

English 125-64: The Extramural Reading Project

Rafe Kinsey

Monday, September 9, 2013

To become good writers and thinkers, you need to read lots and lots of good writing. (After all, how can you be expected to write well if you haven't seen many models of good writing?) We'll do some amount of this in our classroom readings, but we won't have nearly enough time to cover as much reading as you should be doing to develop as writers. Therefore, I'm requiring you to do a certain amount of *extramural*¹ reading each week, in addition to the readings on the syllabus.

Goals of this Project

This project will:

- Show you many examples of clearly-written prose to model your own writing after, especially non-fiction articles that *explain, analyze* and *synthesize* ideas into arguments.
- Give you flexibility to pursue your interests.
- Expose you to a *variety* of writing styles.
- Allow you to enter the intellectual arena of ideas—and help you become comfortable reading in areas where you might not initially feel knowledgeable or at ease.
- Introduce you to a range of topics and ideologies, helping to *broaden* your intellectual perspective.
- Teach you to *discover* valuable and interesting sources of writing on your own,² while *evaluating* the reliability and quality of sources.
- Help you develop (if you don't have it already) a love and a passion for reading, beyond the instrumental requirements of a specific course.³
- Prepare you for future writing assignments in this course, by giving you sources to write about (see below).

The Reading

Each week, you should read *at least two hours*—you're welcome to read more!—of high-quality, serious writing outside of your assigned readings.⁴ What do I mean by "high-quality, serious writing"? I want you to be reading the sort of writing you should emulate⁵ in your

¹ Recall from the syllabus the definition of "extramural": (1) outside the walls or boundaries of a town, college, or institution; (2) additional to one's work or course of study and typically not connected with it. (From the Latin *extras muros* "outside the walls".) Compare this with "intramural" (as in intramural sports). All definitions throughout the semester will be from the *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

² You don't have to be literally "on your own"; most of what we discover, we discover from other people.

³ In particular, I hope this project is *fun* for many of you.

⁴ This includes both readings for this class *and* any readings for your other classes. It's great, of course, for you to be doing reading in your other classes—and you should definitely look at these as models of good writing—but the point of this assignment is for you to do *additional* reading.

⁵ *emulate*: (1) Match or surpass (a person or achievement), typically by imitation: *lesser men trying to emulate his greatness*. (2) imitate: *hers is not a hairstyle I wish to emulate*.

writings in college and beyond: clearly-written and carefully-edited prose about interesting and important ideas.

Rather than try to define this more precisely, let me instead give you some examples.

- The *New Yorker* magazine has some of the best general-interest writing, about everything under the sun. I can't think of a better source for you to start with.
- Some of the great newspapers of the world, like *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, have superb writing. I'd also recommend that you check out the *Economist*, a witty and charming British weekly that covers news, business, economics, science, and culture.
- *Slate* is a free online magazine with dozens of articles each day about a wide range of topics.⁶
- There are many other high-quality general-interest magazines, both in print and online, including *The Atlantic*, *Harpers*, *The New Republic*, *The American Scholar*, and *The New York Review of Books*.
- There are many well-written blogs with precisely this sort of writing—although of course there are many more that *don't* have high-quality writing, and have to be read with a grain of salt.⁷
- And, of course, there are *books*! Once again, you have to be aware of the quality of a book—romance novels or thrillers might be fun, but aren't the sort of writing we're looking for. Examples relevant to this class include Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (linguistics) and Nate Silver's *The Signal and the Noise* (statistics and elections).⁸ A good way of finding reputable authors and books is to see who is published and reviewed in the periodicals listed above.

You have tremendous freedom in choosing what to read, within these categories. There are a few guidelines I'd like you to follow:

- At least *one hour* a week should come from articles that involve *explanation*, *analysis* and *synthesis* of ideas into *arguments*. I'm requiring this because these articles are the best models for the type of writing you'll be expected to do in college. *Slate* is perhaps the best (but far from the only) source of examples in this category.⁹ For the other hour, you're welcome to choose more broadly among high-quality sources of writing that might not center around *analysis* of ideas, including news, fiction, exposition, profiles,¹⁰ and non-fictional books. (You're welcome, though, to spend all of your two hours on analytical articles.)

⁶ For those of you with any interest in economics or politics, I'd highly recommend that you read Matt Yglesias's blog on *Slate*.

⁷ One of my favorite bloggers is Andrew Sullivan, who writes about a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, religion, literature, sexuality, and science.

⁸ You're welcome—indeed, highly encouraged—to read great works of literature, but I want the majority of your reading to be non-fiction, since that will prepare you better for the writing tasks you will have in college and beyond.

⁹ The *New Yorker*, by contrast, tends to be more centered on *stories* and *profiles*, and the newspapers are more focused on reporting the news. Of course, there are exceptions: there are many *New Yorker* articles that do—explicitly or implicitly—make some sort of an argument, and newspapers have opinions sections where people are making arguments.

¹⁰ A *profile* is a newspaper or magazine article about a person. The *New Yorker* has many excellent profiles. For example, in the past week's issue, there's a really interesting profile of John Sexton, the president of NYU. If you're interested in higher education—for example, the rising price of tuition at universities like UM—you might want to read this.

- You should expose yourself to a *diverse* group of readings. Part of college is opening yourself up to new ideas. Yes, you definitely can and should read about your interests, but you should also push yourself to try new things. Over the course of the semester, in our correspondence about your readings, I might nudge you towards a broader variety of readings if I fear that you are reading too narrowly.¹¹
- You should read *high quality* writing. In particular, I want you to read writing that's been carefully edited, because I want you to be reading models for you to aspire to, rather than writing that would be a bad influence. The internet has been a tremendous boon¹² in many ways for good writing, providing unlimited space for writing in a wide range of venues. Unfortunately, the internet has also brought an overabundance of information, not all of it high-quality. Therefore, you have to take care to *evaluate* the quality of your source. As you browse and read, you should ask yourself whether what you're reading is the type of writing you want to model your own work after.

One useful heuristic¹³ for finding high-quality articles is to consider the publication. Almost nothing gets past the *New Yorker's* editors that isn't high-quality. Many publications, though, have writing of variable quality, so you'll have to evaluate on your own the quality of the writing.¹⁴ As we engage in a conversation about your reading over the semester, I'll try to nudge you towards good sources of writing.

Where to Find Sources

Being able to find useful and interesting things to read is an important skill. I'll help guide you over the semester, but I want you also to start learning to explore yourself. Here are a few resources; I've posted a more extensive list of interesting articles, books, publications, blogs, and resources online at

<http://english125.rafekinsey.com/extramural-reading/>

- The Library. This is a wonderful resource in so many ways:
 - The *periodicals collections* have copies of dozens of magazines and newspapers. There are many such periodicals rooms: on the first floor of Shapiro, on the second floor of Hatcher,¹⁵ at the Duderstadt in North Campus, in the Ross Business School Library, etc.¹⁶
 - In addition to the current periodicals, there are also old *bound volumes* of periodicals. If you go to Hatcher 1 East (it's a bit of

¹¹ In particular, you are *welcome* to read from books for your extramural reading, but I don't want your extramural reading to consist exclusively of the same book each week as you finish that book over a month or two. If there's a book that's really interesting, you can couple that book with, say, a series of short articles each week from *Slate*.

¹² *boon*: a thing that is helpful or beneficial. (From French *bon*, "good".)

¹³ The adjective *heuristic* means "enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves," from the Greek word for "find". It's also used as a noun: a *heuristic* is a process or method that is heuristic. Often, there's a sense of a heuristic not necessarily being a *perfect* solution, just being a good enough rule of thumb.

¹⁴ We'll think more about this when we talk about *rhetoric* in a few weeks.

¹⁵ The Shapiro collections are alphabetical; the Hatcher ones are a bit more confusing. Feel free to ask the librarians for help! For the Shapiro ones, if you lift up the shelves, you'll find even more back issues.

¹⁶ One gem is the *Hopwood Room* in 1176 Angel Hall. This room, run by the creative writing program, is open M-F 8.30am-4.30pm and has a great collection of periodicals. You might also check out the *Tanner Philosophy Library*, nearby in 1171 Angel Hall, for a charming place to study.

a maze—ask for help!) and look for the AP 2 and AP 4 shelves, you'll find the past 5-20 years of a variety of periodicals. There's nothing wrong with reading old issues!¹⁷

- The Shapiro *browsing collection* on the first floor has a variety of popular interest non-fiction books.
- The librarians in the libraries will be happy to offer you advice.
- You should also feel free just to *browse the stacks* to find books of interest. Obviously, certain areas of stacks might be more interesting than others.¹⁸ One useful trick is to find out the Library of Congress number of a book you've already enjoyed,¹⁹ and then go to that spot in the library to find similar books.
- You can find copies of older articles through electronic databases that the library subscribes to.²⁰ Ask a librarian for more info!
- Me. In our conversations, I'll offer suggestions for you, based on your interests. Feel free to ask!
- Your classmates. You are *definitely* encouraged to talk with your classmates about readings. Did you read an interesting article? Let your classmates know.
- Social Media. Do you have friends who share interesting articles on *Facebook*? (Or perhaps you use *Twitter*, *Tumblr*, or something else?)
- Bookstores. If you get a chance, take a look at *Dawn Treader Books* on Liberty (a block and a half from State Street) or the new *Literati Bookstore* on Washington (closer to Main Street). Ask the clerks for suggestions! You can also buy magazines at Literati.
- There are many websites that *curate* collections of interesting articles. For example, Andrew Sullivan's blog links to dozens of interesting articles a day. Other sites you might find useful are *Arts & Letters Daily*, *3 Quarks Daily*, *Longform.org* and *Brain Pickings*.²¹
- Many of the periodicals I've mentioned have websites with active blogs. For example, I'd encourage you to check out the *New Yorker*, *New Republic*, and *New York Times* websites.

With all the resources of the library and the internet, you certainly don't have to buy anything for this extramural reading project, but if there's a periodical you like, you might consider subscribing to it.²²

I'd also encourage you to experiment with reading in difficult physical media. It's fine if you do most of your reading online,²³ but try going to the library and reading a print edition, or printing out a copy. How does that change your reading? If you have a tablet, ebook reader, or a smartphone, does reading with that affect your

¹⁷ In addition to old *New Yorkers*, I'd encourage those of you with literary interests to check out the old editions of the *Paris Review*, which are shelved under AP 4. There are wonderful interviews with famous authors about their writing processes. You can also find some of these interviews online at the *Paris Review's* webpage.

¹⁸ In particular, you might find Shapiro a better place to start, since they have more general-interest books.

¹⁹ It's on the copyright page.

²⁰ You can also do this to get access to many subscription-only articles on certain periodicals. For example, you can read everything from the *New York Review of Books* through the library's proxy server. Google it, or ask me for more info.

²¹ On my blog, I do a bit of this, too; you can see some articles that I find interesting in the "interesting links" category of my blog, at rafekinsey.com/blog/category/interesting-links/.

²² Many—including the *Economist*—offer discounted student subscriptions.

²³ For this project, you are *not* required to print out everything you read.

reading? You might also experiment with “read-later” programs like *Instapaper*, *Getpocket.com* or *Readability*.

The Reading Response

Each week, after you’ve done your two hours of reading, you’ll send me an email about your reading. Take 10-30 minutes to reflect on your reading; the idea is to practice the crucial skills of summary, analysis, and evaluation. You should tell me what you read, giving me enough information to identify and easily find the works.²⁴ And then you should tell me a bit about what you read. You might choose to focus primarily on just one of your readings, or you might briefly discuss a few readings. (In either case, let me know all the readings you did.) Was there something interesting in what you read? Did you like it? Would you recommend the article to someone else? Did you disagree with it? Do you want to learn more? Did you notice something in particular about the author’s writing style? Some weeks, I might give you particular prompts to address.

As with the Intellectual Self-Description assignment, you should think about the appropriate level of formality. You should certainly proofread your emails, and you should write carefully; after all, I am your writing instructor.²⁵ But the idea is for this to be a relatively informal opportunity for you to think about your readings; certainly, I hope your tone will be conversational. I might (but won’t always) respond to your emails with questions, in which case you should reply; the whole conversation will be considered part of the assignment.

Length, Amount of Reading, Etc.

I want you to be guided by what you can honestly do in the time-frame provided: read how much you can read in two hours, and take 10-30 minutes to write a response.

Grading

The conversation we’ll undertake in these reading responses will be a substantial part of your 20% “shorter writings” grade. As with everything in the course, I’m looking for signs of intellectual engagement. Are you taking this project seriously and developing as a reader? Do your responses show that you’ve been thinking about the readings—and thinking about how to write about them? Is your writing clear and effective? I won’t grade your individual responses, but I’ll certainly include your reading responses as part of the midterm review. If for any reason your responses are substantially unsatisfactory before the midterm review, I’ll let you know.

²⁴ For example, you should include the author, the title, date, and the publication or publisher. If you read the article online, definitely give me the URL. (Indeed, even if you read it in print, sending the URL might help.) You *don’t* have to follow any specific source format; the idea is to relay the bibliographic information in a useful way for your reader, me.

²⁵ And you should think about various aspects of email etiquette and formatting. For example, you should make sure there are two linebreaks between paragraphs. (And you should **definitely** use paragraphs!) You might find it useful to use numbered lists, or bulleted lists; that’s fine, if it fits your needs.

Logistical Details

Your reading response email will be due *each Friday* by 8pm. I've chosen this time so that, at the end of a busy week, if you haven't had the time to read much Monday-Thursday you can relax on Friday afternoon and do a bit of reading before the weekend starts.²⁶

For your *first* reading response email, please send the email with the following subject: "English 125: Reading Response – [Your Name]". Please use your official *umich.edu* email address. For *following* weeks, please send your email as a *reply* to the same initial thread of conversations within GMail²⁷—this way we'll just have one gmail conversation over the course of the semester.²⁸

These responses will be due every week, starting this Friday, September 13, and continuing until Friday, December 13, not including Thanksgiving week.²⁹ Because sometimes you'll be too busy, I'll give you *three free weeks* when you don't have to do extramural reading: those weeks, just send me an email by the deadline saying that you're taking one of your bye weeks.

Connections to Future Writing Assignments

I want to highlight three future writing assignments which you might want to keep in mind as you do your extramural reading. You are welcome and encouraged to take articles from your extramural readings and use them for these assignments.

- In late September/early October, you'll write a summary of an article making an argument. You can definitely choose one of the articles you've read for this project, if it fits the criteria for the assignment. In your reading responses, you'll be practicing the summarizing skills you'll use for that assignment.
- In late October, you'll write a paper pointing out a *logical flaw* or *fallacy* in an article you've read somewhere. For that assignment, you're strongly encouraged to find your own article, so pay attention if you read an article somewhere that seems somehow wrong.
- For your final project, you're going to write about an application of mathematical thinking to an area that interests you—be it music theory, economics, linguistics, politics, sports, computer science, etc. It's a great idea to do some of your extramural reading exploring potential topics.

²⁶ If this timing doesn't work well for you, let me know and we can arrange a different weekly due date for you on an *ad hoc* basis.

²⁷ I'm assuming you are using GMail for your *umich.edu* email. If you're using another program, just make sure to reply to the initial email you sent, and make sure not to change the subject.

²⁸ **Please follow these instructions.** I'm relatively laid-back—I'm not going to fail you if you don't type the subject correctly—but you'll find in college and in the real world that people will judge you if you can't follow their instructions carefully.

²⁹ You're welcome to use Thanksgiving to make up a week that you missed.