

**First-Year Seminar 154**  
**Sections 2 & 3: From Private Obsession to Global**  
**Phenomenon: The Story of *The Lord of the Rings***  
**Fall 2012**

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**Text**

Required purchase: *The Lord of the Rings*. The University Bookstore has stocked the one-volume 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition, ISBN 978-0-618-64015, \$20

**Description and Goals**

This First-Year Seminar shares with all other FYS sections the important goal of helping you make the transition from high school to college successfully and to give you a good start on your college career. By the end of the course you should be able to

- Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.
- Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.
- Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to your academic studies.
- Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances your academic study at UWSP.
- Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support your academic studies and co-curricular involvement.
- Develop a plan that demonstrates your responsibility for your own education, specifically how it relates to your interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.

These sections also satisfy the General Degree Requirement for Humanities Area 2 (literature). The principal goal of Humanities Courses is “to introduce students to the enduring expressions of the human mind and culture, and provide them with the critical thinking, the interpretive, and the historical perspectives to understand and evaluate these expressions.” Specifically, you will learn some facts about Tolkien’s life and career and develop skills for analyzing fiction, such as character analysis, structure, and point of view.

Class activities will consist primarily of discussion and other hands-on activities, with occasional lectures. Expect to have some kind of assignment—reading, writing, research, etc.—to do for almost every class.

## Assignments and Grading

You'll be doing a number of different things in order to accomplish all the goals of the course. Below are descriptions of most of the assignments, along with the weight each has in the course grade; the due dates are included on the class schedule. Expect handouts with more detail for the larger assignments.

### Reading and Journals

Reading assignments are listed on the course schedule below and should be completed before the scheduled day. Read thoughtfully, taking notes as appropriate. For the weeks when we are watching films, watching the film is your "reading" assignment, to be completed by that day. (All three films are on reserve in the library; I will show each film one evening before we discuss it.) For six of the weeks when there is a reading or viewing assignment, write an informal response, or journal. Guidelines and specifics for the journal assignments will be detailed on a separate handout. Journals contribute **15%** of the course grade.

### Quizzes

There are three planned quizzes, listed on the schedule, that will cover material presented in lecture. In addition, expect some unscheduled quizzes: For any day that there is a reading/viewing assignment, there's a possibility that I will give a quiz on that material. The lowest quiz grade will be dropped and the rest averaged to provide **10%** of the course grade.

### Credit/No-credit Assignments

Several short, simple assignments will not be graded, but you will get credit for doing them. These include

- a pre-course and post-course survey which gives me a sense of what the class's needs are and how well the course meets them,
- a visit to my office for an informal chat about your goals and needs,
- the first drafts of what will eventually become your College Roadmap and your Critical Paper (described below),
- three other preliminary steps as you work toward the Critical Paper, and
- feedback for 2-3 other students on their paper drafts.

These will contribute to your grade for Attendance and Participation.

### Attendance and participation

You should expect to come to every class meeting, come prepared (which includes having with you your book and equipment for taking notes), and participate in whatever activities take place that day. How well you meet this expectation will contribute **10%** of your course grade, with the grade determined following these guidelines:

- A. No absences without a compelling reason, consistently engaged and prepared, all credit/no-credit assignments completed on time.

- B. Possibly up to three absences without a compelling reason, usually engaged and prepared when present (rare exceptions), possibly one credit/no-credit assignment not completed or two of them done late.
- C. Up to six absences without a compelling reason, usually engaged and prepared when present (occasional exceptions), possibly two credit/no-credit assignments not done or up to four done late.
- D. Up to nine absences without a compelling reason, often engaged and prepared when present (some), possibly three credit/no-credit assignments not done or up to six done late.

I will assign a tentative version of the attendance and participation grade around the middle of the semester; this is not a guarantee but should give you a reminder of how things are stacking up.

### Sort-of-graded assignments

These are assignments that are not appropriate for me to give a letter grade to, but that will vary somewhat in quality. They include

- The second and third (final) drafts of your College Roadmap, in which you identify strategies, courses, resources, etc. that will help you make the most of your college experience given your own interests, needs, goals, etc.
- A GDR and Advising plan, a selection of possible courses a list of questions to ask your advisor, which you'll create after we spend some time talking about the General Degree Requirements.
- Two Experience Papers, reports on your forays into the co-curricular opportunities and resources that are available to you at UWSP.

More details for each of these assignments will come in separate handouts. Each will be graded on a three-point scale (minus, check, plus), the criteria for which will be described on the assignment sheet. Collectively, the Sort-of-graded assignments will contribute **25%** to your course grade, determined this way:

- A. Complete all assignments with at least a check, and at least two with a plus.
- B. Complete all assignments, on time, with at least a check.
- C. Complete all assignments, at least three with a check.
- D. Complete all assignments OR earn at least three checks.

### Graded assignments

The major projects of the course, which will receive a letter grade, include a **test** on October 12 and a **critical paper**, due at the end of the semester. **Each** of these is worth **20%** of the course grade. The test covers both the primary text (books and films) and lecture material. The paper is your major opportunity to showcase your ability to analyze and think critically about the material. A study guide for the test, including grading criteria, and details of the critical paper assignment (including the preliminary credit/no-credit steps, and grading criteria) will come in separate handouts.

## Policies

**Attendance:** Attendance is a factor in your grade (as described above), and you should plan to attend class regularly and arrive on time. If you are absent or late, it's in your best interest to let me know (ahead of time if possible) and offer an explanation. I reserve the right to decide whether your reason is a "compelling" one for grading purposes, but if I don't hear from you I will assume there was not a good reason. In any case, you should always check with a classmate to find out what you missed, and see me or check D2L for any handouts.

If you have difficulty participating in any class activities (for example, due to a disability), please let me know so that I can grade your participation fairly and appropriately (and point you toward available resources when necessary).

### Late/make-up work:

- Reading journals **must** be completed before class; no late submissions will be accepted.
- Quizzes and the test can be made up **only** in the case of an extraordinarily compelling reason for missing class.
- Credit/no-credit assignments can be turned in late; see above for how that impacts the participation grade.
- Sort-of-graded assignments can be submitted late, but are ineligible for a plus.
- The critical paper, due at the end of the semester, will lose one letter grade if it is late but turned in during finals week.

**Academic honesty:** All submitted work—including journals and credit/no-credit assignments as well as graded assignments—must be written by the student alone. Any sources used in a paper must be cited and used in appropriate ways. (Any citation system you are familiar with is acceptable.) *Please* see me if you are unclear or uncertain about citations, source use, or acceptable forms of help with your papers. Any instance of plagiarism, collaboration beyond appropriate feedback, or other misrepresentation of a student's work will be dealt with according to the University policy on Academic Misconduct. This can be found in the Community Rights and Responsibilities handbook, available at <http://www.uwsp.edu/stuaffairs/Documents/RightsRespons/SRR-2010/rightsChap14.pdf>.

## Schedule

For Sept. 7:

Log into D2L to take the **introductory survey** (Problems? OK to do this later)

## How FYS learning outcomes are addressed in my sections

- Describe the importance of a liberal education and the ways in which academic study is structured at UWSP.

During the first few weeks, I make a point of having students notice ways in which Tolkien drew on his general education and did research in order to get all the details of his world and his story correct. I also talk about his biography, including some of the ways that his career path changed over the course of his life. Then, we address the idea of liberal education more directly, connecting it to what we've already learned from Tolkien's example. We look at definitions of liberal education, the LEAP outcomes, and the structure of the GDRs/GEP and the majors available at UWSP, and I have them meet in a computer lab to practice searching the timetable and begin identifying potential GEP courses and majors/minors.

- Describe the importance of critical thinking and information literacy and apply the associated skills.

I share various definitions of critical thinking and information literacy and lists of the skills that these encompass, making the points that we cannot complete the task of developing these skills and that they should expect to continue working on these in various courses throughout college. Then we focus on a few basic ideas, which we practice in class discussions and in a paper, one of the major assignments of the course. The specific skills that we practice are finding evidence to support a thesis, considering other viewpoints/countervailing evidence, and connecting the information in an additional source to a thesis (revising the thesis as appropriate). An example of the in-class activities that supported the development of critical thinking were discussions in which we practiced with various arguable topics related to the course content (e.g. "Does The Lord of the Rings have a positive or negative view of war?"), generating evidence for different possible theses on that topic.

- Identify and apply appropriate note-taking, test-taking, and time-management strategies to your academic studies.

I have posted a number of resources with various note-taking methods, study tips, etc. I give one quiz on lecture material that is open-note, followed by a discussion about how well their notes allowed them to do, and then a week later a similar quiz, closed-note, followed by a similar debrief. We also talk about taking notes on a discussion, and eventually I give a test on the same materials.

- Describe the importance of co-curricular involvement and how it enhances your academic study at UWSP.
- Identify and utilize UWSP programs, resources, and services that will support your academic studies and co-curricular involvement.

I combine these two to an extent, and they are addressed primarily through an assignment to participate in two different activities over the course of the semester (either joining in on a

co-curricular activity or using a campus resource) and write a report on each. We spend some class time also, including showing them where information about student organizations can be found and sharing some research that shows a correlation between co-curricular involvement and achievement of the LEAP outcomes.

- Develop a plan that demonstrates your responsibility for your own education, specifically how it relates to your interests, abilities, career choices, and personal development.

As I see it, this outcome to a large extent brings several of the others together. One thing I do in addition to the other activities described above is relate this goal to the experiences of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* and the author's in writing it—none of them had a clear sense of what the entire experience was going to be like (and some of them had no idea at all), but there are various examples of making choices, making tentative plans, adjusting them as needed, etc. (Cheesy, but I hope it helps.)

To develop and demonstrate this ability, students write a one-year plan, including course selection, plans for career exploration or summer jobs/internships, and other concrete steps they will take to meet (or identify) their academic, career, and personal goals.

This paper gives you the opportunity to show off your knowledge of *The Lord of the Rings* and exercise your critical thinking and information literacy skills.

### Topics

Choose a question about *The Lord of the Rings* that requires some interpretation and is debatable. Some possible topics are listed below as examples; feel free to choose one of these or devise one of your own. (It's probably a good idea to check an original topic with me to make sure it's appropriate for this assignment.). You can focus your analysis on the book, the movies, or both.

- What attitude toward war, or warriors, is evident in *The Lord of the Rings*?
- What attitude toward people of different races or cultures is evident in *The Lord of the Rings*? Is it "racist," and if so, in what ways and to what degree?
- What ideas about the nature of men and women are evident in *The Lord of the Rings*? Are certain traits or roles appropriate or inappropriate for one gender or the other? Is it "sexist," and if so in what ways or to what degree?
- What is the environmental philosophy of *The Lord of the Rings*?
- How does *The Lord of the Rings* reflect Tolkien's Catholic faith (or not)?
- What beliefs about government are evident? Can *The Lord of the Rings* be seen as socialist, conservative (etc.)?
- What is the nature of evil, as imagined in *The Lord of the Rings*?
- To what extent do individuals determine events by their choices? Is there such a thing as "fate" in Middle-earth?

Notice that these topics are expressed as *questions*. Your job is to come up with a plausible *answer* to this kind of question (i.e. a thesis), and then support it. Please come see me if you would like help choosing your topic or developing a thesis.

### Process

I'll have you work toward the final version of the paper in stages. All of these are credit/no-credit assignments except for the final draft.

Due on Friday, November 9: Choose your topic. Email this to me, put it in the dropbox, or have it in written form with you in class.

Due on Friday, November 16:

1. Do some preliminary writing on your topic. This could take the form of a tentative thesis and some of the points you might make to support it, a list of passages from the book or scenes in the movies that may provide evidence, or some open-ended writing you have done to explore the topic.
2. Along with your own thoughts on the topic, identify at least one kind of additional information (beyond the book or movies) that you can look for that would be useful to you in forming and supporting an answer to your question.
3. Email this to me, put it in the dropbox, or have it in written form with you in class.

Due on Friday, November 30:

1. Find at least one source that provides the kind of information you identified on Nov. 16 (or something equally useful that you found while looking for the other thing).
2. Write a brief summary of the source and state how this will fit into your thinking about the topic. Does it support an idea you had? Does it work against what you were thinking (in which case, what are you going to do about it)? Does it bring up a new angle on the topic for you?
3. Email this to me, put it in the dropbox, or have it in written form with you in class.

Due on Friday, December 7: Have a complete draft of your paper, typed and printed, with enough copies to give one to each member of your group plus me. (Groups will be set up on or before December 3.)

Due Monday, December 10: Read the papers of your group-mates and write constructive feedback (guidelines for this will be provided).

Due during the final exam time: Turn in one printed copy of your finished paper.

- The final version should be about 5 pages long, double-spaced, with pages numbered and clipped or stapled together. (Double-sided printing is OK.)
- Make sure to give your paper a title and include your name on the first page (or on a cover page).
- Include the information for the outside sources that you used and indicate where in the paper you use information or ideas from the source. (Use any format for citations that you are familiar with, or see me for guidance.)

The final version will earn a letter grade determined using the attached rubric, and will contribute 20% of your course grade.



## Criteria for Grading the Critical Paper

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D/F</b>
<b>Identification of the issue</b>	The question to be answered is clearly identified, complex, and appropriate to the assignment.	A central question, appropriate to the assignment, is evident to the reader.	It may be evident that there is a central question of interest, but this may not be stated clearly, or it may be overly simplified. Or the paper raises multiple questions without clearly connecting them.	There is no evident question to be answered, or the question may be factual in nature or otherwise inappropriate for the assignment.
<b>Thesis</b>	The paper clearly expresses a thesis, or defensible answer to the question explored. The thesis reflects careful thought about the question and takes into account the complexities of the issue, (For example, it may imagine or acknowledge contrasting viewpoints and respond to these effectively.)	The paper has an evident thesis (possibly not clearly stated) and shows some awareness of complexity (perhaps acknowledging other viewpoints but not responding to them effectively).	A position on the issue is evident, but it may be somewhat unclear, simplistic or inconsistent.	A thesis is difficult to discern.
<b>Evidence</b>	The thesis is fully and logically supported with evidence from the text (books and/or movies), which is explained/discussed to make its relevance to the question clear. Consistently accurate information and understanding of the significance of details.	There is appropriate evidence given and explained. Generally accurate; may make small errors or miss the significance of some details.	Some points lack support, some evidence is included without explanation of its relevance, or some explanations are logically weak. There may be significant or recurrent errors of fact or comprehension of the text.	Generally weak or lacking in support and explanation, or only information (no points) included.
<b>Use of outside information</b>	Additional information is relevant and effectively integrated into the discussion of the issue. Source use is acknowledged.	Relevant information is included. Connections between outside information and the writer's thinking may be unclear or awkward. Source use is acknowledged.	Outside information may not have obvious relevance to the question at hand or may overwhelm the writer's ideas. Source use is acknowledged.	No outside information included, or source use is not acknowledged.
<b>Organization</b>	Clear, appropriate organization with effective transitions; an effective introduction, conclusion, and title.	Ideas are in a reasonable order and appropriately paragraphed; introduction, conclusion, and title are present.	Some evidence of appropriate organization, perhaps not consistent; introduction, conclusion, or title may be missing.	Poor paragraph structure or no logical order to the points.
<b>Clarity and correctness</b>	Few or no errors; effective sentence structure and word choice.	Generally correct and clear, perhaps not as effective as 'A' in sentence structures or word choice.	Errors are present, enough to distract but not prevent understanding.	Errors are frequent or severe enough to interfere with communicating ideas.

Across the whole set of papers, here is the distribution of scores for the critical thinking and information literacy criteria:

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D/F</b>
<b>Identification of the issue</b>	31	4	1	
<b>Thesis</b>	16	17	3	
<b>Evidence</b>	14	20	2	
<b>Use of outside information</b>	16	17	2	1

Taken at face value, these numbers look very good. Based on them, it appears that the skill that students were least accomplished in is providing evidence. (The one low score on the information literacy skill is, I think, an outlier, due more to not following directions than to lack of skill.) While we spent class time practicing this, we could spend more, and I can be more explicit about how that in-class activity relates to the papers they will write and the grading criteria.

One problem with assessment that became apparent as I compiled the numbers is that there is some slippage between evaluating the papers for a grade and assessing the skills for purposes of assessment. A successfully completed assignment in FYS is not necessarily evidence of the highest level of the skill in absolute terms. So a “seamless” rubric that will work for grading and for GEP assessment may be challenging to create.

Another issue that came up for me as I was reading the set of papers and choosing examples for this portfolio is that some of the suggested topics worked better than others in providing opportunities to show achievement in recognizing and responding to other viewpoints.

Example 1 of the sample papers illustrates this: on the topic asking students to relate LOTR to Tolkien’s Catholicism, in particular, even strong students seemed unable to identify potential alternate readings. I scored this high on all criteria, but there is not clear evidence of awareness of a competing viewpoint. Interesting as this topic is, I may need to remove it from the list of suggested topics unless I can find or formulate competing interpretations to have students choose between. Meanwhile, an article I read recently suggests giving students a proposed thesis to support or refute in this kind of assignment, and applying that principle may help me avoid this problem in the future.

It may not be apparent from the sample of evidence here, but I have also had difficulty working information literacy into my FYS. One problem is that I don’t want to simply replicate what I do in English 202. My solution was to make IL a small part of this paper assignment, requiring students to identify one kind of information source that would help them make their argument. I could limit them to a primary source, but that could limit the range of topics available. Requiring a secondary source that represents an opposing view would work very well with this assignment, but when I went looking to see how much is available, it seemed to me that the quality of sources that are not professional is generally pretty low, and the professional sources typically will be beyond many first-year students’ abilities.

I used two kinds of indirect assessment that might be interesting. I use quizzes and a test to give students practice in note-taking and study skills. After the test, I invited students to respond to a survey asking what grade they expected to get on the test, what study techniques they used that they thought were helpful, and what else they might have done to study more successfully for the test. There were 27 responses (of 36 who took the test), and the grades they expected correlated fairly well with the actual grade distribution.

Expected grades on test (N=27):

D: 1 = 3.7%  
C: 4 = 14.81%  
B: 15 = 55.56%  
A: 7 = 25.93

Actual grades on test (N=36):

F: 0  
D: 0  
D+: 1 D range = 1 = 2.78%  
C-: 3  
C: 2  
C+: 1 C range = 6 = 16.67%  
B-: 5  
B: 9  
B+: 3 B range = 17 = 47.22%  
A-: 6  
A: 6 A range = 12 = 33.33%

Although the survey respondents were self-selected, this seems to suggest a respectable level of meta-cognition.

Some of the wisdom from hindsight was interesting: ideas for how to be better prepared included taking more notes while reading, reviewing notes more often, and (from one student whose honesty I respect), studying at all.

One other indirect tool was a survey that I had students take at the beginning of the semester and again at the end, self-rating their abilities and reporting their attitudes toward the FYS learning outcomes. The survey was done in D2L and was required (as one of several small assignments that were recorded as done or not done).

37 students completed the survey at the beginning of the semester, and 22 at the end. The lower response rate at the end makes interpreting the results more tentative, but for what it's worth, here they are:

1.

Overall, how confident do you feel in your ability to succeed in college?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	20	13
Somewhat	17	8
A little	0	1
Not at all	0	0

2.

How well informed do you feel about what is meant by "liberal education" and the ways that academic study is structured at UWSP?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	1	13
Somewhat	18	9
A little	15	0
Not at all	3	0

3.

How much value do you place on a "liberal education"?	Beginning of course	End of course
A great deal	11	13
Some	19	9
A little	7	0
None	0	0

4.

How skilled do you think you are at "critical thinking"?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	8	12
Somewhat	25	9
A little	2	1
Not at all	0	0
Not sure what is meant by "critical thinking"	2	0

5.

How important do you consider critical thinking to be?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very important	26	18
Somewhat important	9	4
Slightly important	0	0
Not important	0	0
Don't know	2	0

6.

How strong are your "information literacy" skills?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	4	10
Somewhat	19	11
A little	6	1
Not at all	0	0
Not sure what is meant by "information literacy"	8	0

7.

How important do you consider information literacy to be?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very important	11	13
Somewhat important	16	8
Slightly important	1	0
Not important	0	0
Don't know	9	1

8.

How confident are you in your skills of note-taking, studying, test-taking, and time management?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	10	9
Somewhat	15	8
A little	11	4
Not at all	1	1

9.

How important is co-curricular involvement to you (clubs, cultural events, etc.)?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	16	9
Somewhat	15	11
A little	4	2
Not at all	2	0

10.

How well-informed do you feel about the co-curricular opportunities and academic support available to you at UWSP?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	9	8
Somewhat	14	12
A little	13	2
Not at all	1	0

11.

How confident do you feel about taking charge of your education, career planning, and personal development?	Beginning of course	End of course
Very	13	14
Somewhat	19	7
A little	4	1
Not at all	1	0

**Changes that seem interesting:**

Given the significant difference in response rate, most of the numbers (comparing beginning to end) seem too ambiguous to do much with. However, item 1 shows that at least one student feels *less* confident about succeeding in college than at the beginning of the semester (since everyone who remained in the course responded to the first survey). Possibly that student has developed a more accurate sense of what it takes to succeed, but it still suggests a problem. Similarly, at least one student is still feeling very deficient in study skills at the end of the semester, and five are at the “little” or “not at all” levels combined (item 8).

One thing I may try to improve in those areas is do a similar survey, or perhaps a class discussion, at some point before the end of the semester to find out if some students are feeling this way and figure out what interventions might be appropriate (e.g. more work on those skills in class, some individual referrals to resources, etc.)