

# Check Out David Foster Wallace's Course Syllabus

With the July 31 release of the biopic [\*The End of the Tour\*](#), the late author David Foster Wallace is once again in the news. Wallace is best known for his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, which Time [named](#) one of the 100 best English-language novels written since 1923.

For your interest, here is a link to the syllabus for the [English 102 – Literary Analysis I: Prose Fiction](#) course Wallace taught at Illinois State University in 1994.

The booklist for the course includes the following titles:

- 1) Mary Higgins Clark, *Where Are the Children?*
- 2) Jackie Collins, *Rock Star*
- 3) James Ellroy, *The Big Nowhere*
- 4) Thomas Harris, *Black Sunday*
- 5) Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs*
- 6) Stephen King, *Carrie*
- 7) C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
- 8) Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*

He then includes this warning on the syllabus:

*"Don't let any potential lightweightish-looking qualities of the texts delude you into thinking that this will be a blow-off-type class. These 'popular' texts will end up being harder than more conventionally 'literary' works to unpack and read critically. You'll end up doing more work in here than in other sections of 102, probably."*

The Course Expectations section includes the following:

*"You must read every assignment twice before class and come ready to participate."*

And finally, there's this gem under "Class Rules on Public Discussion":

*"Anybody gets to ask any question about any fiction-related issues she wants. No question about literature is stupid. You are forbidden to keep yourself from asking a question or making a comment because you fear it will sound obvious or unsophisticated or lame or stupid. Because critical reading and prose fiction are such hard, weird things to try to study, a stupid-seeming comment or question can end up being valuable or even profound. I am deadly-serious about creating a classroom environment where everyone feels free to ask or speak about anything she wishes. So any student who groans, smirks, mimes machine-gunning or onanism, chortles, eye-rolls, or in any way ridicules some other student's in-class question/comment will be warned once in private and on the second offense will be kicked out of class and flunked, no matter what week it is. If the offender is male, I am also apt to find him off-campus and beat him up.*

*This does not mean we all have to sit around smiling sweetly at one another for three hours a week. No truths about the form, content, structure, symbolism, theme, or overall artistic quality of any piece of fiction are etched in stone or beyond dispute. In class, you are invited (more like urged) to disagree with one another and with me – and I get to disagree with you – provided we're all respectful of one another and not snide, savage, or abusive. Historically, I've given the highest grades to students whose readings of an opinions about literature were different from mine, provided that those students could argue interestingly and plausibly for their claims. In other words, English 102 is not just a Find-Out-What-The-Teacher-Thinks-And-Regurgitate-It-Back-At-*

*Him course. It's not like math or physics – there are no right or wrong answers (though there are interesting versus dull, fertile versus barren, plausible versus whacko answers)."*