NS 280: Weekly Writing Assignment

Lectures wash over you; readings are processed and diligently recalled for their information content; books are read; papers are written. And the course is over, without you ever having stepped back and reacted to the ideas being presented, without having compared expectations with what was delivered, without ever having gotten angry, or even happy.

The ideas presented in this class may be upsetting, disturbing, or refreshing to you. They may conflict with your common sense, or they might be what you’ve thought naturally all along. By completing weekly writing assignments, you’ll hopefully be wrenched out of the bleachers and allowed to take a more active role in the game. Each week, you will turn in a writing assignment, consisting of three clearly labeled parts. There is no length requirement for these writings; quality is more important than quantity. If I think your writings would benefit from more expansion on the ideas, I will tell you.

→ This 3-part assignment will be turned in at the start of class every Monday (occasionally, there may be a short Wednesday assignment as well). The main thing I am looking for in these is a clear demonstration of effort on your part to synthesize and actively grapple with the course material.

1. Response to a weekly thought question. I will pose a question (occasionally, questions) related to each week’s reading assignment, to which you will respond in the form of a short, formal writing assignment. We will often use these questions as a starting point for our Monday discussion in class, but note that this discussion occurs after you’ve handed in your response to the question. Your response should be considered a short, formal writing assignment. Note that during the middle of the course, when discussing Newton’s Laws of motion, this part of the assignment may be supplemented with, or replaced by, some problems (some of which may be mathematical in nature).

2. A short synopsis of the material presented in class during the previous week. Since there is no textbook for this course, I want to see your characterization of what has been covered, seen through your eyes. These are not meant to be exhaustive accounts of each detail, but rather the broad overview of what was discussed. The goal here is that, at the end of the course, you can read these summaries and be reminded of all the major themes touched on during the course. One way to think about this is to act as though you are teaching yourself the material; indeed, together with the Reader, it is hoped that this will serve as your best reference for the content of the class after it is over.

3. Your reflection on the material, where you record your own changing thoughts and beliefs as the course progresses. The style is decidedly free-form, stream-of-consciousness, and first-draft. There is no need to polish this writing. What I want are your reactions to what is happening in the class. This can take many forms. Does the material excite/bore you? Have you thought of a radical new way of looking at the Universe that needs to get out? Do you want to stop analyzing things completely? Do you find Aristotle repulsive? Would you like to have dinner with Plato? Was Kepler nuts? Do you think Einstein is cool? Whatever it is you’re thinking, write it down. This will also help me keep my finger on the pulse of the class, and let me steer things in directions I think you’ll find most interesting.