**English 309: *House of Leaves* and the Future of Reading**

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**Description.** This course is about what you’re doing at this very moment—reading. While reading has become second nature to most of you, it is a remarkably powerful instrument for personal growth and social control. Reading has come to mediate most of our interactions with others--whether it’s through books, devices, or other technologies—and yet we seldom reflect on it as a practice and process. How we come to read and through what technologies will be the focus of this course. It will use a single text, Mark Danielewski’s postmodern novel, *House of Leaves*, to consider the state of the book and of the various practices of reading at the present moment. *House of Leaves* is a novel that requires us to reconsider the material and social facts of the book—how it feels and looks, and how it functions as an object—along with the reading practices it both requires and complicates. Understanding how we have learned to read—the practices of reading books, websites, and other texts—and how reading has changed over time will require us to enter into the labyrinth of theory. In this course, we will put different theories of reading into conversation with the novel in order to understand their critical perspectives. At the same time, we will use the novel to question the assumptions and the limitations of the theories themselves.

**What is English 309?** This course fulfills the English Department’s distribution requirement for Theories and Methodologies of Language and Literature. While this is a “theory” course that focuses on theories of reading, it doesn’t pretend to be comprehensive nor does it come with a particular theoretical point of view. Rather, the course will look at three related areas of study: the book as a social object, the process of reading, and theories of interpretation, particularly the recent controversy between “close” and “distant” reading. Mark Danielewski’s novel will serve as a touchstone and testing ground for these theories. I have found that students either love or hate *House of Leaves*. If you’re part of the latter group, then this might not be a good course for you to take. That’s especially true if you’re not comfortable with the demands of literary theory.

**My Teaching Philosophy.** Learning to think theoretically simply means learning to ask questions in new ways--and that takes practice and faith in the intellectual generosity of the group. There are no right or wrong answers, only different forms of analysis, self-reflection, and self-presentation. My job, as I see it, will be to put this novel into various historical and theoretical contexts and to raise questions that we can all engage in conversations of various sorts. I stress conversation here because a great deal of work will happen through the students' conversations, hence the importance of class participation. It is through class discussion that we all learn to ask questions and to listen attentively. Your job, in other words, is not just to read, but to read as a way of engaging the ideas, questions and issues of the course. Don't hesitate to ask questions, because if you are perplexed by some opaque phrase or some strange use of typography, then you're probably not alone.

**Canvas.** This course has an accompanying Canvas course page where you can access and download handouts from the course as well as turn in essays. You can reach the site by looking into Canvas (through MyUW); you should be able to see the Canvas site if you are registered for the course. If you are absent from class, check this site ***first*** for any handouts. It’s your responsibility to get and read them.

**Course Objectives.** Each course is different and takes on a personality of its own through the ups and downs of a quarter. In successfully completing this course, you will be able to articulate an original analytical perspective about specific contemporary issues of reading and you will be do so through interdisciplinary integration of humanities and social science methodologies. I have five intellectual experiences I hope you will experience and engage in this course.

* Engaging Theory. Theory is really a form of intellectual self-reflection; it is thinking about thinking. Engaging theory means reflecting on the assumptions that drive our understanding, judgments, and arguments. It also means being intellectually generous enough to read and discuss difficult texts with openness and curiosity.
* Engaging the World. Theory is not opposed to the world, but it is rather a way to engage with our everyday experiences and practices. This objective asks that you be open to the world in the same way you engage theoretical and literary texts. Intellectual inquiry begins, literally, at home.
* Community of Inquiry. It is one of my strongest pedagogical beliefs that students teach each other at least as effectively as they learn from a professor. Sharing ideas and working in teams are necessary to push ideas and arguments further. Hence working in groups are an important part of the class. Being curious about and learning from others is the key to learning.
* Writing with Focus and Intensity. Learning to write as an engaged and curious writer is harder than it looks. Writing is one of the most difficult processes I know and it’s difficult precisely because it’s unnatural. Learning how to possess it and use as effectively as possible is a key to this course’s success.
* Gain confidence in yourself as a public self through practicing the argument and communication tools necessary to effectively articulate (both orally and in writing) your own original positions with respect to the ideas and contemporary problems we discuss.

**Covid Protocols.** We are all still learning to be in-person. That said, I remind you that face coverings are required in the classroom. We should all try to maintain a healthy distance (three feet or greater), if possible, in the classroom. If there are small groups meetings, I will give you the opportunity to move outside or out into the hall in order to maintain a safe distance between members. Here are the commonsense protocols:

* If you have symptoms, stay home. Also, contact me.
* If you test positive, quarantine. And contact me, so that I can help with contact tracing.
* You are free to bring laptops or phones into class in order to help with your learning. Don’t abuse this privilege.

The University’s Covid protocols and plans are available at:

<https://www.washington.edu/coronavirus/autumn2021/?utm_source=uwhp&utm_medium=tiles&utm_campaign=autumn-2021-planning>

**Religious Accommodations.** “Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW’s policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at [Religious Accommodations Policy (https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the [Religious Accommodations Request form (https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/)](https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/).”

# REQUIREMENTS

1. **Online Crowd Sourcing (i.e. Discussions) (20% or 80 points).** In addition to engaging in in-class conversations, another important part of the class will be your on-line conversations on Canvas. I call it crowd sourcing, because this particular course requires all of us to work together to solve the riddles, to answer the questions, or to pose new questions about *House of Leaves.* This requirement is meant to build a sense of connection; this a class not a village, but it exists outside of the four hours per week that we meet. For this reason, it’s important to create a sense of common purpose from our very different expectations and backgrounds. A handout on this requirement will be forthcoming.
2. **Essay Summaries (20% or 80 points)**. Learning to summarize the argument of an essay is a key way to understand not only the theory but also how arguments are put together. I will let you write your two summaries at any time during the quarter. If you wish, you may submit three summaries, and you can drop the lowest grade. Each summary will be worth 10% of your final grade. A handout will be provided beforehand to define the form and the parameters of the summary.
3. **Putting Theory to Work Essay (25% or 100 points).** One of the most important aspects of this course will be learning to do close readings of texts using a theoretical perspective. Employing theory involves the difficult task of choosing a particular aspect of a theoretical essay (a term, a question, a short passage) and using it as the basis for critical analysis of a text. Your essay summaries should help start the process by providing you initial material. We will workshop drafts of your essay and the final draft will be Friday, February 25th. A handout will be forthcoming.
4. **Reading Exam (25% or 100 points).** Exams are usually intended to police you because we don’t really believe that you’ll actually read the novel. In this course, however, not reading the novel isn’t an option (or why would you even take the course?) Rather, I want to use this exam to assess how well you read the novel and the ways in which you can demonstrate various kinds of engagement with it. The Exam will take place on Wednesday, March 9th, the last day of class.
5. **Participation (10% or 40 points).** This requirement is actually pretty simple. It’s not about how engaged you are, or how often you participate. It’s about showing up. If you show up and don’t miss more than 5 classes (that’s 2 ½ weeks’ worth of classes), then you’ll get full credit. If you don’t, you won’t.

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**Texts (available at the University Bookstore):**

Mark Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (full-color edition)

Reading Assignments: The reading assignments for *House of Leaves* noted below for weeks 1-7 indicate where I think you should be in your *first* reading of the novel. They don’t indicate what specific sections we’ll be discussing on which day. (For that you’ll have to be in class or check with the course’s Canvas page.) After you’ve finished reading the novel the first time, you should start back through it for a second time, noting how your understanding and experience of the novel change on second (or third or fourth) reading. Readings marked with an asterisk (\*) can be found on the Canvas Module for that week. **NB: theoretical essays will be discussed on days noted in syllabus.**

**Week 1: The Archaeology of Reading (and Writing)**

Mon. Jan. 3: Introduction: This is not for you.

Wed. Jan. 5: Histories of Writing and Reading

Alberto Manguel, “Beginnings”\*

Stanislas Dehaene, “Inventing Reading”\*

Mark Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, cover to p. 18

**Week 2:** **Reading in the Brain and Society**

Mon. Jan. 10: Reading in the Brain

*House of Leaves*, pp. 19-40

Stanislas Dehaene, “Learning to Read”\*

Karin Littau, “Introduction: Anatomy of Reading”\*

Wed. Jan 12: Reading in Society

Karin Littau, “A History of Reading”\*

Karin Littau, “The Material Conditions of Reading”\*

*House of Leaves*, pp. 41-73 (Chapter V)

**Week 3: The Process of Reading**

Mon. Jan. 17: **MLK Holiday**

Wed. Jan. 19: The phenomenology of reading

*House of Leaves*, pp. 74-152

Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process”\*

**Week 4: Reading as Consuming and Theft of Property**

Mon. Jan. 24: The obsession with reading (and watching)

*House of Leaves*, pp. 153-245

Karen Littau, “The Physiology of Consumption”\*

Wed. Jan. 26: Power, theft, and trickery

Michel de Certeau, “Reading as Poaching”\*

*House of Leaves*, pp. 246-312

**Week 5: Exploring the House**

Mon. Jan. 31: Reading as Exploration

*House of Leaves*, pp. 313-407

Wed. Feb. 2: Remediation: reading genre

Katherine Hayles, “Saving the Subject”\*

*House of Leaves,* pp. 408-490

**Week 6: Close versus Distant Reading**

Mon. Feb. 7: *House of Leaves*, pp. 491-end

Wed. Feb. 9: What happened to close-reading?

Heather Love, “Close but not Deep”\*

**Week 7: Integrating Writing and Reading**

Mon. Feb. 14: **Writing Groups**

Wed. Feb. 16 Katherine Hayles, “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine”\*

**Week 8: Re-Reading *House of Leaves***

Mon. Feb. 21: **Presidents Day Holiday**

Wed. Feb. 23: **No Class**

**Putting Theory to Work Essay Due Friday by 5:00 pm.**

**Week 9: The Novel as a Theory of Reading**

Mon. Feb. 28: Libraries of the Past and Future

Anthony Grafton, “The Book Dematerializes”\*

Wed. March 2: Reading and Affect

**Week 10: The Ends of Reading**

Mon. March 7: All the Answers to the All the Questions

Wed. March 9: **Reading Exam: How Do *You* Read?**