**Mr. Biggs’s English II Honors: Frequently Asked Questions**

**Who are you?** I’m an RBR teacher entering my 8th year and a total obsessive about literature, philosophy and writing. While I also love playing guitar and hanging out with friends, my main interest in life is exploring the creative power of thoughts and words. I get to do this every day with my students, so I guess I’m also a pretty lucky person.

**How do you approach teaching?** Teaching is the creation and coordination of transformative encounters between varied individuals and (in my subject) texts. A good teacher knows how to read the “signs” of a student’s hidden potential and create the kind of experience that will liberate it for the development of greater capabilities (in my subject, creative thought, verbal processing and self-expression). Since every student, every class, and every moment is different, teaching can never be reduced to a procedural activity. It requires staying present to students and constantly reinventing your approach in light of their development and discoveries.

**How is Honors different from C.P.?** The obvious difference is the heavier workload in reading and writing, which is balanced out by the five-point “bump” students receive on their final average. There is also a much greater focus on developing original thesis statements through both deeper literary analysis and interdisciplinary connections with philosophy, history, psychology and science. Finally, Honors is a highly communal experience; students edit each other’s papers, brainstorm together, share source documents, and participate in blog conversations.

**How does Honors prepare students for A.P/I.B. coursework?** This course is designed to progressively increase the difficulty of reading and writing assignments, smoothly inclining toward the college-level work students will take up next year. By the end of this course they will have read and analyzed several classic novels, written their first research paper, and participated in variety of challenging seminar discussions on topics like human nature, individualism, the American Dream and the function of creativity. This will enable them to formulate intriguing ideas into clear point, develop them into comprehensive papers, and communicate these thoughts to others.

**What do students read in this course, and why?** The core works are Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun,* F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry* Finn, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse -5*, and Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49.* These are all classic, “canonical” works, but ones which remain relevant and vibrant in our 21st century context. We also focus on clusters of short stories and poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot and others. At the end of the year, students will chose and read a contemporary novel to put in dialogue with their favorite works in a research paper. The goal is not merely for them to appreciate the American canon, but to become participants in an ongoing conversation about our potential that was initiated, in print, by our greatest minds.

**What is a typical day in this class like?** Quite varied. Honors is fast-paced, and each day touches on a few different subjects or skills. We will usually open with some kind of thought-provoking activity, move into some kind of discussion oriented towards close reading, and then proceed into some kind of writing or creative analysis that allows students to practice responding to literature. Hopefully students leave still thinking about something we’ve discussed.

**How can a student do well in this class?** Obviously, they need to do the work, which will increase as the year progresses. But if they really want an edge, students should read on their own, even if they’re consuming magazines and comics, and write independently, even if it’s “just” blogging. We build neural circuitry through repetition, so the more they read and write the better they will perform. They will also be preparing themselves for college, where it’s common to have a novel or 100 pages of text assigned between classes.