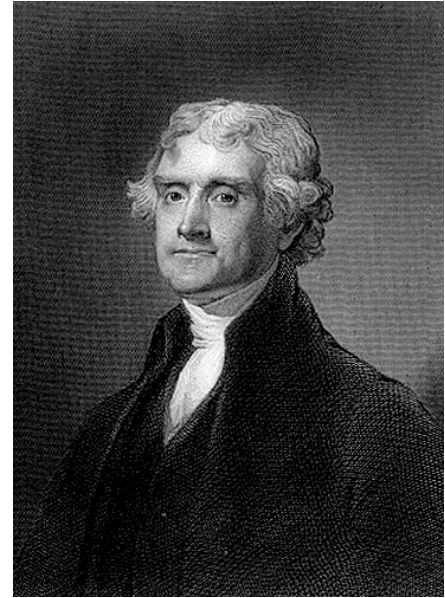


# Early American Literature and Culture

ENGL 640 | Eisenhower Hall 12 | Tue/Thu 11:30-12:45 | Spring 2007  
Course Website: [www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/engl640/](http://www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/engl640/)  
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Office Hours: Tue 1:30-2:30, Wed 10:30-11:30, Thu 10:00-11:00, and many more by appointment



## Course Description

"... *they are a mixture*"  
— J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, "What is an American?" (1782)

Early American Literature and Culture is a survey of American literature and culture from 1492 to 1800. The focus of our study in this course is a "mixture," the heterogeneous American literatures of the era. Our emphasis will be on the **diversity** of American social life in this period. We will read slave narratives, Indian captivity narratives, travel narratives, trial transcripts, sermons and spiritual autobiographies, journals and letters, political tracts and speeches, poems, confessions and diaries, histories, essays, newspaper articles, autobiographies, and three novels. We will read work written by Native peoples, slaves, explorers, women, Puritans, Quakers, Catholics, presidents and a first lady, patriots and loyalists, diplomats and soldiers, farmers and merchants, a famous inventor and diplomat (Benjamin Franklin), a weird Gothic novelist (Charles Brockden Brown), and more. Some of these figures are legendary—Christopher Columbus, Captain John Smith, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Boone, Tom Paine, etc. Others are not well known at all.

Our reading and discussion will be organized around different approaches to the study of American culture. Some sections of the schedule focus on an examination of the writings of different cultural groups and their contacts with other groups. See the "The People and the European Invasion" sections, for instance. The portions of the schedule devoted to Puritanism, the Revolution, and the Enlightenment emphasize the history of ideas and systems of thought. Popular culture is the center of other segments on the syllabus, especially toward the end of the semester when we will be reading sentimental, picaresque, and gothic novels. Some parts of the schedule may focus on the intersection of all three approaches—the "Indian Captivity Narratives" section, for example. The aim in organizing the course this way is to emphasize the variety of cultural approaches to American writing and life. American cultural studies is not simply the study of **cultural groups and identities**, or the study of **theory and ideas**, or the study of **popular culture**. It's all of those things. Moreover, the "**canonical**" authors of this era—Bradstreet, Edwards, Franklin, Jefferson, Wheatley, for example—are all represented.

## Course Goals and Guiding Questions

The primary aim of this course is to help you to develop ways to think about, study, research, discuss, and write about the diversity of American writing and culture from 1492 to 1800. You might also think of Early American Literature and Culture as a course in how to read primary documents and to use those documents to construct a literary and cultural history of "America" (or what would become the United States) in the period before 1800.

Because the study of literature and culture is interdisciplinary, the range of issues we will explore is quite varied at times. Don't be scared or annoyed by this; be fearless and excited about it. Our primary purpose will always be to invent ways of analyzing, thinking about, talking about, and writing about the connection between literature and culture in the period.

A set of guiding questions should help us to get started and to remain focused.

- What are the connections between writing and culture in this era?
- How do we read and interpret these texts from the past?
- What do they tell us about America and American cultures before 1800? In what ways do our reading strategies limit or enhance what the texts disclose?
- In what ways can these documents serve as evidence for cultural-historical claims and interpretations?
- What did these texts *do*? What purposes or functions did these documents serve in their original contexts? And how do we know that they served such functions?
- Should we read a novel or a poem differently than a journal or legal deposition? If so, how does one read a poem to learn about an earlier time or a different culture? And how does one read a personal diary so that it tells us more than the private secrets of people now dead and begins to reveal something about the culture, the time, the place in which it was written?
- Are some documents more interesting and valuable than others? If so, how do we determine which documents have more cultural-historical significance and which less?
- What are the uses of these texts for us in the present?

## Course Requirements

**Reading.** The most important work in a 600-level "Readings" course is careful, patient, thorough reading of the assigned texts. You will need to finish the assigned readings by the time indicated on the reading schedule. I encourage you to keep a reading journal or take reading notes on each text. If you don't take notes of some sort, I'm not sure how you'll be able to keep track of the complexity and diversity of our reading throughout the semester.

**Attendance.** In addition to careful reading, I expect active participation and good attendance from everyone. Some of the most significant learning will happen during our classroom conversations. Thus, I am a firm believer in class attendance. Irregular attendance will hurt your grade; good attendance and active participation in class discussions will improve your grade. If you miss no classes, your grade will move up one step (a B+ will become an A-, for instance). If you miss three classes, your grade will move down one step (your B- could turn into a C+). If you miss five, you will drop a whole letter grade (a C becomes D). If you miss seven classes, you automatically fail the course.



**Papers and Exams.** The writing in our course will consist of three essays and some informal and in-class writing assignments. During the semester, I will distribute handouts describing these assignments in more detail. I will also ask you to take a midterm and comprehensive final examination.

**Grades.** In determining final grades, each course requirement will carry the following relative weight:

Essay 1	10%
Essay 2	20%
Essay 3	30%
Midterm Examination	10%
Comprehensive Final Examination	20%
Participation and In-Class or Informal Assignments	10%



If at any point during the semester you'd like to discuss your work and your performance in the class, please drop by to see me. I enjoy talking with students, and I don't want anxiety or uncertainty about grades to interfere with more important questions (Did Cabeza de Vaca really heal the Indians he met? Is Wheatley calling the "Christians" or the "Negroes" "black as Cain"? What does it mean that the Mahicans gave Governor Burnett "three beavers"?).

**Is this class hard?** Walt Whitman, my favorite poet, once wrote: "Listen! I will be honest with you, / I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes."

So, listen. I will be honest with you. This is not an easy course. The readings here are demanding: sometimes for linguistic reasons (old or unfamiliar language), or cultural ones (the author's world is so different from our own), or intellectual ones (abstract, complex, or obscure ideas), or some combination of the above reasons. I take attendance and class participation very seriously. I will expect you

to talk with and work with other students. You will be asked to write and re-write. Believe me, this is a hard course.

But, precisely because of its difficulty, it will offer rough new prizes. Class will be exciting, even fun. Our discussions will be lively, animated, exhausting. You will have the opportunity to compose the best writing you have ever done. And you will learn so much—about early America and its cultures, about literature and writing, about how to read texts that are strange and difficult because they are so distant from our present.

### **Course Policies**

**Late Papers.** I do not typically accept late papers, but in certain, limited circumstances I will accept papers after the due date. Assignments will lose a letter grade for every class period that they are late. I collect papers at the beginning of class on the due date.

**Revisions.** You may revise your second and third essays. If you would like to revise a paper, the revision would be due one week after the papers have been returned. To submit a revision, please write a one-

paragraph summary explaining why and how you revised and hand it in with both the revised version and the old version with my comments. A revision must be substantially improved to merit a grade change.

**The Honor Code.** Kansas State University has an Honor Code, which stipulates that you should do all your academic work at the university individually. Do not collaborate on any academic work unless approved by your instructor. On all of your assignments, exams, and other course work, the following pledge is implied, whether or not it is explicitly stated: "On my honor, as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work." Perhaps the most serious violation of the Honor Code in an English course is plagiarism—taking or copying someone else's words or ideas as if they were your own. Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses and may be punished by failure on the exam, paper, or project; the truly gnarly XF grade for the course; and/or expulsion from the university. Complete copies of the academic dishonesty policy are available in the Office of Student Activities and Services in the Union, or you may visit the Honor System web page at [www.ksu.edu/honor](http://www.ksu.edu/honor).

**Students with Disabilities.** If you need special accommodation for a learning or physical disability, please contact Disabled Student Services in Holton Hall 202 (532-6441), so that they may assist us in making arrangements.

### Course Resources

**Course Website.** The URL for the course website is [www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/eng1640](http://www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/eng1640). You may find there a online resources related to the course, assignments and handouts, as well as basic information about the class.

**Course Listserv.** You have also all been subscribed to a course listserv, and we can all post comments, information, and queries by sending messages to [earlyamerican@k-state.edu](mailto:earlyamerican@k-state.edu). The purpose of this listserv is to try out ideas and facilitate communication among class participants outside of class. Posting to this listserv is not required; it is here for our convenience. The only rule is this: all postings to the list should be related to our class in some way or another. If you have your K-State e-mail forwarded to another address, the University will subscribe you to that address also so that you can send messages to this list from either address.

**Texts.** The following books are available at the K-State Union Bookstore and Varney's Bookstore in Aggieville:

Carla Mulford, ed., *Early American Writings* (Oxford)  
Hannah W. Foster, *The Coquette* (Oxford)  
Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive* (Modern Library)  
Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond* (Broadview)



**Note:** You will also be doing some reading from a coursepack. It is available now at the Arts and Sciences Copy Center in the basement of Eisenhower Hall.

*Illustrations: Thomas Jefferson (page 1), Phillis Wheatley (page 2), Samson Occom (page 3), Judith Sargent Murray (page 4).*