The Core Literature and Writing Seminar

1. Rationale:
The study of literature as an art form allows students to explore the nuances and conventions of language, considering how it shapes perceptions of reality, creates new possibilities, and challenges preconceptions. In reading literature, students encounter the experiences of others and also look into their own minds and hearts; literature brings together ethical, affective, cognitive, historical, aesthetic, even playful elements of our lives. The literature requirement exposes students to the pleasures—and the challenges—of entering an imaginative space that can range from a lyrical moment of being to a whole society. As an essential part of humanity’s cultural heritage, literature leads us to confront the uncertainty and complexity of life, helping us adapt to an ever more complex world.

The Core Literature and Writing Seminar achieves two distinctive functions in the Core: first, it places special significance on teaching students to become sharper and more perceptive readers of literature; second, it gives priority to the instruction of writing. Literary studies aim simultaneously to excite students’ imaginations and to invite critical thinking; imaginative works provide the ideal material for students to learn to hone their analytical writing skills. Because writing is largely a craft, this course will emphasize the nuts and bolts of writing as well as sophisticated argumentation and nuanced analysis. Through the Core Literature and Writing Seminar students will learn that reading, thinking, and writing are mutually sustaining activities that help them to discover connections between literature and their everyday lives, ultimately enriching their own vision and expanding their sense of possibility.

2. Criteria for the Core Literature and Writing Seminar:
   a. A thematically driven course (as opposed to a survey) that teaches both writing and the skills to understand challenging literature in English.
   b. The course must teach literature as literature, i.e. it does not use books as examples to teach another discipline. The question of how we read and interpret literature should remain a central concern.
      i. The course readings must be from more than one genre and from multiple authors. It would be preferable if instructors avoid using anthologies and instead use exciting primary texts that draw in their students.
      ii. The course should situate the works within the relevant literary traditions or historical contexts.
      iii. The course should teach sophisticated literary vocabulary and methodology (for example, close-reading terminology, or approaches to genre or theory).
      iv. The course should emphasize class discussion, thus highlighting the importance of oral as well as written communication.
   c. The course must devote a significant section of time to teaching formal writing, in particular learning to craft the thesis-driven critical essay.
i. Some class sessions must be devoted to writing, for example through peer-review workshops, opportunities for drafts and revisions, and conferences with instructors.

ii. There will be a substantial amount of writing assigned (at least 20 pages), and the writing should include informal writing exercises as well as some revision of students’ writing. At least some of this revision should take place as a result of comments from the instructor.

d. The course must be taught by literature instructors who can demonstrate the ability to teach both the aesthetics of literary analysis and the skills needed for college-level critical writing.

3. Goals and Outcomes for the Core Literature and Writing Seminar:
   a. Students will be exposed to imaginative texts that spark their curiosity and foster a life-long love of reading.
   b. Students will gain experience using textual evidence to support complex interpretive claims, and they will acquire a mastery of the tools of literary analysis and a deeper understanding of how those tools help to unlock the power and relevance of literature.
   c. The course will demystify the thesis-driven analytic essay and students will gain confidence in their ability to write articulate prose.