Forms: Ecofiction

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Western Illinois University, Spring 2015
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General Catalog Description & Prerequisites

The study of the major terms, issues, critical and textual history of numerous works representing a particular form, genre, or literary school, such as autobiography, epic poetry, the novel, or Gothic.

Specific Description & Goals

This graduate seminar explores contemporary ecological literature and especially the growing body of fiction that responds to the problem of humanly induced climate change (“cli fi”). We will focus on narratives that investigate how the late 20th and early 21st centuries are transforming our vision of “nature,” particularly as humanity reshapes it via new technologies. Our basic goals are to develop a knowledge of key primary and secondary works, repeated themes, and common structural choices in this genre, while pursuing pressing questions about the Earth and the ways in which we inhabit it.

Reaching beyond reactionary rhetoric and utilizing basic primers on the science, we will see that fiction (especially in the U.S., but not exclusively) has begun to tell this story slant: via an epic science fiction novel about terraforming Mars, a National Book Award-winning tale about a Midwestern man who loses part of his memory, a gritty portrayal of an Appalachian woman’s exhaustion with her marriage, and postapocalyptic tales about relationships between men and women, parents and children, and people and dogs. Other jewels include a satirical self-help book on the ties between individuals and communities and a vision of an Asia-dominate future in which calories matter much more than dollars.

Along our journey, we will discover that ecofiction raises many seemingly peripheral questions—about gender, class, religion, national identity, and global economics—that will turn out to be inextricable from debates about “the environment.” Students are thus strongly encouraged to make the course their own, developing projects in areas of related but potentially far-ranging interest. Coursework includes an annotation/discussion facilitation assignment, one short paper, and both in-person and virtual discussions, but the primary written outcome will be a seminar paper suitable for presentation at WIU events and beyond. The aim is to take our answers to the following questions as far as we possibly can:

- How do we evaluate data, rhetoric, and stories of climate change and other ecological issues?
- How are ecological concerns at local levels related to and portrayed beside global challenges?
- How are literary visions of wilderness, rural life, suburbia, and urban environments changing?
- How do the shifts in narration and form that come with postmodern literature affect readers’ and viewers’ orientations to contemporary material and cultural transformations?
- How is contemporary US literature illuminating ties between ecological issues, concepts of beauty and utility, and problems of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and disability?
# Reading & Assignment Schedule

*Any article (etc.) below not listed under “required texts” will be available on Western Online under “Content.”

## PART ONE: FANTASTICALLY WIDE-ANGLE LENSES

### 1st WEEK, JAN 20TH: ECOLOGY AS OTHERWORLDLY FANTASY

**IN CLASS:**
- Interpreting key scenes from *Avatar* (2009)
- Self-introductions (using introductory survey handout)
- Syllabus review and discussion of goals and assignments

### 2nd WEEK, JAN 27TH: MARS AS A WINDOW ON EARTH

**READING:**
- Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* preface, introduction, and part 1, “Romantic and anti-romantic” (xiii, 1-71)

**VIEWING:**
- Documentary: *Disruption* ([http://watchdisruption.com](http://watchdisruption.com))

**IN CLASS:**
- An introduction to Kim Stanley Robinson and science fiction as ecological allegory

### 3rd WEEK, FEB 3RD: NO CLASS (DR. HAMNER AT CONFERENCE)

**READING:**
- Robinson, *Red Mars* (parts 4-5, pp. 203-382)
- Highlights of *The National Climate Assessment* (2014) (read first 68 pp. of the pdf online)
- Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* part 2, “The boundaries of the political” (73-140)
- Look ahead to the remainder of the course and briefly “taste” coming primary texts (with an eye to developing your Seminar Paper topic—to be discussed week 5)

**WRITING:**
- Short Paper due online by Mon 2/9 (see “Assignment Descriptions” later in syllabus)

### 4th WEEK, FEB 10TH: QUESTIONS OF SCALE—FROM GENE TO CLIMATE AND BACK AGAIN

**READING:**
- Robinson, *Red Mars* (parts 6-8, pp. 383-572)
- Excerpt of Robinson’s *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005)
- Clark, *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* part 3, “Science and the struggle for intellectual authority” (141-203)

**IN CLASS:**
- Discussion of Short Paper submissions
- Restating the course’s central questions, with help from *Red Mars*

FEB 12TH: BUS TRIP TO FIELD MUSEUM
TH WEEK, FEB 17TH: A VERY STRANGE EXPERIMENT IN CREATIVE NON-FICTION

~Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (1967)
~Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968)

WRITING: ~Annotation & facilitation (of White, Jr. & Hardin) due online by Mon 2/16: __________

IN CLASS: ~What a “bad Catholic” from New Orleans says about “Nature”—human and otherwise
~Discussion of Seminar Paper assignment and possible topics (proposals due next week)

PART TWO: REALIST CLOSEUPS

6TH WEEK, FEB 24TH: BIRD BRAINS, HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY, AND ...


WRITING: ~Annotation & facilitation (of Naess) due online by Mon 2/23: __________
~Seminar Paper, Step A: 2+ pp. proposal due online (under “Discussions”) by Mon 2/23

IN CLASS: ~An introduction to the eclectic Richard Powers

7TH WEEK, MAR 3RD: … MIDWESTERN LAND USE

READING: ~Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* (parts 3-5)
~William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” (1995)

WRITING: ~Annotation & facilitation (of Cronon) due online by Mon 3/2: __________

IN CLASS: ~Seminar Paper proposal workshopping round 1: constructive feedback on proposals

8TH WEEK, MAR 10TH: THE BEASTS OF SECOND-WAVE ECOCRITICISM

~Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009)

VIEWING: ~*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (streamable on amazon.com for $3-4; 15+ copies available in public library system; one copy on WIU-QC library reserve for overnight check-out)

WRITING: ~Annotation & facilitation (of Nixon) due online by Mon 3/9: __________
~Annotation & facilitation (of Heise) due online by Mon 3/9: __________
~Annotation & facilitation (of Chakrabarty) due online by Mon 3/9: __________
~Seminar Paper, Step B: 3+ pp. of (very) rough drafting due online by Mon 3/9

IN CLASS: ~Seminar Paper, Step B Workshopping: reading and responses to paper drafts

MAR 17TH: NO CLASS (SPRING BREAK)
9th WEEK, MAR 24th: FICTION AS FLIGHT …

READING: ~Barbara Kingsolver, Flight Behavior (ch. 1-8, pp. 1-214)

IN CLASS: ~An introduction to Kingsolver and monarch migration
~Barbara Kingsolver, testimony to Pennsylvania House of Representatives (8/26/14)

10th WEEK, MAR 31st: … OR FIGHT?

READING: ~Kingsolver, Flight Behavior (ch. 9-14 + author’s note, pp. 215-436)

WRITING: ~Seminar Paper, Step C: 10+ pp. of (very) rough drafting due online by Mon 10/30

IN CLASS: ~Ecocritical approaches to Kingsolver

TH 3/26, 3-5 pm: TREE WRAPPING (OAK SAPILING PLANTING PREPARATION) WITH LIVING LANDS & WATERS, DAVENPORT PUBLIC WORKS (1200 46th ST., DAVENPORT, IA 52807)

PART THREE: DISASTERS & (PARTIAL) SOLUTIONS

11th WEEK, APR 7th: ECOFEMINISM, POST / APOCALYPTIC, & UTOPIA-DYSTOPIA

READING: ~Ursula K. Le Guin, The Word for World is Forest (novella, 1972)

VIEWING: ~The Road (2009 film adaptation of 2006 Cormac McCarthy novel)

IN CLASS: ~A short, selective history of very dark stories about humanity, gender, and Earth

12th WEEK, APR 14th: POST-PETROLEUM NOIR CLI-FI …

READING: ~Paolo Bacigalupi, The Windup Girl (2009), ch. 1-17 (pp. 1-179)

WRITING: ~Seminar Paper, Step D: 5 single-paragraph annotations of secondary research articles relevant to your project (totaling at least 3 pp.) due online by Mon 4/13

IN CLASS: ~An introduction to Paolo Bacigalupi via his novels for young adults

13th WEEK, APR 21st: … WITH FOOD SCARCITY AND AI, FOR GOOD MEASURE

READING: ~Paolo Bacigalupi, The Windup Girl (2009), ch. 18-50 (pp. 180-359)

IN CLASS: ~Peak oil, energy dependence, and the future of global capitalism

FRI 4/24: CAS RESEARCH & AWARDS RECEPTION
14th WEEK, APR 28th: SURVIVING ALONE …

READING: ~Peter Heller, The Dog Stars (pp. 3-159)

WRITING: ~Seminar Paper, Step E: Full-length draft of paper that incorporates and responds to at least 3 of the articles annotated for Step D due online by Mon 4/27

IN CLASS: ~Coming full circle: Heller as interpreter of McCarthy
~Course evaluations

15th WEEK, MAY 5th: … OR TOGETHER?

VIEWING: ~Heller, The Dog Stars (pp. 160-320)

IN CLASS: ~Repetition, difference, and the sober hopefulness of spiral temporality

FRI 5/8: WIU-QC STUDENT RESEARCH CONFERENCE

FINALS WEEK, MAY 12th: PAPER PRESENTATIONS

IN CLASS: ~Formal conference-style presentations of Paper #3

WRITING: ~Seminar Paper, Step F: Final version due online by Tu 5/12

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.


A Few of Many Additional Recommendable Texts

FICTION
Paolo Bacigalupi, Pump Six and Other Stories, Ship Breaker, and The Drowned Cities
Walker Percy, Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome
Ursula K. Le Guin, “Paradises Lost,” in The Birthday of the World, and The Dispossessed
Cormac McCarthy, The Road
Kim Stanley Robinson, Green Mars, Blue Mars, the Science in the Capital trilogy, and 2312
Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible
Peter Heller, The Painter (I’ve not yet read this, but looks promising)
Dr. Seuss, The Lorax
Margaret Atwood, the MaddAddam trilogy: Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, and MaddAddam
David Mitchell, Cloud Atlas
George Turner, The Sea and Summer
Joan Slonczewski, A Door into Ocean
Jeff Vandermeer: The Area X trilogy: Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance

FILM & TV
Snowpiercer The Fountain Children of Men I am Legend
Sleep Dealer Dark City Blade Runner Adaptation
The Matrix trilogy Noah Planet of the Apes remakes District 9
An Inconvenient Truth Years of Living Dangerously Living Upstream Crude

NONFICTION & SCHOLARLY BOOKS
Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson, Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction
Eric Otto, Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism
Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor
Ursula Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet
Bill McKibben, Eaarth and Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age
Katharine Harmon, You are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination
Chris Hedges and Joe Sacco, Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt

Grading Criteria

~An A recognizes broad and deep understanding of the course material, regular and insightful discussion contributions, and very strong written work—a major impact on the course’s success.
~A B indicates good commitment to coursework, demonstrable contributions and achievements in both verbal and written analysis, and tangible positive impact on other students’ learning.
~A C reflects adequate completion of coursework, including satisfactory participation and writing.
~A D or F denotes incomplete or unsatisfactory coursework, unsatisfactory participation (missing more than 25% of class time or 4+ classes), and / or detraction from course goals (via plagiarism or otherwise).

I will figure final grades using the university scale (A, B, C, D, or F, with pluses/minus) 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% Article annotation and discussion facilitation
10% In-class (5%) and online (5%) discussion participation, first half of semester
10% In-class (5%) and online (5%) discussion participation, second half of semester
10% Short Paper
50% Seminar Paper
10% Presentation of Seminar Paper (finals week)

I will add 1/3 grade on the Seminar Paper for a high-quality presentation of it at the WIU-QC CAS Research Evening and/or the WIU-QC Student Research Conference (the same materials should work in each context).

Assignment Descriptions

Article annotation and discussion facilitation: During weeks 5-8, we will be reading a selection of major articles in the history of ecocriticism. During the first couple weeks of class, you will sign up to annotate and cultivate discussion for one of these. Your job here is to write a 700-800 word annotation (due on the course website under “Discussions” before the class in question) that (a) spends roughly a third of its space very specifically summarizing the article’s argument (in your own words as much as possible); (b) uses the next third to respond to and evaluate the article (Where is it illuminating or unclear? What should we take away and how might we apply its insights to primary texts we’ve engaged or will engage?); and (c) devotes the final third to developing 3-5 multi-sentence, evocative, open-ended questions inspired by the piece that we can use for class discussion.
Once in class, your task is to use your annotation to describe the article’s claim and your response (know what you’re saying here well enough that you can directly explain it to us, not just read your annotation), then cultivate group discussion of the questions you have prepared. In determining grades on this assignment, I will focus mainly on the written component, but also keep in mind how the group discussion goes. Mechanics matter, but the accuracy and specificity of your representation of the article and the provocativeness and insight of your response and questions will be the biggest factors.

In-class and online discussion participation: On the course website, again under “Discussions,” we will have a set of virtual conversations running in tandem with our in-person ones. These may dovetail regularly or go in completely different directions, but the idea is that we have a forum for informal writing (journal-like, not polished essays) that allows for additional discoveries and inquiries beyond those that we succeed in raising in class. I will set up a few subcategories (e.g. Course Texts, Outside Texts, Related Media Coverage, Connections with Other Courses, etc.), but most of this will just evolve naturally (er, digitally). My expectation is that each student will participate every week, with some weeks involving more extensive posting and responses than others. I will grade your contributions for the course’s first half (weeks 2-8, ending 3/10) and second half (9-15, ending 5/5) collectively, with 5% on each occasion going to in-class contributions and 5% to online contributions. If you’d like an even earlier rough assessment of how you’re doing, just ask after the first few weeks. For the online portion, a good rule of thumb is at least a few hundred words per week, whether in one post or multiple ones.

Short Paper: A 1000+word autobiographical, nonfiction narrative of a key moment in your immediate personal experience with nature, wilderness, urban or suburban environments, and/or the problem of climate change. Be sure to at least briefly reference both our reading and discussions thus far. 2/3 of the grade will be based on how effectively you allow your audience to experience the moment vicariously and how thoughtfully you reflect on your actions or response. 1/3 of the grade will reflect your writing’s organization, clarity, and mechanical polish.

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 other proposals, I will recommend that everyone begin by developing a project about the roles played by ecological questions in 1-3 specific cultural texts, whether novels, films, or otherwise, and whether featured in the course or not. Each student should engage primary materials that seem most individually interesting and valuable long-term and should cite or briefly reference at least three secondary materials from the course and at least three from beyond it. Consultations about potential topics and theses may begin at any point (see office hours on p. 1, but I can arrange other times if needed). The course is designed for the Seminar Paper to unfold gradually: starting with week 6, there are separate due dates for various elements building toward the final version. While preliminary elements will not be graded, their timely completion and the project’s improvement across them will heavily impact borderline final grades. I will respond online to on-time submissions for Steps A, C, and E, and there will also be class time for group feedback. More details will be available in week 5.
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.

~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 such endeavors, but my role is to challenge you beyond your comfort zone and to honestly assess the quality of 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 a snapshot of a brief moment (and even a semester is brief); it takes a lot of these together to begin to illustrate your abilities, and even your entire college GPA can never convey those fully.

~While we will be studying fields in which I am relatively expert, 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 in order to hoard power, but to be in a position to empower others. That can only happen with your simultaneous investment, though. What you get out of this course will be directly related 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 other electronics should not be used during quizzes. Finally, please wait to put away materials until we call it a day; I will respect your schedules as well.

Making Contact

While there are occasional exceptions, I do my very best to build a trustworthy syllabus that won’t need major adjustments during the course of the semester. Please read it thoroughly, as many routine questions I receive are answered somewhere in its pages. Also, please keep in mind that unless you anticipate being gone for multiple class meetings in a row, I don’t need to know about illnesses, transportation problems, work conflicts, or the other routine challenges we share as human beings.

When you have an urgent question not addressed on the syllabus or in class, you are very welcome to contact me, preferably via email (much faster than phone). My goal is to respond within 2-3 business
days, if not sooner; however, I am unlikely to reply at night or on weekends or holidays. Please also note that I use email to make class announcements, so ensure I have an address you check daily.

In short, while I ask you to turn to the syllabus and each other first for simpler questions about assignments or missed materials, I do so in order to save my time for more complex and substantial issues. Please feel welcome to ask questions after class or schedule a visit during office hours; I look forward to many good one-on-one and small group conversations over the course of the semester.

**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 usually get these posted on the course website (under “Content”) within 24 hours.

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 those 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 enough to do yourself. The maximum possible points for the course is 100, so divide your total by that (or by the points available as of a given date), then multiply that number by 4. This puts your score on the 4.0 scale, which I then translate to a letter grade. The same process can be used for any individual assignment. So, for example, if you earned 8 out of 10 points on a quiz, you would divide 8 by 10 (=.80), then multiply that by 4 (=3.20), and that would be between a B and a B+. In each case, I reserve the right to bump the grade up a notch if I believe it’s warranted (or rarely down, most often when there are attendance problems like those described earlier in the syllabus).

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 down when a deadline is approaching, emailing the paper and then posting it asap is fine. My goal is to return papers online within a week of the due date. Late papers can take longer; in those cases, 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. I use MLA style most often, but other styles (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 .doc, .docx, 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. We will briefly review proper citation in class, 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 honesty, consult WIU’s Student Academic Integrity Policy at 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

“In accordance with University policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), academic accommodations may be made for any student who notifies the instructor of the need for an accommodation. For the instructor to provide the proper accommodation(s) you must obtain documentation of the need for an accommodation through Disability Support Services and provide it to the instructor. It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to the instructor’s attention, as he/she is not legally permitted to inquire about such particular needs of students. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations (i.e. fire, tornado, etc.) should contact the instructor as to the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency. Contact Disability Support Services at 298-2512 for additional services” (from Official University Policy Manual at www.wiu.edu/policies/syllabus.php).

Student Rights & Responsibilities

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

The Introduction

1. **Hook:** Will 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 forced?

2. **Thesis:** Is it clear what sentence(s) convey the paper’s central claim?
   - **Strengthening your thesis:**
     - 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 single 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 paper resort to vague generalities that might describe any text? (“The author uses lots of description to help readers understand.”) Does it include gross 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?