

Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian
Languages and Literatures (AMESALL)

Introduction to the Literatures of the Middle East

This course covers a broad sampling of literary works from the MENA/SWANA region, presented in English translation. Through readings, films, music, and food, we'll engage with stories from places and times as diverse as contemporary Jerusalem, Islamicate Spain, the ancient Sumerian underworld, kitchens and parties in medieval Baghdad, the childhood home of Alexander the Great, and the borderlands between empires past and present. Along the way, we'll examine the historical contexts of these stories, discuss their bearing on contemporary social and political issues, and investigate different models of reading and interpreting literature. No previous knowledge of MENA/SWANA languages or literatures is presumed. All are welcome!

Format

In-person course.
M, W 5:40-7:00pm
MU-204

All readings
in English

Instructor

Prof. Ben Koerber
bk311@rutgers.edu

Office Hours by
appointment.

Grades

50% Participation
35% Quizzes (5)
15% Final Exam

Course Requirements

Participation & Attendance

Each class session, your participation will be graded on a scale of **0 to 5 points**. In order to achieve all 5 points, you must observe the following rules:

- ❑ Print out the appropriate [readings](#) and [worksheets](#) and bring to class.
- ❑ Use of all electronic devices is prohibited in the classroom. This includes, but is not limited to, phones, computers, earbuds, headphones, smart watches and glasses, and recording devices. Of course, exceptions are allowed for disabilities.
- ❑ Remain focused on the activity, discussion, or lecture.
- ❑ Arrive on time and stay for the full length of the session.
- ❑ Make at least one substantive verbal contribution to the class discussion (more than just a yes/no question or “fact check”).

There are many ways you can prepare for a discussion if you find speaking spontaneously to be challenging. The worksheets will certainly help. Consider also writing down a couple of questions or comments, or underlining some passages from the reading you found thought-provoking or confusing. You may want to practice tossing around ideas about the reading with friends or relatives (or even with the professor!) beforehand.

Please note that attendance is mandatory. If you need to miss an occasional class for unverifiable illness or circumstances, you are responsible for submitting the absence through the [Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence website](#); this will automatically generate email notification to your instructors. Reporting an absence does not excuse missed work; please still contact your instructors directly to discuss catching up.

Should you find yourself facing an extended absence, please connect with the [Office of the Dean of Students-Student Support](#) as soon as possible.

It is the policy of the Rutgers University not to cancel classes on religious holidays, but to honor students' religious observance and support makeup work. For information on the cancellation of classes due to inclement weather, please see the [University Operating Status page](#).

Readings

- + All readings will be made available as PDFs free of charge! Go to Canvas → Files.
- + **Students are required to print out each reading and bring it to class on the appropriate day** (see “Participation & Attendance”).
- + Students are expected to fully and carefully read the assigned texts, take notes, and come to class prepared to discuss.

Worksheets

Each reading will be accompanied by a “worksheet,” located in the same folder on Canvas. Students are required to print out the worksheet, complete it, and bring it to class in preparation for the lecture or discussion. The worksheet will not be graded or turned in, but failure to complete the worksheet will negatively affect a student’s participation grade.

Quizzes

In lieu of a midterm exam, there will be five (5) short, low-stakes quizzes spread evenly throughout the semester. Essentially, that means there will be a quiz every other week. The quizzes do not require any extra study time, as they are designed simply to test whether students have been following along with the readings.

Final Exam

Students will have a choice between a written, in-class exam, an oral interview exam, and an artistic performance exam (music, drawing, and/or cooking). Details forthcoming.

Course Policies

Electronic Devices

Use of all electronic devices is prohibited in the classroom. This includes, but is not limited to, phones, computers, earbuds, headphones, smart watches, AR glasses, and recording devices. Of course, exceptions are allowed for disabilities. Failure to respect this policy will result in a lower **participation grade**.

Workload

Students are expected to spend approximately 6 hours outside of class each week on all assignments. This includes time spent reading, taking notes, completing the worksheet, and preparing for participation.

Course Announcements

You must check your email regularly for course updates and announcements. Reminders/changes may be issued regarding readings, assignments, or due dates.

Plagiarism and Cheating

Plagiarism or cheating in any form is a serious offense and will result, at the very least, in a grade of F for the course, and possible expulsion from the university. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with policies on academic integrity at Rutgers: academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/

“Artificial Intelligence”

Use of so-called “artificial intelligence,” including but not limited to LLMs like ChatGPT, text-to-audio apps, Grammarly, etc. etc., is strictly prohibited for all components of this course. Let us join together and fight against the evil robots!

Instructor Information

Communication

I welcome and encourage you to share ideas, questions, and concerns about the class with your classmates and with me in whatever format you feel most comfortable with. I also value your feedback on any aspect of the course, including content, format, or anything else you would like to discuss.

The best way to contact me is through email. I usually respond within 36 hours during the week, or within 48 hours if it's a weekend. If I don't respond within that period, feel free to send me a follow-up email. I am also available for office hours via Zoom. To set up an appointment, please send me an email so we can agree on a time.

A note on sending emails: You do not need to begin your message by apologizing for something, whether that's lateness or illness or whatever. No excuses needed. Just begin with a simple greeting ("Hello Prof. Koerber") and explain how I can help you.

Teaching Approach

I am committed to helping everyone succeed in this class. I recognize and respect differences in learning styles, reading speed, comfort with academic and literary language, and so forth. If you **contact me for help**, I will think *more* highly of you, not less. *Please **do** reach out to me as frequently as you want to*, so that I may help you more effectively.

I subscribe to the theory of "**multiple intelligences**." Some of us are better with visual-spatial intelligence, others are better with verbal-linguistic intelligence or logical-mathematical intelligence. Some of us are geniuses when it comes to emotions, sounds, movement, or moral and spiritual dimensions. The activities in the class aim to address all of these abilities, though obviously some more than others.

As much as we all have different kinds of intelligence, all of us also have what are called "**learning disabilities**." These might be technical aspects of how our brains

function differently, or they can be related to medical or emotional/mental states. I recognize all of these as potential hurdles to academic success, and urge you to reach out to me, or to advising and counseling services at Rutgers. Any information you share with me will be confidential.

Finally, whatever your strengths and weaknesses, please be advised that **self-advocacy is key** to your success in this class and beyond. I can only help if you communicate with me as clearly and frequently as possible.

Help!

Rutgers SAS has a very useful webpage for students needing help with anything from writing skills and tutoring to mental health counseling, disabilities, and registration issues: success.rutgers.edu

Please take advantage of this resource!



Course Schedule

Week 1 (Wednesday, Jan. 21): [Introductions](#)

- ☐ First class meeting
- ☐ Carefully read syllabus
- ☐ Access Canvas

Week 2 (Jan. 26 & Jan. 28): [Where is the Middle East? & Why literature?](#)

- ☐ Worksheet

Week 3 (Feb. 2 & Feb. 4): [Hymns of Enheduana](#)

- ☐ Quiz I (in class on Monday)
- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 4 (Feb. 9 & Feb. 11): [Tales and Wisdom from Ancient Egypt](#)

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 5 (Feb. 16 & Feb. 18): [Alexander Romance](#)

- ☐ Quiz 2 (in class on Monday)
- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 6 (Feb. 23 & Feb. 25): [Classical Arabic Tribal Poetry](#)

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 7 (March 2 & March 4): [History of Writing](#)

- ☐ Quiz 3 (in class on Monday)
- ☐ Documentary
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 8 (March 9 & March 11): Poetry and Song of al-Andalus

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 9 (March 16 & March 18): SPRING BREAK

(No classes)

Week 10 (March 23 & March 25): Evlia Çelebi's *Book of Travels*

- ☐ Quiz 4 (in class on Monday)
- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 11 (March 30 & April 1): Epic of Bani Hilal

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Weeks 12 (April 6 & April 8): Graphic Narratives of Palestine

- ☐ Quiz 5 (in class on Monday)
- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 13 (April 13 & April 15): Arab Jewish Identities

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 14 (April 20 & April 22): Music and Food!

- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Worksheet

Week 15 (April 27 & April 29): [Final Exams](#)

- ☐ Exams in class