

Course Syllabus: Writing 4D—The Critical Essay: Science Fiction

Course Description: Students in this writing course explore major works of science fiction in their historical and cultural contexts. Through lectures, critical reading, and discussion, they consider how authors not only react to scientific or technological advancements, but also challenge our assumptions about society and ourselves. Students supplement their literary study with analysis of selected films and television shows. They produce four major essays, developing their skills through an intense process of drafting, critiquing in workshops, and revising.

Course Prerequisites: Crafting the Essay.

Required Texts:

DuZois, Gardner (ed.) The Best of the Best: 20 Years of the Year’s Best Science Fiction.

Silverberg, Robert (ed.) The Science Fiction Hall of Fame: Volume One, 1929-1964.

Stephenson, Neal. The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer.

Week 1:

M	Class Period	Activities
Day 1	Morning	Syllabus. Collaboratively decide on CTY rules and classroom expectations. Teacher introduction. Students create their fantasy island, then interview each other and introduce each other to the class. Deliver pre-assessment essay.
	Afternoon	Discuss SF, fantasy, and horror (Venn diagram on board of where the class sees distinctions and overlaps). Active listening. Teacher reads off sci-fi authors’ definitions. Students actively listen to definitions and discuss how the definitions are similar/different from theirs. Describe different aspects of text: plot, character, etc. In-class practice with “All Summer in a Day” (Bradbury).
	Evening	Focused freewrite: 5 min on what you think will be the best part of this class; what will be the most useful; what will be the least useful or least helpful; and how can the TA or I alleviate that? Discuss “All Summer in a Day” worksheet. Students read “Born of Man and Woman” (Matheson) aloud, then as a class we determine: (1) who the main character is, (2) the significance of the numbers and (3) is this science fiction or not?

T	Class Period	Activities
Day 2	Morning	Focused freewrite: Write about a recent dream you had that would make a good sci-fi movie/story. In-class writing: Write a rejection or acceptance letter to Matheson including his selection in our anthology or rejecting it because it is not sci-fi. Read letters aloud and discuss. Importance of context: read an interview quote by Matheson and ask students whether it changes your reading to know what the author thinks. Read “The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism” (handout) and “Little Red Riding Hood Revisited” (handout).
	Afternoon	In-class writing: How do you see rhetorical analysis fitting into the larger idea of reading about literature? Where does rhetorical analysis belong in a literature class? Stereotype activity. Students stand in front of the class while classmates describe them. Examples might be: hobbies, music they like, etc. Ask the students how accurate the descriptions of them were. Close reading practice: Screen <i>War of the Worlds</i> clips. Students actively take notes.
	Evening	Re-screen the two clips. As we watch, talk out loud about what differences you see between the two versions of <i>War of the Worlds</i> . Why do you think that the directors chose to highlight these differences? What remained the same, and why? Hand out Essay One assignment and choose a story from the anthologies to write about. Mini-conferences to ask students about their story choice and return their commented pre-assessment.

W	Class Period	Activities
Day 3	Morning	Listen to selections from audio broadcast of <i>War of the Worlds</i> . In-class writing: How faithful should a work based on a short story or novel be to be effective? How close should it be to the original? How much discretion or autonomy does a filmmaker or director have? Why? Read: “A Short Guide to Writing About Film”; Dick, “The Minority Report.” Begin thinking about Essay One.
	Afternoon	Discuss “The Minority Report.” Screen <i>Minority Report</i> (film).
	Evening	Finish <i>Minority Report</i> (film). Compare and contrast the Dick story with the Cruise movie. What changed? What stayed the same? Can you offer any reasons why?

Th	Class Period	Activities
Day 4	Morning	Begin Essay One. Draft of Essay One is due for workshopping at end of class.
	Afternoon	Workshop Essay One.
	Evening	Finish draft revisions and turn in Essay One at the end of class. Essay One is due at the end of the class.

F	Class Period	Activities
Day 5	Morning	Students create advertisements for products from the future. Read and discuss “The Nine Billion Names of God” (Clarke)
	Afternoon	Read “Roadside Rescue” (Cadigan) and “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream” (Ellison). Compare and contrast Clarke and Ellison’s treatment of religion.

Su	Class Period	Activities
	Evening	Read and prepare to discuss: “Bloodchild” (Butler); “Helen O’Loy” (del Ray); “That Only a Mother” (Merril). Each student comes up with 2-3 discussion questions for tomorrow’s class.

Week 2:

M	Class Period	Activities
Day 6	Morning	Discuss Sunday night’s readings. Does the author’s gender make a difference in their writing? How would the story be different if it were re-written from another character’s point of view? In-class writing: Choose one story and re-write the story from the point of view of another central character in the story.
	Afternoon	Read and discuss “Mars is Heaven!” (Bradbury). Watch <i>Mars is Heaven!</i> (30 min.) Listen to radio show (30 min.) In-class writing: which version did you prefer, the short story, the radio program, or the short video? Why?
	Evening	Read and prepare to discuss: “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (LeGuin); “It’s a Good Life!” (Bixby); “Against Utilitarianism” (Williams).

T	Class Period	Activities
Day 7	Morning	T. A. lectures on historical context. Discussion of science fiction timeline. Screen <i>The Twilight Zone</i> , “It’s a Good Life!”
	Afternoon	Combined class with Existentialism . Watch <i>Firefly</i> episode.
	Evening	Combined class with Ethics . Participate in lecture/discussion on utilitarianism (on LeGuin, Bixby, and Williams pieces). In-class writing: Tie everything together. How does your reading of the <i>Firefly</i> episode change after participating in the discussions about utilitarianism and existentialism? How does context change your reading of this particular text?

W	Class Period	Activities
Day 8	Morning	Read and discuss: “There Will Come Soft Rains” (Bradbury, handout); “10 ¹⁶ to 1” (Kelly), “The Cold Equations” (Godwin). In-class writing: Write an editorial defending or challenging the decision of one of the characters in “There Will Come Soft Rains,” “10 ¹⁶ to 1,” or “The Cold Equations.” Read in class and discuss.
	Afternoon	Watch <i>The Atomic Café</i> .
	Evening	On board, write themes from all of the stories, films, and other texts that we have experienced thus far. Brainstorm how these texts could fit together for Essay Two. Field questions regarding Essay Two.

Th	Class Period	Activities
Day 9	Morning	Begin Essay Two.
	Afternoon	Workshop Essay Two.
	Evening	Finish draft revisions and turn in Essay Two at the end of class. Essay Two is due at the end of the class.

F	Class Period	Activities
Day 10	Morning	Begin reading <i>The Diamond Age</i> (the first half of Part the First).
	Afternoon	Continue reading <i>The Diamond Age</i> (the second half of Part the First). Give out guided reading worksheet.

Su	Class Period	Activities
	Evening	Continue reading <i>The Diamond Age</i> (the first half of Part the Second).

Week 3:

M	Class Period	Activities
Day 11	Morning	Finish reading <i>The Diamond Age</i> (the second half of Part the Second).
	Afternoon	Discuss <i>The Diamond Age</i> . On the board, write out themes from the book that would work well for Essay Three. Field questions about Essay Three.
	Evening	Begin Essay Three.

T	Class Period	Activities
Day 12	Morning	Continued drafting time for Essay Three. Draft of Essay Three is due for workshopping at end of class.
	Afternoon	Workshop Essay Three.
	Evening	Finish draft revisions and turn in Essay Three at the end of class. Essay Three is due at the end of the class.

W	Class Period	Activities
Day 13	Morning	Read and prepare to discuss: “Flowers for Algernon” (Keyes) “Story of Your Life” (Chiang); “Daddy’s World” (Williams); “Kirinyaga” (Resnick). If students need additional reading, have them read “The Country of the Kind” (Knight) and/or “The Wedding Album” (Marusek).
	Afternoon	Combined class with Philosophy of the Mind . Discuss “Flowers for Algernon” and debate whether or not Charlie was the same person throughout the story.
	Evening	Discuss “Story of Your Life,” “Daddy’s World,” and “Kirinyaga.”

Th	Class Period	Activities
Day 14	Morning	Begin Essay Four. Draft of Essay Four is due for workshopping at end of class.
	Afternoon	Workshop Essay Four.
	Evening	Students complete SPEs. Finish draft revisions and turn in Essay Four at the end of class.

F	Class Period	Activities
Day 15	Morning	Create advertisement for friends and CTY students for the sci-fi class. Share favorite stories, films, moments from the class for next time.
	Afternoon	Parent/Teacher conferences.