

Robin Tierney

Office hours: Tues and Thurs 3:30-4:45, and by appointment

Office phone: TBD

Email: [TBD](#)

Bridgewater State University

Syllabus Summer 2019, 3 Credits

English 234: Survey of American Literature

Course Description

This course investigates both the continuities and discontinuities of the American literary tradition from the colonial to the contemporary period. Reading diverse genres and periods gives us the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be an American and to consider the values that define our national consciousness. This course will also reveal how common American ideals—individualism, democracy, capitalism, progress, innovation, freedom, and multiculturalism—have evolved, sometimes radically, over time. By definition, a literature “survey” course is meant to be inclusive, so we will read multiple literary genres (essay, autobiography, short story, poem, play, letter, and sermon), with attention to the underrepresented voices of women and racial and ethnic minorities. Our readings will cover a wide swath of historical time, from the initial contact between Europeans and natives, to the 18th and 19th-century efforts to forge a distinct national identity, to the development of the U.S. as an industrialized, international power in the 20th century. Students will be introduced to literary styles, movements, and periods such as realism, transcendentalism, modernism, and the Harlem Renaissance. Since the course is intended to be a foundational course taken early on in the major, students will also build skills in close reading and interpreting literature within the context of history, cultural forces, and author biography.

Learning Outcomes

In this class, students will:

- Demonstrate knowledge of major authors, literary movements and genres of writing in American literary history
- Demonstrate close reading skills essential to all literary study
- Situate American literary texts within a variety of historical and cultural contexts
- Demonstrate oral communication skills through discussion and presentation
- Write fully developed critical essays using primary texts as evidence

Required Texts

The Bedford Anthology of American Literature: Beginnings to the Present, Shorter 2nd Edition
(Bedford/St. Martins, ISBN 978-0-312-59713-9)

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Penguin, ISBN 978-01-40481341)

Strategies for Success in the Course:

- Allot several hours for reading AND actively interpreting the reading before coming to class discussion. Active reading involves taking notes, marking passages that you find significant or confusing, noticing patterns of style, word choice, and theme, and asking questions about the meanings of the text. Bring those notes and questions to class.
- Prepare notes in response to the reading questions I have provided for each day, and share those ideas in class.
- Bring a discussion question to class on the days you are assigned (either Tuesday or Thursday). Follow the guidelines for writing discussion questions at the end of the syllabus.
- Share your questions and observations during class discussion on a daily basis. If you have written notes in front of you, it will be easier for you to jump into the conversation. During class, listen and respond respectfully to your classmates' comments. Ideally, students will engage with each other's ideas, not just with my questions.
- Always bring the book to class.
- You should take some notes in class to record my short lectures and also any ideas to which you could possibly return in your essays, or that might be useful to remember for the exams. If I am writing on the board, you should be taking notes. In the subsequent discussion, however, don't be obsessive about transcribing every word said by classmates, since your focus should be on engaging in the conversation as it is happening.
- In your essays, you need to put significant effort into developing thoughtful thesis-driven arguments that are well-supported with textual details and carefully proofed. Allow time to bring your drafts to the Writing Studio for help with focus, organization, and development. Visit my office hours for help with developing topics and focusing your ideas.
- Be well prepared for the oral presentation. Be clear and engaging, and make eye contact with your classmates.
- Study for the exam by reviewing the introductory sections in the book, my handouts, and your class and reading notes.
- Make an effort to come to my office hours (or make an appointment) to see me at least once during the semester to discuss assigned writing or exams.

Electronic devices

Please turn off your phones, laptops, and other electronic devices when you arrive to class so that you can concentrate without distraction. I prefer that students take notes by hand rather than with a laptop; studies have shown that this is the best way to retain information. If you use an e-reader to access course readings, please disable the wireless function during class.

Attendance Policy

0 to 4 absences = no penalty

5 absences = minus 3 points on class participation grade

6 absences = minus 6 points on class participation grade

7 absences = automatically failing the course

Course Requirements and Grading

10%	<p>Class participation and Attendance</p> <p>This course will be a combination of short lecture and discussion. You will be expected to contribute substantive responses to the readings on a daily basis, and I will evaluate the quality of your participation as well as the frequency. The highest grades will go to students who demonstrate that they have thought deeply about the material before coming to class, who spark interesting conversations, and who engage with the comments of others thoughtfully and respectfully. The goal of discussion is to develop your oral communication skills and ability to think and reason on your feet in response to the ideas of others. See attendance policy on previous page.</p> <p><i>Discussion question assignment:</i> Bring a discussion questions to class once per week (students will be assigned to either Tuesday or Thursday). This question should pertain to the reading for that day, and should follow the guidelines offered at the end of the syllabus for writing discussion questions. These questions will contribute to your class participation grade.</p>
10%	<p>Oral Presentation</p> <p>Your oral presentation of 5-6 minutes will offer a close reading (textual analysis) of a prose passage or section of a poem. This presentation will serve as a rough draft or idea map for your first essay.</p>
15%	<p>Close Reading Essay (3-4 pp.)</p> <p>Your textual analysis essay should be developed from your oral presentation, incorporating my feedback (sent via email). You may also draw upon quotations from other parts of the text, in addition to the single passage chosen, to support your argument. The essay is due one week following receipt of an emailed grade and comments on your presentation.</p>
15%	<p>Contextual Analysis Essay (3 pages)</p> <p>This essay will present an argument about how the text reflects or responds to some aspect of its context. Students can draw upon events in its historical moment, literary movements, author's biography, or cultural concerns of the time period to present a focused argument about how ONE specific context influences some aspect of the meaning and purpose of the literary work. Contextual information can be gleaned from the author introductions, from the introductory sections of the textbook, or from additional research (which must be cited properly).</p>
25%	<p>Final Exam</p>
25%	<p>Comparative Final Essay (5-7 pp.)</p>

Late arrival to class

Not only is arriving late a distraction to the whole class, but frequent lateness will negatively impact your own performance in the course and your class participation grade. Since I often pass out handouts, give a short lecture, and update you on assignments at the beginning of class, late-comers may miss crucial information. I take attendance at the very beginning of class, so you also risk being marked absent if you are late. If you are late, it is your responsibility to check with me at the end of class to make sure that you are marked as present. Please let me know in advance if there is some special circumstance that justifies late arrival.

Format and Late Paper Policies

Essays must be typed, double-spaced, stapled, in 12-point Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. All essays should include a descriptive title that reflects the focus of your thesis. Follow the *MLA Handbook*'s guidelines for in-text citations and works cited pages. If you must be absent from class when a paper is due, you may email the paper as an MS Word attachment so that it is still received on time, but you must *also bring a hard copy* to the next class period. I will not grade the work until I receive a hard copy.

In my experience, students turn in papers late because of anxiety or a sudden crisis. In response to that reality, I am giving all students the option to take a grace period for two of the three papers—the close reading essay, the contextual essay, or the comparative final essay. You may turn in 2 of these assignments two days late (via email attachment plus hard copy). If you are still having trouble completing the assignment at the end of the two-day grace period, then you *must* meet with me to set up a schedule for getting the work completed. The key here is to keep the lines of communication open between us and let me help you to stay on track.

The exam and the oral presentation must be completed when scheduled, except for rare emergencies.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the theft of the words or ideas of another writer or speaker (in print, web, visual, podcast, etc.) with the intent to claim them as your own original work for either a written or oral presentation. Plagiarizing is unethical, illegal, and contrary to the goals of an American college education. It does not matter if you change a word or a phrase of the original source here or there. If the ideas, words, or research are not your own, you must cite the source whatever the medium. If you lift even a short string of 2 or 3 words from another source, you must use quotation marks around those words and cite the source. If you are unsure of the rules for citation and documentation, consult the *MLA Handbook* assigned in this course. Please also note that submitting an essay in my course for which you have received credit in another course is prohibited.

Plagiarizing will be considered grounds for failing the assignment and/or the course, and may cause you to face disciplinary action before the BSU academic review panel. Sometimes students resort to plagiarism when they feel overwhelmed with deadlines or doubt their ability to

succeed; instead of cheating, please meet with me for help understanding the texts or developing your ideas for a paper.

Disability Accommodations

In compliance with BSU policy, I will arrange for appropriate accommodations with students who have a documented disability. Students need to register with the Disability Resources office in Maxwell library's Academic Achievement Center and provide me with a letter of notification concerning the specific accommodations requested early in the semester.

Blackboard

I maintain a Blackboard site for the course which will contain important documents such as the syllabus, handouts, and paper assignments. Before contacting me, please check Blackboard first if you lose your hard copy of any of these documents.

Email and Clutter

Please consider disabling the clutter function of your Office 365 Outlook email program. If you don't read even one prior message from a person, then all future messages from that person automatically go to your junk/clutter file. Many students miss important email messages from their professors because of this function, so I advise turning it off. To do so within the Outlook Web app, go to Settings (marked with a gear symbol), then Options, then Mail, then Automatic Processing, then Clutter. Select "Don't separate items identified as Clutter" and then click Save.

Writing Studio

If you want assistance with revising your writing, make an appointment or drop in Monday through Friday at the Writing Studio in the Academic Achievement Center in the basement of Maxwell library. Many of the tutors at the Writing Studio are experienced English majors. Call ahead at (508) 531-2053. Students at all levels of their careers can use this service for help with their writing at the brainstorming, outlining, drafting, or revising stages.

Course Schedule

NOTE: Always read the biographical introduction to each author

Week 1, 27th May-31st May

✓ Introduction

Puritans in New England

"Literature to 1750" (2-27) and "Colonial Settlements" (91-103)

William Bradford, from "Of Plymouth Plantation" (116-135)

John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity" (136-149)

Reading questions: What remnants of Puritan influence and values can you find in contemporary American life? What now seems the most foreign about their worldview?

- ✓ Women and Puritanism
Anne Bradstreet (150-152), "The Prologue" (153-54), "The Author to Her Book" (156), and "Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning..." (159-160)
Mary Rowlandson, "from *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*" (169-188)
Reading questions: How do Puritan theology and gender norms influence these early women writers?

- ✓ The Enlightenment and 18th Century American Literature
"American Literature, 1750-1830" (260-283) and "Writing Colonial Lives" (285-290)
Benjamin Franklin, "from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*" (290-321)
Reading questions: What aspects of Enlightenment thinking can you see in Franklin's autobiography? How does your daily experience differ from colonial era lives? Are there any commonalities?

- ✓ Ideals of the American Republic
"To Begin the World Over Again: The Emerging Idea of America" (372-74)
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer" (374-78)
Thomas Paine, "from *Common Sense*" (379-382)
Thomas Jefferson, "Draft of the Declaration of Independence" (387-393) Phyllis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (427-430), "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth" (431-32), and "To His Excellency General Washington" (434-35)
Reading questions: How do these writers define American ideals? How does their class and status (plantation owners, immigrants, or slaves) inform their ideas of America?

- ✓ American Gothic Fiction--Dark Romanticism
"American Literature: 1830-1865" (484-501) and "American Facts and American Fiction" (771-773 only)
Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter" (779-781, 805-827)
Edgar Allen Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (827-42)
Reading questions: What do these stories reveal about human psychology and the imagination? How do their views of human nature, reason, and science differ from those of the Enlightenment?

Week 2, 3rd June-7th June

- ✓ Reform and Resistance
"The Era of Reform" (503-511) and "I Will Be Heard: The Rhetoric of Antebellum Reform" (512-513)
Margaret Fuller, "from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*" (594-606)
Seneca Falls Woman's Convention, "Declaration of Sentiments" (527-530)
Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" (648-65)
Reading question: How do these writers use the rhetoric of America's founding documents to resist government oppression?

- ✓ Transcendentalism
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (539-41; 555-73)
 Henry David Thoreau, "from *Walden: Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*" (665; 671-81)
Reading questions: How do these transcendentalist thinkers view nature, religion, society, government, and the individual? How do their conceptions of the individual self differ from those of Franklin? What echoes of Emerson's ideas can you see in contemporary political rhetoric?

- ✓ Slave Narratives and Native Protest Writing
 Frederick Douglass, Ch. I to IV of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (700-21)
 William Apess, "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" (533-539)
Reading questions: What are Douglass's most compelling arguments against slavery? What rhetorical strategies do both writers use to persuade or provoke white readers to question racist ideas?

- ✓ Slave Narratives and Gender
 Frederick Douglass, Ch. V to end of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (721-767)
 Harriet Jacobs, "Letter from a Fugitive Slave" (619-623)
Reading questions: How did gender affect the differing experiences of slaves? What is the role of masculinity in Douglass's sense of self? What influences of transcendentalism and romanticism can you see in Douglass's narrative?

- ✓ Capitalism and Labor
 Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener" (876-905)
 Orestes Brownson, "from *The Laboring Classes*" (524-27)
Reading questions: How do these pieces represent capitalism and its effects on workers? Why is Melville's story told from the boss's point of view?

- Forging an American Poetic Voice
 "New Poetic Voices (937-43)
 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (968-1019; read only stanzas 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 15, 21, 24, 32, 39, 43-46, 48, 49, 52); "Beat! Beat! Drums!" (1027); and "The Wound-Dresser" (1029-31)
Reading questions: What unusual stylistic elements do you notice about Whitman's poetry? What are his attitudes about the nation, gender, work, war, the body and the soul? What elements of his work draw from transcendentalism or romanticism?

- Week 3, 10th June-14th June**

- ✓ Nonconformist Poetry
 Emily Dickinson (1043-46), and poems 280 [Fr 340], 288 [Fr260], 303 [Fr409],

435 [Fr 620], 465 [Fr 591], 501 [Fr 373], 709 [Fr 788], 712 [Fr 479], 754 [Fr 764], and 1129 [Fr 1263]

Reading questions: How does Dickinson's style differ from Whitman's? In her poems about death, does she seem to accept or question Christian beliefs in the afterlife, or both? How does her work resist conformity?

✓

Realism and War

"American Literature 1865-1914" (1102-1129) and "Realism, Regionalism, and Naturalism" (1131-39)

Mark Twain, "The War Prayer" (1157-58, 1180-83)

Ambrose Bierce, "Chickamauga" (1199-1207)

Stephen Crane, "[Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War Is Kind]" (intro 1359-60, 1361-62)

Reading question: How do these writers use satire, irony, and gritty realism to provoke readers to question romantic notions of war?

✓

Married Women's Realities

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1296-1311)

Edith Wharton, "The Quicksand" (1311-27)

Reading question: How do these stories reveal the ways in which women were entrapped by marriage, patriarchy, and the domestic sphere assigned to women?

✓

Black and Native Realities

"Writing American Lives" (1393-99)

Zitkala-Sa, "The School Days of an Indian Girl" (1407-19)

Charles Chesnutt, "The Passing of Grandison" (1273-87)

Reading question: How do these pieces resist white power, challenge white American points of view, and unmask false conceptions of reality?

✓

Naturalism: Indifferent Nature and Indifferent Cities

Stephen Crane, "Open Boat" (1340-59)

Anzia Yezierska, "The Lost Beautifulnes" (available on the web; please print)

Reading question: How do these stories reveal a naturalist attitude about fate, nature, or the determining effects of the environment upon human possibility?

✓

Modern Anxiety

"American Literature 1914-1945" (1482-1509)

T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Wasteland" (1623-50)

Reading question: How does the style of Eliot's poetry echo the mood of the speaker and/or of the historical moment (post WW1 for "Wasteland")?

- ✓ Modernist Poetry
 "Modernisms in American Poetry" (1511-19)
 Amy Lowell, "The New Manner in Modern Poetry" (1526-30)
 Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (1523-26)
 Wallace Stevens (1570-72), "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"
 (1576-78) and "Of Modern Poetry" (1581)
 William Carlos Williams (1586-89), "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1596) and "A Sort
 of Song" (1596-7)
 (more readings on next page)
 (continued from March 29)
 Edna St. Vincent Millay, "[I, being born a woman and distressed]" (1663-65, 66)
Reading questions: How do these poems demonstrate modernist poetic ideals as
 described in the intro section or by Lowell or Pound? Why does Millay's poem use the
 traditional sonnet form to offer a modern look at female sexuality?

Week 4, 17th June- 21st June

- ✓ Harlem Renaissance: Black Modernism
 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1690-94); "I, Too" (1695-96);
 "The Weary Blues" (1696-97); and "The Negro Artist and the Racial
 Mountain" (1536-40)
 Zora Neale Hurston, intro (1788-90); "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (handout)
 Countee Cullen, "Heritage" (1699-1701; 1702-05)
 Sterling Brown, "Strong Men" (1684-85; 1688-89)
Reading questions: To what degree do these writers respond to or question Hughes's call
 for a truly "Negro Art"? How does race enable or constrain their artistry?

- ✓ Modernist Fiction
 Sherwood Anderson, "Hands" (1767-74)
 Ernest Hemingway, intro (1871-73) and "Mr. and Mrs. Eliot" (handout)
Reading questions: What attitude do Anderson's and Hemingway's stories take towards
 homosexuality or a reversal of gender stereotypes?

The American Dream Deferred

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (separate book, not in the anthology)
Reading questions: How does Miller characterize post-war American society and
 selfhood, and what is his attitude toward the concept of the "American dream"?

- ✓ Feminist and Queer Literature: Breaking the Mold
 "American Literature since 1945" (1934-63)
 Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" (2115-2126)
 Ursula K. Le Guin, "She Unnames Them" (2138-42)
 Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" (2168-70; 2171-74)
Reading questions: How are these works counter-cultural, resisting norms of gender and
 sexuality or revising traditional literary forms or stories?

✓

What Is Postmodernism?

"From Modernism to Postmodernism" (1965-77)

Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (2151-67)

Don DeLillo, "Videotape" (2205-11)

Reading questions: How does DeLillo's story comment on the American technoculture of mass-mediated images? How and why does Morrison's story frustrate a reader's attempts to determine the race of the protagonists?

✓

Transnationalism and Unheralded Americans

Sherman Alexie, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (2296-2314)

Gloria Anzaldua, "El sonavabitch" (2224-31)

Martin Espada, "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" (2292-95)

Reading questions: How do these pieces challenge notions of who counts as an American? How does Alexie's story figuratively allude to the history of the treatment of natives by the U.S.?

Final Essay Due. Final Exam

Assignment 1: Weekly Discussion Question Assignment

Each student will be assigned to either Tuesday or Thursdays (see your name below). Each week on your assigned day, you should prepare a discussion question concerning one of the readings we have done for that day. Follow the advice for creating discussion questions below. You will write your discussion question on the board at the beginning of class. Also write your question on an index card with your name on it, and submit the card to me after you have written it on the whiteboard.

Tuesday questions: Emily Auerbach, Meka Auguste, Hayley Barner, Melissa Batty, Jenn Berard, Jacob Bibeault, Kylie Bock, AJ Conway, Liam Crehan, Ben Crouse

Thursday questions: Naomi Felix, Krystal Green, Kaitlyn Hampton, Adam Lawn, Sam Missildine, Nahthan Paul, Brianna Prevatt, Jillian Rose, Abby Soares, Mia Thompson

Advice for Creating Good Questions for Discussion

- Good discussion questions are not answered by "yes" or "no." Instead they lead to more sophisticated thinking (analysis, synthesis, comparison, evaluation) about the text and the issues it raises.
- Good discussion questions call for more than simply recalling facts. They should be open-ended, leading to a variety of responses. By recognizing that readers will have different perspectives and interpretations, good questions attempt to engage readers in dialogue with each other about an aspect of the text's meaning that is debatable. Resist the impulse to answer your own question as you are asking it. Wait until a few students respond to the question and then share some of your analysis to spark further conversation.
- Good discussion questions depend on a careful reading of the text. They often ask students to analyze particular scenes or passages closely and to make connections between these details and the rest of the text.
- Good discussion questions are simply and clearly stated. They should not need to be repeated or reworded to be understood. If your question is too long, try breaking it up into one main and several follow-up questions, or trim it down to its most essential part.
- Good discussion questions are useful to your classmates. Good questions can help to illuminate and clarify passages or issues in the text that students may find difficult or open to interpretation. They invite students to consider how social, cultural, and individual differences may influence their reading.
- Good discussion questions make connections between the text and the themes of the course, and may compare this text to other works read earlier in the semester.

Assignment Two: Oral Presentation and Short Essay: Close Reading of Passage

Chosen Author and date (from sign-up sheet):

You have signed up for an oral presentation in this class, which will be developed into a short paper of 3-4 pages. The presentation/paper will be a close reading (textual analysis) of a paragraph-length passage from a prose text, short poem, or stanza from a long poem.

Oral Presentation

Each presentation will be 5-6 minutes. Your presentation will serve as a rough draft or idea map for your short essay. Your presentation should begin with a main argument (thesis sentence) and then analyze details within the passage to support your point. Your thesis should set out an overall interpretation of the meaning of the passage you have chosen, and how the details support that meaning or enhance the author's goal or artistry. It is important to construct an outline to place the details in a logical order. You may wish to boldface or enlarge key points in your outline for easy reference as your eyes go from your audience back to the page. Making eye contact is crucial, as is speaking slowly, clearly, and with confidence. Please practice and time your presentation in advance and be sure that it is 5-6 minutes long. Begin by reading the passage you have chosen aloud.

A typed outline or notes of your presentation must be submitted to me right before you begin speaking, so you will have to make two copies (one for me, one for you). Also type out and hand in a copy of the passage you have chosen.

Short Essay (3-4 pages)

You will receive feedback and a grade from me via email regarding your oral presentation, which you will use to transform the material you presented into a short essay driven by an analytical thesis statement. You may also incorporate insights that you gleaned from the class response to your presentation. *The essay will be due 1 week after you receive comments from me regarding your oral presentation.* As in the oral presentation, the essay's thesis should offer a claim about some aspect of the text's meaning. Your thesis should address a point that is debatable, ambiguous, or open to interpretation, and therefore needs to be proved. If no one could possibly disagree or come to a different interpretation, then it's probably not worth arguing. In the body of the essay, you must prove your point by analyzing specific textual details. You **MUST** include quotations (preferably short phrases or single sentences) from the text and follow up each quotation with your own analysis explaining how these examples support your central argument. You may also draw upon quotations from other parts of the text (in addition to your chosen passage) if they work to support your central argument.

Type out your passage on a separate page, and note that this page is not included in the 3-page requirement.

Further Instructions: Close Reading Presentation/Paper

The prose passage you choose to analyze should be about a paragraph (no more than 2/3 of a page). If you are working with a poem you may choose a stanza or the entire poem if it is less than a page. Choose a rich passage that relates to important themes of the text, makes interesting use of language, and requires analysis. Focus on a theme that the passage addresses and show how it contributes to the larger work by providing a close reading (analysis) of the passage's word choice, metaphoric language, style, and sentence structure. Your presentation and eventual essay should do as many of the following as possible:

- Name the work and author; identify the speaker and/or characters involved; briefly explain the context of the passage (where it occurs in the work, and any important incidents associated with it) and the theme or issue that you will examine.
- Assert an argument about *how* the passage illustrates the writer's attitude toward or stance on a specific issue. Support this argument by pointing to literary characteristics (sentence structure, figurative language, imagery, tone, plot, word choice, characterization) that illuminate the meanings of the passage. Be specific. Refer to (and quote) specific words and phrases and analyze their connotations.
- Support your argument by explaining how the passage is significant in relation to the whole work. You may make reference to other quotations from the text to make thematic connections, but stay focused on your passage for the majority of the presentation.
- Do NOT merely summarize or paraphrase the passage, but analyze why the author used the particular words and style that he or she did.

Pre-writing steps to a successful close reading:

- Begin by reading the passage carefully and underlining any provocative words or phrases that catch your eye. Circle any words that you don't understand. Look them up. Write notes and ask questions in the margins about why the author chose those words and structured the passage in this way.
- Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities. Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how and why.
- Look for the ways that the author uses figurative language (similes, metaphors, symbols) to convey meanings. What other words might the author have used instead of the ones that s/he did? Why choose these words instead of others? What effect do the words chosen have on this passage's significance to the issue that you are examining?
- If you get stuck or have trouble getting started, ask yourself: What is the author leaving out or not saying? What is simply interesting or weird about this passage? What words or other characteristics jump out at you or seem particularly striking or even incongruous? What words seem to have multiple meanings? What connotations do these words carry? How do these connotations relate to your topic?
- You might consider any of the following that apply: from whose point of view do you get this passage? What is the passage's tone (sad, foreboding, celebratory?), imagery (stark, beautiful, inconsistent with the themes?), style (flowery, grandiose, plain?), sentence

structure (long, short, flowing, choppy?), point of view (first, third, omniscient, limited?). Remember, these elements only matter in so far as they affect your interpretation of the topic you are investigating.

- When considering these literary choices made by the author, ask yourself, "What point does the author seem to be making about this subject, situation, or character?" Your close reading should answer this question and provide evidence.

SAMPLE CLOSE READING

“A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bare-headed, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes” (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 53).

This passage, the opening paragraph of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, immediately introduces the novel’s examination of the fine line between a democratic assembly and an ignorant mob. Through its portrayal of a somber Puritan community ruled and easily swayed by the religious elite, *The Scarlet Letter* argues that individual thought is central to the success of a true democracy. As the doorway to the novel, this passage reveals that the novel is not only about the sin and punishment of a single woman but also a critique of the way that the townspeople themselves perceive, quickly judge, and stigmatize Hester for her sin. Here, the crowd appears as a “throng,” a densely packed, almost mob-like group. The men’s hats are “steeple-crowned,” suggesting that even the lay people have merged with the church that has punished Hester. The text presents a faceless group of people – the description of merely their clothing and headwear, along with the fact that there are women unnoticeably “intermixed” with men, implies a lack of individuality. The use of the passive voice in “was assembled” further suggests this lack of individuality – rather than actively judge for themselves, they passively move as a crowd. The mood set by their “sad-colored” garments, gray hats, and hoods and the dark representation of the prison, evidenced by its uninviting door emphasizes the novel’s critique of this community. The appearance of heavy dark, woodplanks (“timbered”) and “iron spikes” is a dreary one, but the door also repels the sense of touch with its sharp and splintery surface.

Assignment Three: Contextual Analysis Essay (Historical, Cultural, and Biographical influences)

Instructions:

The word *context* refers to the world accompanying or surrounding the literary text. Your goal for this assignment is to present a unified argument about some aspect of the text's meaning that also demonstrates how that meaning and purposes is shaped by any aspect of its context—the historical moment, cultural or intellectual concerns of the time, or the life of the author. You may glean this contextual knowledge from the author headnotes, timelines, and introductory sections in the Bedford Anthology, from my mini-lectures, or from additional web sources. For example, you could address how limitations on the lives of women in a particular period influenced the

subjects and style of a female poet, on how an author's privileged class background influenced his attitudes toward the poor in his work, on how particular religious or philosophical concerns of the time inform a writer's work, on how an author conforms to or resists dominant literary styles or movements of his or her day, on how political events of the time shape the author's attitudes, on how writers appeal to or manipulate dominant beliefs of their audience, or on how some event or relationship in the author's life (such as an overbearing father, illness, or military service) illuminates a thematic preoccupation or attitude in the text. In some cases, my reading questions for each day ask you to bring historical, biographical, or cultural context into relationship with the text, so answering one of those questions could form the basis of a contextually driven essay. As with your textual close reading, you must have a thesis sentence to present an interpretive claim that unifies your analysis.

The goal of this short essay is to make connections—to use the information you read or already know about this time period, author, or moment in literary history in order to make better sense of the text. Show how this context allows you to interpret certain passages or themes in the text differently than you could if you only read the words without attention to time, place, and author. Your essay should include and analyze details (quotes) of the text, relating them to whatever specific context on which you have chosen to focus. To provide grounding for your analysis, you may also choose to quote material about the particular context, from the Bedford Anthology or other sources. Please do not simply reiterate the biographical headnote. Instead I am looking for you to choose one specific contextual detail (whether it be historical, literary historical, or biographical) and to show how it shapes or informs the text itself. Any context details that are not related to your focused thesis should be cut. Some students have more difficulty with this assignment than with a standard textual analysis, so I encourage all of you to speak to me individually outside of class about your idea for a thesis. I can suggest some possible contexts to consider for your specific author and text.

Please include a Works Cited list that includes the piece of literature and any sources that you used for context information, including the Bedford Anthology. Use Purdue OWL's website or our own library's guides to MLA formatting for help in achieving correct form.

Note: I will ask each student to share ideas from their contextual essay with the class, so be prepared to talk about what you have written.