

ENGL 1007

Introduction to Literature and Environment

Tu/Th 2:30 - 3:45 pm
 Pillsbury Hall 211
 3 credits
 Fall 2026
 Class #32602
 Section #1

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Course Description

This course aims to introduce you to a select number of writers who have attempted to probe, challenge, and understand the relationship between humans and the environment over the last 175 years or so. Rather than survey a wide range of writers and texts, we will limit ourselves to only a few, so that we can more deeply appreciate the themes these writers have attempted to address and the genres in which they have tried to do so. These themes include attention, indigeneity, and dystopia, as rendered in nonfiction, poetry, fiction, graphic novel, and film. We will also explore how the diversity of identities and perspectives these writers represent — including markers of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, age, and disability — influenced their work and its reception. Although we will restrict ourselves to literature written in English, mainly about the environments of New England, Minnesota, and California, our approach will be decidedly global, with the ever-present threat of climate change never far from our minds. And while we will consider the historical roots of contemporary environmental thought, our primary attention will be on how literature and other forms of cultural production can affect change in the present. Requirements include attendance and participation, a series of short reading responses, three in-class critical essays, and several writing exercises in which you will practice nonfiction, poetry, and graphic storytelling.

Course Objectives

What questions will the course help you to answer? How will you grow in knowledge and understanding?
What intellectual abilities will the course help you to develop?

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- *understand* basic facts and concepts concerning literary and cultural representations of the non-human world
- *analyze* how literature about the environment addresses key themes (attention, indigeneity, and dystopia), reflects the diversity of human experience (especially differences in identities and perspectives), and is shaped by different literary forms (especially nonfiction, poetry, fiction, graphic novel, and film)
- *create* your own literary nonfiction, poetry, and graphic storytelling about environmental themes
- *practice* taking risks, pushing your limits, and becoming uncomfortable in order to learn new things
- *reflect* on your own knowledge, experiences, and learning strategies to improve future performance
- *collaborate* with others to increase your knowledge and understanding
- *communicate* your ideas effectively in writing and in speaking

Liberal Education Requirements

Liberal Education courses help you investigate the world from new perspectives, learn ways of thinking that will be useful to you in many areas of your life, and grow as an active citizen and lifelong learner.

This course fulfills the Liberal Education requirement for *Literature core* by exploring the relationship between language and meaning in literary texts, particularly through analysis of the “four coordinates of

discourse”: author, audience, text, and context. In so doing, the course seeks to demonstrate the power of literature to enlarge our understanding of the human experience, transform our thinking and our lives, and help us imagine new possibilities for our society and the world.

Student Learning Outcomes

This course also meets four of the University’s seven Student Learning Outcomes by helping you to:

- *identify, define, and solve problems*, through the reading responses, critical essays, and creative practices
- *understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies*, through our discussion of the diversity of identities and perspectives among environmental writers
- *communicate effectively*, through your class participation and written assignments
- *acquire skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning*, through all of the assignments, which encourage you to reflect on the relationship of public and private life

CLA Core Career Competencies

This course helps you develop several of the CLA Core Career Competencies, especially:

- *ethical reasoning and decision-making*: This competency incorporates assessing your own personal and moral values and perspectives as well as those of other stakeholders and integrating them into an ethical framework for decision-making. You will develop these skills as you consider the ethical challenges related to our environmental choices and the changes that individuals and organizations can make to help build a healthier society.

Texts

What reading materials will help you to pursue the goals of this course?

In this course, we will read the following four books:

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)
- Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (Penguin, 2020)
- Diane Wilson, *The Seed Keeper: A Novel* (Milkweed, 2021)
- Damian Duffy (Adapter) and John Jennings (Illustrator), *Octavia E. Butler’s Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (Abrams, 2021)

We will also watch Alfonso Cuarón’s film *Children of Men* (2006) and may read a number of articles posted on our Canvas site.

Instructor

How will my background help you achieve your goals in this course?

I was born in upstate New York, to parents with French-Canadian, Irish, and Dutch ancestry, but I grew up in northern New Jersey. For the last 28 years I have taught at the University of Minnesota, where I am a Professor of English. I received my B.A. in English at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and my M.A. and Ph.D. in English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. I currently teach undergraduate and graduate courses in the environmental humanities, literary nonfiction writing, and sustainability studies. Three of my proudest achievements have been helping to co-organize the University’s Environmental Humanities Initiative in 2016, receiving the Morse-Alumni Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education in 2017, and receiving the Arthur “Red” and Helene B. Motley Exemplary Teaching Award in 2022. My research interests concern American environmental literature and its relationship to the ideas of nature, culture, place, and food. I am the author of two books, *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement* (2004) and *The Farmer, the Gastronomer, and the Chef: In Pursuit of the Ideal Meal* (2024), as well as the editor of several others, including *Our Neck of the Woods*:

Exploring Minnesota's Wild Places (2009). I am also a Past President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), and I have been a Senior Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Germany, a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Turin and University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, and a Visiting Professor at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in France.

Names and Pronouns

What should we call one another?

Please tell me how you would like to be referred to in class. I will happily address you by the name and gender pronoun you use, or by any other form of reference, and I would be glad to inform class members to do the same. I encourage you to call me by my first name (most people do), but you are welcome to call me “Professor Philippon” if you prefer. I use he/him pronouns. Note that class rosters will list your legal name unless you [enter a different one](#) through your OneStop account.

Contact Me

How can you contact me to help you learn? What are my office hours?

The easiest way to contact me is immediately after class; I would be happy to meet with you briefly to answer a question or elaborate on a point made in class. To contact me at other times, or to arrange to meet at another time, email is the best way to reach me. I will do my best to respond to you within 24 hours during the work week. My contact information appears at the top of this syllabus.

I do not keep office hours, but I would be glad to set up a time to talk with you, in whatever way is most convenient (email, phone, video, etc.). Even if you do not have a specific question, I encourage you to talk with me at some point during the semester, so that I can get to know you better as a person and learn more about the subjects that interest you, since the main reason I am here is to help you learn and grow.

Feedback and Grading

How will I evaluate the nature, quality, and progress of your learning?

Feedback

I will attempt to provide feedback to you in multiple ways, in person and online. Sometimes this feedback will be for the entire class, and sometimes it will be for you individually. I will also solicit feedback from you about how the course is going on multiple occasions, so I can improve the course and help you learn more effectively.

How I Grade

Grades are an admittedly imprecise attempt by me to measure the nature, quality, and progress of your learning. You should consider the course requirements listed below, therefore, as a means to provide me with *evidence of your learning* — that is, evidence of your acquisition of the knowledge and skills this course is meant to help you cultivate. I will attempt to measure your learning in two ways:

- (1) *grading for effort*, in which I evaluate your engagement with the course material through your attendance, participation, and completion of various assignments
- (2) *grading for mastery*, in which I evaluate how well you are able to meet the standards I set for various assignments.

I believe my role as a teacher is to set clear goals for you to meet, ensure those goals are challenging yet reasonable, and give you the tools and feedback you need to meet them. For this reason, I do not “grade on a curve,” or assign grades based on the performance of the class as a whole.

Grading Standards

I will award grades using the A-F scale outlined in the University of Minnesota's [Grading and Transcripts](#) policy. I will also award pluses and minuses, with the highest possible grade being an "A."

I will assign an "I" (Incomplete) only in extraordinary circumstances, such as hospitalization. An Incomplete requires a written agreement between us, and it will automatically become an "F" at the end of the next semester of your registration if you do not complete the course requirements by that time.

If you are taking this course using the S-N option, you must complete all the requirements, which will be graded using the A-F system. You must earn a "C-" or better to receive an "S" (Satisfactory). If you earn a "D+" or worse, you will receive an "N" (No Credit). If you wish to change from the A-F grading system to the S-N system, or vice-versa, you must do so within the first two weeks of the semester.

I assign grades in terms of a percentage of possible points according to the following standards:

	B+ >= 87%	C+ >= 77%	D+ >= 67%	
A >= 93%	B >= 83%	C >= 73%	D >= 63%	F < 63%
A- >= 90%	B- >= 80%	C- >= 70%		

I may choose to grade more generously, but I will not raise my standards above these.

Overall, I would say I am a "tough but fair" grader. ***I expect your work to be outstanding***, and the way to get an "A" is to meet those expectations in every respect. If at any time you have concerns about your grade, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Grades on Canvas

Although I will be posting grades on Canvas, please keep in mind that the "total" grade shown on the site throughout the semester may not be an accurate predictor of your "final" grade. This is because the "total" grade does not reflect your performance on the assignments and activities that will not be evaluated until the end of the semester, including your attendance and participation. Please consider this when using Canvas to see "how you are doing in the class."

Grades and Workload Expectations

According to the [Expected Time per Course Credit](#) policy, to achieve an average grade, an average student should expect to spend an average of nine hours per week on academic work (three hours in class and six hours out of class) to complete the work of this three-credit course. *Note, however, that course grades are based on the quality of the work submitted, not on hours of effort*

University Policies and Resources

What University policies and resources exist to help you succeed in this course?

Because the number of University policies and resources that apply to academic courses has become quite large, the English Department has compiled a [list of these](#) on its web site. These include important policies on:

- Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences
- Student Academic Integrity and Scholastic Dishonesty
- Student Conduct Code
- Equity, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action
- Sexual Harassment
- Disability Accommodations
- Mental Health and Stress Management
- Academic Freedom and Responsibility

These also include a wide range of resources to support your learning, such as the [Tutoring & Academic Success Center](#), [Student Writing Support](#), and [Student English Language Support](#). Please familiarize yourself with these policies and resources, which will help you succeed in this course.

Basic Needs Security Statement (adapted from Sara Goldrick-Rab)

Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, who lacks a safe and stable place to live, or who needs assistance receiving healthcare or paying their expenses, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to consult the [Basic Needs Directory](#) from the Office for Student Affairs. Furthermore, please notify me if you are comfortable doing so, so I can provide any resources I may possess.

Academic Freedom (from Alan Lightman's "The End of the Enlightenment?")

"Academic freedom ... is the freedom to express and debate ideas without fear of censorship or reprisal. It is the freedom to explore. It is the freedom to let the imagination wander. It is the freedom to exchange knowledge with colleagues and others. It is the freedom to question authority and received wisdom. It is the freedom to test ideas against experiment and to reject those ideas that fail the test. It is the freedom to be honest, even if that honesty challenges prevailing views. It is the freedom to be one's true self."

AI Policy

- *On Writing:* The rapid proliferation of AI tools has made it all but impossible for me to assign take-home writing, because I am no longer able to distinguish between *your* intelligence and artificial intelligence, thus undermining the validity of any grade I assign to your work. As a result, all of the writing for this course will occur in class. This is an imperfect solution to a pervasive problem, because take-home writing helps you practice critical-thinking skills (formulating, articulating, and revising your thoughts) to a degree that in-class writing cannot achieve. I believe what is gained in the reliability of my evaluation outweighs what is lost in the quality of your learning, but make no mistake: something substantial *is* being lost.
- *On Reading and Research:* As much as I can encourage you to read and think for yourself, I ultimately have no control over whether you use AI to summarize the readings or prepare drafts of your critical essays. Nevertheless, I share computer scientist Cal Newport's concerns about the perils of automating hard thought: "The life of the mind is critical to the human experience. It is why you come to a university, just like the entire purpose of a Navy SEAL boot camp is to get ready for the physical hardships of war. Academic institutions need to demonstrate that the life of the mind is hard and worth it. We need to think about cognitive fitness the way we think about physical fitness." (from "Is AI Making Us Stupid?")

Requirements**What will you be doing to pursue the goals of this course?**

To succeed in this course, you must complete the following requirements, which are worth a total of 1,000 possible points. For more information on this point system, see the section on grading.

Summary of Requirements

1. Attendance and Participation (100 points)
2. Reading Responses (200 points)
3. Critical Essays (600 points)
4. Creative Practice (75 points)
5. Learning Assessments (25 points)

1. Attendance and Participation (100 points)

Learning is social; it occurs in community. As a result, you will need to participate actively in this course on several levels, so that we can all work together to broaden our knowledge and deepen our skills.

Attendance: Your regular attendance is important, because we cannot learn from one another if you are not here. If you know in advance that you are going to be absent on a particular day, please let me know. I follow the University's policy on [Excused Absences and Makeup Work](#). ***Note that a pattern of unexcused absences is cause for a grade of "F" in the entire course, regardless of your performance on other assignments.***

Illness: If you experience [symptoms of COVID-19](#) or any potentially infectious respiratory illness, you should not come to class. Such an absence is an excused absence. Boynton Health offers [PCR testing for COVID-19](#). To make an appointment in the Gopher Quick Clinic or Urgent Care, call 612-625-3222.

Community Guidelines: Throughout the semester, we will get to know each other's ideas, personalities, and foibles—both in writing and in person. To make the most of our time together, therefore, I expect only the best of what you have to offer. Ideally, your mind, your courtesy, and your sense of humor should all be operating in top form. You should be eager to learn and grow, open to constructive criticism, and willing to help and collaborate with others. In return, I will always begin and end class on time, will place any course materials online as soon as possible, and will make myself available to answer your questions and discuss your concerns before and after class, whenever possible, in addition to by appointment.

Technology: You are welcome to use a laptop, tablet computer, or cell phone for course-related activities, but sometimes I will ask you to put away all technology to achieve our learning objectives. Please respect me and your fellow students by not using your devices for other purposes (such as non-course-related email, social media, web surfing, and texting). Disrespectful use of technology distracts you and me from the experience we are trying to have together. In particular, studies have shown that putting your cell phone away can increase your comprehension, lower your anxiety level, and foster your mindfulness. Because disrespectful use of technology interferes with learning, it is considered a violation of the Student Conduct Code.

Informal Assignments: As part of your attendance and participation score, I may also ask you to submit other kinds of writing, to work in teams and give informal presentations, and to connect with one or more classmates outside of class as needed.

Why Attendance and Participation Matter: Your regular attendance and active participation matter because this course is not just about acquiring knowledge; it is also about improving your ability to engage in public discourse. It is about helping you find your voice, showing that every voice matters, and practicing the skills of civic participation. This involves reading and listening carefully, interpreting what you have read or heard, and making your own contribution to an ongoing conversation. Your "participation grade," therefore, is my attempt to evaluate how committed you have been to actively engaging others, observing how other people (myself and your fellow students) engage one another, and receiving feedback about your own engagement.

Non-Verbal Participation: Because I recognize that some of your participation will occur in ways that may be difficult for me to judge—such as in small-group discussions, in conversations with one or more other students, and in other unstructured activities—I would also be happy to evaluate your non-verbal participation (or "active listening") by reviewing the notes you take in class. Although active listening cannot take the place of actively contributing to a learning community, it can be an indicator of the depth of your engagement. Please see me if you wish to take advantage of this option.

Grading Criteria: At the end of the semester, I will grade your participation according to the following scale:

- A: frequent and courteous participation, with mature and thoughtful insights
- B: above average participation and insight
- C: moderate participation and reasonable insight
- D: below average participation with little understanding of the issues
- F: little or no participation

To receive the full 100 points for attendance and participation, therefore, you should read the assigned texts carefully, attend the class meetings conscientiously, and participate actively in class discussions, small-group work, and other in-class assignments.

2. Reading Responses (200 points)

Roughly once a week, on either Tuesday or Thursday, I will ask you to respond to the reading for that day at the start of class. These reading responses are meant to:

- help you actively engage with the course material and thus improve your understanding and retention of our subject matter (that is, your learning)
- provide a means for me to know your interests, so I can tailor our class discussions accordingly
- allow students who may not feel comfortable speaking up in class the opportunity to formulate their thoughts in advance of our discussions

In my prompts for these responses, I might ask you to:

- explain why you agree or disagree with a reading
- describe something that confuses, surprises, or troubles you about the reading
- ask a question, and maybe even attempt to answer that question, about the reading
- react to new information you have learned from the reading
- compare one reading to another

Feedback and Grading: Although I will read these responses regularly, I will not be providing written feedback on individual entries. Instead, I will watch for trends in the length, number, timing, and quality of your responses throughout the semester, and I will let you know if you need to improve. ***Pro Tip: If it's not clear from your reading response whether or not you have actually read the text, you're probably not going into enough detail.***

Each reading response will be graded pass-fail and is worth 15 points (10 responses x 15 points = 150 points). There will be twelve responses throughout the semester, but I will drop your two lowest scores. At the end of the semester, I will award an additional grade of up to 50 points for overall merit, based on the following scale:

- A: substantial, detailed, and/or insightful engagement or analysis
- B: some engagement or analysis, perhaps with some summary
- C: mostly summary, with little engagement or analysis

Missed Responses: Because of the nature and purpose of these reading responses, missed responses cannot be made up. In keeping with the University's policy on [Excused Absences and Makeup Work](#), however, I will drop your two lowest scores, so that you can miss two responses with no impact on your grade.

Online Responses: Depending on the needs of the class, I may ask you to complete some of your Reading Responses online instead of in class. I will announce any changes to the schedule in advance of the due dates.

3. Critical Essays (600 points)

I will ask you to write three in-class papers about how the authors we are considering in our class address the themes of *attention* (Thoreau and Oliver), *indigeneity* (Wilson), and *dystopia* (Butler and Cuarón). Each paper will be worth 200 points. We will talk more about these papers in class, but in general an excellent critical essay:

- is focused, well organized, and clearly written
- demonstrates a rich, accurate, and insightful understanding of the course material
- defines terms, supports claims with evidence, and addresses opposing arguments as needed
- is original, interesting, and imaginative as needed

- credits the source of borrowed ideas and statements appropriately
- is free (or almost free) of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling

4. Creative Practices (75 points)

I call these assignments “practices” not because they are practice for some “real thing” that comes later (no more than college is practice for the “real world”), but because they embody two fundamental definitions of *practice*: (1) “the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it,” and (2) “repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). By completing these assignments, therefore, you are both developing your understanding of a genre by *practicing it* and developing your writing and thinking skills by *practicing them*. We will do three in-class exercises in nonfiction, poetry, and comic writing, each worth 25 points, and I will share with more information on all these assignments as they occur.

5. Learning Assessments (25 points)

Three smaller assignments (formatted as Canvas quizzes) help me understand how I can create the most effective environment to help you learn throughout our course:

a. Initial Assessment (5 points): At the beginning of our course, I will ask you five questions:

- how did you learn about the course, and why did you decide to take it?
- what are your fears and concerns (if any) about the course?
- what do you consider to be your strengths and weaknesses as a learner?
- what barriers (if any) to effective learning do you face this semester?
- anything else I should know?

b. Mid-semester Reflection (5 points): Halfway through the semester, I will ask you to complete a mid-semester reflection, evaluating the course, your participation in it, and anything you can do to improve your learning.

c. Self-evaluation (15 points): At the end of the semester, I will ask you to evaluate yourself again, as well as indicate what you have done to improve since mid-semester, and I will take this self-evaluation into account when assigning final grades.

Course Schedule

How is this course structured to develop your knowledge, understanding, and abilities throughout the semester?

This schedule is subject to change, so if you miss a class you should check with a classmate for the most current information. Readings, assignments, lecture notes, and handouts are all available on our Canvas site. All readings should be read before the class on the day they appear.

1. Paying Attention (Nonfiction & Poetry)

9/8	Week 1.1	Welcome
9/10	Week 1.2	Introductions to Our Subject and Each Other Read: Treuer, “I Went to Princeton in Search of Greatness and Came Back Mediocre”
9/15	Week 2.1	Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden; or, Life in the Woods</i> (1854) Read: “Economy” DUE: Initial Assessment

- 9/17 Week 2.2 Read: "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "Sounds," "Solitude,"
- 9/22 Week 3.1 Read: "The Bean-Field," "The Village," "The Ponds," "Baker Farm"
- 9/24 Week 3.2 Read: "Higher Laws," "Brute Neighbors," "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors"
- 9/29 Week 4.1 Read: "The Pond in Winter," "Spring," "Conclusion"
- 10/1 Week 4.2 **Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (Penguin, 2020)**
Read: from *Felicity* through *The Truro Bear*, pp. 1-97
- 10/6 Week 5.1 Read: from *Red Bird* through *Owls and Other Fantasies*, pp. 99-206
DUE: Mid-semester Reflection
- 10/8 Week 5.2 Read: from *What Do We Know?* through *New and Selected Poems*, pp. 207-310
Note: Monday, Oct. 12 is Indigenous Peoples' Day
- 10/13 Week 6.1 Read: from *House of Light* to the end, pp. 311-end
- 10/15 Week 6.2 **Paper #1: On Paying Attention: Thoreau and Oliver (in class)**

2. Seeding the Future I: Agriculture and Indigeneity (Fiction)

- 10/20 Week 7.1 **Diane Wilson, *The Seed Keeper: A Novel* (Milkweed, 2021)**
Read: opening, chapters 1-4, pp. 1-41
- 10/22 Week 7.2 Read: "dormancy: a seed dreams," chapters 5-12, pp. 43-143
- 10/27 Week 8.1 Read: "germination: a seed awakens," chapters 13-20, pp. 145-218
- 10/29 Week 8.2 Read: "pollination: and the Corn said know me," chapters 21-27, pp. 218-285
- 11/3 Week 9.1 Read: "wachékiye: the earth hears me," chapters 28-end, pp. 287-372 (*It's Election Day!*)
- 11/5 Week 9.2 **Paper #2: On Agriculture and Indigeneity: Wilson (in class)**

3. Seeding the Future II: Dystopian Visions (Graphic Novel & Film)

- 11/10 Week 10.1 **Damian Duffy (Adapter) and John Jennings (Illustrator), *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (Abrams, 2021)**
Read: Introduction and 2024, pp. iv-21
- 11/12 Week 10.2 Read: 2025, pp. 22-79
- 11/17 Week 11.1 Read: 2026, pp. 80-119
- 11/19 Week 11.2 Read: 2027, pp. 120-end

11/24	Week 12.1	Watch Alfonso Cuarón, <i>Children of Men</i> (2006)
11/26	Week 12.2	No class (Thanksgiving)
12/1	Week 13.1	Read: TBA
12/3	Week 13.2	Read: TBA
12/8	Week 14.1	Paper #3: On Dystopian Visions: Butler and Cuarón (in class)
12/10	Week 14.2	Last class
12/11	Fri	Self-evaluations due by 11:59 p.m.
12/30	Wed	Final grades due by 11:59 p.m.