

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING LITERATURE

TAs usually get the opportunity to teach literary texts in one of three ways: by teaching a lower-level literature class, by assisting a professor who is teaching a literature course, or by incorporating literary texts into their introductory writing courses. These circumstances are often tied to the TA's degree program, years of service in the department, and interests.

### Teaching a Literature Course of Your Own

TAs in a master's program rarely get the chance to teach a literature class of their own. Most of those opportunities go to TAs who are advanced doctoral students. These experienced TAs typically develop their own course syllabus, choose their own texts, and design and grade their own assignments.

If you obtain one of these teaching assignments, expect little additional training. Most departments do not offer advanced workshops for TAs teaching literature classes for the first time. Therefore, you will need to take advantage of whatever informal support systems you have developed, getting advice and guidance from your teaching supervisor, professors, and fellow TAs. Selecting texts the first time you teach a literature class can be especially difficult; you have to decide if the readings are too difficult, too easy, too traditional, too idiosyncratic, too canonical, or too experimental. Check with instructors who have taught the course; see if you can examine syllabi they developed for the class, and ask them to comment on the texts you are considering. In addition, gather as much information as you can about the papers and exercises teachers commonly assign in the course and the grading standards they employ.

### Assisting a Professor in a Literature Course

Leading a discussion section of a large literature class is perhaps one of the few times you will truly be a teaching "assistant" in graduate school. At many universities, professors and TAs jointly teach these classes: once or twice a week the professor lectures to all the students taking the course and once or twice a week TAs meet with smaller groups of students in discussion sections. TAs may serve many roles in these classes, depending on what the professor asks them to do. In addition to leading class discussions, TAs may design and grade essay assignments and tests, grade papers and tests the professor designs, calculate the students' course grades, develop Web pages, or lecture to the entire class on occasion. Some professors meet regularly with their TAs to talk about the course, answer their questions, and coordinate the instruction being offered in the various discussion sections; others do not.

As a TA, you have an important function in these courses. If students have any problems or questions, they will turn to you for help. You will be expected to master the course material, attend every lecture, and teach the

required texts. You will often find yourself explaining what the professor said in a lecture, explicating texts, and teaching students how to write their papers or prepare for their tests. In most courses, you will assign midterm and final grades. In short, you will be responsible for the day-to-day business of teaching your students.

### Incorporating Literature into a Writing Course

Many TAs teach literary texts in their introductory composition classes. Whereas some writing programs structure their courses around the study of literature, most do not. More commonly, instructors in these programs teach one or two literary texts in a course that otherwise focuses on other types of assignments. In many cases, the instructors do not get to choose the literary texts they teach—all of the students in the writing program study the same texts. Some programs, though, allow instructors to choose the literary texts. When you teach literature in a writing course, the real challenge is integrating that assignment with the others on your syllabus. Also, you cannot assume that your students already know how to read literature critically, write about literary texts, or adhere to the conventions of literary analysis. You will likely have to teach these skills.

## PRESENTING MATERIAL IN A LITERATURE COURSE: A RANGE OF OPTIONS

Successful instructors know how and when to vary the way they teach literary texts. Below are just some of the options available to you.

### Lectures

The most traditional way to teach literature is for the professor to lecture on the texts. Lectures are the most efficient way to present course material—you can cover a lot of ground in an hour-long presentation. In fact, sometimes lecturing is the best way to present certain material, such as the historical background of a text, the author's biography, and trends in critical interpretation. But there are trade-offs for this efficiency and coverage. For your students, lecturing is a passive activity: while you talk, they sit silently and listen.

Chapter 7 offers several tips on how to lecture effectively—here is some additional advice that applies specifically to lectures on literary texts. First, if your lecture includes references to specific dates, names, locations, or titles, prepare a handout or overhead that contains this information. Having this material at hand increases the likelihood that your students will pay attention to your lecture instead of fretting that they misspelled a name or missed a date. Second, when lecturing about a literary text, make frequent references to the text itself, including page numbers. Third, explain why you are lecturing on this material. Why is this information important? How will it help your students understand

the text? Do not expect your students to make these connections themselves. Starting your lecture with an overview of what you will cover—perhaps even placing an outline on the board—and explaining what your students should learn from the presentation will make the lecture more productive.

### Close Readings

Close readings involve leading your students through a small section of the text—a chapter, a paragraph, or even a sentence—offering commentary as you proceed. Your goals can include teaching the students how to read literature carefully and critically, how to tease out the meanings and implications of the language, how to make connections between various parts of a text, how to understand the relationship between a text and its author or between a text and its broader culture, or how to articulate a personal response to a text.

Close readings can resemble lectures—the teacher stands in front of the class, speaking at length on passages in the text. Although close reading a text this way is efficient, it is also passive; students are only listening to and watching the teacher. To address this problem, make close reading more interactive, offering your commentary on a passage and then asking for your students' responses. If students are reluctant to speak, call on them, and through your questions, lead them to a fuller understanding of the text. When your students offer an opinion, keep them tied to the text and ask them to explain their reasoning process: how, exactly, did the words on the page lead them to this particular position or interpretation?

### Class Discussions

Students usually like to discuss literature. You can capitalize on this enthusiasm in several ways. For example, you can alternate between focused and open discussions. With focused discussions, you set the agenda for your students, identifying a question or a passage to talk about. Sometimes these discussions lead to a consensus of opinion; other times they just complicate and enrich your students' understanding of the material. With open discussions, the students talk about whatever aspects of the text strike them as interesting or important. The students may focus on a particular question or passage for a while, but the next speaker may draw their attention to an entirely different aspect of the text. Open discussions allow students to determine the direction of the class, often increasing their interest and motivation. This type of discussion also gives you the chance to find out what aspects of the text most interest your students. For additional tips on leading class discussions, see Chapter 7.

### Student Oral Presentations

Brief oral presentations increase student participation in class. Students can offer reports on the historical or cultural background of the literary text or on the life and career of its author. Reports can focus on specific chapters or stan-

zas of a work, specific characters, particular elements of literature, or particular scenes or lines. They can present the students' personal response to the material, their critical reading of the text, or their synthesis of relevant criticism.

If you require oral presentations, offer your students instruction on how to prepare and present them and decide how you will evaluate or respond to their presentations (see Chapter 7 for advice on these matters). The presentations do not have to be graded, but unless they affect the course grade, students may not take them seriously. One possibility is to incorporate some material from the oral presentations into your tests or quizzes. Specify time limits for the presentations and enforce them. With some guidance and support, oral presentations can be a valuable addition to the course, resulting in interesting, imaginative projects.

### Group Projects

For variety, you might occasionally assign group projects. Groups of students can present the results of their work orally or in writing, and their projects can be graded or ungraded, completed in class or out. You can place students in groups or have them self-select—limit each group to five or fewer members, though. As your students work on their projects, meet with each group occasionally to answer their questions, help them resolve problems, and offer advice (see Chapter 7 for more tips on using group work in class). You can require your students to complete their projects outside of class, but devote some class time to the assignment as well.

For many reasons, students sometimes object to group work, especially in a literature course. Some simply do not like to debate literary interpretations: they know what they think a text means and are not interested in discussing or questioning their views. Others feel that the work load gets unevenly distributed in group projects—some students do more work than others. Still other students resent the forced sociability of group work; they prefer to work alone and do not like being forced to collaborate with others. If you are committed to employing group work in your literature class, address these objections and accommodate these students as best you can. Most students who object to group projects will complete them; they may just need more guidance and reassurance, and perhaps a chance to vent some of their frustrations.

### Multimedia Presentations

When teaching literature, consider using multimedia presentations to supplement your instruction. For example, show your students film versions of the works you are studying. If class time does not allow you to show the entire film, show certain scenes. Films help students visualize the work they are reading and enable them to compare genres: What are the differences between the print and the film versions of the work? What are the differences between the director's vision of the literary work and their own? Another option is to

find the work on audio tape and play parts of it for your students. Hearing the words spoken aloud helps students understand the material and often generates interesting class discussion. It is especially helpful to play a recording of the author reading his or her own work—students hearing the author's own voice often remark that it makes the work more "real" or immediate.

Along with showing films and playing audiotapes, consider other ways you can supplement your instruction in a literature class. For example, when I teach my course on the literature of the Vietnam War, I bring in maps of Vietnam, diagrams of battle sites, combat photographs, pictures of aircraft and weapons frequently mentioned in the works, pictures of the Vietnamese landscape and people, and reprints of newspaper and magazine articles from the war years. I also share with my students music from the Vietnam War years, old network news casts, and current documentaries. All of this supplemental material helps students understand the texts they are reading, making it more accessible and placing it in a historical and cultural context.

### Informal Writing Exercises

Teaching literature presents many opportunities for informal, ungraded writing assignments. These assignments help focus the students' attention on particular aspects of a text or on particular literary interpretations and can prepare them to write longer, more formal papers. Described below is a range of informal writing exercises useful when studying literature.

#### Responses Essays

With these assignments your students explore their personal reactions to the literature they are reading. The actual assignment can be stated several ways. Below are just a few examples:

- What did you find interesting in the reading? Why?
- What did you find confusing about the text? Why?
- What part of the reading best relates to your life? How so?
- Which parts of the reading seem most or least believable to you? Why?

Even though these essays are not graded, and there is no "right" or "wrong" answer, they should exhibit certain qualities. Successful response essays should be:

**Clear:** students articulate their responses in language that is understandable and precise.

**Specific:** students tie their responses to specific passages in the text.

**Explicit:** students explain the link between the passages and their responses.

While response cannot be "right" or "wrong," they can be clear or unclear, grounded in the text or not grounded in the text, fully developed or underdeveloped.

Response essays encourage students to make personal connections to the texts they are reading, to explore what the text means to them, to pay close attention to the words on the page, and to develop ideas for future, more formal papers. The responses can be written in class or out of class and shared with the teacher, with other students, or with no one at all: you do not need to read every response essay your students write, especially those completed in class. Teachers often employ these assignments to help students develop their critical reading skills, to help them learn to question their responses to a text, or to generate class discussion—when the students finish their response essays, the teacher may open the class for comments, encouraging students to talk about the responses they have just written.

#### Predictions

Making predictions promotes reflective reading. With these assignments students are asked to speculate in writing on the direction a text will take before or as they read it. As a prereading strategy, ask students to predict what will happen in a book, story, or poem based only on its title or author. This exercise brings to the students' conscious attention the expectations they make as readers, expectations that influence how they read and respond to texts. You might also ask your students to make predictions as they are reading the text: at the end of a chapter, for example, ask them to guess what will happen next and to explain their predictions. These exercises encourage students to read texts closely and critically.

#### Questions

At the beginning of class, ask your students to write down any questions they have about the literature they are reading, collect and quickly scan them, read a few aloud, and then spend the rest of the period working out answers. Alternatively, collect the questions, read them outside of class, and choose a few to address the next time the class meets. Some teachers like to have students write down questions at the end of class, after a lecture, discussion, or presentation. Quiet students then have an opportunity to ask questions they might not ask in class, and you get the chance to gauge how well your students understand the material. Writing out questions also helps students think critically about the texts. Oftentimes students who are struggling with material do not understand why they are struggling until they are asked to articulate their questions. This exercise gives them that opportunity.

#### Dialogues

This creative exercise asks students to write a dialogue involving characters from the works they are studying. In these dialogues, students can imagine what characters from different works might say to each other if they happened to meet, or they can ask characters questions. These role-playing exercises promote empathetic readings of literary texts and help

**FIGURE 11.1 Presenting Material in a Literature Course: A Range of Options**


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Lectures
Close Readings
Class Discussions
Student Oral Presentations
Group Projects
Multimedia Presentations
Informal Writing Exercises
Response Essays
Predictions
Questions
Dialogues

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students develop a deeper understanding of characters and themes. To complete dialogues successfully, students have to assume a new perspective; they have to see the world through the character's eyes and assume the character's voice.

The various ways of presenting course material in a literature course are summarized above in Figure 11.1.

## FORMAL PAPER ASSIGNMENTS IN A LITERATURE COURSE

Formal literature-based essays usually require students to respond to, analyze, critique, or synthesize the texts they read. When designing an assignment in a literature class, pay particular attention to your own intentions: Why are you requiring this assignment? What do you expect your students to learn by writing this essay? What skills do they need to complete the assignment? Do your students currently have those skills or will they need instruction? Below are just a few of the formal, literature-based assignments you might consider using in class, based on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a collection of stories about the experience of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. Choose ones that meet your students' needs and suit your course goals.

### Response Essays

As with informal response essays, these assignments ask students to examine their personal reactions to literary texts. In their papers, students articulate their reactions to a reading and explain the link between the text and their responses. Possible response essay assignments might include:

- When reading the story "Love," how did you react to the way Martha treated Lt. Cross on his return from the war? Why did you respond this way?
- What was your response to Rat Kiley killing the baby water buffalo in "How to Tell a True War Story"? What aspects of the story most influenced your response?

These assignments ask students to examine their personal reactions to characters, events, and themes in the texts they read. But they also require students to consider how their knowledge, feelings, prejudices, and life experiences influence their reading. These essays are usually evaluated in terms of their clarity and development.

### Analytical Essays

Analytical essays usually ask students to explore how an author achieves a particular end through the use of a certain literary device or technique, such as characterization, symbolism, foreshadowing, allusion, setting, or rhyme. To complete the assignment, students have to focus on one aspect of the text, examine it closely, form their interpretation, and relate their conclusions to the work as a whole. Here are some possible analytical paper topics:

- How does O'Brien employ setting in "Speaking of Courage" to help readers understand Norman Bowker's psychological trauma and feelings of isolation?
- Kiowa's death is described quite differently in two stories, "Speaking of Courage" and "In the Field." How does O'Brien's use of point of view in these stories further his argument that truth is often hard to pin down in a war?
- Courage is an important theme in *The Things They Carried*. Choose one story out of the collection and explain how it addresses the question of what it means to be courageous.

These assignments call on the students to focus on one or two stories, isolate for examination a particular element of fiction or a particular theme, examine it closely, then articulate and defend an interpretation. The students would, of course, be expected to support any contentions with evidence from the text and to explain how that evidence actually supports their interpretation or claim.

### Critiques

Here students evaluate the quality or worth of a literary text. To complete these complex assignments, students have to understand the standards critics typically employ to critique literature. If they do not know those standards, you need to teach them in your class. If they know the standards but