

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of a painting, likely by Vincent van Gogh, showing a gnarled, dark brown branch of a flowering tree (possibly an almond tree) against a clear, vibrant blue sky. The branch is covered in numerous small, light pink and white blossoms. The painting style is visible with thick, textured brushstrokes.

USCDornsife
Department of English

SPRING 2026

GRADUATE COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

History, Theories and Practice of Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies in Television

Kessler, Sarah

M | 5:00-7:50 PM

SECTION: 32778

One might argue that no amount of “prestige” programming can undo popular perceptions of television as a debased cultural medium. One might also argue that no amount of brilliant research and writing in cultural studies can undo scholarly perceptions of the field as a debased academic arena. In this graduate seminar on cultural studies in television, we will neither claim TV for the fantasy of high culture nor dismiss it as “trash.” (Obviously.) We will have no patience, either, for debates on the validity of cultural studies as an area of inquiry. Rather, we will devote ourselves to examining the always already relevant mass medium of television through the theoretical frameworks cultural studies—and its attention to the intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and disability—provides for us.

Make no mistake! We will critique these theoretical frameworks! And we will critique TV down to its unabashedly capitalist foundations! But we will do this while remaining attentive to the highly classed, racialized, and gendered dynamics of both the popular and scholarly discourses that surround television and its positioning as an object of study. Our goal is to come out of the seminar with deeper knowledge of TV’s material and discursive histories, a workable genealogy of television studies (including a clear sense of its positioning within/without the field of cultural studies), and a toolkit for analyzing television beyond representation alone.

Expect to read the work of: Racquel Gates, Stuart Hall, Hunter Hargraves, Michele Hilmes, Amanda Lotz, Alfred Martin, Tania Modleski, Brandy Monk-Payton, Margaret Morse, Susan Murray, Laurie Ouellette, Rebecca Wanzo, Kristen Warner, Raymond Williams, Kristal Brent Zook, and more. Expect to watch a lot of TV.

Renaissance English Literatures and Cultures

On Words

Lemon, Rebecca

F | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32755

Polonius: “What do you read, my lord?”

Hamlet: “Words, words, words.”

Hamlet’s response to Polonius seems at once dismissive and exhausted. And his attitude to words is famously vexed: if words might move him to tears, he also condemns words as the province of the “whore,” “drab,” and “scullion.” This course will, in contrast to Hamlet’s prejudicial attack, take words seriously, investigating their etymologies and their histories in order to illuminate the texts they live in. Drawing on Raymond Williams’s approach to “keywords,” this class begins by investigating the flourishing scholarship on words, following what Jeffrey Masten has called a “renewed historical philology.” In his appeal to attend to words and their histories, he writes, “We have not sufficiently attended to *etymology*—the history of words (the history *in* words).” Then, energized by readings and manifestos by Adorno, Williams, Masten, Roland Greene, and others, we will begin our primary investigations: studying keywords in early modern literature. We will concentrate each week on a play or poem(s) in tandem with a critical piece that illuminates keyword(s) in the text. In a week on Shakespeare’s sonnets, we begin to think with Kim F. Hall about the racialized constructions of “fair.” With *Richard III*, we will study the words “now,” “determined,” and (following Ramie Tarrow’s essay on the play), “amen.” Our study of *The Merchant of Venice* will concentrate on the words “quality,” “shadowed,” “bond,” “conversion,” and “blood” (reading the work of Patricia Akhimie on quality, Ian Smith on shadowed, Amanda Bailey on bonds, and Janet Adelman on blood). For *Twelfth Night* we will consider the word “baffle” (reading Adam Zucker on this term and phenomenon). For *The Tempest*, we will consider the word “pinch,” building on Patricia Akhimie’s reading of that word in the play. As the course unfolds, I am open to your own reading interests, as we decide what keywords we study, in what Shakespeare texts.

Foundations in the Environmental Arts and Humanities

Griffiths, Devin

M | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32792

How do we think and write about the environment in an era of environmental crisis? How might our scholarship and creative practices shape the world to come? These questions will be central to our seminar, which will examine major works of the environmental arts and humanities (EAH) to explore how a variety of artists, academics, and activists have explored the interpretation of nature and the place of humans within it.

The environmental arts & humanities (EAH) is an interdisciplinary field that examines the multiplicity of humanity's relationships with the environment through the perspectives of the humanities, arts, and social sciences. EAH researchers employ tools like critical analysis, storytelling, attention to aesthetic and imaginative practices, and historical research to investigate how people perceive and depict the environment. They also examine how these depictions influence knowledge and decision making, across time and in the present day.

EAH advocates argue that the humanities and arts play a crucial role in addressing urgent environmental challenges, such as climate change, the shift away from fossil fuels, inclusive conservation practices, and environmental racism. Their research is often intersectional, drawing from various disciplines, including art, history, literature, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies, and critical geography.

Image by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *The Seine at Bougival*, 1879.

Though centered on the twentieth century, this seminar will explore the wider field of the environmental arts and humanities from its seeds in nineteenth-century natural history and nature writing to its emergence as a full-fledged and deeply interdisciplinary research program in the twenty-first. Our readings will pair primary readings of creative works of fiction, poetry, art, and personal narrative, with secondary sources drawn from fields as diverse as ecological science, history, art history, sociology and anthropology. Over the course of fifteen weeks, we will consider the following topics: Indigenous knowledge and land management; histories of environmental racism; ecofeminism; environmental affects, including climate anxiety and ecological mourning; histories of environmental science, ecology, and ecosystem; deep ecology; the Western conservation movement; "slow violence" and the environmentalism of the poor; extractivism and energy cultures; world perspectives on environmental history and colonialism; nature poetry and locodescription; "cli-fi"; environmental activism and the divestment movement; and green Marxism.

This seminar is open to graduate students from a variety of academic backgrounds, including but not limited to literature, art history, history, philosophy, environmental studies, anthropology, communications, and related fields.



20th-Century American Literatures and Cultures

Handley, William

T | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32791

“Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time,” argued the first academic historian of the West, Frederick Jackson Turner. The western historian and novelist Wallace Stegner wrote about the “Doppler effect” of western American history: from the vantage point of the present, the sound of the past alters as it comes near, then recedes, like a passing train. The New Western History and settler colonialist studies have significantly revised Turner’s and Stegner’s ethnocentric work, foregrounding tragedy and indigenous “survivance” in the “geography of hope.” Yet the imbrication of past and present that Turner and Stegner understood inescapably still inheres in contemporary writing about the West.

This seminar will look at 19th-century literary and historiographical representations of the West through the lens of late-20th and early-21st century fiction and criticism. We will explore how writers and artists queer and revise real and imaginary pasts and in doing so alter paradigms of futurity, from Transcendentalism and Manifest Destiny to Postcolonial, Queer, and Anthropocene studies. Like the racialized and gendered subjectivities and bodies that make them matter, temporal and spatial imaginaries in the West are haunted fictions with real consequences.

To hear and critique the Doppler effect of western U.S. history, we will put into dialogue chronologically disparate but culturally overlapping texts. What is lost and gained by re-imagining the ghosts of settler colonialism’s depredations and its temporal ideologies—and by “filling in” the lost subjectivities of historical experience? Why is historical fiction about the 19th-century West on the rise in the 21st and what is at stake in these re-imaginings?

Image by Claude Monet, *Nymphéas et Pont Japonais*, 1899.

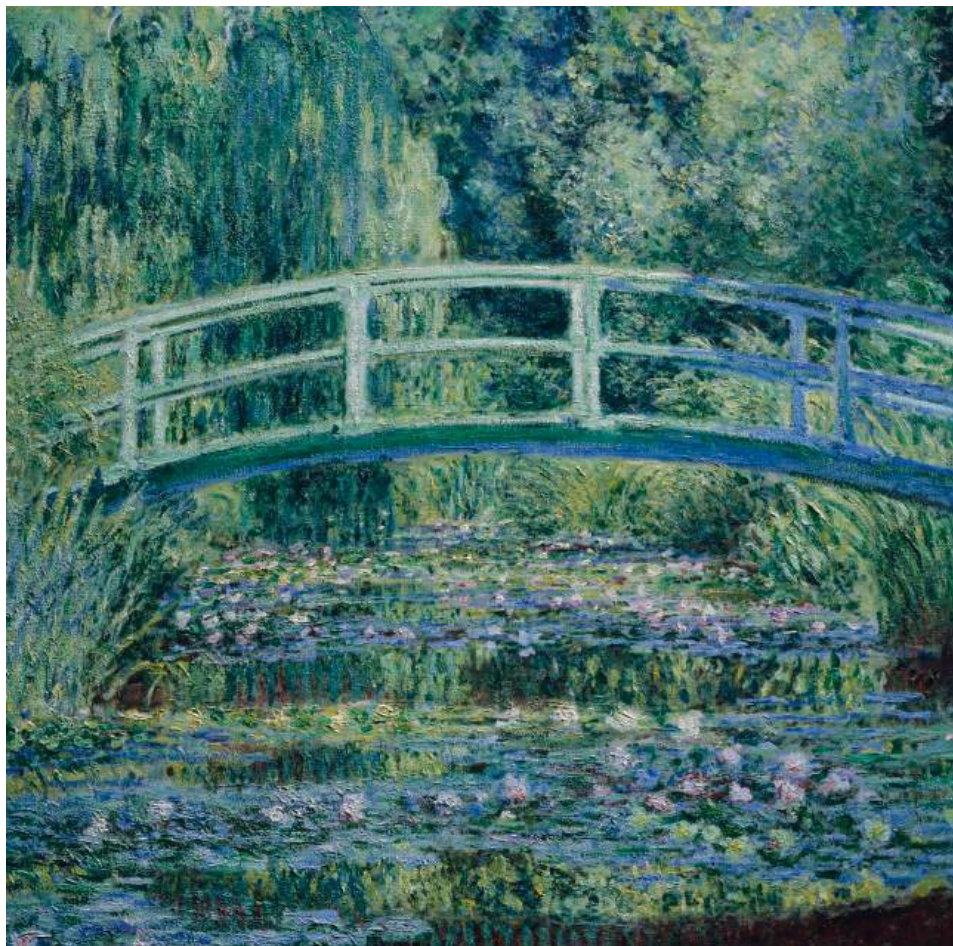
Practicum in Teaching English and Narrative Studies

Sanford Russell, Bea

T | 2:00-3:20 PM

SECTION: 32793

This class will give you practical tools for teaching literature and writing, from syllabus and assignment design to the nuts and bolts of how to use and organize class time. Although our focus is on praxis, we will devote some of the semester to considering different theoretical approaches to pedagogy. You should expect to leave the class a more confident and organized teacher, and with stronger materials for your professional teaching portfolio.



Theory and Criticism

Nelson, Maggie

W | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32810

Roland Barthes once (allegedly) said that the critic “must choose between being a terrorist and being an egoist.” I don’t think these are our only choices - but it’s worth pondering what choices there are, and asking which ones we want to try on or try out. When we write (or read) theory or criticism, do we do so as lovers? haters? moralists? clinicians? explicators? promoters? etc. Rather than take up a particular theme in theory or criticism today, this class will explore the various positions and practices available to us, and give students an opportunity to contemplate not only what kind of work they most want to be doing, but also where that work might circulate. Some categories we might explore: critic as egoist/memoirist (Shon Faye, Neige Sinno), critic as creative artist (Paul Preciado, Ben Lerner, Jack Whitten), critic as pedagogue (Judith Butler, Jacqueline Rose, Amia Srinivasan), critic as diagnostician (Byung-Chul Han, Franco “Bifo” Berardi), critic as self-help/ counselor (Sara Ahmed, Adam Phillips, Timothy Morton), critic as polemicist (Andrea Dworkin, Susan Sontag), and so on. Come ready to read and write, think and talk, as always.



Second-Year Pro-Seminar

Leal, Jonathan

W | 5:00-6:20 PM

SECTION: 32815

This course is designed to help students gain practical knowledge for writing and research beyond coursework. We will cover the basics of scholarly publishing, the practicalities of working professionally in a discipline/field, the dissemination of academic research beyond traditional forms and venues, and a variety of career paths within and beyond the university. Our collective goals will be to expand horizons, sharpen practical tools, and ask important questions about criticism, the arts, contemporary academia, and ourselves.

Graduate Nonfiction Writing Workshop

Treuer, David

T | 5:00-7:50 PM

SECTION: 32833

Life may very well be “one thing after another” and text “one word after another” but of the two only texts are scripted—life is for better or worse a series of accidents. Creative non-fiction is a vast genre and a tricky practice. Ranging from scholarly essays to travel writing and personal reflection creative non-fiction takes the elements of the “truth” (stated fact, event, conflict, narrative arc, the plot of “life,” the evolution of a thought or thoughts, the quote, the word, the utterance) and recombines them—sometimes carefully and with premeditation and other times in ignorance and “from the gut”—into written narrative. These “true” narratives are meant to move, educate, convince, sway, and transport us. This workshop will focus on your work in the genre with the goal of helping you make and perfect at least two new nonfiction pieces.

Image by Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with cypress tree*, 1889.

ENGL-696

Graduate Poetry Writing Workshop

Manuscripts, Long Poems, Sequences

Lewis, Robin

TH | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32880

This course is a poetry workshop for PhD students who are working on compiling a manuscript or folio. These can be defined broadly to include either a poetry collection, a long poem, a series of poems, video poems, or artists books. All are acceptable. The aim here is on durational organization where experimentation and risk will be encouraged over traditional performances. Other than excavating issues surrounding order and presentation, we will also read a few essays on poetics and craft. This course will run very much like a traditional workshop. The only distinction will be that instead of reading single poems, we will consider your projects in their entirety.

ENGL-697

Graduate Fiction Writing Workshop

Bender, Aimee

TH | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32826

This class is a generative one, for those writing novels. If you happened to have finished your novel... that is great! But we won't be reading full drafts for this round. The course is more for the seedlings, the kernels, the image or scene or moment as of yet undeveloped, the few chapters that haven't quite moved forward, and we will aim to see what's there and try to help you see what's there. It will be about wandering and exploring and making. We'll read novels (as of yet undecided), and read about novel-writing (Zadie Smith, Matt Bell, Matthew Salesses, others), and mainly you all will write pages of novels and we'll read those and discuss those too. Also plan on some discussion about workshop itself, and what helps/doesn't help at this stage of the game. It'll be an experiment, and your flexibility is appreciated too.

If you want to write short fiction instead, we can incorporate that into the class pretty easily, but just expect that most of the discussion will be novel-related.



Top Image by Claude Monet, *Sunset at Pourville, Open Sea*, 1882.

Bottom Image by Claude Monet, *Marine*, 1882.

ENGL-700x

Theories and Practices of Professional Development I

Dissertation Project Design & Prospectus Workshop

Cohen, Ashley

T | 2:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32830

This course will help you to design an elegant, feasible, and maximally important dissertation project, and to convey the strength and scope of your project in a compelling prospectus. Designing a coherent project will make the actual process of writing the dissertation much easier. A cogent prospectus will provide the basis for fellowship applications and even job materials in years to come. In short, this course will be one of the most important experiences of your graduate education. We will meet bi-weekly, on zoom.

ENGL-701x

Theories and Practices of Professional Development II

Job Placement Seminar

Griffiths, Devin

F | 3:00-4:50 PM

SECTION: 32831

Where do you want to go, and how are you supposed to get there?

This 2-credit seminar is a practical workshop for the genres, codes, and strategies that will help advance your career as a researcher and writer after finishing your Ph.D. It is designed not only to help students interested in pursuing the academic job market, but also alternative careers outside of academia.

Topics: application materials including the job letter and c.v., genres of the interview and presentation and how to prepare for them, sample teaching documents, writing samples, letters of support, job market

analysis, the difference between liberal arts and R1 institutions, the difference between postdoc and job applications. But it also values the skills and strategies needed that will help pursuing a non-academic career, including job hunting, informational interviews, working with hiring directors, and translating your work and research to date – including your Ph.D. – for employers who are not familiar with the English Ph.D.

Above all, we want to explore how to cope with the stress of the market and to support each other.

The seminar will meet on a bi-weekly basis, and in addition, will be expected to participate in periodic mock interviews and job talks. The placement director will also meet with each of you individually to review materials and discuss your strategy on the market.

Though the course is listed as meeting at a specific time in the catalogue, I will in fact survey all of the students who enroll to find a time that works for everyone to meet every other week. We will also use Zoom to support students who are not currently or only intermittently in LA.

ENGL-703x

Academic Writing

Dissertation Bootcamp

Cohen, Ashley

F | 12:30-1:50 PM

SECTION: 32840

In order to make good progress on your dissertation, it is critical that you complete one chapter every semester. This course is designed to help you do that. We will begin with the question of what belongs in a chapter, and what doesn't. We will then learn the best methods for getting writing (and thinking!) done on a regularly scheduled basis. We will discuss how to write for an audience, and how to write effectively at the sentence, paragraph, and section levels. We will talk about how to manage research, including how to keep track of all those notes and citations, and how to handle secondary scholarship in your chapter. We will also discuss how to solicit feedback and what to do with it, i.e., revision and rewriting. Finally, we will have an optional unit on archival research and working with primary sources.

Along the way, we will form solidarity groups designed to build community and help keep each other on track.

CONTACT US

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D-CLEARANCE REQUESTS:

Contact **Janalynn Bliss** (jbliss@usc.edu) to request D-clearance for graduate workshop and form and theory courses.

Contact **Andrea Leal** (leala@usc.edu) to request D-clearance for other PhD courses in the Department of English.