

How to Excel in an Undergraduate Literature Course

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I: What to Expect

Expect to read! When you sign up for a literature course, anticipate spending many hours every week in the company of books. Let this be your one great expectation, and you will not be disappointed. Do you like to read? Do you enjoy stories? Do you feel enriched by having your ideas challenged, by thinking philosophically about the circumstances of life, people, and abstract concepts, or by experiencing the beauty that is possible through the skilled or merely felicitous use of language? If so, then you will probably get along just fine with the company you'll be keeping.

But, alas, there are other factors--factors of a decidedly practical aspect--that insist on being taken into consideration. First, there is that most obtrusive time factor. Do you have the time to invest into a literature course? Courses vary, yet it is safe to say that literature will always take whatever time you can give to it, and teachers often demand that you give to it more time than you are inclined or believe that you are capable of giving. Therefore, expect to read even beyond your inclination and supposed capability. Such a conclusion may seem too vague to be helpful, but it is meant to suggest an attitude that may be of benefit when you find that all of your courses have assignments due during the same week. Of course, only you can decide what your schedule will permit, but if you have doubts, allow yourself the liberty of examining the course requirements before you commit yourself.

Second, there is the factor of your reading speed and comprehension. If you know that you lack the reading skills necessary to keep up with the course schedule, you may want to make that self-knowledge the basis of your commitment to the course. If you engage only in those activities in which you know that you can succeed, you're not likely ever to break through to any new success. John Stuart Mill said it best in his *Autobiography*: "A pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can." Not all excellence is measured by an academic grade. If you have a weakness in reading, either in speed or comprehension, a literature course may not be the course to take for an assured "A," and yet it may provide you with the incentive to excel in self-improvement. Therefore, expect to improve as a reader.

What might you expect regarding the class and the way that the course is taught? Well, if you already have expectations, then expect also to be surprised. Some literature courses require considerable writing, others do not. Some emphasize the lecture as a mode of teaching, others favor class discussion, perhaps even allowing for student presentations. No single approach works best for all teachers or, for that matter, all classes. Therefore, aside from the expectation of being required to read, it is best not

to have set expectations regarding the way that the course is structured or taught. In fact, whether a particular pedagogical approach works depends as much or more upon each student's willingness to accept that approach as it does upon the instructor's ability to use it. Teachers with any experience at all know this, and they will appreciate your support.

II: The Course Syllabus and Schedule

What textbooks are you going to need to purchase? By what date will you need them? Will there be any writing assignments? If so, what sort of writing assignments, how long must they be, and when will they be due? What about exams? What mode of examination should you expect--essay, short answer, multiple choice, or some other? Over what subjects will you be tested? How will the teacher determine your grades? All of these questions and more should be answered by the course syllabus and schedule.

Think of the course syllabus as a legal contract between you and your instructor. Don't be misled by the fact that there's no dotted line requiring your signature. Your enrollment in the course is a tacit agreement to all the conditions set forth in the syllabus. Therefore, read the small print! Ask for an explanation of any details that are unclear to you. If there are important details missing from the syllabus, politely ask your teacher to make those details available to you. Perhaps, they could be written on the chalkboard during a class session for the benefit of all or, even better, printed as an addendum to the syllabus, so that copies can be distributed to the class. Although you'll want to leave it to your instructor to determine how she or he will make additions to the syllabus, don't be shy about asserting your right to know what to expect from the course and what conditions you are agreeing to by remaining in the class. Remember, though, *to be courteous and respectful!*

Know the syllabus! Study it as if you were to be tested on it. I've known instructors that have, in fact, formally tested their students on the syllabus. I too have tried that approach. Admittedly, we may have gone a bit too far. Even so, we instructors want and expect our students to know our policies and the requirements of the course. At least, study the syllabus so that you know exactly what information it contains and will know, for future reference, when you need to consult it. If you miss an exam, a crucial deadline, or fail to bring the needed materials to class one day, you may want to check the syllabus to see what, if any, excuses may be valid; but, bear this one truth in mind--despite the fact that it is a cliché--that ignorance is no excuse. In fact, ignorance of the syllabus is worse than having no excuse, since it suggests to the instructor a lack of appropriate concern regarding the course. So, if your aim is to excel, don't sabotage your performance by failing to know the syllabus.

III: In the Classroom

Does your course syllabus note that part of your final grade is determined by

class participation? If not, you might want to add it in the margin, for unless your grade is determined by a machine, you can be sure that--regardless of how objective your instructor may believe that she or he is--a definite personal impression is likely to have a definite, however small, effect on your grade. Many students make so little an impression on their instructor that their name, printed above the essays and exams they turn in, brings forward no favorable recollections to the instructor's mind. Even if your instructor insists that personal considerations have no bearing upon his or her grading, make it your policy to act as though they do have a bearing. After all, your instructor may be more human than he or she believes. Of course, impressions work on people's unconscious in differing ways, and it is always possible that the student who makes a positive impression in the classroom may create higher expectations in the mind of her or his instructor. This being the case, the surest and safest advice I can offer is this: first, realize that class participation *does* make a difference, and second, whenever possible, avoid making a negative impression.

More likely, however, your syllabus will state that a portion of your final grade will be determined by the quality of your class participation. What are the basic types of participation that your instructor will be evaluating? Usually, your syllabus will delineate these types. Look for any tasks that cannot be included in the other graded assignments. For example, if your syllabus notes that 40% of your grade will be based upon your exam scores, 40% upon your essays, and 20% upon class participation, then it is clear that anything required of you by the instructor that is not part of an exam or an essay will likely be considered as part of class participation.

Often, teachers will expect students to participate in class discussion, and usually that discussion will be about some aspects of the required reading. Unless both the reading and the discussion take place within the classroom during a single class period, you should allow time outside of class for whatever preparation is necessary for full participation during the class discussion. Occasionally, a teacher will give advance notice regarding the specific aspects of the literature to be discussed, but more often students are simply expected to be prepared for whatever discussion arises. So, come to class having carefully read the texts (see section iv below), and come to class with specific questions and observations that you are willing to share.

Set where you will be seen by your instructor. The more visible you are, the more likely you will be called upon to share your thoughts. At least, the instructor will note your interest in the discussion and your desire to participate. If the seats are arranged in rows and you are sitting in the front row, when you participate in the discussion, speak to both the teacher and your fellow students. In other words, encourage a response by making the entire class your audience. Even if you want only the instructor to reply, let your question or remark be heard by the entire class, so that the instructor's reply will be meaningful to all.

Be polite. Never interject while another is still speaking. Don't engage in a discussion with your neighbor while another speaker has the floor. In fact, as a general rule, reserve all private discussion until after the class. Never, never, during class time, read a newspaper or notes or text for another class. Rather, always remain attentive, either to the lecture, discussion, or text under consideration, as the situation dictates.

When and how should you take notes during a class discussion or lecture? Very

often students complain either that they can't write fast enough to keep up with all that the teacher is saying, that they take too many notes that prove to be of no use in exams or essays, or that they can't determine when something that is said during discussion should be noted for future use. These are serious complaints, but difficult to address in a general fashion. However, these two rules will always apply: if it's written on the chalkboard, make a note of it, and if the teacher emphasizes it, either by repetition or by vocal inflection, make a note of it.

Of course, these simple rules may not be adequate. To gain further guide-lines, you'll have to do a little research. You may try asking your instructor what relationship the discussions or lectures have to the exams and essays. Unless you know something about the exams and essays, you will have difficulty knowing how much of or what part of the discussions will be applicable. No doubt, much of what is said in class is merely intended to help you in your immediate understanding of an author, text, concept, literary form or theory. Ask your teacher to give you some guidelines in taking notes. You may even find that your teacher would prefer, at times, that you don't take notes.

When you are taking notes, keep in mind, first, that they must be legible, and second, that they need to be legible only to you. I've heard many students and graduates complain that they had returned to their earlier classroom notes only to find them unreadable, not merely because of sloppy handwriting, but because many of the allusions or cryptic remarks were no longer meaningful. Some students, knowing that they want to preserve their notes for future years, will make the opposite mistake, carefully printing in complete sentences, but missing half of what the instructor is saying. Instead, think of your classroom notes as short-term jottings. Abbreviate, omit the use of articles (a, an, the) and any unessential words, and don't worry about neatness. After class, convert your notes for long-term use. With a word processor you can organize them, filling in any words and additional notes that may be helpful to you. The process of typing your notes will not only provide you with a permanently usable record, but it will also reinforce what you have heard in class, and thus aid in your learning of the class material.

IV: Reading

Entire books have been written on the subject of reading, ranging from the predominantly practical (e.g., Mortimer Adler's *How To Read a Book*) to the highly theoretical (e.g., Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?*). My purpose here is to offer a few simple guidelines to those uninitiated into the arcane discipline of English.

I once had a student who professed to have read every assigned text, yet he could never pass a quiz. He told me that he couldn't ever recall the details of anything he had read the night before. Another student expressed her opinion that the whole idea of "discussing" a text is absurd, for the purpose of reading literature is to find pleasure. Either a work is enjoyable, or it is not--and that's all there is to it! Well, I suspect that both of these students had the same problem, and it is the most common problem for undergraduate students of literature. They hadn't learned to read. I don't

mean to say that they were illiterate. It's not that they lacked the skills to read; they simply had never been placed into a situation in which they had to learn how to apply those skills to their full advantage.

Reading, like listening, is an art, the object of which is to comprehend so as to appropriately respond. We've probably all, at one time or another, been so engrossed in a television show that, when a person asked us a question or made some remark, we listened only enough to gather the tone of the voice, by which we could tell whether a question or a comment was being made. When the speaker paused, we probably responded by saying something like, "Uh-huh," "Sure," "Is that right?," or "You don't say?"--depending on whether we thought we heard a question or a statement. If we guessed mistakenly, we would then hear a more emphatic, "Are you *listening* to me?" Listening requires attention. Why? Because listening implies comprehending. Without comprehension, no communication takes place.

The same is true with reading. We have not truly read until we attend and comprehend. However, unlike the person who interrupts our television show, a written text will not accuse us of inattention if we fail to respond appropriately. That task belongs to your teacher. Unfortunately, many students entering into college have never been made to attend to their reading. They have managed to get by with stock responses to what they thought they were reading--"Uh-huh," "Sure," "Is that right?," "You don't say." Literature requires and deserves a thoughtful and intelligent response, and this can only be given by the student who has learned how to read.

It might be helpful to consider a text as you would a mathematical problem. In order to arrive at an intelligent response or sum, you must first rightly discern the parts. Of course, readers of literature discern the relationship of the parts differently, and each reader approaches a text with her or his own unique set of experiences and expectations. This is why any one work of literature can be meaningful to people for very different reasons. However, no work of literature has ever been meaningful that has not first been comprehended.

During the seventeenth century, books were often printed with brief marginalia intended to summarize the content or interpret the meaning. If you have a reprint of an old edition of the King James Version of the Bible or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you can see that someone, either the author or an editor, has attempted to do part of the work of reading for you. Fortunately, books printed today rarely include this sort of marginalia. Although they may include frequent footnotes, these notes usually add information rather than interpret or summarize what has been written. When I read, I add my own marginalia. I summarize the content of paragraphs and whole pages, and I make brief observations, usually comparing one thought with another. This practice forces me to slow down and think clearly about what I am reading, and I often recommend this practice to my students. Of course, if you have a borrowed book or a valuable edition, you'll want to use a notepad instead of writing directly in the book.

If my earlier comparison of literature with mathematical equations suggests that the discipline of English is a dry science, then the analogy has been taken too far, for nothing could be further from the truth. Though the business of reading is often work, the rewards of understanding enrich our lives and add pleasure to our days. Allow me

another metaphor: Reading is a journey. The pleasure of the journey is not to be found waiting for us at the very end, but is found along the way, within the journey itself. As Coleridge said, in his *Biographia Literaria*, "The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself."

Academic success may be measured by the grade that you receive at the end of the semester, but could you honestly claim that the semester itself has been a success if it has not afforded you pleasure along the way? Although the paper you write on a book may earn you an "A," if you found no pleasure in the reading of the book, then your experience in the course has not been altogether successful--in fact, it has largely been a failure. When you read, therefore, read *with* comprehension but *for* pleasure. My experience in reading and grading student papers has often proved to me that the students who are truly stimulated by the texts, both intellectually and emotionally, are the ones who write the best papers on those texts.

V: Writing

Expect to write *at least* one essay. You may be required to write, in addition to essays, a number of shorter papers, such as explications of text (usually for poetry readings), creative imitations of text, and responses to your readings or a reader's journal. Be sure to check the syllabus early in the semester, so you will know exactly what types of writing will be required of you.

Your instructor will expect you to adopt the conventions of writing. These include the essay form, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and--for all courses in the discipline of English--the style and documentation procedures of the Modern Language Association (MLA). If you need assistance with any of these, speak with your instructor early in the semester. He or she will be able to direct you to useful reference tools and, probably, give you directions toward acquiring individual tutorial assistance.

Writing is work; it is rarely easy. However, there are some things that you can do to make it easier. First, don't wait until the last moment to determine your topic. Think about possible subjects and theses as you read, but limit yourself to subjects that *you* find interesting. When you have two or three alternatives, rank them, and speak to your instructor about them. You probably want to arrange for a meeting during her or his office hour or after class, or arrange for dialogue by way of e-mail or phone. Your instructor will be able to inform you whether a topic is appropriate or very promising, and he or she will likely be more than willing to suggest possible ways of developing or researching the topic.

Second, take notes as you read. Whenever you find a passage that might be pertinent to your topic, make a note of it on an index card. Don't worry about using too many index cards. Once you've determined your exact topic and have established a working thesis, you can weed out the cards that don't appear to be relevant or needed. After you've created an outline of your argument, you can arrange the cards in the order

that will be most useful to you. Furthermore, as you take notes, be sure to indicate direct quotations by using quotation marks, cite the page references, and keep a record of the full bibliographical information, so that you can document the sources that you cite.

Third, use a word processor and frequently save your writing on a disk. Expect revision to be an ongoing part of the writing process. A word processor facilitates revision to such a degree that it has rendered the typewriter obsolete. Anticipate a power failure or your computer crashing. If you have your writing on a disk, you can pick up where you left off, at another time or with another computer. While you're at your computer, check the printer. Make sure that it's working and that you have enough ink and paper.

Finally, complete the first draft at least one full day before the essay is due. Have a more experienced writer read through your paper, noting any errors and making suggestions for whatever improvements might be made. Many intelligently written essays have been marred by careless errors that could easily have been corrected, if only the writer had allowed time for a critical reading and revision.

VI: Afterthought

After all has been said, we find that the answer to the question "How do I excel?" is determined by how we define "excellence." Until we know the meaning of "excellence," we will not know to what degree of success we have attained in life or even in a single undergraduate literature course. And this is a task that is both highly personal and communal. While we must determine what is excellent for ourselves, we do so in the context of a community, and we do so through reading, observing, and reflecting. Perhaps, an undergraduate literature course is a good place--if not to begin--to continue the journey toward an answer to the question, "How do I excel?"