



Writing about Novels

ENG 6824 | Fall 2023
Professor: Roger Maioli

Section 8RM1 | Class Number 23436

Instructor: Roger Maioli (rogermaioli@gmail.com)

Meeting times: Wednesdays, Periods 9–11 (4:05–7:05 PM) | Office hours: Mondays, 2–4 PM

Zoom link:

Course description

At around 2013, the editor of a prestigious journal in American literature told me and a group of fellow graduate students: “Brilliant readings are a dime a dozen. If you have a brilliant reading of a novel, keep it. I have no need for it.” This was more than a quip. He was revealing to us a hidden rule of academic publishing: that in order to get published, it is not enough for an essay to be good. It also needs to follow certain formal procedures, engage in appropriate ways with the secondary scholarship, demonstrate its relevance given the current state the field, and be directed at the right journal.

This seminar will help you understand and follow these unwritten rules of academic publishing, with a focus on writing about novels. We will begin the semester by reading selected works by Aphra Behn and Jane Austen, and we will focus on essential reading skills such as finding an interpretive problem, locating textual evidence and counter-evidence, identifying relevant secondary scholarship, and defining where your reading fits within current debates in the field. Having practiced reading, we will then practice writing. You will be producing and workshopping short and long writing assignments that will help you structure your paper within the conventions expected by academic journals. Later in the semester you will be focusing on a novel of your choice (not to exceed 400 pages). I will work with you on developing your reading, and at the end of the semester you should have a robust draft. I will be giving you extensive feedback on how to enrich that draft prior to finally submitting it to a journal.

Readings

In addition to a range of secondary sources, which we will be finding together on online databases or through the library, we will be reading a total of five novels: Aphra Behn's *The History of the Nun* (1689) and *Oroonoko* (1688); Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813); one novel of your choice; and one novel chosen by one of your colleagues. Please purchase the Behn and the Austen in the editions below so we all have the same pagination:

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Writing*, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford: OUP, 1994).
ISBN: 9780199538768.

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: OUP, 2019).
ISBN: 9780198826736.

Course schedule

Introduction

Aug 23: Introduction.

Activity: Read Edward Said's "Jane Austen and Empire" and Patrick Fessenbecker's "In Defense of Paraphrase." You will be receiving them via email as PDF attachments.

In addition, start thinking of a potential novel to write your final paper on. Prioritize novels you may want to write about for your dissertation. You don't need to have read them before, as I'm building time into the semester for you to do that. Just keep your candidates below 400 pages. Your decision will be due on **October 4**.

Unit 1: Reading for evidence

Aug 30: Read Aphra Behn's *The History of the Nun*.

Activity: You will be given a prompt defining a topic and formulating a question about the novel. As you read the novel, take note of **all** passages that seem relevant for addressing that question. Those passages are your **evidence**.

Writing assignment: In a word document, copy the relevant passages and write comments explaining in what ways they serve as evidence for answering the prompt's question. If they seem relevant, you should also write comments on broader plot developments that are not necessarily captured in

quotable passages. The resulting document may be anywhere between four and eight pages. Email me your notes and make sure you have them easily available for reference in class.

Sep 6: Read everyone's notes on *The History of the Nun*, plus two presentation papers.

Activity: I will compile everyone's notes and recirculate them as a single document. In reading this document, you will probably see textual evidence that you missed but others found; you may also find that your colleagues interpreted crucial passages differently than you did. Consider how the new textual evidence and these differences in interpretation bear on your reading of the novel. This will help you sharpen your views on the novel and respond to the two presentations we will be seeing in class.

Writing assignment: Two of you (according to a schedule to be determined) will give short presentation papers (1,000-1,600 words) answering the original prompt. The papers must be circulated by **10 PM of September 5**.

Unit 2: Finding and addressing interpretive problems

Sep 13: Read Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*.

Activity: This time, instead of receiving a prompt with a question, you will create that prompt yourself. Your main task will be to identify what we will be calling an **interpretive problem**. You should also start thinking of how to address that problem, but this week we will focus on problems rather than on answers. Our class discussion, in other words, will focus on the challenges that *Oroonoko* poses for its interpreters.

Writing assignment: In 300-600 words, explain, with appropriate quotations, your interpretive problem. I will create a Canvas thread where you should post your prompt **by 10 AM of September 13**. You will be given detailed instructions on how to do this. We will discuss everyone's interpretive problems in class.

Sep 20: Read two articles on *Oroonoko* (to be defined), plus two presentation papers.

Activity: I will choose two of the interpretive problems you identified and ask you to read two articles, one related to each problem. Your job is to consider whether these articles satisfactorily address the problem. Do they address the textual evidence in ways that seem persuasive to you? Are there relevant passages or developments that they lose sight of?

Writing assignment: Two of you will give short presentation papers (1,400-1,800 words) addressing an interpretive problem in conversation with the relevant article. The papers must be circulated by **10 PM of Sep 19** so everyone will get a chance to read them in advance.

Unit 3: Engaging with the existing scholarship

Sep 27: Read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Activity: Read the novel in the same way we've read our earlier texts: look for interpretive problems and identify passages that seem relevant for addressing those problems.

Writing assignment: In 300-600 words, identify an interpretive problem in *Pride and Prejudice*. This will be due on Canvas by **10 AM of September 27**.

Oct 4: Read three articles on *Pride and Prejudice*.

Activity: Your first task this week is to decide **which novel** you would like to write your final paper on. Let me know in person by the end of class.

In addition to that, you will have received instructions on how to search for scholarship on Austen. Each of you will create a list of six sources and post it to Canvas **by noon of Friday, September 29**. Out of that list, I will choose three articles which we will read for class. We will be reading these articles for both **content** and **form**. During class discussion I will invite you to summarize the arguments, discuss their merits and shortcomings, explain what seems compelling or unconvincing to you and why, and consider how the authors structure their arguments — especially in the opening pages.

Oct 11: Start reading your chosen novel. Read two more articles on *Pride and Prejudice* and write an introduction to a paper.

Activity: Start reading the novel you intend to write your final paper on. Read it slowly, with an eye on interpretive problems as well as relevant textual evidence. I will ask you to send me, by **October 23**, a one-page plot summary with a brief indication of the themes that matter to you.

Writing assignment: In 900-1,200 words, write an introduction to a hypothetical paper on *Pride and Prejudice*. The introduction must identify an interpretive problem, survey what the existing scholarship has had to say on that problem, and briefly indicate how you would intervene in that debate. Use the three articles we read in class plus two additional articles of your own choice. Either one or two of you will be presenting your introductions in class. They must be circulated by **10 PM of October 10**.

Oct 18: Read two presentation papers and the remaining sections of your chosen novel.

Activity: Finish reading the novel you intend to write your final paper on.

Writing assignment: Two of you will give presentation papers on *Pride and Prejudice*. Papers should be 1,400 to 2,000 words and begin with a revised version of the introduction you wrote last week. The papers must be circulated by **10 PM of October 17**.

Unit 4: Writing about a novel

Oct 25: Start reading someone else's chosen novel and write a summary of your novel. In addition, start looking for secondary sources.

Activity: Start reading a novel chosen by a colleague (to be defined). You will be that colleague's main interlocutor as they develop their own project. Someone else will be reading your chosen novel as well, to serve as your main interlocutor.

Writing assignment: Write and email me, **by October 23**, a plot summary of your chosen novel, with brief remarks on the themes that matter for you. Keep the plot summary and your remarks each to 300 words. On October 27 we will meet individually for 25 minutes to discuss potential interpretive problems. I will have read your plot summary, but I may be unfamiliar with your novel otherwise.

In addition, by **October 25**, send me a list of ten potential secondary sources on your novel. You don't need to have read them yet.

Finally, please give your interlocutor a sense of the themes you intend to explore, so they can keep those themes in mind as they read your chosen novel. Just avoid giving them spoilers, as we all want to have fun.

Nov 1: During this week you should finish reading your colleague's chosen novel and start reading the secondary sources on your novel. Write a short description of your interpretive problem.

Activity: Today we are meeting as a trio — you, me, and your main interlocutor. You will fill us in on your evolving ideas and I will invite your interlocutor to weigh in.

Writing assignment: In 300-600 words, define your interpretive problem. Email it to me and to your interlocutor by **noon of October 31**, so we will have time to read and think about it. Since you are someone else's interlocutor, you will also be receiving and reading a similar document.

Nov 8: Finish reading the ten secondary sources on your novel. Write a tentative introduction to your final paper.

Activity: This week we are meeting again as a trio to discuss your ideas as they have evolved. But now we will also discuss your position towards the existing scholarship on your novel or topic.

Writing assignment: In 800-1,100 words, write a tentative introduction to your final paper, in which you identify your topic, survey the existing scholarship on that topic, and take a stance towards it. Submit it to me and to your interlocutor by **noon of November 7**.

Nov 15: We will be meeting on this day to talk about how to write the central sections of your paper, which you will be in the process of writing. You will have received advice on this, and we will work as a group to address questions you may have. The writing assignment below is due later this week.

Writing assignment: Write a 3,000–4,500-word draft of your paper. This is considerably shorter than the actual paper will be, but the purpose is to rehearse the steps in your argument. You will be able to expand later on after receiving feedback from both your interlocutor and me. This draft must begin with a proper introduction. You will be sending it to us via email **by the end of November 17** (two days after our usual class meeting).

Nov 22: *No class meeting: Thanksgiving.* Respond to your interlocutor's draft and start re-reading your novel.

Activity: Re-read your novel over this week and the next. You will see it with different eyes now that you are engaged in a conversation with other scholars.

Writing assignment: Having received your interlocutor's draft on November 17, read it and write a report on it. I will give you a sample report to give you a sense of what it should look like. You will be sending your report only to me by the end of **November 20**. Please be timely, as I will need to read everyone's drafts and provide additional comments in the next few days.

Nov 29: Finish re-reading your novel and read (1) my comments both on your draft and on the draft you reviewed, and (2) one article for class.

Activity: This is our last general meeting. We will get together as a group one last time to take stock of what we've accomplished and do two additional things. The first will be one last round of conversation between authors and interlocutors, in which you will discuss your plans for addressing the comments you received. Secondly, we will discuss a sample article you will have read for class and talk about how that article addresses some of the challenges involved in writing the body of an essay — especially how to incorporate criticism and how to subordinate your close reading to the needs of your argument.

Dec 6: No class meeting. Work on your final paper. This will involve reading more extensively in the secondary literature.

Dec 17: Final paper due.

Assignments

You will be receiving detailed instructions on each of your writing assignments. But here are the general guidelines for the two main assignments — presentation papers and your final paper.

Presentation papers

Format: Word document, double spaced (no PDFs please)

Length: Varies depending on assignment

Font: Times New Roman size 12, double-spaced

Deadlines: According to a schedule to be determined

Each of you will write, circulate via email, and read in class one short presentation paper on one of our primary sources, sometimes engaging with secondary sources as well. Your presentation will be followed by a question and answer (Q&A) session. I will create a schedule in consultation with you after our first class meeting.

The final paper

Format: Word document, double spaced (no PDFs please)

Length: 6,000–8,000 words

Deadline: December 17

Font and documentation: Follow the guidelines style recommended by the journal/magazine you are working with.

You will be writing your final paper *as if* you were submitting it to the journal/magazine of your choice. For that reason, write it following their style guidelines. Academic articles are usually longer than the length limit for this paper, but you will find it easier and more productive to stick to 6,000–8,000 words at this stage. I will give you feedback on your paper, and if you decide to revise it and eventually submit it for publication, you will find it convenient to have that extra space at your disposal.

Two things to keep in mind:

- Your paper must have a title. A good title should indicate your topic as well as the source or author you are writing about.
- Submit a cover sheet including a short abstract of the paper and identifying the journal/magazine you are hypothetically submitting it to.

Grading policy

Getting a good grade is important for you, and for that reason I will not assign grades to individual assignments. This will allow you to try and experiment with topics and approaches without worrying about how a specific weekly post or presentation paper will affect your grade in the long run. Instead, you will receive a grade based on your overall work for the course.

Additional Course Policy

In-class recording: Students are allowed to record video or audio of class lectures. However, the purposes for which these recordings may be used are strictly controlled. The only allowable purposes are (1) for personal educational use, (2) in connection with a complaint to the university, or (3) as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. All other purposes are prohibited. Specifically, students may not publish recorded lectures without the written consent of the instructor. To “publish” means to share, transmit, circulate, distribute, or provide access to a recording, regardless of format or medium, to another person (or persons), including but not limited to another student within the same class section. Additionally, a recording, or transcript of a recording, is considered published if it is posted on or uploaded to, in whole or in part, any media platform, including but not limited to social media, book, magazine, newspaper, leaflet, or third-party note/tutoring services. **A student who publishes a recording without written consent may be subject to a civil cause of action** instituted by a person injured by the publication and/or discipline under UF Regulation 4.040 Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code.

Plagiarism: All written assignments should be your own work. Plagiarizing the work of others (by copying printed or online sources without acknowledgement) is illegal, and you may fail the course if you plagiarize. If you have questions about how to document your sources, or if you want to make sure you are not committing plagiarism without realizing it, please ask me.

Special accommodations: Students with disabilities are encouraged to register with the Office of Student Service in order to determine appropriate accommodation. I will be pleased to provide accommodation, but students are responsible for notifying me at the beginning of the semester.

Counseling and Mental Health Resources: Students facing difficulties completing the course or who are in need of counseling or urgent help should call the on-campus Counseling and Wellness Center.

Sexual Assault and Harassment: Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender are civil rights offenses subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, etc. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you can find the appropriate resources here:

http://www.ufsa.ufl.edu/faculty_staff/fees_resources_policies/addressing_sexual_misconduct/reporting_sexual_misconduct/

UF Online Course Evaluation Policy: Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last 2-3 weeks of the semester. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.