

Dear Reader

Emily Balch Seminar Section 20

Fall 2026

Instructor: Devin Lawson (she/her)

Instructor Contact: dlawson@brynmawr.edu

Office: TBA

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM, or by appointment

Class Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:40 AM to 1:00 PM

Course Location: Taylor Hall C

Course Description

The desire to communicate with other people is strong, whether that be through physical pieces of paper carried by foot over long distances or the instant delivery of emails and text messages. Does a letter do something that other types of writing cannot? Are letters still relevant in our current post-modern world? Throughout this course, we will tackle the question of how people across time have used letters to communicate with and relate to each other – and what those insights might mean for us now.

Required Texts

The following texts are available for purchase at the Bryn Mawr bookstore:

- Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose The Time War*
- Virginia Evans, *The Correspondent*

All other course readings will be posted on Moodle.

Requirements and Grading

- Preparation and participation (30%)
 - Your grade in this category will consist of completing all assigned readings before class so our discussions can flourish; contributing thoughtfully to and listening actively during in-class discussions; and providing constructive and respectful feedback to your peers on their writing
- Diagnostic assignment (graded based on completion)
 - In this assignment, which is meant to give me a sense of you and your writing, you will argue whether or not something is a letter
 - **Due Friday, September 4 by 11:59 PM**
- Introductory letter (graded based on completion)
 - This letter will introduce you and your writing background to me
 - **Due Friday, September 4 by 11:59 PM**

- Three formal essays, draft and revised version
 - Between the beginning of the semester and Thanksgiving break, you will write **and revise** three formal academic essays. Drafts will be graded based on completion, while the revised versions will be graded on a scale from 0.0 to 4.0. Revision is a key tenet of the Emily Balch seminars, since it is a critical skill required for academic writing. As a result, an essay without its corresponding draft **and/or** writing reflection **and/or** attending the conference will receive a maximum grade of 3.0.
 - Essay 1 will be a 3–4-page analytical essay on Heloise and Abelard (15%)
 - **Draft due Friday, September 18 by 11:59 PM**
 - **Revised version due Friday, September 25 by 11:59 PM**
 - Essay 2 will be a 5–6-page essay comparing or contrasting the *Heroides* with the Eva Byrne material from Special Collections (20%)
 - **Draft due Friday, October 9 by 11:59 PM**
 - **Revised version due Friday, October 23 by 11:59 PM**
 - Essay 3 will be a 6-8-page essay applying Lacan and/or Derrida to *The Jack Randa Hotel* or *This Is How You Lose The Time War* (25%)
 - **Draft due Friday, November 13 by 11:59 PM**
 - **Revised version due Wednesday, November 25 by 11:59 PM**
- Four conferences (graded based on completion)
 - These one-on-one meetings with me are an opportunity for us to delve deeper into your writing. The first conference will be an informal opportunity for us to get to know each other better, while the remaining three will be used to discuss the drafts of your essays.
 - **Conference 1 will take place during Week 2 (September 7-11)**
 - **Conference 2 will take place during Week 4 (September 21-25)**
 - **Conference 3 will take place during Week 8 (October 19-23)**
 - **Conference 4 will take place during Week 12 (November 16-20)**
- Three writing reflections (graded based on completion)
 - These are 250-word responses meant to give you an opportunity to reflect on your writing process. Due with the revised versions of your essay, you will outline how you responded to and incorporated the feedback you received on your draft.
 - **Writing reflection 1 is due on Friday, September 25 by 11:59 PM**
 - **Writing reflection 2 is due on Friday, October 23 by 11:59 PM**
 - **Writing reflection 3 is due on Wednesday, November 25 by 11:59 PM**
- Final project (10%)
 - This assignment will bring together the final two units of the course, where we consider letter collections and archives, as well as the relevance of letters in our lives today. You will select an archive of your own, then write a finding aid

accompanied by a short response in which you outline the reasoning for your choices.

- **Due Friday, December 18 by 12:30 PM**

Policies

- **Attendance**

- Given the discussion-based nature of this course, attendance is crucial – but I also understand that life happens. If you must miss a class for any reason (mental health day, illness, family emergency, religious holiday or observance, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible. Two absences are excused. More than two unexcused absences will compromise your ability to pass this course.

- **Late work and extensions**

- Deadlines exist for my benefit, but also for yours. Nevertheless, as with attendance, I understand that life happens. If you need an extension, contact me at least 24 hours before the deadline, barring exceptional circumstances. As a general rule, the farther in advance you contact me, the longer an extension I am willing to give. Late work without an approved extension will be penalized one step for each day it is late (i.e., a 4.0 paper that is turned in one day late will be lowered to a 3.7).

- **Technology**

- Unless we are completing an in-class assignment that requires them, laptops, Kindles, iPads, and other similar devices must be stowed away. If you need an exception to this rule, please speak to me.

- **Accommodations**

- Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>).

- **Honor code and academic integrity**

- I take Bryn Mawr's honor code very seriously. As per Bryn Mawr's honor code, "Each student is responsible for the integrity of his or her own academic work. Thus, it is important that each student read and understand these academic resolutions, as each student will be held responsible for them." I encourage you to review its tenets.

- **AI use**
 - A primary learning goal in this course is to develop your skills in critical thinking and academic writing. Both of these are process-based activities that take time and repeated practice to develop. AI tools remove opportunities for learning and growth in this arena. For this reason, you may not use generative AI tools of any kind in this course. AI generated work will be treated as plagiarism.
- **Writing center**
 - The Writing Center offers free, individual consultations on writing assignments of any kind. Trained peer writing tutors are available six days a week, Sunday-Friday. Book an appointment through the online schedule (brynmawr.mywconline.com) or walk into the Writing Center on the first floor of Canaday library and ask for a conference.
- **Title IX**
 - Bryn Mawr College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence are violations of Bryn Mawr's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.
 - The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sexual misconduct. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to Associate Director of Civil Rights and Title IX Coordinator Cary Carr. Information about the College's [Sexual Misconduct policy](#), reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website.
- **Academic and personal success**
 - I am deeply invested in your success, both inside and outside the classroom. As such, please feel free to drop into my office hours or send me an email, and I will do my best to help you or direct you to other resources that may be of use.

Detailed Schedule

***NB: Readings should be completed *before* the class for which they are listed. This schedule is tentative and subject to change.**

1. Introduction: Letters Defined

Week 1

Tuesday, 9/1

- Hi all, welcome to *Dear Reader*! I am delighted to have you along for the ride. There are no formal readings for our first class. Instead, read through the syllabus and make note of one reading or assignment that intrigues you or that you are excited about. In our first class, we will get oriented to each other and the course and its expectations. In preparation, you might consider the following questions: what *are* letters? Do they have specific, unique characteristics?

2. Love Letters: Now that we are oriented regarding letters, we will spend some time studying a specific type: love letters.

A. Status and Power: Or, can you be co-workers with your ex?

Thursday, 9/3

- Heloise and Abelard, Letter 1 (pg. 18, first paragraph; pp. 22-31; pp. 43-49) and Letter 2

Friday, 9/4

- **Diagnostic assignment and introductory letter due by 11:59 PM**

Week 2 [Conference 1]

Tuesday, 9/8

- Heloise and Abelard, Letters 3-4

Thursday, 9/10

- Heloise and Abelard, Letters 5-6
- Harvey, *Writing with Sources*, pp. 2-5, 10-14, 15-17, 22-26, 32-37, and 44

Week 3

Tuesday, 9/15

- Glenda McLeod, “‘Wholly Guilty, Wholly Innocent’: Self-Definition in Heloise’s Letters to Abelard”

Thursday, 9/17

- Print and bring two copies of your draft of Essay 1 to class for in-class peer review

Friday, 9/18

- **Draft of Essay 1 due by 11:59 PM**

B. Mail and Female: Gender and Genre

Week 4 [Conference 2]

Tuesday, 9/22

- Ovid, *Heroides* 1 (Penelope to Odysseus)
- Ovid, *Heroides* 4 (Phaedra to Hippolytus)
- Ovid, *Heroides* 9 (Deianira to Hercules)
- One *Heroides* of your choice!

Thursday, 9/24

- Ovid, *Heroides* 16 (Paris to Helen)
- Ovid, *Heroides* 17 (Helen to Paris)
- Ovid, *Heroides* 20 (Acontius to Cydippe)
- Ovid, *Heroides* 21 (Cydippe to Acontius)

Friday, 9/25

- **Essay 1 and writing reflection 1 due by 11:59 PM**

Week 5

Tuesday, 9/29

- In class today, we will visit Bryn Mawr's archives in Special Collections, where we will work with material from the Eva Bryne collection. Specifically, we will be looking at letters written by Bryne, Helen Rubel, and Leona C. Gabel. From 1919 through 1923, the three were engaged in a family coded relationship in which Bryne was "Mummy", Rubel was "Daddy", and Gabel was "Baby." The collection also preserves ephemera sent with the letters, such as dried flowers and locks of hair. In preparation, read [this blog post](#) on archives.

Thursday, 10/1

- Ovid, *Heroides* 15 (Sappho to Phaon)

- Bring a sentence or two from the Eva Bryne collection that you feel captures a point of comparison or contrast with the *Heroides*. Please feel free to return to Special Collections and read some more of the material. The Reading Room is open Monday through Friday from 10 AM to 4 PM.

3. Theorizing Letters: Let's theorize!

***NB: This unit has the most dense, theoretical readings we will encounter this semester. Read (and re-read) slowly, carefully, and intently. Use all your resources, especially your fellow classmates and me.**

Week 6

Tuesday, 10/6

- Edgar Allen Poe, *The Purloined Letter*

Thursday, 10/8

- Print and bring two copies of your draft of Essay 2 to class for peer review

Friday, 10/9

- **Draft of Essay 2 due by 11:59 PM**

Week 7 – Fall Break: NO CLASS

Week 8 [Conference 3]

Tuesday, 10/20

- Reread Edgar Allen Poe, *The Purloined Letter*
- Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*”

Thursday, 10/22

- Reread Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*”
- Niall Campbell, “The Letter Always Arrives at its Destination”

Friday, 10/23

- **Essay 2 and writing reflection 2 by 11:59 PM**

Week 9

Tuesday, 10/27

- Jacques Derrida, *The Purveyor of Truth*

4. Letters Destabilized: The theoretical models in our previous unit used a story in which a letter was stolen as their basis. We will resume that thread here by turning to fiction in which letters do not function as they should or are pushed to their logical limits.

Thursday, 10/29

- Reread Jacques Derrida, *The Purveyor of Truth*
- Alice Munro, *The Jack Randa Hotel*

Week 10

Tuesday, 11/3

- Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose The Time War*, pp. 1-101

Thursday, 11/5

- Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone, *This Is How You Lose The Time War*, pp. 102-198

Week 11

Tuesday, 11/10

- Breather day – assignments TBA

Thursday, 11/12

- Print and bring two copies of your draft of Essay 3 to class for peer review

Friday, 11/13

- **Draft of Essay 3 due by 11:59 PM**

5. Letter Collections and Archives: In the previous unit, we explored the risks and potentials of letters in narrative. In this unit, we will pivot to the problems letters raise for scholars in real life, specifically within the context of archives. How should we think about and study letters?

Week 12 [Conference 4]

Tuesday, 11/17

- Aurelia Plath, *Introduction to Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*
- Jennifer, Douglas, “Toward More Honest Description”
- Trinidad, David, “[More Is More: Sylvia Plath’s Letters.](#)”

Thursday, 11/19

- During class today, we will return to Special Collections, where we will continue our discussion of how archivists process collections. We will use the collection of Agnes Michels, a former Bryn Mawr Latin professor, which I processed during the 2025-2026 academic year, as a case study. In preparation, read the Agnes Michels finding aid, the Eva Bryne finding aid, and the Lucy Chew finding aid.

6. Letters Today: After completing our tour through the possibilities afforded by letters, we will conclude by thinking about the role letters play in our present lives. Are letters, in all their evolutions, still relevant today?

Week 13

Tuesday, 11/24

- Get a head start on reading *The Correspondent*! In class, we will get first-hand experience with the problems letters might raise by playing the game Love Letters. In the game, you will try and seduce Princess Annette by delivering your letter and deflecting those of competing suitors. We will also have some time to work on Essay 3.

Wednesday, 11/25

- **Essay 3 and writing reflection 3 due by 11:59 PM**

Thursday, 11/26 – Thanksgiving: NO CLASS

Week 14

Tuesday, 12/1

- Virginia Evans, *The Correspondent*, pp.1-150

Thursday, 12/3

- Virginia Evans, *The Correspondent*, pp. 151-281

Week 15

Tuesday, 12/8

- Read or listen to Isabel Allende on the Modern Love Podcast, where she discusses her epistolary relationship with her mother
- Listen to Carly Simon's album *Letters Never Sent* and/or Sabrina Carpenter's album *Emails I Can't Send*

Thursday, 12/10

- Reflect on everything we have read and talked about this semester. Was there a text, question, or theme that felt particularly moving or important to you? Did something from this course resonate with your own personal experience or your field of study? Do you have a favorite epistolary text/other media we didn't cover in class but that you think speaks to what we have discussed? Come prepared to share. In class, we will have one final closing discussion (with food and drink!) and complete course evaluations.

Week 16

Friday, 12/18

- **Final project due by 12:30 PM**