

# ENGL 120

## British Literature

### Chaucer to Pope

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### *General Description*

#### **Overview and Objectives**

English 120 is a survey of British literature during the period from about 1385 to about 1745. It has essentially two objectives.

The first objective is implied in the term **survey**, which means to gain an overview of the main historical, philosophical, and aesthetic currents at work during the years under consideration and to study the effects of these currents on a number of great works of the literary imagination. This aspect of our study is, strictly speaking, literary **history** as distinct from literary **criticism**, and it is not to be regarded as an adequate means **in itself** to genuine understanding and appreciation of the individual works with which our course is concerned. However, it is a necessary precritical study in that it provides backgrounds and contexts to aid in making intelligent critical judgments.

The second and ultimately more important objective of ENGL 120 is to introduce you to close reading of and critical thinking about literature. Most of the commentary and suggestions in this course manual are devoted to this end; but no commentary can be expected to do more than advise and stimulate you toward your own goals of understanding and appreciation, goals that can be attained only through direct experience with the texts. Therefore, over and above any considerations of literary history, you are asked in each lesson to consider—basing your conclusions upon the text itself—what sort of statement the author is attempting to make, what particular view of reality the work represents, and what literary means the

author uses to embody his vision in art. Finally, you are asked to evaluate closely your own reactions to these works and to formulate clearly in your own mind your reasons for liking or disliking what you read.

## **Course Materials**

One text is required for this course:

*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Stephen Greenblatt, general editor. Volumes A, B, and C. 8th edition, 2006.

This book can be purchased from Friday Center Books & Gifts online at <https://s4.its.unc.edu/HigherGrounds> or by using the book order form located in this course manual.

The pagination in volumes A through C is continuous, from page 1 in Volume A to page 2904 in Volume C. Each volume contains duplicate appendices.

We will rely heavily on this text for introductions to periods, authors, and individual works. You may find it useful to make notes or outline the material from your anthology in a separate notebook. You will need this information in preparing your lesson assignments as well as in taking the final exam. Please become familiar with the “Literary Terminology” section found in the appendix pages of each volume. This section contains an excellent brief discussion of prosody (the study of meter, rhyme, and stanza), figurative language, and other literary terms used in the study guide, such as “irony” and “satire.”

The editors of your text have provided bibliographies for period works as well as for many of the major authors you will read for this course. If you are interested in any particular author or period, I urge you to explore these *Selected Bibliographies*, found in the appendix pages at the end of each volume. The three volumes all begin with the same “Suggested General Readings,” but then provide lists particular to the period covered by that volume.

The same *Preface to the Eighth Edition* is found in each volume. Within the preface you will find a subheading titled

*Additional Resources*, which describes Norton’s online resource, Norton Literature Online, at [wwnorton.com/literature](http://wwnorton.com/literature). If you have access to the Internet, I urge you to visit the Web site to discover a treasure of resources that will deepen your understanding and appreciation of these works.

## **Completing the Written Assignments**

Because a correspondence course has no formal lectures, class discussion, or conferences, the written assignments, along with the final exam, are the means by which you convey your understanding of the works. Please be conscientious and precise in your answers. When considering a question, think about the **adequacy** of your answer rather than the number of words or the amount of time spent on the answer. Often you will find that a brief answer is adequate. At other times, however, you will find that a good answer requires a good deal of hard thought and a fairly long discussion. “How long is long?” Most questions can be adequately answered in 250–500 words. Please use these numbers as a rule of thumb; do not shrink or stretch your answers to meet the word count.

### ***Be specific***

Consider the implications of the questions as well as the specific information required. Often there is no “right” or “wrong” answer. The quality of the answer depends on the richness of your insights in such cases. If you bring creativity and originality to your work, your answer will obviously be better than if you do not.

Do all of your assignments with the text open before you. It is a good idea to read through the questions before you begin reading the assigned work so that you can take notes while reading. When you have finished the assigned work, go back to the pages on which you have made notes. This technique will enable you to be **specific** when you answer the questions. There are two mistakes that students generally make in answering questions: They rely too much on generalizations, and they mistake plot summary for analysis. When you make a point, support it by quoting or referring to the text. For example: “We know that the narrator of *The Canterbury Tales* is naïve from his spirited defense of the Monk’s hunting in violation of his monastic vows (General Prologue, ll.183–188).” If you are quoting a passage, **discuss** the quotation or

reference. Why does it support your answer? How are you interpreting the passage? What is noteworthy about it? Does the imagery illuminate some aspect of an event or characterization? What is important about the event? If you discuss in depth, you will probably not fall into the trap of plot summary. Plot summary is an account of who did what to whom. Most questions in the written assignments call for analysis rather than plot summary.

*Format for  
citing passages*

When you quote or refer to a poetic passage, always cite the line numbers; for a prose passage, cite the page numbers. If you are referring to a play, cite the act, scene, and line numbers. Give this information in parentheses following the reference, and use Arabic numerals to designate act, scene, and line(s), as follows: (2.3.24–25).

*Writing a  
character sketch*

If you are asked to do a character sketch, begin by deciding what the **dominant trait** of the character is. Try to unify your answer by showing how specific characteristics are related to or derived from the dominant trait. Finally, ask yourself what the function of the character is in the work. How is his or her dominant trait related to the function? What in the author's larger design requires that he or she be given **this** dominant trait and **these** characteristics rather than other ones?

**Grading and  
Final Exam**

In addition to completing the written assignments in this course manual, you must pass a supervised final exam in order to receive credit for this course. Suggestions on how to prepare for the final can be found after Lesson 23. Feel free to contact me to discuss a work that still gives you trouble.

Each assignment is graded with a letter grade, and these are averaged when you have completed all assignments. The averaged grade is weighted 60 percent. The final exam is weighted 40 percent.