

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us/).

## A few words about books and reading

You’ll notice that we are not reading a textbook for this course. Instead, all the required books for this course are primary sources, i.e., original works, not secondary sources written about primary sources.

During much of the 20th century there was a belief in many educational circles that college students were simply not intellectually capable of reading and understanding primary sources. So, the thinking went, students should be asked to read only secondary sources such as textbooks about original authors. When you take a psychology course, for example, you are often not asked to read Watson, Freud, Skinner, Jung, Adler, Maslow or other original thinkers, but are instead asked to read a textbook that summarizes and simplifies these authors for you. If you take a sociology course you do not read Max Weber, Emile Durckheim or any of the other great original thinkers, but only textbooks about them. The same has held true for most courses in history, biology, physics and other disciplines.

Fortunately that practice has begun to change in the last decade or two, and professors are coming to realize that college students are perfectly capable of reading original sources.

In this course you will be reading real original books by the original authors, not watered down and not pre-digested for you by a secondary source. These books are, further, some of the best books ever written in all time, and are also some of the most influential books ever written. I think you will find them provocative.

Some of these primary sources are books that have the capacity to stir minds and souls. Franz Kafka believes that some books have the power to free minds and souls. He says:

"I believe that we should read only those books that bite and sting us. If a book we are reading does not rouse us with a blow to the head, then why read it? Because it will make us happy, you tell me? My God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy we could, if necessary, write ourselves. What we need are books that affect us like some really grievous misfortune, like the death of one whom we loved more than ourselves, as if we were banished to a distant forest, away from everybody, like a suicide; a book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us." — Franz Kafka

I’m not sure that every book we read should have this profound an effect on us, but perhaps a few should. Other books can somehow almost bring something to life within us, as Albert Schweitzer says:

"Sometimes our light goes out but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light." — Albert Schweitzer

I hope that some of the books you read this quarter will be meaningful ones for you.