

University of Richmond
CORE 101-102: EXPLORING HUMAN EXPERIENCE
The Common Syllabus for 2008-2009

Aims of the Course

The Core Course must be important: It is the only course that everyone has to take at the University of Richmond. And it must be fundamental: Everyone has to take it in his or her first year. What does this course do that is so important and fundamental?

The Core Course has three overlapping aims:

- (1) to expand your knowledge and understanding of different ways in which thinkers and writers have interpreted human experience;
- (2) to develop your ability to engage and compare texts through reading, thinking, writing, and discussion; and
- (3) to establish a foundation for conversations on serious questions, among both students and faculty, that extend beyond the course itself.

How does it endeavor to achieve these aims?

The course pursues the first aim by assigning texts that display a wide array of perspectives on the meaning of life. The guiding assumption is that the examination of a variety of approaches to common human problems will give you a more sophisticated understanding of what is involved in making thoughtful sense out of experience. All the texts in the course tend to focus on similar basic questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why do people behave the way they do? To whom or to what do we owe responsibility? But since the writers of these texts look at these questions from varying points of view (they live in different times and places, occupy different social positions, have different physical constitutions), they don't treat them in the same way. In trying to comprehend why this writer sees the world this way, while that writer sees it that way, you should not only discover new possibilities for interpreting experience, but also deepen your sensitivity to the challenges that interpretation must confront. Whether you agree with them or not, the exercise of thinking through various writers' visions of the world should give you a better understanding of the grounds for, and implications of, your own views.

The course pursues the second aim by having you do some hard thinking about difficult books. The guiding assumption is that one of the best ways to learn to read, think, and express yourself well is to study the work of proven good readers, thinkers, and writers. By analyzing how gifted people think through tough problems on paper – by getting into conversation with smart men and women – you will get better at the job oneself. So instead of asking you to master a specific body of information, this course will ask you to read and interpret a series of complex texts. The point is not to learn facts and formulas (although you will learn many new things), but to develop skills: how to absorb difficult material relatively quickly; how to see the way a text works; how to fashion clear, subtle, persuasive arguments for a position. Toward such ends, the course will require you to do considerable reading, conversing, and writing. Class sizes will be kept small so that you will feel free to join in discussion and will enjoy an instructor's close attention to your intellectual growth.

The course pursues the third aim by maintaining a common syllabus for all sections and drawing its instructors from the entire University faculty. Because every first-year student will be reading

the same book at pretty much the same time (and more than likely a lot of upper-class students have read the book too), there is always something substantial for students to talk about, not just in class, but in the dining center and residence hall. Should we buy this argument for political reform? Should we love or hate this character? What exactly is this writer trying to say? And because the course is not the property of one department, there are faculty all over the University who are in on the discussion. The fact that faculty from a variety of disciplines will approach the common material in different ways should enrich conversations about that material: You can learn much by comparing the approach taken in your own section with that taken in others. By nourishing this common discussion, the course will provide an important undergirding for all other courses at the University: No matter what course a student is taking, the instructor knows that the members of the class have read certain books and discussed certain issues that can serve as a common point of reference for what he or she has to say.

This is a demanding course, but it should also be a rewarding and enjoyable one. It is designed to stretch you intellectually and conceptually and should thus provide a solid foundation both for your further study at the University and for your reflective living after graduation. What could be more fundamental or more important?

Course Work

Your main job in this course will be to read the assigned texts and analyze them in discussion and writing. The minimum writing requirement for all sections of the course is two or three essays per semester, requiring analysis of texts read in the course and totaling approximately 3000 words (about 12 standard typed pages). All sections are also expected to have a midterm examination and a final examination, the latter administered during the final examination period at the end of the semester. Examinations may be undertaken in the classroom during designated examination sessions, or they may be administered as take-home examinations. In either case, your instructor will design these examinations to elicit preponderantly discursive and analytical responses from you. You should expect work beyond this minimum. The nature of this work will vary from section to section: Your instructor might require more extensive formal essay writing, journal-keeping, the leading of class discussions, participation in electronic discussion groups, drawing, making music, or other activities. A guide to the faculty's expectations for reading, writing, and studying is on the last page of this syllabus.

Grading

Separate grades will be given for discussion and the writing assignments. Each instructor will determine the relative weight of examinations, discussion, and papers in calculating the final grade, with the stipulation that at least half the grade will rest on discussion and the writing assignments.

Attendance Policy

The specific attendance policy for your section will be set by your instructor, but it should be obvious that you cannot participate in class discussions, as required, without being present.

Honor Code

All students in this course are expected to abide by the University Honor Statute. The Core Course requires that students learn how to read the assigned texts and work out their meanings

for themselves, in class discussions and on their own, under the guidance of the instructor. The reading of outside sources instead of the texts is a violation of the spirit of the course and will be considered intellectual dishonesty.

Whom to Contact about Questions or Problems

If you have questions or problems that cannot be handled at the level of your section (e.g., scheduling problems), you should contact Professor Raymond Hilliard (Core Coordinator). Professor Hilliard's office is Ryland 303i; his phone is 289-8289; and his email address is rhilliard@richmond.edu.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

On the following pages is the common reading schedule for the course. All sections will read the same commonly assigned texts in the same order. In each semester, however, your instructor will add one additional text of his or her own choice and will provide a more precise calendar of reading assignments for your particular section. As specified in your instructor's individual syllabus, the required reading will sometimes be limited to parts of texts rather than entire works.

Be sure to purchase the editions of these texts that are on sale at the campus bookstore. (A listing of these editions is provided, along with a copy of this syllabus, on the Core website.) Having the same edition will assure that you will know the reading assignment for each class and will be on the same page as your instructor and classmates during classroom discussions. (Effective discussion will often require a close look at certain passages in the texts.)

Be sure to keep your first-semester texts for the second semester, when you are likely to need them. Many instructors and students will make connections among texts from both semesters, and some assignments may invite such connection-making.

The guiding idea of this course is that giving meaning to human experience is a complicated and difficult business. As we will see in the first semester, the difficulty is related to the complex interplay between society and the kinds of knowledge or understanding that human beings seek. In the second semester our focus will be on similarly complex relationships between the powerful desires that motivate most individuals and the factors, both internal and external, that make it difficult, and sometimes dangerous, to fulfill these desires.

I. THE SHAPE OF SOCIETY

(Core 101, Fall 2008)

In Core 101 we will consider the shape of society and the significance of social and cultural factors in human experience. We will ask such questions as: What do we mean by "society" and "culture"? How do customs, values, social roles, and economic realities impact upon the way that humans make sense of their experience? To what extent do social circumstances determine what humans seek, the meanings they discover, and the limits of what they comprehend about themselves and the world around them? We will also consider various reactions to the

constraints imposed by society and culture, exploring how selected authors have criticized the shape of society and re-imagined the possibilities of human experience.

A. Knowledge, Society, and Culture

Our main concern in this first section of the course will be the relationship between society or culture, on the one hand, and various ways of knowing, on the other. We will begin with a novel that portrays the way that stories (even in the form of gossip) can give meaning to human experience, especially as humans confront the intrusion of new customs, values, and authorities into their social environment. After that we will explore three different ways of understanding human experience: first through discussing philosophical claims that human reason can escape social conditioning and that human souls can transcend the limits of physical existence; then through considering polemical arguments about the way that Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped notions of good and evil, thereby constraining the free expression of human inclinations; and finally through reflecting upon scientific analyses of the origin of species and the development of society – analyses that challenge long-held, culturally-sanctioned ideas about the nature and significance of human experience.

1. Naguib Mahfouz, *Fountain and Tomb* (Egypt, 1975)
2. Plato, *Apology, Phaedo, and Symposium* (Greece, 4th century B.C.E.)
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Germany, 1887)
4. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species and The Descent of Man* (England, 1859 & 1871)

B. Re-Imagining Society

In this second section of the course we will focus on four writers who, for the sake of what they believe to be necessary for human happiness or fulfillment, have criticized the existing social order and called, explicitly or implicitly, for radical change. We begin with someone who opposes the imposition of foreign cultural forms upon traditional ways of life and proceed to a critic of the way that human sexuality has been used, not just to differentiate biological functions, but to apportion social roles and opportunities. After that we will consider the work of an analyst of economic structures and of the ways in which these structures shape human experience. Finally, we will end the semester as we started it: with a novel – one that captures much of what we have been discussing about the shape of society and its impact on human experience.

1. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* and selected essays (India, 1909-1940)
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (France, 1949)
3. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* and selections from *The German Ideology, Capital*, and other works (Europe, 1844-1867)
4. Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (U.S.A., 1905)

II. SHAPING LIVES

(Core 102, Spring 2009)

In Core 102 we will need to keep in mind our previous discussions about the shape and impact of society, but our focus will shift to the ways in which individual human beings go about fashioning lives that promise to be fulfilling. A general assumption made by the various writers we will read is that human beings are driven by powerful desires or impulses which are

frequently difficult to satisfy and sometimes detrimental to their well-being, at least as defined and enforced by society. Our readings will raise such questions as: Where do our desires come from? – From our having been created by a beneficent God? from our participation in a particular society? or perhaps from our individual genetic make-up? And by implication, at least, we will be invited to consider whether we should seek to satisfy our desires or endeavor instead to curb and discipline them. In either case, we might well reflect upon whether we must – and how we can – learn to live with a sense that our desires will never be completely fulfilled.

A. Desire and Human Possibility

We will begin this section of the course with a writer who believes that human beings must strive to re-direct their desires away from the flesh and the social world and toward the divine. We will follow his text with one that dramatizes a man's ill-fated desire to assert a particular cultural identity while confronted with sexual desire, on the one hand, and conflicting knowledge (or what he takes to be knowledge), on the other. After that we will consider how a roughly parallel conflict plays itself out within a very different cultural setting, which will allow us to probe more deeply into the relations between self-fashioning and the shape of society. Finally, we will turn to the medium of poetry to gain insight into the inner dimensions of an individual's efforts to establish an identity that will allow full and honest expression of desires that conflict with the shaping that society attempts to impose.

1. Augustine, *Confessions* (North Africa, ca. 400)
2. William Shakespeare, *Othello* (England, 1604)
3. Chikamatsu, *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (Japan, 1721)
4. Adrienne Rich, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* (U.S.A., 1951-1991)

B. Living within Limits

In this last section of the course our focus will be on various factors that limit what human beings, as desiring creatures, can achieve. Our first book, encompassing the reflections of an African-American at the onset of the Jim Crow era, explores the desire of an entire people for social and economic equality – and the formidable barriers that frustrated that desire. Our second text, a novel set during a time of violent political upheaval associated with apartheid in South Africa, depicts a woman's desire for moral redemption as she faces death. Our third book, written by the founder of psychoanalysis, explores the multifaceted conflict – said to be irresolvable – between our biologically-based impulses and the demands of “civilization.” And our final text of the course deals with the emotional and moral damage that can occur when cultural values compel the denial of fundamental desires, and hence the denial of the most basic sense of who one is. With this text, we will have come full circle, ready to recast our original question into whether or not the particular society in which we live is shaped as we think it should be, whether or not we are inclined to change what we can about our society, and whether or not we wish to continue our own individual exploration of the nature, limits, and possibilities of human experience. If, over the preceding year, you have enhanced your ability to read with discrimination, discuss with acuity, and write with insight, your responses to these questions will lie more securely in your own hands.

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (U.S.A., 1903)
2. J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (South Africa, 1990)
3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Austria, 1930)
4. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (U.S.A., 1956)

EXPECTATIONS FOR READING, WRITING, AND STUDYING IN CORE

In taking the Core Course, you are embarking on a journey of reading and writing that is likely to be quite different from what you experienced in high school. Not only will you encounter new kinds of texts and new kinds of papers and examinations, you will also encounter heavier demands on your mind and time since many of the texts will be more challenging and extensive than those you've read in the past, and you will be asked to get more out of them. Below are some guides to what your Core instructor will expect of you.

How much time should you spend on Core-related work?

- Although the length of reading assignments will vary according to the text, you should expect on average to spend 2-3 hours reading for every hour you spend in class. In other words, plan on spending 6-9 hours every week reading for Core.
- Although the speed with which people can write well varies considerably, a handy formula for estimating the time necessary to write an essay for Core is about 1.5 hours per page. In other words, be prepared to set aside 6-9 hours to write a 4-6-page paper. This is *writing* time: It does not include the time you will need to gather and consider your evidence.
- To prepare well for a midterm examination you will need to study 8-10 hours. For a final, you will need to study at least the equivalent of two full days. These estimates assume that you have kept up with your work.

By what standards will your writing be judged?

In the Core Course we want you to learn to write essays (including those on examinations) that are:

- Designed to persuade. They should propose a clear, arguable thesis and present a sustained case for it.
- Well-organized. They should present their case in an efficient and orderly manner.
- Clear. They should convey their meaning through carefully chosen words in sentences and paragraphs that can be easily followed by a good reader.
- Full of supporting evidence. They should demonstrate thoroughness in collecting all the evidence relevant to the issue at hand, care in presenting it accurately, and deftness in molding it into a cogent, persuasive argument.
- Insightful and imaginative. They should demonstrate a capacity to see beyond the obvious and resourcefulness in conveying complex arguments and meanings.
- Subtle. They should be attuned to the complexities of the texts we study, making judgments about them that are appropriately nuanced and qualified.
- Stylistically engaging. They should be written in a tone appropriate to the subject and in a way that draws the reader in.
- Grammatically and orthographically correct. They should be virtually free of errors in grammar, syntax, and spelling.

Since these dimensions are interlocked in many ways (good organization, for example, is often a product of imagination), they cannot be used as a simple checklist for judging your writing. But they should help you understand what you are aiming for: To be judged excellent an essay must score very high on all these dimensions.

For examples of excellent Core essays, take a look at the prizewinners on the Core website:

<http://core.richmond.edu/>