

Literature and Medicine

Last Updated: Mon, 01/05/2026

Course prefix: LMC

Course number: 3219

Section: A

CRN (you may add up to five):

35311

Instructor First Name: Perry

Instructor Last Name: Guevara

Semester: Spring

Academic year: 2026

Course 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, Paul Kalanithi, Atul Gawande, Jeannette 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:

- 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.
- Practice slow reading as a critical skill, demonstrating how sustained attention, listening, and restraint shape interpretation in both literary study and clinical

contexts.

- Apply concepts from the health humanities—such as narrative medicine, health humanities, 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:

- Audre Lorde, *Cancer Journals* (ISBN 9780143135203)
- Jeannette 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, Metzl, and Wald (ISBN 9781479808106)

Grading policy:

Grading System: A (90 - 100), B (80 - 89), C (70 - 79), D (60-69), F (below 60)

- Participation (20%)
- Facilitation (15%)
- Poetry Reading (10%)
- Midterm Exam (20%)
- Adaptation and Imitation (15%)
- Final Exam (20%)

Note: More specific instructions for assignments and grading rubrics will be posted on Canvas. If you have a question about the particulars of an assignment, course policy, or grade, please contact your instructor by email as soon as possible. Finally, please keep in mind that grades are not a judgment of your intelligence or value as a person. Assignments and exams provide opportunities to evaluate what you understand and where there is a need for more learning.

Attendance policy:

Attendance and active participation are essential to your success in this course. Because “Literature and Medicine” depends on careful reading, ethical listening, and sustained attention, participation here is not measured by how often or how loudly you speak, but by

how thoughtfully and responsibly you engage with texts, with one another, and with yourself. This course is a collaborative learning community. Students are expected to come to class prepared, having completed the assigned readings, and ready to engage in discussion, close reading, and reflective activities. Participation may take many forms: attentive listening, asking questions, contributing insights, reading aloud, participating in small-group work, or engaging seriously in moments of shared silence and reflection.

At several points during the semester, we will practice **slow reading**: sustained, device-free attention to a short text in class. During these sessions, students will read quietly and without discussion for an extended period of time, followed by reflection or conversation. These moments are not breaks from participation—they are participation. Slow reading is treated in this course as an ethical and intellectual practice, one that cultivates patience, care, and attentiveness.

Be mindful of the following course policies:

- **Attendance:** Regular attendance is expected. Please contact me as soon as possible if you have serious extenuating circumstances that affect your ability to attend class.
- **Preparation:** Students are required to bring the assigned text(s) to class, whether in physical or approved digital form. If you are unable to obtain a text due to financial hardship, please contact me as soon as possible.
- **Technology:** Cellular phones are not allowed in class. Laptops and tablets are permitted only for ADA accommodations or for clearly class-related purposes.
- **Deadlines:** All assignments must be submitted on time. Late submissions are not accepted.

Academic honesty/integrity statement:

Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. The immediate objective of an Academic Honor Code is to prevent any Students from gaining an unfair advantage over other Students through academic misconduct. The following clarification of academic misconduct is taken from Section XIX Student Code of Conduct, of the Rules and Regulations section of the Georgia Institute of Technology General Catalog: Academic misconduct is any act that does or could improperly distort Student grades or other Student academic records. Such acts include but need not be limited to the following:

Unauthorized Access: Possessing, using, or exchanging improperly acquired written or verbal information in the preparation of a problem set, laboratory report, essay, examination, or other academic assignment.

Unauthorized Collaboration: Unauthorized interaction with another Student or Students in the fulfillment of academic requirements.

- Plagiarism: Submission of material that is wholly or substantially identical to that created or published by another person or persons, without adequate credit notations indicating the authorship.

- False Claims of Performance: False claims for work that has been submitted by a Student.
- Grade Alteration: Alteration of any academic grade or rating so as to obtain unearned academic credit.
- Deliberate Falsification: Deliberate falsification of a written or verbal statement of fact to a Faculty member and/or Institute Official, so as to obtain unearned academic credit.
- Forgery: Forgery, alteration, or misuse of any Institute document relating to the academic status of the Student.
- Distortion: Any act that distorts or could distort grades or other academic records.

While these acts constitute assured instances of academic misconduct, other acts of academic misconduct may be defined by the professor. The Honor Agreement may reappear on exams and other assignments to remind Students of their responsibilities under the Georgia Institute of Technology Academic Honor Code.

Core IMPACTS statement(s) (if applicable):

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Humanities area. Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals. This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question: How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic, and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome: Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance, and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies: Ethical Reasoning; Information Literacy; Intercultural Competence.