



Georgia Institute of Technology

LMC 3219: Literature and Medicine

School of Literature, Media, and Communication

Section B, 3 Credits, Fall 2026

Instructor Information

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General Course Information

Description

In her essay, “On Being Ill,” Virginia Woolf diagnoses the impoverishment of the English language for its failure to accurately represent the experience of sickness. For centuries, writers have attempted to give linguistic shape to physical and mental suffering, but Woolf insists we need a new vocabulary—words “subtle” and “sensual”—to faithfully express the body’s tremors and throes, cancers and convulsions. In this course, we will trace literary and medical representations of illness and healing from the early modern period to the present, paying attention not only to those who suffer but also to those who care for the suffering. Authors may include Audre Lorde, Susan Sontag, Atul Gawande, Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Edson, and John Donne. Topics may include biopolitics, illness and metaphor, mental health, the ethics of care, disability, and the evolving field of the health humanities.

Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze how literary forms, including poetry, memoir, drama, and film, represent illness, pain, disability, mental health, and care, with attention to language, form, and medium.
- Explain how medical knowledge and practices are historically and culturally situated, and how concepts such as illness, health, disability, and depression change across time, communities, and institutions.
- Evaluate the ethical stakes of representing illness and suffering, including the risks of metaphor, narrative, and interpretation.
- Apply concepts from the health humanities, such as narrative medicine, poetic medicine, and disability studies, to analyze texts, films, and other cultural artifacts related to medicine and health.
- Articulate how categories of difference shape experiences of illness and care, and how literature can both expose and resist structural harm.

Required Course Materials

Texts and media include:

- Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals* (ISBN 9780143135203)
- Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (ISBN 9780679744474)
- Margaret Edson, *Wit* (ISBN 9780571198771)
- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (ISBN 9780312420130)
- *Melancholia* (dir. Von Trier, 2011)
- *Keywords in the Health Humanities*, eds. Altschuler, Metz, and Wald (ISBN 9781479808106)

Additional readings from such authors as Virginia Woolf, Elaine Scarry, Oliver Sacks, and Andrew Solomon will be available on Canvas.

Grading Policy

Final grades in this course are based on the weighted components listed below. Each assignment is designed to assess different aspects of your learning, including close reading, interpretive analysis, collaborative inquiry, and reflective engagement. At Georgia Tech, final course grades are awarded on a scale of A-F with no +/- grades (A = 90–100; B = 80–89; C = 70–79; D = 60–69).

- Participation 10%
- Quizzes: 10%
- Midterm Exam: 20%
- Facilitation: 20%
- Collaborative Project: 20%
- Final Exam: 20%

Description of Graded Components

Participation: This course emphasizes practices of attention, listening, and care; participation therefore includes not only attendance, but also careful preparation, contributing to class discussions, and respectful engagement with others.

Quizzes: Short, low-stakes quizzes assess your preparation and comprehension of assigned readings. These quizzes focus on key concepts, terminology, and basic understanding rather than interpretation. Their purpose is to support consistent engagement with course materials and to build a shared foundation for discussion.

Midterm Exam: The midterm exam assesses your understanding of key concepts, readings, and critical frameworks from the first half of the course. It may include a combination of multiple-choice questions, short answers, and a brief essay.

Facilitation: Each student will lead a 15–20 minute seminar-style discussion on an assigned reading. Facilitations should include a brief framing of key ideas, attention to specific passages, and thoughtfully designed questions that invite multiple perspectives.

Collaborative Project: In this collaborative project, you will work in a small group to create a narrative or poetic artifact that explores illness, care, diagnosis, or embodiment. Projects may take the form of a performance, audio narrative, digital exhibit, or material object (such as a zine). This assignment invites you to translate course concepts into creative practice.

Final Exam: The final exam assesses your understanding of key concepts, readings, and critical frameworks from the entire course with emphasis on synthesis across texts. It may include a combination of multiple-choice questions, short answers, and a brief essay.

Course Policies

Attendance Policy

This is a discussion-based, collaborative course that depends on your active presence. Regular attendance is essential to your success and to the learning community we build together. Because much of our work takes place through conversation, close reading, and in-class activities, your participation cannot be replicated outside of class. Attendance will be taken into account when determining final grades.

Academic Integrity and Code of Conduct

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. Any suspected violations of the [Honor Code](#) will be referred to the Office of Student Integrity.

Students are expected to adhere to the Georgia Tech [Student Code of Conduct](#) and maintain respectful and professional behavior in all course interactions.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, [contact the Office of Disability Services](#) (404-894-2563) as soon as possible to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. [The Student-Faculty Expectations](#) articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

Technology Policy

To support sustained attention and meaningful engagement, we will maintain a focused, distraction-free classroom environment. Cell phones must be silenced and put away during class. Laptops and tablets are permitted only for ADA accommodations or when explicitly required for a class activity.

Generative AI Policy

In this course, you will develop skills in close reading, attentive listening, collaborative discussion, and creative engagement with language and forms of media, exploring the varied experiences of illness and health. Generative AI cannot perform this work for you. Overreliance on such tools not

only undermines your development as a critical thinker, but also short-circuits the interpretive and creative processes that this course is designed to cultivate.

Unless explicitly authorized as part of a specific assignment, the use of generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT or similar tools) to generate written work, analyses, or creative material for this course is not permitted. Unauthorized use will be considered a violation of the Georgia Tech Honor Code and may be referred to the Office of Student Integrity.

Extensions and Late Assignments Policy

Because this course is structured around discussion, collaboration, and cumulative work, deadlines are important and should be taken seriously. Assignments are designed to build on one another and to support our shared work in class. Late assignments are not accepted except in cases of documented extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness, family emergency). If such circumstances arise, please contact me as soon as possible and provide appropriate documentation. Extensions are granted at the instructor's discretion.

Missed in-class activities, such as discussions, facilitations, and workshops, generally cannot be made up, as they depend on real-time participation. In exceptional cases, alternative arrangements may be offered. In accordance with Georgia Tech policy, accommodations will be made for approved Institute activities (such as athletic events or official university travel) and religious observances, provided that you notify me in advance. If you anticipate conflicts related to major academic or professional commitments (e.g., career fairs, interviews), please communicate with me as early as possible so that we can plan accordingly.

Consistent communication is key. Students who reach out early are much more likely to receive flexibility than those who do not.

Campus Resources for Students

Academic Success and Advising

Academic Success and Advising, a unit in the Office of Undergraduate Education & Student Success, provides free support for your courses. Students can attend scheduled supplemental review (PLUS) sessions, stop by Drop-In Tutoring, or schedule a one-on-one appointment through Knack. To explore what options work best for you, please visit us online at success.gatech.edu/tutoring, email us at tutoring@gatech.edu, or come see us at Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons, Suite 283.

Communication Center

[The Communication Center](#) supports writers and communicators from across the Georgia Tech community with communication skills and projects related to their academic work, careers, and civic and community lives. As an inclusive resource, the center welcomes those of all identities, languages, and ability levels. If you need support with a writing or public speaking assignment, I encourage you to schedule an appointment with a trained consultant at their location in 447 Clough Undergraduate Learning Commons.

Student Well-Being

At Georgia Tech, we are concerned about your overall physical, social, and mental well-being. A comprehensive list of wellness related resources has been compiled and maintained by the Office of the Vice President for Student Engagement and Well-being and can be found here: <https://students.gatech.edu/student-resource-guide>.

[Stamps Health Services](#) (SHS), a department within the Division of Student Engagement and Well-Being, is an outpatient facility designed to meet the health needs of students and their spouses/domestic partners. SHS's mission is to promote the health and well-being of the Georgia Tech community so each student can pursue their academic success. They are located within the Joseph Brown Whitehead Building. You may make an appointment online, in the patient portal, or by phone at (404) 894-1420.

Counseling and other mental health services are available at the [Center for Mental Healthcare and Resources](#). They work with all students who visit to develop an individualized care plan based on your unique needs. Their staff of case managers and counselors specialize in mental health concerns that affect college students, and they provide students with evidence-based and data-driven interventions to help you to improve your functioning and get back on track with your personal, social, and academic goals. They are located in 238 Smithgall Hall and can be reached at (404) 894-2575.

Notes

A Note on Challenging Texts and Classroom Culture

Many of the texts we encounter this semester will ask us to consider experiences and perspectives beyond our own, ones we may not relate to or even fully understand. While these works may make us feel uncomfortable or even vulnerable, I ask that we attempt to engage with the material and consider how these challenging texts may shape and reshape our thinking. Keep in mind that you do not have to relate to or even like a work to find value in its craft, its aim, its position in the world. Sometimes, the most difficult works are the ones we learn the most from, the ones we find ourselves coming back to, year after year. I recognize that engaging with these texts requires a certain level of risk, and I will do my best to create a safe classroom community that allows you to discuss and learn from these works in productive, meaningful ways. I expect that everyone in the class will do their part to sustain this community.

Because I believe that engaging with any artistic work requires vulnerability and because I do not want to make assumptions about my students' unique challenges, I do not offer content warnings. I do, however, encourage you to speak with me if you are concerned about specific forms of content. I will help prepare you to encounter assigned material on the terms best suited to your well-being. Finally, I understand that engaging with such material may take you to a place that no longer feels productive and may be trauma-inducing. Should this occur, I respect your right to exclude yourself from class discussion, and I encourage you to contact the Center for Mental Healthcare and Resources.

A Note on Changes to this Syllabus

This syllabus is subject to change. Students will be notified in advance of any changes.