Literature and Place: Narrating Climate Change

Dr. Everett Hamner  
Western Illinois University, Fall 2018, Thursdays 5:30-8  
ENG 532: Q01 (Quad Cities Complex 2216), westernonline.wiu.edu  
Office hours M 10-12, W 10-11, Th 4-5 in QCC 2209  
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General Catalog Description & Prerequisites

The study of the works of one writer or a group of writers in terms of various geographies, political and otherwise.

Specific Description & Goals

This course considers emerging directions in very recent US literature as it engages pressing questions about anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change. Moving through three novels, a provocative film, a wide array of ecocriticism, a work of nonfiction journalism, and one text to be selected together, we will ask how and why *homo sapiens* is collectively destroying its habitat and that of other species. More critically, we will pursue solutions, asking how the cultural narratives we spread can cultivate them.

The course’s first half will be the most weighty in terms of pages read and the science, history, and fiction we cover. In this phase, I will provide relatively extensive background information via lecture while we ponder two of the most widely celebrated climate change novels to date, Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017), and study a very demanding and provocative film, Darren Aronofsky’s *mother!* (2017). Not coincidentally, these texts represent some of the greatest strengths of three major (if sometimes overlapping) subcategories of current climate fiction: realism, utopianism/solarpunk, and apocalyptic.

After pausing at the midpoint to survey a rapidly expanding body of criticism about climate literature, we will further nuance our thinking by introducing the possibilities of climate metafiction and climate nonfiction. In Richard Powers’s stunning interlacing of the lives of trees and humans, *The Overstory* (2018), we will ponder the “long and prepared accident” by which cross-species attentiveness and other forms of wisdom can become tangible. With Elizabeth Rush’s *Rising* (2018), we will step out of fiction entirely, partially in order to better understand what narrative of any sort can and cannot do.

Following a final text (to be chosen collectively), the course will reach its climax as students finish seminar papers that connect its material to areas of personal interest. Students’ first priority should be to wrestle with each of our shared texts and to gain a solid grasp of critical insights emerging around this new literary category. Ultimately, though, the semester’s most significant outcome will be these
individual projects. Considerable time will be dedicated to their gradual evolution, and students should begin that process as soon as potential foci become apparent.
## Meeting, Reading/Viewing, & Assignment Schedule

### PLEASE NOTE:
~“READING,” “VIEWING,” or “WRITING” = watch, read, or complete in full BEFORE class
~“IN CLASS” = no preparation required

### Part One: Before 2018

#### 1st WEEK, AUG 23rd: WARMUP

**IN CLASS:**
- Local TV piece on climate change [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vgta3mXSeQ&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vgta3mXSeQ&feature=youtu.be)
- Sampling of “Global Weirding” episodes [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCi6RkdaEqrRVK3AriyF4ow/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCi6RkdaEqrRVK3AriyF4ow/videos)
- Syllabus review, discussion of goals and assignments, and introductions

#### 2nd WEEK, AUG 30th: CLIMATE REALISM & THE SCIENTIFIC BASICS

**READING:**

**IN CLASS:**
- A climate science primer

#### 3rd WEEK, SEP 6th: THE FORCES BEHIND CLIMATE CHANGE DENIALISM

**READING:**
- Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, ch. 9-14 (pp. 215-433)

**IN CLASS:**
- A history of the climate wars

#### 4th WEEK, SEP 13th: CLIMATE APOCALYPTIC

**VIEWING:**
- *mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, dir., 2017; watch in advance)

**WRITING:**
- Reflection due on W.O. under “Assignments” by 4 p.m. on 10/4

**IN CLASS:**
- My “nearly carbon-neutral” presentation this summer [http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?p=17664](http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?p=17664)
- The significance of genre

#### 5th WEEK, SEP 20th: CLIMATE UTOPIANISM, SOLARPUNK, & ANGRY OPTIMISM

**READING:**

**IN CLASS:**
- Robinson, “Rethinking our Relationship to the Biosphere” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=489loZlepM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=489loZlepM)

#### 6th WEEK, SEP 27th: FROM SUNK COSTS TO PRICELESSNESS
### Reading

**7th & 8th Weeks, Oct 4th & 11th: Climate Crit & Theory**

**Reading:**
- ONE per student (see “Annotation & Discussion Facilitation” on p. 8 below:
  - Lindsay Thomas, “Forms of Duration: Preparedness, the Mars Trilogy, and the Management of Climate Change.” *American Literature* 88.1 (March 2016): 159-84.

**Writing:**
- Annotation due on W.O. under “Discussions” by 4 p.m. on 10/4

**In Class:**
- Student-led surveys of key claims & insights by selected critics: what is most helpful?
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Oct 18th</td>
<td>Climate Metafiction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>READING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Richard Powers, <em>The Overstory</em> (2018), part 1, “Roots” (pp. 1-152)</td>
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<td><strong>WRITING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Paper, Step 1: an initial, very rough mess of brainstorming about what texts &amp; questions interest you most and about final project possibilities (500+ words), due on W.O. under “Discussions” by 4 p.m. Th 10/18</td>
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<td><strong>IN CLASS</strong>:</td>
<td>~My LARB conversation with Powers this spring: <a href="https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/heres-to-unsuicide-an-interview-with-richard-powers/">https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/heres-to-unsuicide-an-interview-with-richard-powers/</a></td>
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F-Sa 10/19-20: 15th Annual EGO / ΣΤΔ Conference: Thriving (or Living) in a Digital World (Macomb)

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<th>10th</th>
<th>Oct 25th</th>
<th>What’s Crazier?</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>READING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Powers, <em>Overstory</em>, part 2, “Trunk” (pp. 153-352)</td>
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<td><strong>WRITING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Paper, Step 2: Polished Prospectus. A much sharper prospectus for the course’s final paper that (a) describes key texts and questions, (b) offers a tentative thesis and presents examples of the kinds of evidence that might support it, and (c) lists at least 5 secondary non-course texts that you may engage (500+ words), due online by 4 p.m. Th 10/25</td>
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<td><strong>IN CLASS</strong>:</td>
<td>~Pitching your paper to a fellow student: what might be at stake?</td>
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<th>11th</th>
<th>Nov 1st</th>
<th>Unsuicide</th>
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<td><strong>READING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Powers, <em>Overstory</em>, parts 3-4, “Crown” &amp; “Seeds” (pp. 353-502)</td>
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<td><strong>IN CLASS</strong>:</td>
<td>~Powers &amp; the future of climate fiction</td>
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<th>12th</th>
<th>Nov 8th</th>
<th>Climate Nonfiction</th>
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<td><strong>WRITING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Paper, Step 3: Half Draft. 1500+ words of rough draft, due online by 4 p.m. Th 11/8</td>
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<td><strong>IN CLASS</strong>:</td>
<td>~Clips, <em>Beasts of the Southern Wild</em> (2012) ~Finalize group decision on weeks 14-15 text</td>
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<th>13th</th>
<th>Nov 15th</th>
<th>The Radical Idea of Retreat</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>READING</strong>:</td>
<td>~Rush, <em>Rising</em> (pp. 136-261)</td>
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WRITING: ~Paper, Step 4: Short Annotations. Three 250-word annotations for selected works of theory and/or criticism that your final paper may engage (aim for roughly 1/3 summary and 2/3 analysis), due online by 4 p.m. Th 11/15

IN CLASS: ~Sharing of most useful recent theoretical and critical finds

TH 11/22: NO CLASS (THANKSGIVING BREAK)

14th WEEK, NOV 29th: TBD

READING: ~TBD

WRITING: ~Paper, Step 5: full-length (3000+ words) draft due online by 4 p.m. Th 11/29

IN CLASS: ~Paper workshopping

15th WEEK, DEC 6th: MINI CONFERENCE

READING: ~TBD

IN CLASS: ~Paper, Step 6: Mini Conference Presentations

FINALS WEEK, DEC 13th: WHAT'S NEXT

WRITING: ~Paper: final version due online under “Assignments” by Th 12/13

IN CLASS: ~Looking ahead to spring coursework and beyond

Texts for Purchase

PLEASE NOTE:
*Prices below are rounded from recent amazon.com new prices — that site has free 2-day shipping for students. In many cases, used copies can be purchased less expensively (also try bookfinder.com).
*I am happy for students to use complete electronic versions of texts so long as they use appropriate citation methods when writing papers and can accept occasional challenges in finding a given passage.

• *mother!* (no need to buy film: 7 DVD & 2 blu-ray copies available via RiverShare public library system; available to stream via Amazon, YouTube, Google, iTunes, etc.)
• One additional text chosen collectively

![Photo by Kristi McCluer, Oregon, 2017]

**Additional Recommendations**

**FICTION**
Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993; Seven Stories, 1998.


**FEATURE FILMS & DOCUMENTARIES**

*A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

*Arrival* (2016)

*Avatar* (2009)

*Blade Runner 2049* (2017)


*Disruption* (2014)

*First Reformed* (2017)

*Geostorm* (2017)


*Merchants of Doubt* (2014)

*Noah* (2014)

*Snowpiercer* (2013)

*Tree of Life* (2011)

*Years of Living Dangerously* (2014, 2016)

**GRAPHIC NARRATIVE**


Kate Evans, *Weird Weather: Everything You Didn’t Want to Know about Climate Change but Should Probably Find Out* (2006)


**ADDITIONAL 21c HISTORY, THEORY, & CRITICISM**


Johns-Putra, Adeline. “‘My Job Is to Take Care of You’: Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road.*” *Modern Fiction Studies* 62.3 (Fall 2016): 519-40.


**Grading Criteria**

I will figure final grades using the university scale (A, B, C, D, or F, with pluses/minuses) and the values below (with minor adjustments as needed). Please note the “My Grades” function on the course website, which lets you track assignment grades and estimate your current overall grade at any point.

- 10% Reflection (Week 4)
- 10% Annotation & Discussion Facilitation (Week 7-8)
- 5% Paper Step 2: Polished Prospectus (Week 10)
- 5% Paper Step 4: Three Short Annotations (Week 13)
- 20% Paper Step 6: Mini Conference Presentation (Week 15)
- 50% Final seminar paper

**Brief Look at Main Assignments**

**Reflection:** How, when, and why has your response to climate change changed? After several weeks together and considerable lecture material from me, I want us to step back and ponder our own stories in this area a little. I can’t be the only one whose response to this problem has changed over time, but whether your tale goes back many years or only a few weeks, I want you to get specific about what has shaped your emotional and intellectual responses most fully. Moreover, I want you to probe why that occurred. Consider engaging sub-questions like any of the following: (a) What does/did climate change really mean to you in physical, tangible terms? (b) How did the human sources from which you learned about climate change matter to your response? (c) What impact did different rhetorical and/or literary genres/approaches have in shaping your response? (d) How much does/did your response involve, stem from, or produce feelings of betrayal, confrontation, anger, or despair? What about solidarity, encouragement, hopefulness, or determination? (e) What might matter most for you going forward in shaping your words and actions concerning this topic?

**Annotation and Discussion Facilitation:** Before week 7’s meeting, you will submit before class (by 4 p.m.) an “annotation” of a secondary text, then take the lead in generating class discussion about it on either week 7 or 8. Sign up on the website under “Discussions” for your preferred text asap (first come, first serve). Your job is then to write a very tight, carefully edited 400-500-word annotation (due in the same spot under “Discussions” before the class in question) that (a) spends roughly a third of its space very specifically summarizing the article or chapter’s argument (in your own words as much as possible); (b) uses nearly two-thirds of the space responding to and evaluating that argument (Where is it most illuminating? How might we apply its insights to various texts we’ve engaged?); and (c)
concludes by offering 3-5 multi-sentence, evocative, *open-ended* questions that it has raised for you. One or more of these will likely prove fodder for group discussion when you present the text, which should involve *talking through* your annotation rather than simply reading it verbatim.

**Seminar paper:** An extensively revised and carefully polished 3000+ word (12+ pp.) argumentative research paper that grows out of our course materials and conversations. While very open to discussing a wide range of proposals, I will require the following elements be included in each paper: (a) at least one page of close reading/analysis of at least one primary text; (b) at least one page of argument about a specific question related to climate change, environmental justice, etc. that we discussed during the semester; (c) specific engagement with at least two secondary texts from within the course and at least four secondary texts from outside the course.

The Seminar Paper will unfold gradually across the course’s second half, in which the reading load lightens as we move closer to finals week. Starting with week 9, there are separate due dates for various elements that build toward the final version. Please note that *these are not optional* and that several are individually graded, with late completion costing 1/3 of a grade per week. I will be firm about this because it’s *critical* for good writers to learn the practice of meeting intermediate deadlines; I am yet to meet a strong professional writer who has not developed this ability. For the same reason, we will also hold a mini-conference in which you’ll present abbreviated versions of your final papers. Learning to put your best foot forward in such contexts is something that can only improve with practice.

I strongly encourage you to make this project serve your larger interests and to strategize throughout the semester’s first half about how your individual passions might be related to some element of the course. The sooner you begin tossing around a proposal with me, the more time there will be for it to cook, and we all know that’s how you bring out the juiciest flavors.

Final version grading breakdown: 1/3 for the non-obviousness and sophistication of your argument itself; 1/3 for the depth, extent, and organization of the evidence you present; and 1/3 for your paper’s mechanical and stylistic polish.

*Slow change: wind and solar farms seen out the window, somewhere in the high desert of the northwestern U.S., summer 2018*
My Teaching Philosophy and Expectations of Students

The better we understand each other’s expectations, the more quickly we can develop a good working relationship. Here are a few key elements of my teaching philosophy:

~I want students to engage me and each other authentically and maturely. I hope this course will spark your curiosity in many ways, and that happens best when students honestly and tactfully share reactions to controversial topics. I intentionally raise such issues because a public university classroom is a uniquely valuable setting in which to explore and learn from frank, respectful disagreement. I aim for us to develop a classroom community that everyone appreciates and that extends beyond its walls. In these conversations, I aim to make room for all and to dignify every perspective insofar as possible; at the same time, I will not pretend complete neutrality is possible or even desirable, and there are times when it is my job to emphasize facts and offer insights that emerge from relative expertise.

~Just as critically, I expect students to be professionally responsible. You should approach this course as you might a challenging, rewarding job, one with tasks that are yours alone. I well understand that it is very hard to balance multiple classes, paid work, childrearing, and other responsibilities, but my roles include challenging you beyond your comfort zone and honestly assessing your academic work (not your value as a human being). Having a good sense of how your work stacks up, both in terms of strengths and weaknesses, is critical for your future decisions. Do your best to remember: a grade is only a snapshot of semester, and it takes a lot of these together to even begin to illustrate your abilities; in fact, your entire college/grad school GPA will never convey those as fully as the recommendation letters you enable professors to write about you.

~While we will be studying fields in which I am very experienced, I approach this class as a learner, too. Wisdom is not just knowledge, but humility, a deepening awareness of how much one does not know. I spent over a decade earning my graduate degrees not to be a guru, but to be in a position to empower others. You show you are ready for that with your simultaneous investment. In short, what you get out of this course will be closely tied to what you put into it, during and beyond class meetings.

Attendance & Participation

My courses differ substantially from those requiring regurgitation of memorized information. Our goals include learning new interpretive approaches, understanding diverse people and ideas, expanding critical thinking and creativity, strengthening analytical and writing skills, and learning from each other’s unique backgrounds. Thus preparation for each session, regular on-time attendance, and thoughtful discussion participation are crucial. Except in extreme circumstances, each class missed beyond 3 (with tardiness or early departure counting as ½ class) will automatically lower the final mark by 1/3 grade (e.g. missing 4 classes changes a B to a B-). Extensive absences will result in an “F” for the course.

Classroom Courtesies

Please excuse yourself when necessary; transitions are the best times. Please mute cell phones and other potential distractions; obviously, laptops and electronics should not be used during in-class quizzes. Finally, please wait to put away materials until we call it a day; I will respect your schedules as well.
Communication

While there are occasional errors, I do my best to build a trustworthy syllabus that won’t need major adjustments. Please read it thoroughly and consult it before asking questions. Also, keep in mind that unless you expect to be gone for multiple class meetings in a row, I don’t need to know about illnesses, transportation problems, work conflicts, or the other ordinary challenges. When you have a question not addressed on the syllabus or in class, please ask after class or in office hours. If that isn’t possible, email is the next best option (far faster than voicemail). My goal is to respond within 2 business days, but if the answer would require more than a sentence or two, I may ask to talk in person. Finally, be aware that I do use email to make class announcements, so ensure I have an address you check daily.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Q. Can I make up the quiz I missed?
   A. Yes – but only within the next week (whether in office hours, during the next class meeting’s break, or immediately afterward). Also, I only offer this opportunity once per semester, barring extreme circumstances (which do not include having to work, car breakdowns, deaths in friends’ families, etc.).

2. Q. Can you tell me what I missed in class?
   A. Not really; the experience of most of our conversations and even my presentations will be difficult to replicate in other forms. However, I can say that almost every week, I hand out some form of discussion notes, and I post these on the website (under “Content”) soon thereafter, if not beforehand.

3. Q. What should I write about?
   A. What do you care about? What has grabbed you and evoked some sort of emotional response, whether positive, negative, or in some combination? I regularly encourage students to engage texts and questions that have significant personal resonance; most people do their best work when it means more than a grade. If you’re having a hard time getting at what you care about, seek out conversation – not just with me and peers, but also with family, friends, and others who know you well. Sometimes having to introduce your learning to those unfamiliar with the material helps the most in figuring out what excites you.

4. Q. How does your grading scale work?
   A. My system may mean your grade is higher than you think. Western Online will compute your current course grade using my formula, but it’s simple to do yourself, too. Divide your points total by the points available so far, then multiply by 4 to translate to a 4.0 scale (and the corresponding letter grade). The same process can be used for any individual assignment. E.g. if you earned 8 out of 10 points on a quiz, you would divide 8 by 10 (=.80), multiple that by 4 (=3.20), and that would be between a B and a B+. At the course’s conclusion, when consistent attendance, participation, paper draft effort, and other course contributions warrant, I sometimes bump up borderline grades (but never down).

5. Q. Do you want a hard copy of my paper, and when will it be graded?
   A. Please submit papers via the course website only; if it should be inaccessible as a deadline approaches, emailing the paper and then posting it the next day is fine. I rarely need more than 1-2 weeks to return papers online, but late papers often do take longer; please alert me of your submission with an email.

Further Writing Assignment Guidelines

In addition to utilizing the argumentative essay revision guide at the end of this syllabus, it is worth familiarizing yourself with a good style guide. English majors should use MLA most often, but others (Chicago, APA, or another with pre-approval) are fine as long as they are consistently applied. Please
use this page setup on all assignments, unless specified otherwise: 1” justified margins on all sides; size 12, Times New Roman font; and double-spacing. Finally, provide a cover page including paper title, course title and my name, your name, and date, as well as a list of works cited or a bibliography. Unless instructed otherwise, all assignments should be submitted online as a docx, doc, or rtf file.

**The Writing Center**

“The U.S. Bank WIU-QC University Writing Center is available to assist you with general and specific questions on writing assigned in any discipline and at any academic level. The one-on-one assistance available is valuable for generating ideas, talking about global-level issues such as organization, and even working through grammatical problems. The writing center is located in QC Complex 2219. Call 309-762-9481 for an appointment and be sure to bring a copy of your assignment.”

**Late Work**

*Barring extreme emergencies or prior arrangement, I will deduct one-third of a grade for each week (or portion thereof) that an assignment is late. If you anticipate special difficulty in meeting a deadline, please discuss this with me privately and well in advance so that if warranted, we can consider special arrangements. Readings and assignments are in many ways cumulative, so it is important that you keep up; at the same time, we lead busy lives and occasionally other priorities intervene. Balancing those realities, my policy aims to make being on-time important without making a rare delay devastating.*

**Academic Dishonesty**

Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty are among the most serious violations of a student’s integrity and of relationships with the instructor, fellow classmates, and the university. In the humanities, plagiarism most often involves presenting another person’s specific words or ideas as one’s own, whether by copying or closely paraphrasing, and without citing the source. *Please be aware that such an offense will at minimum result in an “F” on the assignment and in many cases leads to an “F” for the course.* In many of my courses, I briefly review proper citation, but if you have questions about how to credit an idea or information source, ask. If you are unsure about definitions or consequences of academic dishonesty, consult WIU’s Student Academic Integrity Policy at [http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php](http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php).

**Counseling Services**

“Confidential counseling services are available for WIU-QC students. Time management, stress management, balancing work and family, study skills, low self-esteem, relationship problems, depression, and anxiety are some examples of issues that students may address in personal counseling. Students may call 309/762-1988 to make an appointment with Counseling and Career Services.”

**Accommodations**

“Students with disabilities: In accordance with University values and disability law, students with disabilities may request academic accommodations where there are aspects of a course that result in barriers to inclusion or accurate assessment of achievement. To file an official request for disability-related accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center at 309-298-2512, disability@wiu.edu or in 143 Memorial Hall. Please notify the instructor as soon as possible to ensure that this course is accessible to you in a timely manner.”

**Sex Discrimination/Title IX**
“University values, Title IX, and other federal and state laws prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual assault/misconduct, dating/domestic violence, and stalking. If you, or someone you know, has been the victim of any of these offenses, we encourage you to report this to the Title IX Coordinator at 309-298-1977 or anonymously online at: http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php. If you disclose an incident to a faculty member, the faculty member must notify the Title IX Coordinator. The complete Title IX policy is available at: http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php.”

Food Insecurity Resources

“Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact The Pantry at WIU-QC for support: 309-762-3999 (x68041); Quad Cities Complex, Building C, Room 2412. Furthermore, please notify your professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable your professor to help connect you with confidential support resources on campus. For more information about The Pantry at WIU-QC please visit: http://www.wiu.edu/qc/student_life/pantry/.”

Student Rights & Responsibilities

For further information on expectations for both students and university personnel, please see http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php.
Dr. Hamner’s Argumentative Essay Revision Checklist

The Introduction

1. **Hook:** Does your introduction (including the first sentence) efficiently grab readers’ attention without being silly, exaggerated, or disconnected? Is the shift from it to the paper’s thesis natural or abrupt?

2. **Thesis:** Is it clear what sentence(s) convey the paper’s central claim? Ask yourself these questions, too:
   - Is your claim obvious or subtle? Boring or daring? Outlandish or plausible?
   - Is your claim vague or specific? General or precise?
   - Is something significant clearly at stake in your argument? Have you provided a sense of why it matters whether your reader buys or dismisses your claim?

3. **Map:** Does the introduction preview the order in which the paper will examine the evidence?

The Body

4. **Main Points:** Can you summarize in a quick phrase the main point and/or task of each body paragraph, or are some paragraphs’ goals or relevance to the thesis unclear?

5. **Topic Sentences and Concluding Sentences:** Within a given paragraph, do the topic sentence and concluding sentence fit, without being identical? Do they provide meaningful links between paragraphs?

6. **Organization:** Are there any paragraphs that don’t make logical sense in the organization of the essay — e.g. too-short/disconnected “lonely” paragraphs or too-long/repetitive “bullying” paragraphs? Should any be removed or integrated elsewhere? Can you reorder so the argument’s force grows more naturally?

7. **Textual Evidence/Quotation:** Is there sufficient evidence from specific texts (at least one quotation per body paragraph, as a general rule) to back up the argument’s main points? Are there appropriate page number citations? Does the paper introduce quotations with a sense of their original context? After quotations, do you offer interpretations of their meaning or just expect readers to hear them as you do?

8. **Minimal Summary, Maximum Analysis:** Except in briefly introducing unfamiliar key text(s), does the paper avoid plot summaries? Does your interpretive and analytical work remain the focus?

9. **Reasonable Specifics, Not Generalities or Overreaches:** Does your unique argument reach beyond back-cover or Wikipedia descriptions? Or does it resort to clichés anyone might say, or that could describe any text? (“The author uses lots of description to help readers understand.”) Does it make reasoned claims? Or does it rely on overstatements that cost you credence? (“In this story everything is about death.”)

The Conclusion

10. **Closure:** Does the conclusion bring the essay to a meaningful close or end abruptly? Does it avoid exact restatement of the introduction, but still reinforce your main points? Does it suggest how the essay’s main ideas might be expanded into other contexts and why it matters that your reader take them seriously?

Mechanics & Style

11. **Grammatical & other mechanical issues:** Has at least one strong writer proofread your paper?
   - Among the most common problems (beyond spelling, capitalization, basic punctuation):
     - Pronoun reference: are the referents of your pronouns clear? Do they agree in number?
     - Run-on sentences and fragments: is each of your sentences a single, complete thought?

12. **Stylistic issues:** Have you presented your work in the most professional, attractive manner possible?
   - Among the most common problems, especially for less experienced writers:
• Verbal “fluff”: is every word and phrase doing real work toward demonstrating your thesis? Have you eliminated as much repetition as possible? You want the “impact per word ratio” as high as possible.
• Have you stayed in the present tense while writing about literature, film, or other artistic texts?
• Have you provided an accurate, unique, provocative, inviting title?
• Does your paper fit the length and formatting requirements?