



*“Everybody’s doing something. We’ll do  
NOTHING!”*

## English 170: Literature of Minds and Selves

Professor Christine Hoffmann  
cehoffmann@mail.wvu.edu  
Office Hours T/TH 2:00-6:00

### Course Description

This course explores the nature of consciousness, selfhood, and humanness through literary and filmic representations of thought and character, especially those that deviate from the norm.

### Course Topic

#### **Getting Away with Everything in Texts about Nothing**

In a crucial early moment in *King Lear*, the old king’s fool asks him, “can you make no use of nothing?” In a less crucial moment in Season 4 of *Seinfeld*, George suggests that the pilot Jerry is pitching to NBC should be “about nothing.” Though he is skeptical at first, Jerry eventually admits, “I think you may have something there.” The scene is a metacommentary on *Seinfeld* itself, famously described as the “show about nothing” that aired for 9 seasons. But long before *Seinfeld*, medieval and early modern writers asked themselves how they might make use of nothing, answering with ingenious narratives and projects that provocatively flatten the distinctions between the significant and the insignificant, the productive and the unproductive, the human and the nonhuman, the sacred and the fake.

In English 170, we’ll consider how we determine, individually and culturally, what is *of use* and what is not(hing). Examining pre-modern standards for usefulness—as well as our own standards—our objective is to construct general and generous definitions of utility for not only pre-modern periods but also the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Alongside Erasmus’s *Folly* and Shakespeare’s fools, we’ll study the personas of Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee and Reggie Watts. As we navigate the *Musaeum Clausum*, Thomas Browne’s catalog of fake books, and *Ficciones*, Jorge Luis Borges’s labyrinthian collection of short stories, we’ll join the ranks of *Ingress*, the massively multiplayer online role-playing game that tracks fake portals around real landmarks. We’ll read accounts of monstrous encounters in early modern pamphlets and medieval bestiaries, then scroll through the pages of the *SCP Foundation*, an online community devoted to protecting humanity from monstrous “anomalies.”

### Learning Outcomes

- Situate & interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts
- Draw & articulate connections between texts
- Practice rhetorically effective writing & communication
- Critically evaluate the criteria for consequential vs. trivial art, literature & media

## Course Materials to purchase (print copies only; no e-texts for these)

William Shakespeare & Ian Pollack, *King Lear* ISBN-13: 978-1579126179

Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* ISBN-13: 978-0802130303

## Course Materials to access through ecampus or online

Erasmus, *Praise of Folly* (plus several other examples of encomium and mock encomium)

Thomas Browne, *Musaeum Clausum*

SCP Foundation website

Ingress, a free mobile app



## Participation

150 participation points can be earned through in-class exercises, group discussion assignments, reading quizzes and other activities given during class. In addition, **I will keep track of your verbal participation**, awarding ~7 points every week (another 100 points) to students who contribute substantially to class discussion. Speak up every day, bring your book and stay engaged in the discussion (that means staying alert and off your phone), and you'll likely receive full credit.

## Attendance & Make-Up Policies

I will keep track of your attendance; if you miss more than 6 class periods (i.e. more than 20% of the 15-week course), you will fail. I impose no additional penalties for missing class other than the participation points you'll lose for missing in-class work. I don't need to see any doctor's notes or other excuses; there are unfortunately always consequences for missing class, even when you have a good reason, even when it's something you can't control.

Exams can be made up/rescheduled in special circumstances (e.g. school-sponsored trips, Days of Special Concern), but quizzes and verbal participation can never be made up. Some in-class writing exercises may be made up; just ask (though avoid phrasing your request as, "did I miss anything when I was absent?" The answer to that question is always *Yes, you missed class.*)

## Coursework

Class Exercises	150
Verbal Participation	100
Unit 1: (Mock) Encomium	150
Unit 2: SCP Foundation Page	150
Unit 3: Ingress Bibliography	200
Unit 4: Reflective Essay	250

## Grading Scale

Assignments add up to a total of 1000 points. Convert point totals into percentages, and the letter grade equivalents are:

A=90-100; B=80-89; C=70-79;  
D=60-69; F=0-59

## Assignment Descriptions (more detailed guidelines on separate ecampus pages)

### **(Mock) Encomium**

Compose a mock encomium to an insignificant object, activity, person, animal or concept.

### **SCP Foundation Page**

Design and submit a page for inclusion in the SCP Foundation website

### **Ingress Bibliography**

Compose a review of Ingress that includes quotations from fake scholarly books and articles written about the game. Also compose a bibliography that lists full citation information for at least 20 of these fake sources.

### **Reflective Essay – Making Use of Nothing**

Answer King Lear's fool's question, *can you make no use of nothing*, in a researched essay of 4-6 pages. This is meant to be a reflective essay, so the "nothing" you should attempt to make use of includes any and all of the course texts from this semester. Secondary sources should also be incorporated.

## Teaching Philosophy and a Note about Sensitive Material

One of my main goals as a teacher is to present English studies as a dynamic, dramatic, social activity. I will encourage you to focus not on discovering THE truth in the literature we study, but on navigating the complex contexts that surround the literature. Often the most meaningful analysis comes out of conversations that, though they may not end in clear consensus, exercise our critical thinking and enhance our engagement with, and understanding of, how people actually communicate in the world. I will do my best to steer this class in the direction of relevant, engaging discussion.

That said, students should note that this course may contain some material that is sexually explicit, politically controversial, or religiously sensitive. In addition, there may be readings, videos and works of art that include sexual content, violence or graphic language, including references to sexism, racism or other disturbing

points of view. The purpose of the course is to engage intellectually with all these matters, in an academic framework of scholarly inquiry. While all are encouraged to respect the diverse sensibilities in the classroom, discussions may be frank. If such content is a concern for you, you may wish to consider registering for another course.

### WVU English Department's Affirmation of Values:

#### Affirmation of Values

We, the members of WVU's Department of English, believe that critical and creative reading and writing constitute acts of radical love. We ally ourselves with a multitude of departments, student bodies, and dedicated individuals across the country and the world who refuse to remain silent within a climate of hatred and violence: be it from sexism, racism, classism, ableism, nativism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, or Islamophobia. We are committed to building communities, not dividing them. Colson Hall and our classrooms campus-wide are spaces where students, faculty, and staff may safely voice their concerns and where we may, together, foster futures more just. We aim to raise the status of those suppressed by the status quo; in assembly with human and nonhuman beings, we protest all types of environmental degradation, especially those prescribed at the expense of inhabitants' health. Our research and syllabi affirm the core values of compassion, inclusivity, and care that a diverse humanities program holds for everyone. By telling stories of those who suffer under oppression in any form, past and present, we honor the ability of language and other means of communication – in each area of study we offer – to redress these wrongs, urge unity, and pursue peace. To those who seek shelter or wish to expand its scope, we welcome you; we thank you; we are with you.

## **Academic Dishonesty**

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me before the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

## **Accommodations**

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (304-293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, see [diversity.wvu.edu](https://diversity.wvu.edu).

## Course Schedule

When readings are listed, they are due on that date; that means you ought to come to class having read the materials listed under that class's date.

Here is [the link to view the course slides](#).

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1/10

Introduction to the course

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### Unit 1: the significant and the insignificant

1/12

Junichiro Tanizaki, [In Praise of Shadows](#), first 4 pages

Jody Rosen, [In Praise of the Humble Knot](#)

Skim Synesius's [Praise of Baldness](#)

The Axis of Awesome, [Four Chords](#)

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1/17

Eric Lemay, [In Praise of Nothing](#) ([scroll to bottom of page for link to text](#))

Bertrand Russell, [In Praise of Idleness](#)

Francois Jullien, [In Praise of Blandness](#), pages 23-39

Leslie Stern, [The Smoking Book](#), read a handful of the stories collected here, all of which feature smoke/smoking

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1/19

Desiderus Erasmus, [In Praise of Folly](#)

Katie Roiphe, [In Praise of Messy Lives](#)

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1/24

William Amos (2000) [In Praise of Blackflies](#)

Lucian, [Muscae Encomium](#)

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1/26

**3 copies of Rough Draft of Encomium Assignment Due in Class for Peer Review**

[sign up](#) for individual conference time

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1/31

[no](#) class meeting; individual conferences with Prof. Hoffmann in Colson 329

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2/2

**Encomiums due in class**

Class Symposium

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### Unit 2: the human and the nonhuman

2/7

Read [about](#) the SCP Foundation

[Join](#) the SCP Foundation

Read [How to Write an SCP](#)

Read ["What is Posthumanism?"](#)

[Begin *Wall-E* in class]

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2/9

[Finish *Wall-E* in class]

Read SCPs for Animals, Vegetables, Objects: SCP-173, SCP-682, SCP-006-J, SCP-093, SCP-689, SCP-426, SCP-294, SCP-506 SCP-401 SCP-504

Jane Bennett, "POWERS OF THE HOARD: FURTHER NOTES ON MATERIAL AGENCY"

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2/14

SCPs for environments: SCP-087, SCP-2000, SCP-895, SCP-2317

Eileen Joy, ["You Are Here: A Manifesto"](#)

optional: William Cronon, ["The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"](#)

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2/16

SCPs for disembodied tech or cyborgs SCP-055, SCP-1981, SCP-914, SCP-1733

Amber Case, Ted Talk: [We are all cyborgs now](#)

optional: N. Katherine Hayles, excerpt from [How We Became Posthuman](#)

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2/21

Emma Marris, Ted Talk: [Nature is everywhere - we just need to learn to see it](#)

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2/23

China Mieville, short stories from *Three Moments of an Explosion*

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2/28

**3 copies of rough drafts of SCP Foundation pages due in class for peer review**

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3/2

In-class Presentations of SCP Foundation pages Introduction to Ingress

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**Spring Break** [Play](#) Ingress over the break!

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### Unit 3: the sacred and the fake

3/14

Browne, [Musaeum Clausum](#)

Alternative Link: <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/musaeum-clausum-1684/>

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3/16 Borges, [Ficciones](#)

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3/21 Borges, *Ficciones*

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3/23 Borges, *Ficciones*

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3/28 Peer Review

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**Unit 4: the productive and the counterproductive**

3/30 Introduction to Fake News (library day)

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4/4

Colbert & Watts & Bee

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4/6 No class; Professor Hoffmann is at a conference; Fake news report due; read Reflective Essay Assignment and annotated bibliography assignment

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4/11

King Lear, Acts 1-3

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4/13

King Lear, Acts 4-5

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4/18 TBA

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4/20 Conferences

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4/25 Peer Review

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4/27 End of course discussion day