

## A Quick Response to Week 3 Journals

I want to begin by thanking those of you who have been completing the work for the course and taking things seriously. As we proceed, I will increasingly focus my time and attention on those students who are active in the course. For those of you who have not completed any work for the course yet, please know that I assume you plan to **FAIL** for the semester. I would recommend dropping the class if you don't plan to take part in its necessary and weekly tasks.

A quick note on grading, exams, and papers: as far as weekly grading goes, I generally just track completion and completeness. I don't supply number grades for responses; I assume that if you did it, you know you get credit, and if you didn't, you won't. This approach allows for more holistic grading, but doesn't allow me to post a grade each week. If you are concerned about your progress at any point, please let me know. I will give out the first paper assignment soon, so that you have time to complete it. Finally, your midterm will be a timed exam through Blackboard (unless you would rather take in person), the technical details of which we will cover as it gets closer. I will try to make it work around your schedules because of the Blackboard option. The midterm (and the final) will be essay exams, graded for content and completeness. I will explain the midterm and first paper more in the coming weeks.

Generally, those of you who completed the assignment seem to have valid responses to the readings. I want to stress that each of you will read and approach the class differently, based on your background and knowledge of the subject. Please don't feel intimidated by the responses or work of your peers, because you aren't required to enter the course with the same knowledge they possess. Do try, as we continue the Discussion Board this week, to learn from each other. Responses that differ from your own should present an opportunity to see things differently.

The key difference between the “online” section and a normal section of this course is the approach to readings. Students who meet in a normal class can show up confused and never admit that they don’t have a clue. In an online section, however, you have to learn actively. I also can’t give you the same quality lectures online, simply because I can’t talk to you for three hours each week. For example, in a “normal” version of this course I taught last semester, we compared Poe’s alcoholic narrator to Billy Bob Thornton from *Bad Santa*, just to get a sense of how inebriated he was the entire time. This type of observation is harder to pull off online, because I can’t see if you understand what I mean without writing 100 pages a week.

One thing I can specifically point out, to those of you who have kept up with course responsibilities, is how to find your “answer” to questions and ideas. Though you will approach things differently, you do each come to similar conclusions, in a general sense. Several of you were concerned in your journals with “digging deep,” or how deeply you need to read each piece. I want to stress that you should read to the best of your ability. The key is EVIDENCE. Can you explain how you came to the conclusions you did? Can you use the story/poem/sermon to specifically explain your own thoughts? In a literature class, being able to argue why you read a certain piece a certain way is more important than accepting some “right” answer. Through discussion board, however, we have a chance to read, respond, and possibly change our minds if someone else says something sensible. Don’t feel like you are wrong or not capable of reading. **Just be open to things meaning more than they seem.** Not everyone will get every nuance or secret connection in each piece, even me. Our goal, together, is to come to some common ground and feel comfortable with why.

I’ve had a few concerns about time management and due dates, which I will take into consideration (including a midnight on Sunday versus noon deadline). I will try to allow you

ample time on the weekends to complete coursework in the future. I just don't want us to slip too far behind. Again, you don't need to memorize every detail and nuance of every story or poem. Instead, through readings, thinking, and interacting, I hope that you can come away from each week with a "spectrum of ideas" about the theme and a sense of each author's position. The point was to see how well you can read and what details you can locate. While I'm shocked that some of you couldn't manage to complete this multiple choice quiz AT ALL, most who did hopefully gained from the experience. Remember, you can take the quiz over and over, so if you think it would help, feel free to complete it again (especially if you scored under 60 out of 100). Otherwise, I assume you haven't read at all.

The work you do online is graded on a few criteria: 1) have you attempted to complete the work on time, 2) have you made a clear effort to follow directions and answer questions (did you do what was asked/did you use specifics to back you up?), 3) have you gotten the general idea within the ballpark, and 4) do you see the connections between works. I expect that, sometimes, all of us will be way off or out in left field. This is part of the learning experience. If you already knew everything, you would not need to take the course. Instead, just try to respond honestly and show that you are getting the general idea from readings/questions.

Since Edwards and Poe were popular this week, I'll discuss them for a moment. Most of you had a strong response to Edwards (mostly painful), which was the point. You don't need to agree with him, but it is important to know that this man was real, that this sermon was given many times, and that it has left a mark on American history. I don't expect you to be converted to his version of Christianity in my course (in fact, I hope you are not converted – since you should be reading critically). I expect you to be able to see what ideas he is playing with. For his sermon, seeing all the images of God's wrath helps us see how he would try to convert people in

an age without TV or electricity. The fear of God comes through the images of God as fearful. As for Poe, the focus was on the elements of superstition and the reliability of his narrator. Do we trust this drunk guy's version of reality, as he approaches death row? Do you think the black cat was really a manifestation of evil? Or was all this a figment of his imagination? Poe doesn't tell us specifically, since this is not a sermon. As the reader, you need to decide what you believe and why. Several of you also mentioned 'karma' as a religious concept, which helps the story make sense to us. Your actions do have consequences, whether you seriously believe in orthodox religion or not. He acknowledges God (since the narrator mentions that man is in His image, superior to other creatures and animals), but he still acts from a spirit of Perverseness, doing wrong for wrong's sake. As a result, he suffers the consequences.

To conclude, for those of you working, I appreciate your contribution. Keep doing what you are doing and let me know if you have concerns. Keep being open to the possibility of learning from yourself and each other. And focus on the **connections** between ideas and works of literature, especially as we head into science week, which will contrast with ideas about religion. Keep focused on the **perspectives and themes** we are given, and how they interact with each other (Poe versus 'Hellfire Edwards' [as a classmate coined him] or Bradstreet versus Dickinson). On the flip side, for those of you not completing the work for this course, please seriously consider dropping. I will not accept excuses after midterm for why you never emailed me about your situation. I would rather you drop the course than fail it, because I could focus my energies on those who are taking the class seriously. Of course, if you choose to fail, that is your business, but don't say I didn't warn you.

Ultimately, the online course is designed to reward students for what they put into it. You are responsible for completing the work and making the best of the resources available. If you have questions or concerns as we proceed, don't hesitate to ask.

Bonus: One of your classmates included this video of "The Black Cat," if you are interested: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQKCudxv8EA&feature=fvst>