Welcome Letter For Ethnic American Literature (English 350-80) For Spring 2011

Dear student:

If you're reading this letter, it should be because you are enrolled in English 350-80 (Ethnic American Literature), an online course for the spring 2011 semester. All of the information that you need for the course will be available on the course website through the *Blackboard* system. However, this web site will not be available until classes begin on January 18. I'm sending out this letter so that you'll know a little bit more about the course beforehand.

Textbooks:

The reading list for the course is:

1. *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.
2. *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich.
3. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.
4. *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison.
5. *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan.

How is an online course different than a traditional course?

If you haven't taken an online course before, you may be wondering about the experience. I've taught online many times before. My sense is that taking an online course is no easier and no harder than taking a traditional course, but it is different, and it requires some different skills and attitudes.

The advantage of taking a traditional course is that there is (or should be) a lot of spontaneous discussion. If you have questions that you want to ask, the instructor is right there and can give you an immediate response. In many traditional classrooms, the focus is mostly on listening, and you can often just sit there and take everything in.

An online course doesn't give you the opportunity for this kind of spontaneous dialogue, but it gives you a lot more flexibility since you can do the work at a time that's convenient for you--at least within reason. There are still deadlines twice a week, but if you want to do the coursework at two in the morning, you can. And while you do lose some of the back and forth that you'd get in a traditional classroom, what you gain is time to think about other people's comments and to decide on your own. In the best cases, this means people's responses are more thoughtful and more in-depth. In a traditional classroom, participation is sometimes rewarded, but it's usually optional. Some students rarely say anything in class. In this class, however, you can't just sit back and be silent. You have to actively participate by responding to questions I've posted, and to things that your classmates have written. In fact, there will be two times over the semester

when I will assign you to bat ideas back and forth with other classmates and to use the material as the basis for your papers.

Most of the time you'll be asked to write a 300 word response to a question that I post about the reading. That's not a whole lot of writing--it's about a page if you typed it out, double-spaced. But it does add up pretty quickly. By the end of the semester, you will have done over thirty pages of writing (not including your formal papers) —and that's more than you would probably do for most classes.

The good news is that most of this writing is unedited and ungraded. As long as you do the minimum amount for each posting and as long as you keep up, posting twice a week before the deadline, you should do fine. More good news is that once you post your thoughts, your writing and your ideas (as well as the writing of your classmates) stays up there on the web site for you to refer back to. This means that when it comes time to write your papers, you aren't starting from scratch. There is a lot of writing already up there, and you can use it as raw material or even rough drafts for your papers.

So—even though we won't meet face to face during the semester, this online course is quite different from a correspondence course. That is to say, it's not a course that you can do over whatever time period you want at whatever pace that you want. It's not a set of ready-made material and questions for you to answer. Instead, it's quite interactive—probably more interactive than most traditional courses. It requires you to log on regularly and to participate in a discussion of the material with the other students.

The *Blackboard* Course Web Site:

This course uses *Blackboard* as a way of posting information and communicating. If you've taken a course (either online or traditional) that's used *Blackboard*, you'll probably be pretty comfortable with the way the course works. If you haven't used Blackboard, please refer to the *Blackboard* Web Site at http://bb.wpunj.edu/. There is a lot of information there about how to use the site. If you still have questions, you may want to schedule time for a brief orientation sometime during or before the first week of classes. I'm reachable by cell phone at (973-650-5511 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting   973-650-5511   end_of_the_skype_highlighting), or you can email me at weaverc@wpunj.edu.

How This Course Works:

This course requires you to log onto this web site at least twice during the week and to post a writing assignment each time. Assignments are usually due by 8:00 A.M. on Mondays and again by 8:00 A.M. on Thursdays. Most often these assignments will be short responses to discussion questions that will be posted in the *Discussion Board* section of the web site. A typical week might look like this:

- Monday: Log onto the web site. Go to the *Assignments* section and read what's due this week. This section will probably direct you to the *Discussion Board* where you will be asked to post a response to a question or given a short writing assignment.

- By 8:00 A.M. on Thursday: Log onto the *Discussion Board*, and post your response. Usually there will be a minimum length requirement. Please pay attention to it! These responses are not graded, but they do count for credit, and you will not receive credit for postings that don't meet the minimum. Also–check the *Assignments* section once more. There will be directions on what your next assignment (due by 8:00 A.M. Monday) is.

- Between Thursday morning and Sunday night: Check back to the web site and read how other people responded to the assignment–and my comments at the end. It's very important to read my comments. Your posts aren't graded, and sometimes people will ask me how they can know how they're doing with the posts. The answer to that question is to read what some other people have posted and to read my comments at the end. They'll let you know if you're on the right track, and, hopefully, point you in directions that you can use in your papers.

- By 8:00 A.M. on Monday: Post your response to the next assignment.

It is very important that you post your responses on time. Failure to do so will significantly affect your grade. If you have trouble posting your assignment, please contact me right away. I suggest that you do not wait until five minutes before the deadline to post your assignments. Give yourself more time in case you have technical problems.

It's also important that you follow the minimum length guidelines that I give for each assignment. If you post a response that is significantly short of the requirement, you will not get credit. Most of my students do well in this class, getting a grade of B or better. But the students who do not do well often miss several deadlines and post responses that are too short.

Some weeks we may deviate from this process. For example, twice over the semester, I will assign you to work with a small group of classmates. I'll set up a *Group Area*, where I'll ask you to write an extended discussion--a "back and forth" exchange on a particular theme or topic that you'll use to build into a paper. The Monday/Thursday deadlines will probably remain the same, though.

Technology: What You Need

For this course, you will need:

1. A reliable Internet connection and a web browser.
2. A word processing program--either Microsoft Word (preferred) or a program which allows you to save your document in MS Word or RTF format.

When you post a response to the *Discussion Board*, you don't need any other software. But when you post a longer document, like a draft of a paper, you'll probably use a word processing document. This raises a problem. What if someone else doesn't have the same word processing software? In this case, they (or I) may have trouble reading your paper.

For this course, it would be really helpful if you have *Microsoft Word* as your word processing software. If you are using different software, you may still be able to use the "Save As" menu to save it in a format that other people can read. The best would be "Word," but if that is not an option, then RTF (Rich Text Formatting) should also be readable by anyone else. If you are not using Microsoft Word, you should experiment a bit before class begins to make sure you are ready to post your papers. Can you find the drop down menu that lets you save your document in a different format? If you need help, please fill out the Help form on the Blackboard web site, and someone will mail you back a response. It's a really good idea to get these bugs worked out before you have to post your paper!

You cannot use *MS Works* or *Apple Works*, as most computers can not read this program.

Your First Assignment:

Your first assignment will be due on Thursday, January 20 by 8:00 A.M. It will be a 300 word response to a question that I've posted on the *Discussion Board* section of the website, so be sure to check for it earlier in the week. You should also make sure to begin reading our first novel, *The House on Mango Street*. I'll expect you to have finished the novel and to post a response to my discussion question by 8:00 A.M. on Monday, January 24. If that sounds daunting, don't worry too much. It's a pretty short novel. On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt if you got the book ahead of time and got a jump on the reading.

Well, that's all for now. I'm looking forward to reading your ideas and working with you over the semester. Check the web site as we get closer to the start of the semester and there will be more stuff posted!

 Good luck and have fun in the course!

–Chris Weaver