

ENGL-352g: BOOKPACKING AMERICA

- exploring US regional cultures through classic and contemporary novels

Spring Semester T/Th Class 2025

Section: 32707

This class is an exercise in 'bookpacking,' an innovative form of literary adventure in which novels serve as portals through which to explore American regional history and culture.

Over the course of the semester, we'll take a metaphorical road trip through the different regions of the USA - New England, the Appalachia, the South, the Hispanic Southwest and so on — and we'll use one novel per region to unpack each region's culture, past and present.

The course promises a vibrant overview of the myriad facets of the American experience, offering an important exercise in cultural empathy and understanding - all the more vital in this age of profound division.

Offered for both English and GE, the course offers a holistic approach to the humanities, combining elements of literature, history, geography, politics and social studies. If you are interested in a course that celebrates literature with a real world application, this class is for you. All majors welcome.

The class is led by Andrew Chater, a contemporary educator and award-winning BBC historian who has designed a variety of classes for USC students on the 'Bookpacker' model. Please visit www.bookpackers.com for a wealth of content on bookpacking at USC, and www.andrewchater.com for more information on the class instructor.

When Spring Semester 2025 Tu / Th 9.30-10.50am

Where WPH 104 (to be confirmed - check Schedule of Classes)

Instructor Andrew Chater chater@usc.edu

Office hours by appointment Fall Semester 2024 - on Zoom
Spring Semester 2025 - THH-404G - Tu/Th 11am-1pm

ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT

Required Reading

1 - Novels

- The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler, 1939
- Deliverance - James Dickey, 1970
- Other Voices, Other Rooms - Truman Capote, 1948
- Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison, 1977
- My Ántonia - Willa Cather, 1918
- Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko, 1977
- Typical American - Gish Jen, 1991

2 - Short Story Collections

- Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout, 2008
- Woman Hollering Creek - Sandra Cisneros, 1991
- Close Range - E. Annie Proulx, 1999

Plus one 'free choice' novel for your 'Special Project'

Assignments

Papers

- 2 x academic papers on themes emerging from the novels
- 1500 to 1750 words per paper = 3250 words total

Special Project

- Multimedia project 'bookpacking' a novel of your choice
- 2500 words + photos and interactive media

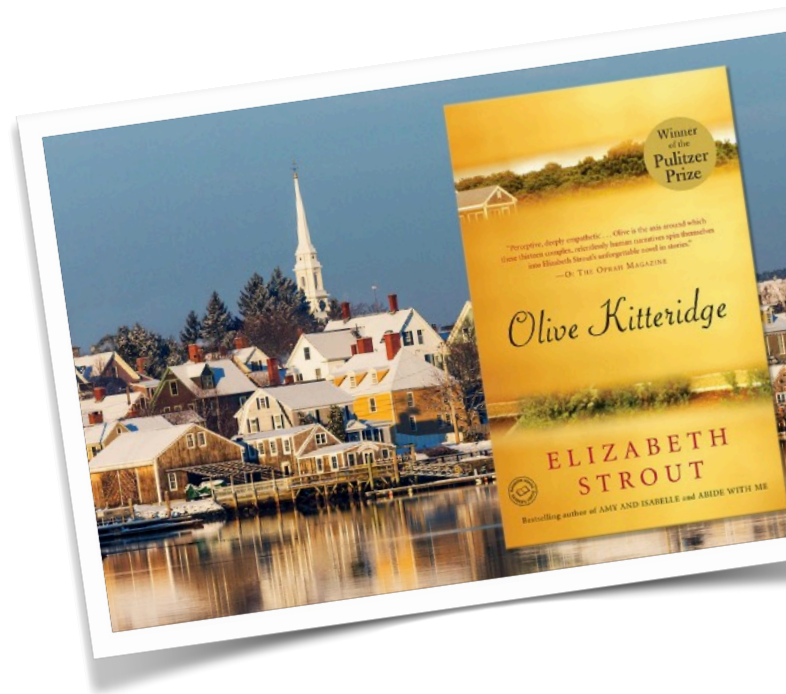
Presentation

- Oral presentation of your Special Project to the class

Grading

- Participation: 10%
- Paper 1 = 25%
- Paper 2 = 25%
- Special Project: 30%
- Special Project Presentations: 10%

More information on assignments and assessment, including a full briefing document on the Special Projects, is given later in this syllabus.



SYLLABUS AND SCHEDULE

In-person Seminar Schedule

Jan 14, 16, 21, 23		Los Angeles
<i>The course begins in L.A., the city that brings us together. We'll look at SoCal's founding myths, and ask why the Golden Land boasts such a dark literary heritage.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Jan 21)</i>	The Big Sleep - Raymond Chandler
Jan 28, 30, Feb 04		New England
<i>Yankee New England is 'white and uptight' - or so says Maine novelist Elizabeth Strout. Is she right? We'll dig into some classic and contemporary New England novels to find out.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Jan 30)</i>	Olive Kitteridge - Elizabeth Strout
Feb 6, 11		The Appalachia
<i>Appalachian culture was under the spotlight through the years of Donald Trump's Presidency. We'll beat a trail through backwoods fiction in search of empathy and understanding.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Feb 6)</i>	Deliverance - James Dickey
Feb 13, 18, 20		The South
<i>The South wrestles with the weight of its history. Truman Capote's brilliant first novel captures the contradictions of this fascinating and troubling region.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Feb 18)</i>	Other Voices, Other Rooms - Truman Capote
Feb 25, 27, March 04		African America
<i>Song of Solomon traces the African American trajectory backwards, from 20th c. Michigan to 19th c. Virginia. It's a novel with profound contemporary relevance.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Feb 27)</i>	Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison
Mar 6, 11		New Orleans
<i>New Orleans has a unique literary heritage forged of a fusion of cultural strands: Cajun, Creole, White Protestant, and African-American with a Haitian influence.</i>		
	<i>(No required reading)</i>	
Mar 13, 25		The Midwest
<i>"With enough time, American civilization will make the Midwest of any place" - (Garrison Keillor). We'll explore the distinctive character of heartland America through the fiction of the Plains, the Midwest and Chicago.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Mar 13)</i>	My Ántonia - Willa Cather

Mar 27, Apr 01, 03		Mexican America
<i>Chicano authors celebrate the traditional and folkloric, whilst acknowledging an ongoing struggle for a slice of the American Dream.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Mar 27)</i>	Woman Hollering Creek - Sandra Cisneros
Apr 8, 10		Native America
<i>Leslie Marmon Silko chronicles Native American life in the desert Southwest. Her punchy and poetic work looks back to a traumatic past, and forward to the future.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Apr 10)</i>	Ceremony - Leslie Marmon Silko
Apr 15, 17, 22		The West
<i>E. Annie Proulx's short stories explore contemporary lives in the Great West, a much mythologized land where the tough living conditions pit rugged individuals against the power of capital and corporations.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by Apr 22)</i>	Close Range - E. Annie Proulx
Apr 24, 29, May 01		New York City
<i>New York fiction is a world in itself. We'll focus on two attributes of the city - as a place of financial hubris, and as the epicenter of the American 'melting pot'.</i>		
	<i>Required reading (by May 01)</i>	Typical American - Gish Jen

We will then meet again on Zoom for two sessions at the end of exam week, during which students will make an oral presentation of their Special Projects to the class. The class will divide into two groups for these sessions.

Presentation Sessions

May 13, 14		Presentations
Group 01	<i>May 13, 8-10am</i>	
Group 02	<i>May 14, 9-11.30am</i>	

MORE INFORMATION ON ASSIGNMENTS / ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Participation

Participation is defined as:

- attendance at all seminars
- reading fully the required texts
- thoughtful contribution to discussions
- active participation in the Special Project Presentations

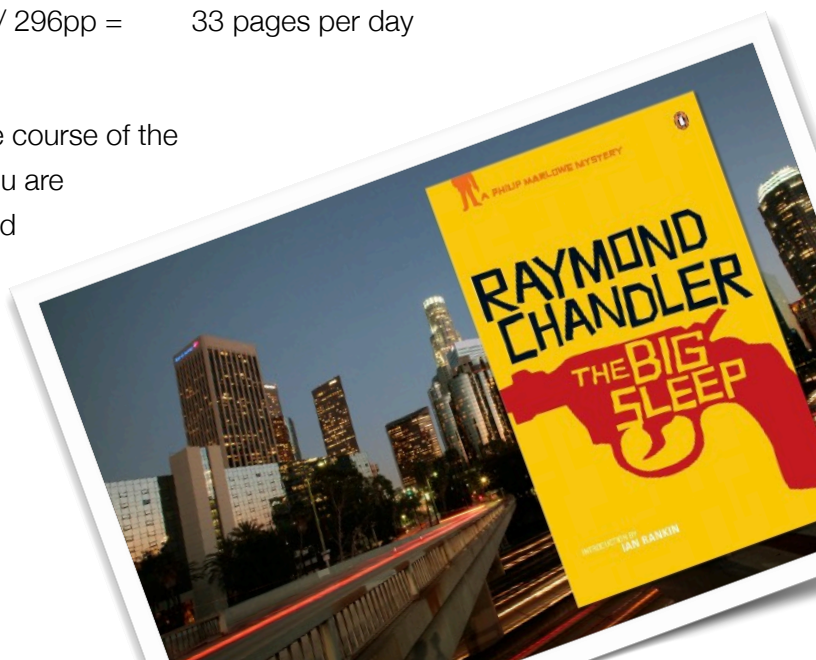
Attendance will be noted at every seminar. More than three absences without valid cause over the Semester will negatively impact your overall grade. Five absences will result in a failure for the class regardless of your performance in the papers and the Special Project.

Reading Workload

To keep on top of the reading, please study this table. It provides the number of days available to read a book, the page count of each book, and thus the number of pages you need to be reading per day, at that point of the course. It's up to you to note when the reading load is particularly heavy, and to plan accordingly.

(Course Begins)	01.14		
The Big Sleep	01.21	7 days / 277pp =	40 pages per day
Olive Kitteridge	01.30	9 days / 320pp =	36 pages per day
Deliverance	02.06	7 days / 278pp =	40 pages per day
Other Voices, Other Rooms	02.18	12 days / 208pp =	17 pages per day
Song of Solomon	02.27	9 days / 352pp =	40 pages per day
My Ántonia	03.13	14 days / 175pp =	13 pages per day
Woman Hollering Creek	03.27	14 days / 165pp =	12 pages per day
Ceremony	04.10	14 days / 243pp =	17 pages per day
Close Range	04.22	12 days / 285pp =	24 pages per day
Typical American	05.01	9 days / 296pp =	33 pages per day

You may each opt out of reading one novel during the course of the Semester. You must declare to me in advance that you are choosing to opt out of the upcoming book. (You would be wise to save this privilege for a particularly busy part of the Semester).



2 x Papers

Each paper should be 5 or 6 pages long, double spaced (approx. 1750 words). Please proof-read for clarity, substance, and style. Papers should be emailed to me in Pdf format.

Late delivery of papers without my permission or OSAS accommodation will incur a grade reduction. Papers delivered more than five days late without my permission or OSAS accommodation will not be graded.

Paper 1

- Due: 9am Feb 25th
 - Focus on one of 'The Big Sleep' / 'Olive Kitteridge' / 'Deliverance' / 'Other Voices, Other Rooms'
 - Write a critical review of your chosen novel
- Notes on Paper 1

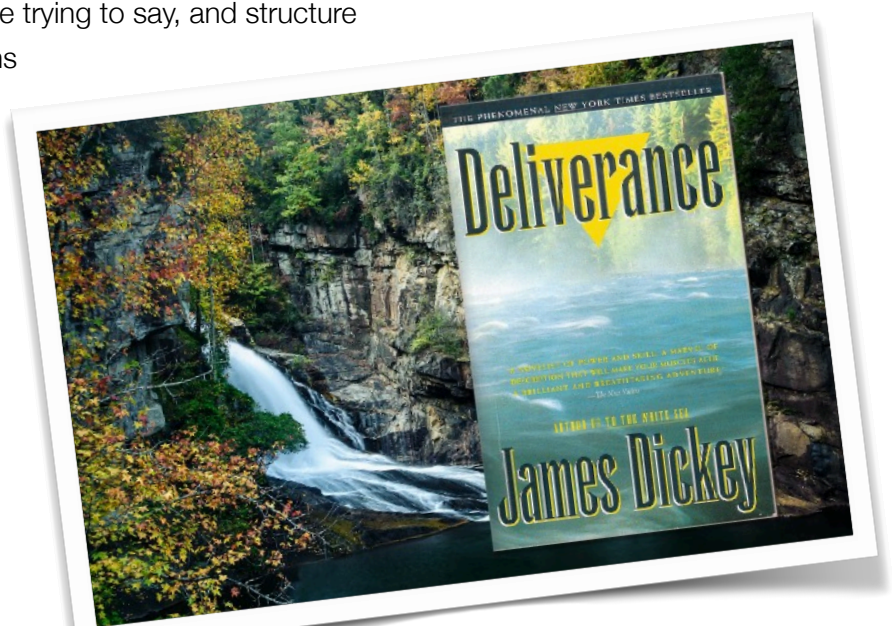
This first paper invites a personal response. What did you think of the novel?

Essentially, what I'm looking for here is the kind of thing you might find in the books section of a contemporary newspaper. Imagine the novel in question were being reissued in a contemporary edition. The reviewer's job is to balance objective criticism with personal reflection. Try to give the reader both a sense of the book, and what you thought of the book.

'Criticism' is usually understood these days in the negative sense, but the word is actually neutral - you can just as well write positive criticism. What I'm looking for is an honest, personal, interesting response. I want to know what you thought, and I want to see you back up your thoughts with considered and insightful argument.

Don't google around the subject. Don't quote any secondary sources. I have no interest in what other people think about the book, or what received wisdom is about the book. I am interested in you, and what's inside your head, and the originality, honesty and clarity of your thinking. Don't give lengthy descriptions of plot. You might want to describe the plot briefly in broad overview, enough to give the reader a sense of what the book is 'about'. You are likely to provide some details of plot, to illustrate some of the points you're making - but I don't want a synopsis of 'what happens'.

Work out the 'big picture' of what you're trying to say, and structure your work accordingly, using paragraphs as the building blocks of good structure. The reader wants to be interested in the detail, but also to have a sense of where we're 'going'.



Quote from the text, enough to back up your arguments. Choose interesting and apposite quotes; find the quotes that are really telling and nail what you're trying to say, and to give a sense of the 'reader experience'. Please don't feel obliged to include citations; think more journalistically, and quote the text as a newspaper reviewer might quote the text, rather than as an academic might quote the text!

Obviously, you're writing about books which are not contemporary. Keep in mind when they were written, and let that sense of period be a part of what you're reviewing. How well does the book hold up? How significant is the book as a historical artifact?

Paper 2

- Due: 9am Apr 29th
- (Focus on one of 'Song of Solomon' / 'My Ántonia' / 'Woman Hollering Creek' / 'Ceremony' / 'Close Range')
- Options:
 - 1 - Write a critical review of your chosen novel
 - 2 - How well does your chosen novel succeed as a novel of place?
 - 3 - Discuss a thematic element of your chosen novel

Paper 2 broadens your options.

If you wish, you can discuss your chosen novel from a 'bookpacking' perspective. What aspects of regional place, culture, geography and history emerge from your chosen book?

Or, you might wish to home in on one particular thematic aspect of the book that interests you.

Feel free to absorb ideas from our seminars into this second paper - but strive, too, for originality and unique perspectives.



- General notes on Writing Style and 'Voice'

You'll have gathered, from what I have outlined above, that I'm suggesting you break from the norms of academic writing. What you write for me might be very different in tone from what you write for other professors, and I'm inviting you to shake off some of the academic strictures you may be used to.

Last semester, I had a student who wanted to compare two novels, and he began a paragraph, "In the context of an intertextual paradigm...". Yuk! This is not how people speak in the real world. This kind of language is alienating and elitist. In the real world we want clarity, and we want 'voice'.

Your voice matters. The way you write is an opportunity to discover your voice. So - write with personality. Translate the way you speak to a written style that flows on the page. That doesn't mean abandoning good grammar; grammar is incredibly useful. But rules are meant to be broken, provided you break the rules in your 'voice', and with style (or what the French call 'panache').

So. Loosen up your style, and write for the real world - without being lazy or slapdash.

It's a challenge, and you may find it hard after years of 'academic' thinking. But please, enjoy the process!

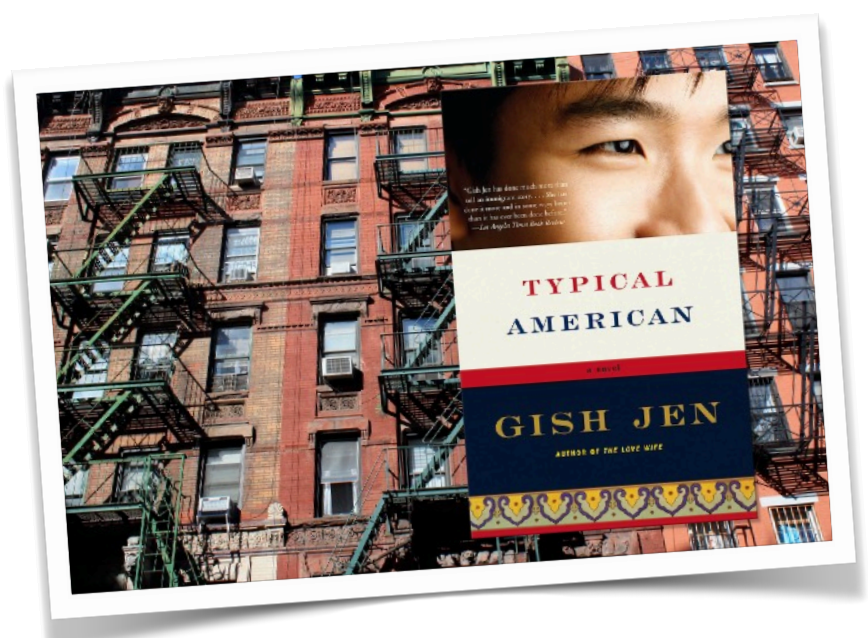
(If you want further inspiration on how to write well, read George Orwell, one of the great prose stylists of the 20th century. His inspired and important essay "Politics and the English Language" is available online).

- What am I looking for when I'm grading papers?

Grading is subjective. There is no formula for writing good essay. My grading style may differ from that of other professors.

But let me reiterate the key points I've outlined above:

- What I'm looking for is an honest, personal, interesting response. I want to know what you thought, and I want to see you back up your thoughts with considered and insightful argument.
- I am interested in the originality, honesty and clarity of your thinking.
- Write with personality. Let me hear your 'voice'. Translate the way you speak to a written style that flows on the page.



Special Project

By the end of the Semester, you will research and deliver a multimedia project on the experience of 'bookpacking' a novel (most likely, a Los Angeles novel) of your choice.

The report will describe how the novel you have chosen helps us understand a particular region or subculture of L.A.. But more than that - it will describe the immersive experience of 'bookpacking' the novel - meaning, that you'll have visited the locations described, and will report back on the interplay between text and reality.

This is a 'summative' project, in that it will involve you incorporating new skills learnt over the course of the class. You will be expected to think, and work, in a cross-humanities way, as befitting the 'bookpackers' idea - weaving together place, people, and text, and forging connections between past and present, making sense of complex cultural phenomena through this cross-disciplinary lens.

The project will be delivered as a combination of prose (2500 words minimum) and other media - photos, video, audio, maps. Delivery format will depend on the media used. If you intend to deliver words + pictures, Pdf format is best; if incorporating video and audio, we will discuss the best format for delivery on an individual basis.

My intention - with your consent - is to publish the best of these pieces on the bookpackers website, and you can visit bookpackers.com to get an idea of what students have delivered in the past - you will find a variety of styles and formats represented.

On Blackboard, you will find an 'Inspiration List' of Los Angeles novels, with a brief description showing how each ties into a particular district or culture of the city. Choose one that interests you and let me know your choice, and this will then become 'your' subject for the semester. Read the book, plot the locations, visit the settings, interact with the locals. Live the book as 'immersively' as you can. The more immersive your experience, the more vibrant and interesting your final project.

It will be up to you to plan when and how you will visit the L.A. locations in the novel. Discuss the logistics with me if you are concerned about this. Some L.A. locations are safer than others; be wise, and keep me abreast of your plans.

(You may, if you choose, select a novel from any part of the US - but only if you have the opportunity to visit that location at some point during the semester, perhaps during Spring Break. Please discuss this option with me if it appeals).

- Special Project Schedule

- Feb 11th - deadline to select Special Project novel
- Feb 25th - Special Project briefing, in class
- May 12th - Special Project delivery deadline 6pm PST

- Final Presentations

There is an oral element to the Special Projects.

During exam week, you will attend an in-person session with a group of your peers, during which time you will present your projects to the group, highlighting key elements of your original research, and fielding questions.

The Final Presentations will be held on May 13th and 14th, on Zoom (see page 4).

Each student will be given 20 minutes - 15 mins to present, and 5 mins to answer questions.



COURSE OBJECTIVES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." - Atticus Finch in 'To Kill a Mockingbird'

The challenge is empathy - understanding the mystery of other people. Fiction offers a solution. The fictional landscape is full of people who behave and think differently to us. Spending time in the company of these fictional characters, we come to understand what has made them how they are. We may never come to sympathize with them; but we can, at least, empathize. Empathy in America today is in short supply. The nation is culturally divided. This course aims to help us bridge that gulf of misunderstanding.

It does so in a way that is cross-disciplinary, combining elements of literature, history, geography, politics and social studies. It encourages holistic study - a pure humanities experience, pushing us to think in surprising ways.

Other Learning Outcomes

1 – Critical and creative. Students will learn:

- to understand in depth the complex relations between a culture and its representations
- to grasp the skills and theories of interpretation and to see how interpretive interests shift with time and place
- to study a range of contrasting narratives from the perspective of several disciplines
- to engage in self-directed research
- to exercise their own skills in writing, generating new ideas by controlling and shaping language

2 – Philosophical and empathetic. Students will learn:

- to study behaviors of complex characters leading uncertain lives with competing values, weighing human costs and human benefits
- to test attitudes and understandings that are beyond their own immediate experience
- to engage with complex literatures as a preparation for understanding complex lives

3 – General Education (Humanistic Inquiry). Students will:

- cultivate a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression, including literature, language, philosophy, and the arts, as well as develop an understanding of the contexts from which these forms emerge;
- read and interpret actively and analytically, think critically and creatively, and write and speak persuasively;
- evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives and to formulate informed opinions on complex issues of critical importance in today's global world;
- collaborate effectively through traditional and new ways of disseminating knowledge.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty - **including any use of content generated by AI** - are equally unacceptable. Students who submit papers which I suspect include AI generated content will be subject to a viva. Failure in the viva will result in a failing grade for that paper.

See additional information in SCampus and university policies on Research and Scholarship Misconduct.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office](#) webpage for [undergraduate-](#) and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - (213) 740-2101

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

Adjustments to this Syllabus may be made during the course of the semester.

