

Texas A&M University—San Antonio
English 3315: Introduction to Critical Theory (Spring 2024)
Tuesday / Thursday, 9:30 am – 10:45 am
Classroom Hall 205

Instructor: Dr. Jackson Ayres

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Office Hours: Wed, 1:00-2:00pm; Thu, 11:00am-noon; and f2f or virtual meetings by appointment

Course Description

Introduction to Critical Theory introduces students to concepts, traditions, and debates in critical theory, and provides experience in the application of critical theory in English studies as a discipline.

This course explores diverse sources and approaches to critical theory, a body of thought that both seeks to understand the world and to change it for the better. Critical theory, in whatever context it is practiced, emerges from lived experiences and responds to challenges of a given moment. Even if action isn't the focus of a theorist, each framework for understanding the world that we encounter ultimately points toward action. These frameworks, or lenses, allow us to step outside of our own perspectives and lived experiences, in turn allowing us to perceive issues in new ways. We will also explore how we can create, use, and circulate critical theory based on our experiences and concerns.

Transferable Skills

Skills practiced in this class that are valuable elsewhere include critical thinking and reading, persuasive writing, analytic writing, synthesis of information, and collaboration.

The Ungraded Classroom

This class is ungraded. An ungraded course attempts to relocate the focus and purpose of the classroom onto *learning*, not ranking. Grades are not a necessity of education – in the centuries-long history of higher education, grades are a recent invention – and good reasons exist to discard them.

Students sometimes feel uncertainty or resistance to ungrading. A common negative reaction from students to ungrading is a sense that the instructor is abdicating a major responsibility. If there is no grading, this view asks, how will students receive guidance, recommendations, and a record of their accomplishment? Rest assured that while there are no *grades*, we still have *assessment* in forms of feedback, and review – but, I am detaching these assessment activities from grading, a move that prevents a grade from overshadowing or distorting assessment, feedback, and review. Ungrading also accommodates a customizable educational experience, as you create your own individualized learning plan and proceed through the course in a way that makes it most meaningful to you and your goals.

Of course, the requirements of the university mean that I must submit a final grade. In the end, then, you do in fact receive a grade. However, you and I will collaborate to determine, in a qualitative and holistic way, your course grade. Throughout the semester, we will reflect on your work, process, and learning goals. Your final reflective self-assessment asks you to decide your grade for the course. I will respond, and, in turn, you will either revise your grade or stick with it. This process has some caveats, identified later in this document, and I do retain a right to override; yet, I trust your judgment so I will only override a grade decision in select, rare circumstances – and it will not always be to lower a grade.

Instructor-developed Goals

- Understand definitions, functions, and reasons for critical theory;
- Understand the roots of critical theory and its evolution across contexts;
- Evaluate various critical frameworks;
- Apply critical frameworks to contemporary issues and our own personal circumstances;
- Understand the place of critical theory within English Studies.

In addition to (or, to some extent, in place of) these goals, each student will develop, with me, their own personal learning goals. Students can periodically adjust their goals throughout the semester.

Required Texts

All course readings will be available online via our course Blackboard site.

Note: reading critical theory is difficult. **Please do not let this deter you!** Read *actively* by engaging with the text, asking questions and noting your reactions and connections to other texts and to the world beyond. Bring your observations and questions to class for us to work through them together.

Attendance & Participation

I take attendance each class session for recordkeeping, but I do not formally assign any graded value for attendance and participation. The class offers opportunities for different types of participation.

Assignments

We have three categories of assignments: 1) engagement, 2) checkpoint, and 3) depth assignments.

Engagement Assignments

- Padlet bulletin board posts
- Collaborative Google document contributions
- In-class discussions
- Other classroom session activities

Engagement assignments may seem routine, but they cannot be undervalued: these consistent, short or brief assignments are the essential building blocks of your learning. These varied assignments allow you to explore our readings, brainstorm, make connections, and pose generative questions. They enable you to think through the ideas and arguments presented by our readings, clarifying your understanding of them and formulating critical responses, and extend our class conversations. In-class activities will occur on an ad hoc basis, and may include polls, peer review, free-writes, among others.

Impact on final self-assessment: we will incorporate how and to what extent you use engagement assignments toward your learning, but there is no requirement for them tied to final grade maximums.

Checkpoint Assignments

- Learning plan
- Process letters (2)
- Mid-semester reflection
- Final self-assessment

Checkpoint assignments undergird the ungraded pedagogical approach and structure your ongoing learning experience. The learning plan establishes your goals for the semester. Intermittent process letters ask you to describe and meta-cognitively comment upon your learning methods and progress. A reflection at mid-semester allows you to pause, take stock of your work in the course, and decide if you need to make adjustments in your approach to the class or revisions to your learning plan. Finally, the self-assessment at the end of term has you narrate and evaluate your learning experience and course performance; as part of this task, you will identify your course grade and then consult me about it.

Impact on final self-assessment: completing fewer than half the required checkpoint assignments (i.e., fewer than three) automatically limits your maximum final grade by one letter-grade.

Depth Assignments

- Keywords paper
- Critical Theory Podcast Report paper
- Applying theory paper
- Close reading paper

Depth assignments enable you to engage critical theory in sustained, focused, and substantive ways. I ask you to complete one project within the first half of the semester, another for the second half.

Impact on final self-assessment: completing half or fewer the required depth assignments (i.e., two or fewer) automatically limits your maximum final grade by one letter-grade.

How to Submit Your Work

Submit assignments electronically to Blackboard. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the Blackboard system prior to submission / posting, and contact me if you have questions. Use MLA format.

Late Papers

I accept late work. However, if you submit work late, I may not have time to provide narrative feedback, undermining course benefits and outcomes, and the Final Self-Assessment determining your grade takes into consideration missed deadlines. Furthermore, please see the Course Schedule for late submission cut-off dates. In appropriate circumstances, request an extension in advance.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

ENGL 2321 assumes that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves, working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and/or using artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT. Use of any AI-generated content in this course qualifies as academic dishonesty and violates Texas A&M-San Antonio's standards of academic integrity.

Writing, Language, and Digital Composing Center:

The Center provides writing support to graduate and undergraduate students in all three colleges. Writing tutors work with students to develop reading skills, prepare oral presentations, and plan, draft, and revise their written assignments. Students can schedule appointments with the Center in JagWire under the student services tab. The Writing, Language, and Digital Composing Center can be

reached by emailing wldcc@tamusa.edu. Students can also make appointments with the Writing, Language, and Digital Composing under the Student Services tab in JagWire.

JAGS

Additional academic skill resources can be found in The JAGS (Jaguar Academic Guides to Success) Program. JAGS offers academic skill building strategies and can assist you in developing an effective academic success plan. If you are interested in the JAGS program, please contact the Student Academic Success Center at (210) 784-1352.

Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disability. If you believe you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact Disability Support Services (DSS) for the coordination of services. DSS is located at the Main Campus on the 2nd floor of the Central Academic Building in room 210. The phone number for DSS is (210) 784-1335 and email is dsupport@tamusa.edu.

Counseling Resources

As a college student, there may be times when personal stressors interfere with your academic performance and/or negatively impact your daily functioning. If you or someone you know is experiencing life stressors, emotional difficulties, or mental health concerns at Texas A&M University – San Antonio, please contact the Student Counseling Center (SCC) located in Modular C, Room 166 (Rear entrance) or call 210-784-1331 between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday – Friday. After-hours crisis support is available by calling 210-784-1331. Please contact UPD at 911 if harm to self or harm to others is imminent.

All mental health services provided by the SCC are free, confidential (to the extent permitted by law), and are not part of a student's academic or university record. SCC provides brief individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, consultation, case management, and prevention services. For more information, please visit www.tamusa.edu/studentcounseling

Safer Spaces

We will work together to create a safer classroom for every student enrolled in this course. We will treat each other with common decency and respect. Derogatory or abusive comments made regarding race, class, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, size, appearance, age, religion, ethnicity, political orientation, or nationality are grounds for dismissal from the classroom community. Enthusiasm is encouraged; hostility is not. These rules apply to online interactions as well face-to-face ones. No trolling! If you experience any discomfort, please contact me and we will redress it.

Meeting Essential Needs

Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live, and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact the Dean of Students (DOS@tamusa.edu) for support. Furthermore, please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable them to provide any resources they may possess.

Student Misconduct

Appropriate conduct is essential to the effective functioning of the University. University policy defines unacceptable conduct, both academic and non-academic misconduct, and penalties for such behavior in [The Student Handbook](#) and The Student Code of Conduct.

Academic Rights and Responsibilities

As a member in an academic community, students at Texas A&M University-San Antonio are expected to exhibit a high level of honesty and integrity in their pursuit of higher education, be mature, be self-directed and be able to manage their own affairs. Students who are unwilling to abide by these basic expectations will find themselves facing academic and/or disciplinary sanctions. Students are expected to share in the responsibility and authority with faculty and staff to challenge and make known acts that violate the Texas A&M University-San Antonio Code of Conduct. For more information please [this site](#), which includes information on policies for the use of AI tools. Students, moreover, are expected to contend with the content of the course and the academic field from which that content emerges. Please refer to [the Student Handbook](#) for more information.

Texas SB17

Texas Senate Bill 17, the recent law that outlaws diversity, equity, and inclusion programs at public colleges and universities in Texas, does not in any way affect content, instruction or discussion in a course at public colleges and universities in Texas. Expectations and academic freedom for teaching and class discussion have not been altered post-SB 17, and students should not feel the need to censor their speech pertaining to topics including race and racism, structural inequality, LGBTQ+ issues, or diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Financial Aid and Verification of Attendance

According to the following federal regulation, [34 CFR 668.21: U.S. Department of Education \(DoE\) Title IV regulation](#), a student can only receive Title IV funds based on Title IV eligibility criteria which includes class attendance. If Title IV funds are disbursed to ineligible students (including students who fail to begin attendance), the institution must return these funds to the U.S. DoE within 30 days of becoming aware that the student will not or has not begun attendance. Faculty will provide the Office of Financial Aid with an electronic notification if a student has not attended the first week of class. Any student receiving Federal financial aid who does not attend the first week of class will have his/her aid terminated and returned to the DoE. Please note that any student who stops attending at any time during the semester may need to return a portion of his/her federal aid.

University Email Policy and Course Communications

All correspondence between professors and students must occur via University email accounts. You must have Jaguar email account ready and working. If it is not working, contact the help desk at sahelp@tamusa.edu or at 210-784-4357.

The Six-Drop Rule

Students are subject to the requirements of Senate Bill (SB) 1231 passed by the Texas Legislature in 2007. SB 1231 limits students to a maximum of six (6) non-punitive course drops (i.e., courses a student chooses to drop) during their undergraduate careers. A non-punitive drop does not affect the student's GPA. However, course drops that exceed the maximum allowed by SB 1231 will be treated as "F" grades and will impact the student's GPA.

Course Schedule

Note: readings listed for the below dates should be completed *prior* to that live session.

Unit 1: Introductions

Week 1

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16

Introductions

THURSDAY, JANUARY 24

bell hooks, “Critical Thinking”

Review ungrading principles, format, policies, and documents

Complete and submit pre-conference Learning Plan by Friday, 11:59pm

Sign-up for individual learning conferences by Friday, 11:59pm

Week 2

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23

No class – individual conferences

THURSDAY, JANUARY 25

No class – individual conferences

Week 3

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30

Jennifer Rich, “Introduction,” *An Introduction to Critical Theory*

Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 01

Max Horkheimer, excerpts from “Traditional and Critical Theory”

Week 4

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 06

Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”

Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 08

In-class unit review / work time

Critical Theory Podcast Report due Sunday, 11:59pm

Unit 2: Power

Week 5

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13

Michel Foucault, “Panopticism”

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

Michel Foucault, “Panopticism” (continued)

Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies”

Process Letter 1 due by Friday, 11:59pm

Week 6

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

Edward Said, introduction to *Orientalism*, day 1

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

Edward Said, introduction to *Orientalism*, day 2*Week 7*

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Decolonising the Mind"

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29

In-class unit review / work time

Close Reading Assignment due by Sunday, 11:59pm**Unit 3: Culture***Week 8*

TUESDAY, MARCH 05

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

THURSDAY, MARCH 07

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Mid-semester Reflection due by Friday, 11:59pm (sign up for optional conference)**Optional Mid-semester conferences****Late submissions from Units 1 and 2 no longer accepted as of Sunday, 11:59pm***Week 9*

No class – SPRING BREAK

Week 10

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

Pierre Bourdieu, "Introduction" from *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'"

Week 11

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility"

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

In-class unit review / work time

Keywords Assignment due by Sunday, 11:59pm**Unit 4: Boundaries***Week 12*

TUESDAY, APRIL 02

Gloria Anzaldua, "La Consciencia de la Mestiza"

THURSDAY, APRIL 04

Gloria Anzaldua, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

Process Letter #2 due by Friday, 11:59pm

Week 13

TUESDAY, APRIL 09

Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”

THURSDAY, APRIL 11

Michel de Certeau, “Spatial Stories”

Week 14

TUESDAY, APRIL 16

Kim TallBear, “Genomic Articulation of Indigeneity”

THURSDAY, APRIL 18

Jesmyn Ward, “Cracking the Code”

Week 15

TUESDAY, APRIL 23

Donna Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto”

THURSDAY, APRIL 25

In-class unit review / preparation for Final Self-Assessment

Applying Theory Assignment due by Sunday, 11:59pm*Week 16*

TUESDAY, APRIL 30

No class – A&M-SA Reading Day

Late submissions from Units 3 and 4 no longer accepted as of Friday, 11:59pm**Sign up for self-assessment conference***May 01-May 07 (Finals Period)***Self-assessment virtual conferences****Submit Self-Assessment prior to scheduled conference**