# English 297 w/ English 202 Introduction to English Language and Literature

## Course Syllabus

Some tales, once we have heard or read them, live in our minds as memories of personal experience. Such is the story of a young woman who, wandering the Earth to avoid losing her way, marked the trees along the road with her hatchet. The signs we leave behind might not avoid the fate of everything that is human: transient and prone to oblivion. Yet, if those brief and unclear signs fail to spare us all wondering and temptation, they can to a great extent alleviate them and, at least, be of help by convincing us that we are not alone in anything we experience, nor are we the first and only ones who have even been in that position.

*Ivo Andric, Signs by the Road Side (Stanislava Lazarevic, translator and abridged by NW).*

### Instructor’s Information:

**Instructor’s name:** Dr. Norman Wacker

**Office hours:** Monday and Wednesday 12:30 – 1:30

**Office:** A-18, Padelford Hall

**Class Time and Classroom**: M/W/F 11:30 – 12:20 p.m. THO 331

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**Texts as Languages and Figurations of Personal and Collective Experience**

English 297 is a 5-credit linked writing course with English 202, the course designed by UW’s English Department to provide a common understanding of key methods and objectives of English studies and an overview of the varieties of English language, literature and cultural study that are the focus of the discipline of English.

Storytelling traditions, their media (whether oral, print or pictorial, or genre whether prose, poetry or drama, are among the most influential sources of the collective understandings of communities that share a common language and common traditions as well as powerful media for the articulation and preservation of minority and alternative histories and traditions.

When re-told in the contexts of primary and higher education, these traditions are important vehicles for defining, reproducing and of course imposing shared heritage and assuring its presence in both popular and high culture from generation to generation. Perhaps equally important in a global and connected world, storytelling traditions also resonate powerfully with diverse legacies articulated when communities interact across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

**The Work of Reading and Writing about Literatures**

For all their power, the influence of these traditions is often indirect and unexamined, having taken place in the earliest phases of our development as readers or been communicated without apparent fanfare, debate or scrutiny in school curricula, popular speech and fables. Whether commercial, political or religious influential and uncontested commonplaces can dominate private and public discourses and beliefs, something much on display in recent debates about fraudulent nature of print, broadcast and digital news media.

In the absence of concerted reflection and study, we may not be able to identify and truly understand the shaping legacies of these traditions and increasingly varied forms of media on the way we *view*, *construct* and *interact* with the world around us. It is the job of English 297 students and the instructor--in tandem with the English 202 lecturer and sections instructors--to provide together a rich reconstruction, analysis and heightened critical perspective on the methods and stakes of the storytelling traditions we consume and ways individual readers and whole communities of readers come to understand and enact them.

**Close Reading and Cultural Context: How We Will Produce Critical Awareness**

In order to engage the “signs and pathways” of works of literature, we must read texts in a close and discerning way, if we are to unpack meanings produced in no small part by the collective and individual work of readers and the culturally determined frameworks through which we view them.

To recover and expand the cultural impacts of works we read, we must also place them in their larger contexts*,* using English 202 readings and lectures as rich surveys of the scope and diversity of literatures studied in English (spanning traditions from ancient to modern and often including the influence of works originally articulated or written in forms and languages other than English).

We will use the practice of *close reading* of literary forms, including distinct uses of narration, vocabulary, images and tone to reconstruct the way texts shape the tapestries of inferences and meanings readers present and past arrive at as they puzzle and reflect their way through these features of texts, oral, written and pictorial works.

**A Note on the Reading and Critical Writing about Reading we will do in English 297**

Reading is a culturally situated, deeply personal and challenging intellectual experience. It is also a rich opportunity to exercise and develop our own agency as readers and students of literature, and enter into conversation with readings produced by our peers and by experts in the field. The intersection of perspectives and the real and imagined communities of readers that generate them, are so rich that English studies almost always requires we engage in greater depth and variety the texts we read and the contexts in which they originate. Fully articulating the significance of what we read makes the critical writing we produce a richly refractive lens whereby we deepen our engagement in and enactment of the complex texts we read.

Texts are complex products of cultural practices, philosophical and religious beliefs or historical events with which we may be unfamiliar. The purposes and appropriate approaches to an assigned reading, the contexts of the texts we read, as a result, can escape or disorient us initially, even upon thoughtful re-reading. Signposting our paths through the world of the text via informal and formal writing is, as Ivo Andric states above, a fundamental tool of navigation, allowing the critical writer to enact, in addition to her own cultural traditions and perspectives, the multiple perspectives and collective meanings generated by diverse communities of readers and writers.

Below are some questions from Stephan Greenblatt’s essay “Culture” summing up some of the ways close and reflective reading of literary texts imparts multiple perspectives to the objects of cultural and literary studies. Greenblatt suggests several questions readers can use to capture the diverse perspectives they bring to the act of reading and its reflexive shaping of significance of the objects they read. .

* What kinds of behavior, what models of practice, does this work seem to enforce?
* Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
* Are there differences between my values and the values implied in the work I am reading?
* Upon what social understandings does the work depend? Why might different readers produce different understandings?
* Whose freedom of thought or movement might be advanced or constrained, implicitly or explicitly by this work?
* What are the larger social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame might be connected? What persons and communities, what acts and beliefs are celebrated? What persons and communities are disparaged?

### Linked Course Requirements and Approaches

We will complete and post homework to the English 297 Canvas site before each class meeting. Homework postings will be shared and reviewed during each class meeting. These assignments will include brief close reading log entries, discussion board postings, descriptive outlines and rough drafts, each part of the required preparation for three major English 297 assignments—two short critical essays on English 202 course readings and one creative project in one of the genre (poetry, fiction, drama, or visual media) of our English 202 readings or kinds of performance discussed in English 297 and in lecture.

This will be a highly collaborative and interactive class. We will exchange and discuss pre-writing homework with our classmates, prepare rough and revised drafts for each major assignment, and receive peer and instructor comment at each stage of the preparation sequence. Our linked course writing assignments will consistently integrate our knowledge of lecture content as well as lecture course critical and literary texts. While the courses are two distinct 5-credit courses, they should be highly complementary throughout, allowing us to make strides towards understanding the lecture course topics, the larger discipline and the kinds of writing practiced in English studies that would be unusual in a single free-standing 5-credit 200-level course.

My role as your instructor is to assure members of the class receive close support and guidance in the practices of close reading and entering into critical discussions with peer and expert critics of the texts and methods of English 202. I also believe the course will allow each of us to identify the range and diversity of English study—creative writing, criticism, specific historical periods or literatures in which you are interested and where and whether the English minor or major might figure into your long-term personal, education or professional goals. I will deem this course and the individual accomplishments of its students to be especially successful to the extent that each of us grows in our mastery of close reading skills, awareness of important cultural and historical contexts of the texts we read and confidence in our ability to contribute to the conversations and debates that define the field, whether as critics, thoughtful readers or creative writers. I will find us especially successful if we also contribute to defining longer term personal, educational and professional objectives to be pursued beyond the confines of this course.

**Note: Pre-writing and Major Writing Assignment instructions and drop boxes will be found throughout the course on our Canvas English 297 Course Site under the Assignments tab.**

### Reading Log Entry and Peer Comment Guidelines

Our reading logs will vary, drawing on a mix of informal, low stakes, writing and more formal writing designed to scaffold preparation of our three major writing assignments and will include:

**Annotation**: Marking up lecture course readings (and peer work in progress) by highlighting key terms, phrases and concepts, including formal features of key passages we find noteworthy during initial reading and flag for the kind of re-reading and close analysis that might inform revision of our initial interpretations.

**Comment**: Framing observations, questions and inferences in the margins of the text which state observations, articulate questions, define key terms and paraphrase difficult passages, sketch working responses, provisional conclusions and / or larger claims about a concept, a passage or challenge an assertion made in or by others about the text.

**Summation:** A concise analytical summary of your reading should include one claim about each of the following:

1. The impact or significance of the formal features of this text—narrative point-of-view, uses of language, thematic or plot development and their impact on you as a reader.
2. Conclusions about the cultural context of the text (aspects of that context below).

* Behavior, beliefs or practices, this work seems to enforce.
* Why readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling.
* Differences between my values and the values implied in the work.
* Assumptions about society on which the work depends. Who or what is praised? What is blamed?
* Whose freedom, status, thought or movement might be constrained by this work? Whose would be enhanced?
* What are the larger social structures with which these acts of praise or blame might be connected?

### Scaffolding Major Assignments: Reading Logs Peer Review, and Drafting

Writers fail or succeed one manageable step at a time, not in either a catastrophic failure or flood of inspiration all at once. A nuanced command of difficult texts, is something the expert writing we read sometimes displays, at other times the writer may assume or bury under difficult jargon and abstractions, the evidence on which its interpretations and claims are grounded. Effective critical writing cites supporting evidence for the inferences the writer draws about the text. Inferences of substance are arrived at through measured reading, re-reading and reflection that shares more with the practice of empirical science than vague personal impressions or matters of opinion.

The linked course will emulate the practices that allow committed students of critical and literary texts to become ever more reflective, informed and effective readers and analytical writers—practices you will come to recognize as you move on in your university study and professional training as standard practices among advanced students and successful professionals.

**Pre-Writing and Reading Logs**: informal reading notes and comments translate reading and thinking activity into malleable written records that can be revisited, edited, even cut and pasted into descriptive outlines and rough draft sections. Students of literature and professional writers rely heavily on this preparation when discussing texts and ideas with others and preparing critical writing—such exchange is much more than a series of “off-the-cuff” remarks or impressions. It is a first-take and early crafting and trial ballooning of positions, an exchange that contributes to the range and depth that all members of the group will bring to the text and their initial writing about the text—few first takes and first impressions about complex texts survive, unrevised, but all benefit when subjected to thoughtful appraisal by others.

**Peer review:** Writers share work--sometimes by choice with trusted peers and tutors, sometimes by course requirement, or by contract with exacting / critical peers, teachers, editors and workplace supervisors. Writers also learn by reviewing writing completed by peers on similar topics or in similar genre, gaining guidance in and important awareness of conventions and strategies and ways they contribute to effective writing. It is part of a long apprenticeship that most writers—even the most celebrated—have used to realize their potential and maintain excellence over the course of long careers. This also assures we do not confuse--or God forbid--submit for a grade or publication our raw, impressionistic, first drafts in place of the best work we can do when informed by others who are conversant with the same texts and questions with which we are wrestling and others have long wrestled before us.

**Key Elements of Critical Writing:** Carefully prepared initial writing, rough and revised drafts scaffold to a document that contains most of the critical sections that will make-up the final essay. *Introductions* briefly frame a critical essay, an *informing question* anchors the essay and places it in a cultural context. A *thesis* about the critical contribution of the focused analysis to follow is emerging. The *body* amounts to focused thesis-centered exposition of the reader’s analysis of text and context. The *closing discussion* expands upon the kinds of stakes his or her analysis has for a thorough understanding of the text and its contribution to either a historic or a contemporary context, including ways in which they may be a significant departure from previous or widely held ways of looking at the text.

**Final Edits and Revisions:** When the text is truly a full-blown work of analysis, it is ready for thoughtful editing for submission or publication. Both peers and the instructor of this course will enjoy familiarity with each stage of your work and be conversant with the work being produced by others in the class. If we engage and thoughtfully integrate the resulting perspective, we possess an editorial resource to help us craft a final “revision plan” of the kind that takes place before the published work we consume in publications and university study materials, see light of day. In this way, we make sure we enjoy most of the resources available to writers who grow accustomed to and eventually master the demands and rigors of writing for advanced academic study, or for publication. Writing happens in stages, in communities and with substantive review and input from others—peer editing and instructor / student conferences assure these stages are completed before our work is submitted in its final form.

### Course Grading

**Basic Course Requirements: 1)** Timely completion of all homework and in-class activities, including close reading exercises, discussion postings, outlines, drafts and revisions. 2) Timely completion of final projects. **Deductions for assignments 1 day past due, no-credit for assignments not posted by day two. If you believe you have a valid reason for a missed class or late homework, such as illness or emergency please notify me in advance of class or the assignment due date.**

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| **Course Component** | **% of Total Grade** |
| Major Essay 1 | 20% |
| Major Essay 2 | 20% |
| Major Essay 3 | 20% |
| Major Essay 4 | 20 |
| Class Participation  (aggregated hw and in-class activity) | 20% |

No final exam or class meeting during finals week. Participation extra credit for closeout Reflective Essay and Standard Course Evaluations.

### Other Requirements

Post all homework to Canvas by attaching an **MS Word file** or pasting your **Word** text directly into the assignment drop box window. **No-PDF’s or Pages please!** Bring each day’s homework to class on a device to exchange with classmates. Regular class attendance is absolutely required and necessary to your success. In-class-activities will be posted and receive homework credit. In-class work cannot be made-up in the case of un-excused absences.

Don’ts: **No texting in class. No earbuds in class. No non-class content on your devices while in class, no use of phones.**

Dos:Participate! Collaborate! Engage! I have never met a student or a colleague who has not had important perspectives, questions, aspirations or experiences to contribute to their own success and their colleagues. Disengagement, silence or opting out can be toxic, undermining our personal sense that we matter and others matter to us. Please join in and keep in mind that even low key public speaking and presentation are challenging for almost all of us, but among the awards are overcoming the subtle forms of self-censorship we can impose on ourselves in the process. It’s rare for my students to pass the quarter without doing something that either myself or their peers find awesome, so don’t hide!