

FINAL PROJECT

LITERATURE FOR THE PRESENT

What Can Literature Help Us Understand About the Questions We Live With?

Throughout this course, we have read literary works from different countries, historical periods, and cultural contexts. These works were written in the past, but many of the questions they raise remain close to our lives today: freedom, family, success, loneliness, social pressure, inequality, love, death, belonging, prejudice, memory, war, nature, and the search for a meaningful life.

For your final project, you will bring literature into conversation with **a question that matters to you and to people living today.**

The main question of the project is:

What can literature help us see, understand, or question about the lives we are living now?

This is **not a book report**. You do not need to prove that several literary works are similar.

Instead, your task is to show how reading literature can make an important contemporary or personal question **deeper, more complicated, or differently understood.**

PART I. GROUP PROJECT: LITERATURE FOR THE PRESENT (Day 15)

You will work in a group of **4–5 students**.

Your group will choose **one question that you genuinely care about** and use **3–4 texts from this course** to explore that question.

Step 1. Choose a question that matters

Start with a question, not simply a topic.

For example:

Too broad:

Success

Better:

Who decides what a successful life should look like?

Too broad:

Freedom

Better:

Why can people be free in one sense but still feel unfree?

Too broad:

Family

Better:

Why is it sometimes difficult to understand the people closest to us?

Other possible questions include:

- Why do people feel lonely even when they are surrounded by others?
- How much should we change ourselves to belong?
- How do family expectations influence the choices we make?
- Why do people sometimes hide parts of themselves from others?
- What makes someone feel like an outsider?
- Does success necessarily lead to a meaningful life?
- What happens when our ideals encounter reality?
- How does the past continue to shape the present?
- How do people live with loss?
- How does society influence the way we see ourselves?
- Can anger help us respond to injustice, or can it also damage us?
- What do we lose when money and achievement become too important?
- How can people remain human in violent or unjust circumstances?
- What makes a life meaningful?
- What does it mean to truly know another person?
- What does “home” mean?
- What is our responsibility to other people?
- How should we live when we know that life is temporary?

You may propose another question.

A good question does **not** have an obvious answer.

Step 2. Explain why your question matters now

Tell the class why your group chose this question.

You may connect it to contemporary life, such as:

- university life;
- relationships;
- family expectations;
- friendship;
- career choices;
- pressure to succeed;
- social media;
- consumer culture;
- inequality;
- discrimination;
- environmental concerns;
- war and violence;
- migration;
- identity and belonging;
- issues that young people today frequently experience or discuss.

You may refer to personal experience, but **no student is required to disclose private or sensitive information.**

You may speak from observation rather than personal experience.

Step 3. Choose 3–4 texts from our course

Choose works that help your group think about the question.

The texts do **not** need to agree with one another.

One text may help you understand the problem.

Another may challenge your first assumption.

Another may offer a completely different perspective.

Ask this question about every text:

What does this particular work help us see about our question?

Do not select a text simply because it contains the same “theme.”

Step 4. Use the texts as different lenses

For each literary work, identify what it contributes to your thinking.

You should use **specific evidence from the text**, but you do not need to organize the project around isolated quotations.

You may discuss:

- the work as a whole;
- a character;
- an important relationship;
- a recurring image;
- a conflict;
- an important scene;
- the ending;
- the narrative voice;
- several connected passages;
- or an idea that develops throughout the work.

Your evidence should support your interpretation.

The important question is:

What can we understand because we have read this work?

Step 5. Show how literature complicated your thinking

This is one of the most important parts of the project.

Your group should be able to explain:

At first, we thought...

The literary works made us question...

Now we think...

For example:

At first, we thought loneliness mainly meant being physically alone. After reading Joyce and Salinger, we began to see that people can also experience loneliness inside families,

relationships, and social groups. We now think that loneliness may have as much to do with communication, belonging, and being understood as with being physically alone.

Your reading does not have to produce a final answer.

Literature may make you **less certain**, and that can be valuable.

Step 6. Make a meaningful connection to the present

Include at least **one concrete present-day connection**.

This might be:

- an experience common among university students;
- a situation you have observed;
- a social-media phenomenon;
- an advertisement;
- a public debate;
- a film or cultural object;
- a social problem;
- an issue affecting your generation.

Do not simply say:

“This text is still relevant today.”

Instead, explain:

What does the literary work allow us to notice about this contemporary issue that we might otherwise miss?

Step 7. Tell us what literature contributes

At the end of your project, return to your original question.

Explain:

What do you understand differently after reading these works?

For example:

Before reading these works, we tended to think of success mainly as something an individual achieves through talent and hard work. Franklin, Fitzgerald, and Tolstoy made us reconsider this

idea. They helped us see that our definitions of success are also shaped by social expectations, class, recognition from others, and our own ideas about what makes life meaningful.

Your conclusion does not need to solve the problem.

It should show that literature has helped you **think better about it**.

GROUP PRESENTATION

Each group will give an **8–10 minute presentation**.

A clear presentation might follow this sequence:

Our Question -> Why It Matters Today -> What Text 1 Helps Us See -> What Text 2 Helps Us See -> What Text 3 Helps Us See -> Present-Day Connection -> How Our Thinking Changed -> Final Thought

Do not spend your presentation summarizing plots or giving long author biographies.

Assume that your classmates have read the course texts.

Every group member should understand the **whole project**, not only the text they personally worked on.

After the presentation, the instructor may ask any member of the group to explain the group's choices or ideas.

PART II. INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION (due date: Day 15)

LITERATURE AND MY LIFE

Each student will submit an individual reflection of approximately **400–500 words**.

This is different from the group project.

For this part, choose **ONE literary text from the course that has become personally meaningful to you**.

It may be a text that:

- reminded you of something in your own life;
- helped you understand yourself better;
- helped you understand another person differently;
- connected with something you are currently experiencing;
- made you reconsider an assumption;

- made you uncomfortable in a productive way;
- gave you language for something you had thought about before;
- raised a question that feels important to your future;
- connected with your values, hopes, worries, relationships, or decisions;
- or simply stayed in your mind after you finished reading it.

You may respond to the **whole work**. You do not have to choose one single “moment” or passage.

However, your reflection should still show that you have read the work carefully. Use specific characters, situations, images, ideas, or passages when they help explain your response.

Your main question is:

Why does this particular literary work matter to me personally?

Go beyond:

“I liked this story.”

“I can relate to the character.”

“This book taught me an important lesson.”

Instead, explain the connection as specifically as you can.

For example:

The Death of Ivan Ilyich made me think about how much of my own idea of success comes from expectations around me rather than from what I personally value.

Or:

The Catcher in the Rye made me think about the pressure to appear fine, confident, or successful even when a person feels uncertain inside.

Or:

“The Dead” made me reconsider how easily we assume that we fully understand people who are close to us.

Or:

Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” made me think differently about how anger can come from experiences larger than a single individual, while still becoming something that the individual has to decide how to live with.

Or:

Wordsworth made me notice how rarely I pay attention to the physical environment around me when I am busy with study, screens, and everyday responsibilities.

Your reflection might discuss a relationship, a decision, a fear, an ambition, an observation, a value, or a question about your future.

The connection should be **personal and specific enough that the reflection could only really belong to you.**

What should your individual reflection do?

By the end of 400–500 words, your reader should understand three things:

First: Why did you choose this particular work?

Second: What in your own life, experience, thinking, values, relationships, worries, or future does the work connect with?

Third: What did reading it allow you to see, understand, question, or reconsider?

You may find this structure useful:

Before reading this work, I tended to think...

What I recognized / questioned / noticed while reading was...

This connects with my own life because...

What I now understand differently is...

What I think I will carry with me from this work is...

You do not need to use these exact sentences.

Important note about personal writing

“Personal” does **not** mean that you must reveal a painful, traumatic, or private experience.

A thoughtful reflection can be about something ordinary:

- choosing a major;
- worrying about future employment;
- arguing with a parent;
- misunderstanding a friend;
- wanting to meet family expectations;
- deciding what success means;

- spending too much time online;
- feeling pressure to fit in;
- thinking about money;
- being afraid of failure;
- noticing nature differently;
- becoming more independent;
- wondering what kind of adult you want to become.

Choose something you are comfortable writing about.

WHAT NOT TO DO

For both the group project and the individual reflection, avoid:

- long plot summaries;
- biographies copied from websites;
- very general statements about “humanity”;
- listing themes without explaining them;
- saying only that a text is “relevant today”;
- giving the interpretation you think the instructor wants;
- forcing several texts to give the same message.

Instead, demonstrate:

careful reading + a meaningful question + specific thinking + a connection that matters

ASSESSMENT

Component	Points
Meaningful and clearly framed question	15
Understanding of the literary texts	20
Use and interpretation of textual evidence	20
Connection between literature and present-day life	15

Component	Points
Evidence that reading complicated or developed your thinking	10
Group presentation: clarity, engagement, and organization	10
Individual Reflection: specificity, thoughtfulness, and personal engagement	10
TOTAL	100

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

Use this checklist:

- Our group has one clear question that matters today.
- We use 3–4 texts from the course.
- We explain what each text helps us understand.
- We use specific textual evidence.
- We do more than summarize.
- We make at least one meaningful connection to contemporary life.
- We explain how reading the texts changed or complicated our thinking.
- Every member understands the whole group project.
- My individual reflection focuses on one course text that is personally meaningful to me.
- My reflection makes a specific connection to my own life, values, concerns, relationships, decisions, or future.
- My reflection sounds like **my reflection**, not something that could have been written by anyone.

The two questions to remember

For the **group project**:

What can these literary works help us understand about a question that matters today?

For the **individual reflection**:

Why does this literary work matter to me, at this point in my own life?