

English 124.011: Mountain Literatures

Mondays and Wednesdays 2:30-4; 4199 Angell Hall

Amrita Dhar

amritad@umich.edu

Office Hours: Mondays 12-2, and by appointment; 3023A Tisch Hall

Generic Course Description: Academic Writing and Literature

This class is about writing and academic inquiry. Good arguments stem from good questions, and academic essays allow writers to write their way towards answers, towards figuring out what they think. In this course, you will focus on the creation of complex, analytic, well supported arguments addressing questions that matter in academic contexts. The course will also hone your critical thinking and reading skills. Working closely with your peers and your instructor, you will develop essays and other written assignments through workshops and extensive revision and editing. Readings will cover a variety of genres and often serve as models or prompts for assigned essays; the specific questions you pursue in your essays, however, will be guided by your own interests.

Specific Course Description: Mountain Literatures

Mountaineering has been called the most literary of all sports—indeed, many of its best practitioners are also its best writers. But what is it about mountains that so inspires writing? How does language hold on when the going gets steep? How are experiences of extreme altitude and adventure conveyed in ways that not only attract but absorb a general readership? In this course, we shall frame our discussions around such questions as we read some of the finest mountain writing in English. From Leslie Stephen's understanding of unstructured play as a requisite of grand adventure to Helen Mort's exploration of climbing as a transformative activity, from Nan Shepherd's profoundly spiritual encounters to Eric Shipton's apparently phlegmatic planning, from Ang Tharkay's illiterate yet poetic autobiography to Katie Ives's beautifully crafted language, we shall range far and wide among the heights as we tease out questions of craft, allure, and responsibility.

Course Goals

In this course, we shall work towards:

1. Developing your methods and strategies for sustained good reading, writing, revising, and editing;
2. Improving your ability to interpret literary works and to explain those interpretations in writing;
3. Inculcating critical thinking and writing;
4. Inspiring a sense of pleasure with textual interactions.

Course Requirements and Grading Breakdown

Attendance and participation	10% of course grade
One short paper (4 pages; close reading)	20% of course grade
Article report (4 pages; analytical)	20% of course grade
Presentation of final project	20% of course grade
One long paper (12-14 pages; research-based)	30% of course grade

The first essay due—a short paper of 4 pages—will be an exercise in **close reading**, asking you to read a particular work with specific attention to and pressure on its language. You will be encouraged to spot and tease out layers of meaning—those that are apparent, and those not so

apparent. You will read with an alertness for nuance and undertone to the text in front of you, and lay out in your own writing the emphases and/or contradictions you note.

In the second week of the term, I shall ask each of you to commit to a date in March on which you will present on an article that you would like to bring to the class's attention. You don't have to know just yet what this article is; the readings and discussions of the first half of the semester will rightly prove to be spurs towards your deciding on a particular essay you want to analyse or respond to. The article report, an **analytical** essay of 4 pages, will ask you not only to employ your close reading skills, but also to analyse your selected text to state *what* it means, and *how* it makes the point(s) it does. This is not an invitation to summarise its stance or argument. Rather, it is a means to help you tease out the manner in which it *achieves* its stance or argument. Thus, you will learn to both locate and use *evidence* to ground the claims you make. Note: you will both present this orally in class, *and* turn in a written version. While it is the essay that will primarily be graded, there will be added points for a clear, succinct, and thought-provoking presentation.

In a continuation of the exercises designed to make you a better thinker, a better writer, *and* a more confident speaker, the **presentation** of your final project will be a conference-style laying forth of *your research question*, your views on *what makes it an important question* for *all* of us to consider, and some indication of *your findings* as you begin to write your final paper. By this time, you will have completed your annotated bibliography for your final project, and will have a good sense of the thrust of the argument you wish to make in your final paper. You will use the time you have for this presentation to tap into the collective mind of the class, bounce ideas off your peers, and gauge their reactions and responses. Note: during the three days of in-class presentations towards the end of term, you will be evaluated not only on how you *present*, but also on how you *respond* to others' presentations. Each of you will be expected to ask at least three (and ideally five) substantive and probing questions over the course of the presentations.

Your final paper will be a sustained piece of **research-based critical or argumentative writing**. For this, you may pick up and pursue a question that particularly compels you, respond to a piece of writing you feel strongly about, analyse a film that leaves you wanting or excited, cull evidence from various texts around you to make an argument about a social issue, or pretty much anything at all—just as long as it has a bearing on the course topic. In my experience, the best papers come out of real questions, or issues that a writer feels passionately about. I encourage you to start thinking about your final paper early. I shall be consistently available for individual consultations to talk through ideas you may have, and to direct you to sources and avenues that will be rich for the kind of exploration you wish to do. Over the terms, I have had the great fortune to read some *excellent* final papers on a stunningly diverse set of subjects, and I have learnt a great deal from them. I look forward to no less from this class. Think boldly, exercise both rigour and imagination in equal measure, and write well.

Other evaluations: on days of workshops and presentations, your classroom participation will be especially crucial. On these days, you will be evaluated on your powers of listening, assimilation, and on-point discussion. During workshops and presentations, you will have to be present at your most alert, most critical, but possibly also most generous. Please remember that the aim of good feedback is to refine an idea or an argument or a piece of written work, and we must collectively take responsibility to make that happen.

Course Policies

1. The class is a learning community; please remember that each member is a valuable and equal part of it.
2. This is a reading-and-writing-intensive course. Allow sufficient time for reading, writing, re-writing, and editing. Expect to spend class-time in intense discussion or writing exercises, and expect to spend time outside class on reading and assignments.
3. If you require extra time or other adjustments to fulfil course expectations, please let me know in the first few meetings of term so that I can plan any necessary adjustments to assignments and due dates.
4. If you *must* miss a class meeting, please let me know in advance. It would be smart as well to arrange to trade notes with a classmate in case you do have to be absent.
5. This course adheres to the Department of English plagiarism policy, with details available at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/undergraduate/advising/plagNote.asp>. I shall expect the work you turn in to be entirely your own, written specifically for this course. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the assignment, and possibly for the course. I shall also refer any plagiarism case to the Dean of Academic Affairs, who may impose other penalties.
6. Please bring each day's reading—and pen/pencil and notebook—to class for discussion.

Grading Standards

Grades are measures, not rewards. And many factors go into evaluating each individual paper. However, as some very general guidelines, I have listed these outlines below:

A: Advances a clear and persuasive thesis through a thoughtful selection of evidence. Demonstrates engagement with and a clear understanding of the prompt. Goes considerably beyond class discussion in developing an independent reading/argument. Does not generalise but develops specific and well supported interpretations.

B: Develops a clear thesis, well supported by evidence. Tends to be a little more superficial and obvious than an A essay, either in the thesis, or in the specific details considered, or in repeating some of a class discussion. Shows a serious attempt to understand and respond to the prompt. Does not generalise.

C: Provides some analysis, while remaining relatively general. Uses the prompt minimally. Tends to be over dependent on class discussion and does not develop an appropriately independent analysis. Tends to generalise and to be impressionistic in advancing interpretations.

D: Fails to analyse or argue. Forgets what the prompt was. Deals not in evidence, but in generalisations.

E: Work plagiarised, or not turned in.

Schedule (date, text under discussion, other agenda)

[An asterisk next to a text indicates that it is of some length, and you are advised to allow extra time for it.]

4 January

Introduction to the course

Discussion of two short poems by Helen Mort (texts handed out in class)

9 January

Katie Ives, 'Transgressions' (text handed out in the previous class)

Self-assessment as a writer due in class

11 January

Katie Ives, 'Transgressions'

Initial discussion of close reading strategies

16 January

Martin Luther King, Jr Day; no class

18 January

Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe**

Brief quiz on the first half of the book

23 January

Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe**

Further discussion of close reading strategies

25 January

Gary Snyder, selections from *Danger on Peaks* (texts handed out in the previous class)

In-class written practice of close reading

30 January

Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa: The Memoir of Ang Tharkay**

Close reading paper prompt distributed

1 February

Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa: The Memoir of Ang Tharkay**

In-class written practice of close reading

6 February

Research methodology orientation at Shapiro Undergraduate Library

8 February

Draft of close reading paper due in class (please bring 3 copies of the draft of your paper)

Peer-review workshops in class

Peer-review responses due in class

13 February

Gary Snyder, selections from *Danger on Peaks* (texts handed out in class)

Close-reading paper due in class

15 February

Session on Mountain Photography at the University of Michigan Museum of Art

20 February

Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind**

Reaction to/analysis of one of the photographs studied at UMMA due at the start of class

22 February

Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind**

Discussion of strategies of critical analysis

Mid-term self-assessment due in class

27 February

Winter Break; no class

1 March

Winter Break; no class

6 March

Eric Shipton, *Upon That Mountain**

In-class article reports, according to order of signing up (5 minutes each)

Written article reports due in class for those who have presented on this day

8 March

Eric Shipton, *Upon That Mountain**

In-class article reports, according to order of signing up (5 minutes each)

Written article reports due in class for those who have presented on this day

13 March

Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

In-class article reports, according to order of signing up (5 minutes each)

Written article reports due in class for those who have presented on this day

15 March

Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

In-class article reports, according to order of signing up (5 minutes each)

Written article reports due in class for those who have presented on this day

20 March

Selections from Lauret Savoy, *Trace* (text handed out in the previous class)

22 March

In-class presentation of research-questions (2-3 minutes each) towards final papers

27 March

Philip Connors, *Fire Season**

Discussion of research strategies and practices (personal notes, annotated bibliographies)

29 March

Philip Connors, *Fire Season**

Discussion on research strategies and practices (references, citations)

3 April

Selections from Helen Mort, *No Map Could Show Them* (texts handed out in the previous class)

5 April

Selections from Helen Mort, *No Map Could Show Them*

Annotated bibliography for final project due in class

10 April

In-class presentation of final projects (7 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of questions and comments)

12 April

In-class presentation of final projects (7 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of questions and comments)

17 April

In-class presentation of final projects (7 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of questions and comments)

20 April

Final research papers—with self assessment—due in my Canvas mailbox by noon

*Submission/attendance/active participation for everything marked in **bold** is **mandatory**.