

**Instructor Information:**

Brianne Bilsky  
 Dean of Berkeley College & Lecturer in Humanities  
 Office: Berkeley College, F11  
 Office Hours: W, 10:30am-12:00pm and by appt.  
[brianne.bilsky@yale.edu](mailto:brianne.bilsky@yale.edu)

**Course Information:**

HUMS 095  
 First-Year Seminar  
 Humanities (Hu) or Writing (WR)  
 MW 9:00-10:15am (Eastern)  
 Location: Zoom

**Certain Uncertainties: Literature, Physics, Philosophy**

Why does the universe exist? What is the nature of reality? Who are we? Where are we? How do we know?

This first-year seminar attempts to address such uncertainties by looking at three seemingly disparate disciplines: literature, physics, and philosophy. Throughout the twentieth century, significant advances were made in each of these fields. In literature, the modernists and postmodernists changed the way we read and write. In physics, modern cosmology and quantum mechanics profoundly affected our understanding of the universe's origins and the nature of reality. In philosophy, new schools of thought such as structuralism and poststructuralism challenged our perception of language and meaning. By placing such seemingly separate fields of study and some of their signature advances in conversation, this course not only aims to explore certain uncertainties but also to underscore the value of a liberal arts education.

**Texts to Purchase (7)**

**Note:** You can purchase **either** paperbacks **OR** e-books, whichever you prefer. For your reference, below are approximate prices for each version. Any reading that appears on the Schedule of Classes but is not listed here will be provided to you electronically.

- \* **Auster, Paul.** *The New York Trilogy*: ISBN: 0143039830 (paperback approx. \$14; e-book approx. \$11)
- \* **Crease, Robert and Alfred Scharff Goldhaber.** *The Quantum Moment*: ISBN: 0393351920 (paperback approx. \$17; e-book approx. \$10)
- \* **Doctorow, E. L.** *City of God*: ISBN: 0812985893 (paperback approx. \$14; e-book approx. \$11)
- \* **Holt, Jim.** *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*: ISBN: 0871403595 (paperback approx. \$14; e-book approx. \$10)
- \* **Lightman, Alan.** *Mr. g*: ISBN: 030774485X (paperback approx. \$13; e-book approx. \$13)
- \* **Ozeki, Ruth.** *A Tale for the Time Being*: ISBN: 0143124870 (paperback approx. \$14; e-book approx. \$13)
- \* **Woolf, Virginia.** *Mrs. Dalloway*: ISBN: 9780156628709 (paperback approx. \$14; e-book approx. \$10)

## Learning Objectives

This course aims to help students:

- \* Learn about the history and development of modern physics, literature and philosophy.
- \* Learn about the conventions of literary works that grapple with concepts from physics and philosophy.
- \* Learn to make connections between the sciences and the humanities; between scientific and literary culture; and between texts.
- \* Strengthen critical reading and critical thinking skills.
- \* Strengthen writing skills, such as: defining and defending a thesis, identifying and incorporating evidence, properly documenting sources, and using feedback to create substantive revisions.
- \* Demonstrate knowledge of authors, literary works, scientific principles, and philosophical issues.

## Course Requirements

Requirements are designed to assess student success in achieving the course's learning objectives. Students will receive full descriptions of each major assignment in separate prompt sheets. Because this course carries a WR designation, all essays will make use of a writing process that includes drafting, feedback and revision.

- \* **Essay 1 (10%):** 4-5 pages; choice of assigned topics
- \* **Essay 2 (20%):** 5-6 pages; choice of assigned topics
- \* **Essay 3 (20%):** 5-6 pages; individually-developed topic
- \* **Final essay (35%):** 8-10 pages; individually-developed topic
- \* **Discussion Posts (5%):** small writing assignments to be completed on Canvas
- \* **Participation (10%):** contributions to class discussion

## Academic Freedom, Instruction Method, Attendance and Lateness Policies

**Academic Freedom:** This course is animated by the principle of intellectual freedom. It is a space in which we can discuss difficult ideas and alternative views. It offers, in other words, the very thing that a college education should afford—namely, an opportunity to advance your own unique thoughts and claims, however tentative. Take full advantage of it. Be curious; ask questions; challenge your assumptions and ideas; and respect others as they contend with and formulate their own.

**Instruction Method and Attendance:** This seminar will be taught via Zoom in real time on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9:00-10:15am (Eastern). There are no asynchronous elements such as pre-recorded lectures. Because this is a seminar, the attendance and participation of each student is essential to the overall success of the class. Students are expected to attend each class on time and be prepared to fully engage with the course material and with each other. That said, each student is permitted two absences for any reason without penalty. In most cases, missing more than two classes during the term will negatively impact your participation grade. The severity of the impact will depend on the frequency of and reason(s) for the additional absences. If you know that you are going to miss a class, please notify me ahead of that class if possible.

**Late Assignments:** An assignment is late if it is turned in at any time after the specified due date and time. In most cases, late essay submissions that are *not* accompanied by a Dean’s Excuse will be penalized by an immediate 10% reduction in the overall assignment grade and an additional 10% reduction for every 24 hours thereafter that the essay is late. For more information about Dean’s Excuses, consult the [YCPS, Section H. Completion of Course Work](#).

## **Yale College Policies and Resources**

**Plagiarism Policy:** Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this seminar. We will discuss integrity in writing and in research and specifically how to avoid unintentional plagiarism. As stated in the [Yale College Undergraduate Regulations](#):

Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s work, words, or ideas as if they were one’s own. Thus most forms of cheating on examinations are plagiarism; but the term is usually used in reference to papers rather than examinations.

If one uses a source for a paper, one must acknowledge it. What counts as a source varies greatly depending on the assignment, but the list certainly includes readings, lectures, websites, conversations, interviews, and other students’ papers. Every academic discipline has its own conventions for acknowledging sources. Instructors should make clear which conventions students must use. In all situations, students who are confused about the specific punctuation and formatting must nonetheless make clear in written work where they have borrowed from others—whether it be a matter of data, opinions, questions, ideas, or specific language. This obligation holds whether the sources are published or unpublished.

Submission of an entire paper prepared by someone else is an especially egregious form of plagiarism, and is grounds for the imposition of a particularly serious penalty, including expulsion from the University.

**The Yale Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL):** The CTL “supports students across the curriculum as they take ownership of their learning” through “various teaching, tutoring, writing and technology-enable learning programs distributed across the University.” The following CTL webpages provide an overview of resources that would be particularly helpful to students in this course:

- \* [Mission and Guiding Principles](#)
- \* [Humanities and Social Sciences Tutoring](#)
- \* [Undergraduate Writing Resources](#)
- \* [Using Sources](#)

## Schedule of Classes

### I. Something Rather Than Nothing

AUG 31 (M):	course introduction
SEP 2 (W):	Holt, <i>Why Does the World Exist?</i> (pp. 3-78)
SEP 7 (M):	Holt, <i>Why Does the World Exist?</i> (pp. 79-200)
SEP 9 (W):	Holt, <i>Why Does the World Exist?</i> (pp. 200-275)
SEP 14 (M):	Lightman, <i>Mr. g</i> (pp. 3-71)
SEP 16 (W):	Lightman, <i>Mr. g</i> (pp. 72-141)
SEP 21 (M):	Lightman, <i>Mr. g</i> (pp. 142-212); writing workshop

### II. Quantum Questions

SEP 23 (W):	Crease, <i>The Quantum Moment</i> (intro, chp. 1, 2)
SEP 28 (M):	<b>Essay 1 due</b> ; Crease, <i>The Quantum Moment</i> (chp. 3, 4)
SEP 30 (W):	Woolf, "Modern Fiction" and <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> (pp. 3-64)
OCT 5 (M):	Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> (pp. 65-122)
OCT 7 (W):	Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> (pp. 123-194)

### III. The Measurement Problem

OCT 12 (M):	Crease, <i>The Quantum Moment</i> (chp. 6, 7, 8); writing workshop
OCT 14 (W):	Crease, <i>The Quantum Moment</i> (chp. 9, 10); Barthes, "Death of the Author"
OCT 19 (M):	<b>Essay 2 due</b> ; Auster, <i>NYT (Ghosts)</i> , pp. 131-192)
OCT 21 (W):	Auster, <i>NYT (City of Glass)</i> , pp. 3-71)
OCT 26 (M):	Auster, <i>NYT (City of Glass)</i> , pp. 72-130)

### IV. Phys-losio-fiction

OCT 28 (W):	Doctorow, <i>City of God</i> (pp. 3-75)
NOV 2 (M):	Doctorow, <i>City of God</i> (pp. 76-145)
NOV 4 (W):	Doctorow, <i>City of God</i> (pp. 146-195); writing workshop
NOV 9 (M):	<b>Essay 3 due</b> ; Doctorow, <i>City of God</i> (pp. 196-270)
NOV 11 (W):	Ozeki, <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i> (pp. 3-85)
NOV 16 (M):	Ozeki, <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i> (pp. 86-236)
NOV 18 (W):	Ozeki, <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i> (pp. 237-322)

### [NOV 21-29: November Break]

NOV 30 (M):	Ozeki, <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i> (pp. 323-430)
DEC 2 (W):	writing workshop; course wrap-up

**DEC 11 (F): Final Essay due by 5:00pm**