

🔗 English 322: Environmental Literature and Culture 🏹
**Apocalypse Now: Disaster, Risk, and Eco-catastrophe in American
Environmental Literature and Film**

Books, films, images, and news articles predicting earth's collapse are everywhere in post-WWII American culture. As we face complex environmental problems including climate change, species extinction, and plastic pollution, narratives of fear, anxiety, and risk imagine all kinds and degrees of natural disaster, including total apocalypse. Speculative fiction and the subgenre of "climate fiction" ("cli-fi"), which have grown increasingly popular in our new millennium, anticipate the impacts of large-scale environmental change, often by describing frightening futures. Recent films, from *Wall-E* to *The Day After Tomorrow*, bring apocalypse and its aftermath to the big screen in ways that seem designed to make us nervous in the present. A glance at the headlines on any given day might yield obituaries for coral reefs and extinct species, or accounts of weird weather, or record-shattering forest fires, floods, and hurricanes. Meanwhile, visual artists struggle to find new imagery suitable to our uncertain future.



This course tracks representations of risk, disaster, and eco-apocalypse from *Silent Spring*—in which Rachel Carson warned readers of a small town where “no birds sing”—to the present. Looking closely at literature, film, and art, we will ask questions such as:

- How has American nature writing evolved since WWII, especially in its treatment of environmental risk, loss, and potential collapse?
- How do dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction and film shape our attitudes about particular environmental problems in the present?
- What emotions are common to environmental narratives since WWII? What alternatives to guilt, shame, fear, anxiety, and ecological grief are available to us in the 21st century?

Required texts: Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1984); Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993); Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2004); pdfs and web links on BbLearn; access to required films

🔗 Communication & Conferences 🏹

I genuinely enjoy talking with students, so please come see me outside of class! I'll hold formal office hours each week, but I will make appointments if these hours don't work for you. I want to foster open dialogue both in the classroom and out. If you have questions or concerns, I encourage you to speak with me in person; email questions are fine as well. I hope to meet for one-on-one conferences at least once during the semester. Conferences are opportunities for you to speak to me directly about your essays, the course content, or any issues related to the class. They are also chances for me to get feedback from you on how the course is going.

🔗 Accommodations 🏹

Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have documented temporary or permanent disabilities. All accommodations must be approved through Disability Support Services as soon as possible, so we can make sure you have what you need. Contact info for DSS: 208-885-6307 / dss@uidaho.edu.

🔗 Attendance & Late Work 🏹

Coming to class shows your commitment to the course, and I do take attendance. I allow for unforeseen circumstances and illness; you get two “freebies” (one week of class) before your grade is affected. Bank these excused absences for when you really need them. *Missing three classes will drop your final grade by 25 points; missing four classes drops it a full letter grade, and missing six classes or more means that you will fail the course.* Keep a careful record of the number of times you miss class, and note that coming late or leaving early will be counted toward attendance (3 incidents = 1 absence). Talk to me right away if you foresee any problem satisfying the attendance requirement. *Note: I do reward students who make it to every class.*

I don't accept late homework or assignments (since they are no longer relevant to what we're doing in class), so you must find a way to get that work to me on time or else take a zero for the assignment. If a long or short paper is late, I may accept it, but I reserve the right to subtract points if you are late turning in assignments. To avoid late penalties, your best bet is to turn assignments in on time. If you have to miss a class, please let me know as soon as possible. Please ask a classmate what you missed and/or check the syllabus/schedule before emailing me with questions.

🔗 Academic Honesty 🏹

In college, you become part of an academic community of readers, writers and critical thinkers. As such, you are responsible for contributing your own thoughts and words, but also for crediting others for *their* thoughts and words. According to University and departmental policy, plagiarism is claiming someone else's work (*either ideas or words*) as your own. Plagiarism is a serious offense. In this course, if you commit academic dishonesty, the penalty will include failure of the assignment in question, and possibly failure of the course. The writing you do in this course must be yours and yours alone. You must not hand in writing by someone else as if it is your own. The writing you do must also be work written for this particular course and not for another. If you are ever uncertain as to whether you are using someone else's writing inappropriately—or if you're feeling confused or overwhelmed about an assignment—please come talk to me.

🔗 Assignments and Grading 🏹

Participation: 200

Discussion board posts (4 @ 25): 100

Reflective responses (3 @ 50): 150

Short paper: 150

Long paper: 250

“Apocalypse in the news” presentation: 100

“Apocalypse now” found text: 50

1000 points possible

Participation: 200 points. Our class will be most engaging and productive for you if you actively participate in the reading, writing and discussion processes. You should come to discussions having read (or viewed or listened to) the day's material and prepared to say something about it. *Thoughtful contributions to our discussions* are the best way to earn a high participation grade. I want our classroom to be an environment in which all student comments are welcome, and lively debate is encouraged. That said, please be sensitive to how your language choices might impact other students, especially

when discussing controversial issues. The role you play in the community of our classroom is the biggest factor in your participation grade.

To earn an A in participation, you will be a leader in class discussions, extending and shaping them in interesting ways. You won't dominate conversations but rather engage your peers (not just me) by asking productive questions, building on the comments of others, and addressing other people's remarks—always respectfully and thoughtfully. An A student does these things consistently, in pretty much every class. What differentiates a B participation grade from an A are differences in the consistency of your performance, the specificity of your comments, the relationship of your ideas to texts, the frequency of insightful comments, etc. The C participation grade is given to those who do not lead the class, but who show up to class and periodically contribute to discussions. I do not expect any of you to get below a C in this category; if I see this happening, we'll talk.

Finally, our class is discussion based and will not usually require personal computers or other electronics. Leave them at home unless you have a special need that requires you to use one (in which case, talk to me) or I invite you to bring laptops for a particular purpose. Please silence your phones and put them away during class.

Discussion board posts: 4 @ 25 points each (100 points). To enrich our discussion of primary texts, you'll post *four* discussion starters on the BbLearn discussion board prior to the start of class on the day we first talk about that particular text. You might point us to specific passages (or scenes) you'd like to talk about or make connections to other texts and issues in the class. These discussion starters should be 100-150 words and should *include at least two thoughtful questions*.

Reflective responses: 3 @ 50 points each (150 points). You will write three very short reflective responses (max one page, single-spaced) on any three of the texts we read/view during the semester—your choice. These are not to be polished essays. I'll assess them for the quality of your engagement with the text (not for grammar, punctuation, or other technical skills) and they do not require outside research. These reflections will help you engage the texts, develop your writing skills, and play around with ideas for the longer paper. One of these papers may provide the foundation for your longer writing assignment, and it might also connect to your presentation topic.

Short paper: 150 points. The short paper is practice for the longer paper and should hone two skills in particular: close reading and developing an argument (or thesis) about a text. You should be ready to share your paper with the class. The topic is up to you; we'll discuss possibilities in class.

"Apocalypse in the news" presentation: 100 points. While I'll expect you to contribute in every class period, you'll also be asked to do a 15-minute presentation during one class period, focusing on that topic's representation in a contemporary news source. There are two options for format:

1. Creative/artistic option. Represent a news piece (written or visual) about environmental risk, disaster, or apocalypse in a new, creative way. For instance, you could turn a written news article into music, poetry, a short film, or a painting. Your presentation should show us both the new creative work you've produced and the original news source, and you should talk about the decisions you made in producing the creative work, including what it teaches us about the original source and about our course themes.
2. Analytical option. Analyze and interpret someone else's creative work about environmental risk, disaster, or apocalypse. You could choose a song (or album), a TV series (or episode), a film we haven't seen as a class, or a piece of literature we haven't read together. As in the creative option, you should select/bring a news source that connects in some way to the creative work and address both what connects them and what they teach us.

You'll be evaluated on things like organization, creativity, engagement, thoughtfulness, and basic presentation skills (such as eye contact, pacing, clarity, and voice); I'll hand out a rubric separately. You'll want to be sure you direct our attention to particular course concepts, texts, issues, and previous discussions.

"Apocalypse now" found text: 50 points. Since our reading list is far from comprehensive, and since I'm eager to see what contemporary texts you associate with environmental apocalypse, risk, and disaster, I'm asking each of you to contribute one "found text" to the course. You'll be responsible for bringing the text to class and telling us a bit about it, as well as for handing in a brief (200-250 word) critical summary. The text may be a visual or a written text (of any genre), and your critical summary should focus on how this text illuminates what's relevant, important, or urgent about our course themes "now" (in our contemporary world). These will be due at the end of the semester and will serve as a sort of conclusion for the course. Be on the lookout for a "found text" starting now!

Longer Paper: 250 points. The short paper and reflective responses will help you prepare for writing one longer paper—6-8 pages, double-spaced—on a topic of your choice. This paper will ask you to engage the course issues, conduct outside research, and demonstrate that you have learned the skills to generate a finished product you are proud of. I will read proposals and invite you to conference with me about the paper, and we will workshop pieces of your papers together. I'll provide more information about this assignment, including a detailed grading rubric, in a separate document.

🔗 Learning Outcomes 📄

Finally, here are some of the ways our course will help us reach our departmental and university goals:

Knowledge:

- ✓ Read and appreciate a wide range of literary and cultural texts.
- ✓ Develop a detailed understanding of the contexts of literary works by situating them within social, political, cultural, and aesthetic movements.
- ✓ Develop a detailed understanding of distinctive qualities of a range of literary and visual forms.
- ✓ Develop greater appreciation of the nuances of language and style.
- ✓ Enter an interdisciplinary conversation about environmental apocalypse, disaster and risk and contribute in some unique way to that conversation.

Skills:

- ✓ Learn to connect reading and writing about literature to current literary, philosophical, scholarly, and cultural trends and movements.
- ✓ Refine skills in writing about literary works in the context of ongoing scholarly discussions published in academic journals.
- ✓ Refine skills necessary to present material effectively in front of a group.
- ✓ Improve command of vocabulary, grammar, usage, and citation conventions.

Values:

- ✓ Appreciate the value of literary study—on its own and in connection to other disciplines—in preparing you for a productive work life in the 21st century.
- ✓ Engage in writing as an activity that takes place in a professional community of writers and thinkers.
- ✓ Appreciate the value of the humanities in preparing you to be a citizen of the world and local community through considering/exploring how narratives about environmental apocalypse, disaster and risk circulate within American culture.

Measures: informed participation in class discussion and in small groups; reflection in blogs; feedback on other students' work; performance on essays; presentations.

English 322: Environmental Literature and Culture
Tuesday/Thursday – 2:00-3:15
TLC 041

Week/Day	Topics & Concepts	Assignments & Readings
Week 1 Tues. August 21	Welcome	Syllabus and introductions
Thurs. August 23	Apocalyptic stories: Biblical, secular, constructive, narcissistic, comforting	Rachel Carson, selections from <i>Silent Spring</i> ; Rob Goodman, “The Comforts of the Apocalypse”
Week 2 Tues. August 28	Pollution, toxics, risk	Greg Garrard, “Beginnings: Pollution” and “Apocalypse” (from <i>Ecocriticism</i>); Robinson Jeffers, “The Purse-Seine.”
Thurs. August 30	Pollution: plastics	Adam Dickinson, “Hail.” Short film: “Plastic Bag.” Presentation.
Week 3 Tues. September 4	Consumption, waste and techno-fixes	Watch <i>Wall-E</i> (at home). Presentation.
Thurs. September 6		<i>Wall-E</i> . Presentation.
Week 4 Tues. September 11	Artistic responses	Chris Jordan, “Albatross” and other projects. Edward Burtynsky photos. Presentation.
Thurs. September 13	NO CLASS.	Post a discussion starter for <i>White Noise</i> on BbLearn.
Week 5 Tues. September 18	Risk society and the toxic everyday	Don DeLillo, <i>White Noise</i> (through part I: “Waves and Radiation”). Presentation.
Thurs. September 20		Don DeLillo, <i>White Noise</i> (part II: “The Airborne Toxic Event”). Presentation.
Week 6 Tues. September 25	Risk narratives	Don DeLillo, <i>White Noise</i> (finish). Ursula Heise, “Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk Narrative in the Contemporary Novel” (focus on <i>White Noise</i> analysis). Presentation.
Thurs. September 27	“Will the apocalypse have been now?”	DeLillo, cont. Andrew McMurry, “The Slow Apocalypse”
Week 7 Tues. October 2	Mapping Loss	“What is Missing?” and “Numbers and Nerves” websites (browse at home). Presentation.
Thurs. October 4	Surviving the Apocalypse	Octavia Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i> (through “2027,” p. 150). Presentation.
Week 8 Tues. October 9	Empathy	Octavia Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i> (finish). Presentation.
Thurs. October 11	Afro-Futurism	“To Get Ready for Climate Change, Read Octavia Butler,” by Stephanie LeMenager. Presentation.
Week 9 Tues. October 16		Octavia Butler, <i>Parable of the Sower</i> . Reflective response due.
Thurs. October 18	Indigenous Cli-Fi	Nanobah Becker (dir.), <i>The 6th World</i> . Short paper due.
Week 10 Tues. October 23		<i>The 6th World</i> ; Salma Monani, “Science Fiction, Westerns, and the Vital Cosmo-ethics of <i>The 6th World</i> .” Presentation.
Thurs. October 25	NO CLASS.	Watch <i>Interstellar</i>.

Week 11 Tues. October 30	Cosmic frontiers and techno-fixes	<i>The 6th World</i> and <i>Interstellar</i> . Presentation. Reflective response due.
Thurs. November 1	Post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction	Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Road</i> . Presentation.
Week 12 Tues. November 6		Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Road</i> . Reflective response due.
Thurs. November 8		Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Road</i> . Presentation. Paper proposals due.
Week 13 Tues. November 13	NO CLASS.	Catch up day: work on papers and found texts.
Thurs. November 15	Surviving the Apocalypse	Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Road</i> . Helen Simpson, "Diary of an Interesting Year." Presentation. Reflective response due.
Week 14	NO CLASS	Be thankful.
Week 15 Tues. November 27	Apocalyptic narcissism	<i>The World Without Us</i> excerpts and website; one episode from <i>Life After People</i> . Reflective response due.
Thurs. November 29		Paper draft due. Workshop paper drafts in groups.
Week 16 Tues. December 4	Apocalypse now	Apocalypse now found texts due. Writing workshops, cont.
Thurs. December 6		Writing workshops, cont.
Week 17		Final papers due Tuesday, December 11 by noon.