literature, what we often refer to as Romantic and Victorian literature. One of my more recent interests is in the world of rare books and collecting. This was a relatively new area of study for me, as I had no official training in this regard during my undergraduate or graduate years. However, I was fortunate enough to meet some book collectors and bibliophiles, who introduced me to other rare books experts and teachers in the field. I am always surprised and overwhelmed by the generosity of these specialized professional who share their love for the book as a material object. Thinking about the book as a form of *technology* and an *object* has shifted my thinking in so many ways. Before this, I had been trained not to judge a book by its cover or bindings and only consider what was inside it. I know that during your time as an English major, you will be reading texts as literature, analyzing works mostly for their message and content. I hope to cover all of the important skills we discussed during the first lecture. At the same time, I hope that our short foray into the material lives of books will feel equally new and compelling to you as it was for me. I also hope that your schedule will allow you to join me for some of the field trips I have arranged for our course. They are not required, but are immensely enriching, and I hope you will make every effort to attend.

Some of the themes for this course — anthologizing, commonplacing, and canonbusting — comes out of two strands of my professional life. One is the history of my past 10 years teaching at Lehman College. When I arrived, the curriculum was a very different beast than what you encounter today. Questions of what is required reading, what is important and useful to our students, and what represents the body of knowledge we wish to pass on from generation to generation — these questions shape my approaches to teaching each semester as I reconsider who I am teaching and why you are here. The very idea of a canon may be anathema to some. I am curious to learn, over the course of this semester, what your ideal canon looks like, if one even exists, and how the university and our college coursework needs to change alongside the evolving needs and interests of you, our students.

Outside of teaching, I am also active in several professional literary societies in my field of study. One of these is the Keats-Shelley Association of America. As the society's Vice President and director of public outreach, I am presently co-organizing an initiative that revolves around the theme of commonplacing. You'll notice that this is a component of this course. I hope that, through some of these networks I've forged, you will be able to connect with various scholars, graduate students, and teachers from around the country and around the world. These include grade school teachers, high school teachers, museum curators, poets, fiction writers, and artists. I encourage you to expand your purview beyond the walls of our classroom and meet some wonderful scholars and thinkers who are thinking through the same themes with us this year.

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I began our first class today with a challenge, inviting you to use this course as an opportunity to find your footing as an English major and to help clarify your strengths and preferences. Perhaps you already know that your passion lies in theater, or that you wish to specialize in the poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Or, most probably, you are just embarking on a survey of English literature and don't yet know which texts will shape your studies the most. Either way, I urge you to check in with yourself and with me throughout the semester, in order to reflect on your progress as a reader, a critic (an interpreter of

texts), a speaker, and a writer. Though we cannot expect ourselves to fall in love with all genres, all periods, and all authors under the immense umbrella of English literature, we can develop the skill of cultivating interest and using useful language from the field to help us discern what it is that appeals to us or doesn't appeal to us, and why.

I'm very interested to know a bit more about your background, academic or otherwise, and am eager to hear you expound on your own literary favorites. Who are the authors that most shaped your intellectual life? Which courses may have changed the track of your education? What kinds of writing do you find abhorrent? What activities or interests do you nurture to help define who you are? Do you enjoy writing creatively or working for the school newspaper? Are you fluent in other languages? (Spanish? Arabic? Urdu?) Any information that you feel comfortable sharing will help add to the rich diversity of our classroom and strengthen the foundation for our semester ahead.

I now invite you to write back to me in a page-long letter (typed, single-spaced, and proofread) that will allow me to get a taste of your writing and to learn about your potential goals for the semester. What factors led you to declare an English major? Which works of literature speak to you the most? What are your literary tastes and what has shaped them? Are you a confident writer? What styles of writing have appealed most to you in the past? Which of the skills that I've mentioned might you consider your strengths or weaknesses? What do you hope most to develop this term? This letter is also a space where you can voice any ambitions, concerns, or insecurities about your journey as an English major and the course itself.

This is also an opportunity to share with me what else you may have on your plate this semester, year, or on a weekly basis. Many of us juggle our scholarship with other commitments, and the balance of this contributes to the whole person that you are. It will be helpful for me to better understand your home or work situation and receive suggestions early on about what modes of teaching or kinds of assignments would be most conducive to your learning, thus minimizing stress and miscommunication.

As you answer one or more of these questions, (not all), I challenge you to already boost your writing to the next level through one stage of *self-revision*. After you have drafted your letter, on paper or in a word processor, find three passages in which you might improve your vocabulary or word choice. For instance, take vague, general phrases and replace them with vivid, descriptive adjectives and nouns. Swap out weak or diluted verbs with "\$50 words" from the thesaurus. Find two or three instances of casual, colloquial language and replace them with more sophisticated formulations.

I often exercise these nifty revision tools myself. As you'll see, a writer is never "dead set" in his or her ways, but our writing skills can be constantly evolving until we reach the writerly voice to which we aspire. *Be sure to PDF both versions of your letter and submit them together: the original draft version and the more polished second version. Please indicate, using **bold**, italics, underline, or ~~strikethrough~~, the revisions you've made so that I can see the improvements made.* Finally, don't over-think this piece; you should never treat writing prompts from this class as stifling or stressful, but rather as a liberating space in which you can channel your thoughts to me and others. I'm eager to get to know you as a reader, a writer, and a literary critic over the course of the semester, but this is simply a way to jump-start that process.

Looking forward to your written reply,



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