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ENG 2011G-001: Literature, Self, World: Fiction

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He sat on the edge of his bed with his elbows on his knees and scanned the stack of cartridges. Each cartridge in the dock dropped on command and began to engage the drive with an insectile click and whir, and he scanned it. But he was unable to distract himself with the TP [Teleputer] because he was unable to stay with any one entertainment cartridge for more than a few seconds. The moment he recognized what exactly was on one cartridge he had a strong anxious feeling that there was something more entertaining on another cartridge and that he was potentially missing it.

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The technologist Linda Stone coined the term “continuous partial attention” to describe what ails us in the early twenty-first century: an increasing inability to give our full attention to any one thing for very long for fear of missing everything else that is out there (as if one could, really, “have it all”). Reading a big novel is, among things, practice in the art of attention.

In this course, we will undertake an extended adventure in reading with David Foster Wallace’s extraordinary 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. It is difficult to describe this novel without giving too much away. The novel is set in the near future. Its principal settings are a prestigious tennis academy and a halfway house for recovering addicts, the one at the top of a hill, the other at the bottom. Among the many questions that the novel invites its

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reader to consider is this one: how are these two worlds connected?

TEXTS

The novel is available from Textbook Rental. I encourage you to buy your own copy, so that you can mark it up and make it your own. Michael Harvey’s *The Nuts and Bolts of College Writing* and John Trimble’s *Writing with Style* are supplements to our work, two great books for student-writers.

You should have access to a hardcover collegiate (college-level) dictionary when reading.

Infinite Jest contains material that some readers may find offensive or disturbing (language, sex, violence). In such cases, please consider taking another course.

REQUIREMENTS

Requirements: As with any great endeavor, “the effort is the prize,” as the jurist Benjamin Cardozo said. The primary work of the course: reading and participating in an ongoing conversation about the novel. If you do not see yourself keeping up with the reading (it will average twenty-seven pages per class), you should consider taking another course. Writing: some short responses to the reading, a longer essay (5 pp.), and a final examination.

ATTENDANCE

Be here, on time, every time. You’re responsible for all assignments,

whether or not you’re here when they’re announced.

Frequent absences will affect your grade, not through a system of points and deductions but simply because not being here will make it difficult to do the work that the course is meant to involve.

If you must miss a class, you should get in touch with me beforehand to find out what you will miss.

Photocopied pages to go with our reading will be available from an envelope on my office door.

LATE WORK, MAKE-UP WORK

Missed work cannot be made up. Late work is acceptable only if you have my approval in advance.

DISABILITIES

If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, contact the coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

OFFICE HOURS

Talking to professors is one of the smartest things a college student can do. Please, come in to ask questions and talk about your work in the class. If office hours don’t work for you, make an appointment.

If you feel uneasy about talking to professors, read “How to talk to a professor” for potentially helpful advice: <http://goo.gl/VYSkv>.

E-MAIL

Before you e-mail me, please read and follow the guidelines in “How to e-mail a professor”: <http://goo.gl/4n6EH>. These guidelines are read all over the world and will serve you well in e-mailing any professor (assuming that your professor answers e-mail).

One guideline that you don't need to follow: you need not add your class number and meeting time to your signature. I'll know who you are.

DECORUM

The atmosphere in our class should be serious—not somber or pretentious, but collegiate and genuinely intellectual. No eating, sleeping, talking, texting, or doing work for other classes. No headphones, hoods, iPods, or phones. Electronic devices should be turned off and out of sight. Please show proper respect for our small community of learning.

DISCUSSION

Consider what the writer Thomas Merton says about a teacher he admired (Mark Van Doren, Columbia University):

Most of the time he asked questions. His questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before.

I like to ask questions that make people think. I also like it when people ask me such questions. Think of a question not as something whose answer you're already supposed to know but as an invitation to think. I know that this suggestion might go against the grain of much of your experience in school. You should be asking relevant questions too, of me and perhaps of one another. That helps to make the class less like a quiz show and more like a conversation. Asking questions is what's involved in critical inquiry.

GRADING

Your grade will be based on your writing (60%), class participation (20%), and final exam (20%).

Writing receives a letter grade. Missing writing receives a zero. Participation receives a numerical grade, an overall evaluation of the extent to which you're prepared and contributing: 100 (always), 85 (frequently), 75 (usually), 50 (sometimes), 0 (rarely or never).

To calculate semester grades, I use numerical equivalents for letter grades:

A	95	A-	92	B+	87	B	85
B-	82	C+	77	C	75	C-	72
D+	67	D	65	D-	62	F	55

Sometimes when I grade writing I'll give a grade that falls between two grades—e.g., B+/A- (89.5).

For semester grades, 90 or above is an A; 80 or above, a B; 70 or above, a C; 60 or above, a D; below 60, an F.

EWP

You may include work from the course in your Electronic Writing Portfolio. Please make sure that you understand the requirements for the EWP and that you fulfill them in a timely way. For more information: <http://www.eiu.edu/assess/ewpmain.php>.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The English Department's statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and the representation of them as one's original work" (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*)—has the right and responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course.

And my statement concerning academic integrity:

Any breach of academic integrity—from

lifting words or ideas without attribution to submitting a wholly unoriginal essay—is a serious matter and will get you a serious penalty. The Student Standards office recommends an F for the course. You will also be required to take a course in ethics administered by Student Standards, whose staff will keep your misconduct on record and notify your other professors that one of their students has violated academic integrity.

You should be familiar with Eastern's statement on academic integrity (posted in classrooms) and should ask if you have any questions about quoting from and/or documenting sources. But because the work of the course is to be an expression of *your ideas in your words*, aside from words and ideas from properly acknowledged sources, questions of plagiarism and collusion should never arise.

Do not "borrow" work or give your work to anyone (allowing someone else to make use of your work is also a breach of academic integrity and will also get you a serious penalty, up to and including an F for the course).

COURSE OUTLINE (WEEKS)

1-14: *Infinite Jest*

15: Taking stock of the novel

Modest pieces of writing will be assigned as in-class writing or on a due-next-class basis.

Longer essay: April 25

Final exam: May 2, 10:15