

## *Choosing a Theme for Your Course*

Teachers of English 101 at Tulane can and should organize the readings for their course around a particular theme. In so doing, they invite their students to explore certain issues in much greater depth than if the readings were not so carefully linked, and this unified exploration, of course, models for students the general work of the academy. What's more, it creates a rhetorical context – that is, a set of positions and perspectives among which students can situate their own writing – that will help students develop a meaningful sense of audience and purpose for their writing.

Some themes, however, serve better than others. More specifically, themes best serve a section of 101 when they are characterized by two particular features:

1. They provide a springboard for more expansive, general reflection about writing, about language, and about texts. They provide insights into the essential business of the course, which is student prose and its improvement. For example, a teacher might choose “Vampires” as the theme of the course, and while the students might learn some fundamental skills about scholarly writing and become familiar with the conventions of a certain branch of academic humanism, this theme is even more successful if it is mined as an elaborate metaphor for profound, far-reaching aspects of language and writing. In a sense, the point here is that all texts are somehow “about” writing and textuality, and when themes lend themselves particularly well to lessons-in-composition, they best serve the course. When they don't, the course constantly threatens to split into two mini-courses – one that offers a little information on vampires, say, and one that offers a little information about how to write, but neither of them making the sort of lasting contribution to the students' education that the more unified version can.
2. They link student writing in fairly direct ways to the world outside the academy, to the various crises and conflicts that most urgently face humanity in our time. As Kurt Spellmeyer argues in *Arts of Living*, the academic humanities must reinvent themselves in ways that strengthen their social relevance, lest they become merely “academic” in the pejorative sense – that is, fulfill the stereotype of the solipsistic navel-gazer of the Ivory Tower. To do this, Spellmeyer urges teachers of writing to focus their courses on themes that directly open onto broad issues like environmentalism, globalization, information-technology, and identity-politics. Incidentally, the student essays that most often become finalists for the Boyette Prize are the ones that engage the theme of their particular section of 101 to reach intelligently and persuasively into precisely these broader issues, a fact which suggests how meaningful, how rhetorically powerful, these issues intrinsically are.