

Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara  
Russian 014: The Russian Novel – Revolution, Terror, Resistance  
Swarthmore College  
Fall 2020

“Yes! I thought the shift to online courses was handled quite well. This course felt as, if not more, engaging as the in-person humanities classes I’ve had. I liked the use of a google doc for discussion outside of class and the use of questions posted on the doc to structure and inspire in class discussion. The ‘queue’ system for class discussion also helped prevent large silences or talking over people on zoom. In general the creation of out-of-class forums for interaction and viewing one another’s work and ideas (eg. google docs, scalar ebook) helped contribute to a sense of community despite not being in the same classroom or campus.”

“I think the class materials were excellent! All of the books were different and taught different ideas and different histories, while still having continuity with each other. Some of the best discussion moments were when we could talk about multiple books at once.”

“I have enjoyed the format of our remote class. I think Professor Vergara utilized his resources well and created an engaging learning space. The common breaks in break out rooms before reconvening and giving us time to discuss in a smaller setting was a lot less intimidating and more productive than if we had just stayed in the larger group for the whole class period.”

“This class was excellent online. I still love breakout rooms; they work fantastic and better than the in-person equivalent, imo. I kind of can’t think of something that didn’t work well.”

“The shift to remote learning has been successful, the use of various Zoom features like the hand raising, poll, and breakout room options made learning more engaging than just listening to a lecture about the material.”

“I’ve really enjoyed the different writing styles that we have read. Even though some were frustratingly difficult it was fascinating to learn about the writing style of that author. The writing styles tended to be drastically different from any English literature I have read.”

“I learned a lot about the changes Russian society underwent as a result of the Russian Revolution.”

“I found the novels themselves and our class discussions very interesting. My favorite of the novels was probably *Envy*, followed by *The Aviator*; the unit of class discussions I got the most out of was probably *Between Dog & Wolf* simply because I would’ve parsed almost nothing of it

on my own, although it's certainly the case that there were things revealed through class that I wouldn't have gotten on my own from every book."

"The most interesting thing I learned from this course was to broaden my sense of what literature can look like. I learned that a book does not necessarily need a plot in the sense that we are used to, and it can still get points across to readers in an unconventional way."

"I think I improved my approach to writing and critical reading. Maybe not 'interesting' but definitely a useful think to learn and improve upon. The most memorable part of class was the chance to interview the author Vodolazkin! Was fascinating to hear about his writing process, ideas, philosophies, etc. Very cool."

"Learning about the structure of Soviet literature, and how different authors pushed against it, was particularly interesting. I also liked learning about defamiliarization while we were reading *Envy* and *Invitation to a Beheading*."

"I think the discussion questions and responses have been very effective in getting me to think more deeply about the text. The responses are also one of the only ways I get to interact with my classmates outside of class, which is nice since I don't get to actually see my classmates in person."

"I love the group conversations around discussing the books, especially when trying to decipher 'cryptic' texts together (like *Dog* or *ITAB*). It's really nice to hear various different perspectives and have people build upon each other's idea to form a good picture of what each book is trying to get at."

"I think having public discussion questions that everyone else reads and can respond to is very useful. Also, the 1 2 3 chat system has really helped make the discussion aspect of the class work smoothly...I've actually started using this system whenever I need to moderate discussions for clubs and stuff."

"I have found the time for class discussion to be most engaging and helpful, as the questions provide helpful themes and ideas to focus on to gain a broader picture of the novel. The discussion is also when there are opportunities for more students to bring in additional sources or expand upon their interpretations of the text in meaningful ways."

“I think the assignments are appropriate considering that we are all disconnected from one another; more specifically, I think the assignments help me connect with my classmates, especially since each assignment definitely aids in my understanding of the texts.”

“I have loved the structure of the course. I really appreciate the deadline times and the flexibility with regards to posts and annotation scalar pages.”

“I like the annotations as there are various Russian words or phrases that I’ve never heard of mentioned in the readings. Usually, it takes a long time if I had to search up each individual phrase, so having the annotations to refer back is a help. The biography assignment was fun as we get to know more about the minds behind each piece of literature.”

“Online questions and responses - Really helpful for seeing the main takeaways from our readings and the interesting insights of my classmates.”

“Annotations - Useful to contextualize things.”

“I have enjoyed the projects and think that this course is pushing me to write in more creative ways.”

“The alternating annotations and questions is nice because we can approach the text in different ways each week.”

“The biography was interesting to complete since it was a group project, so it was somewhat difficult to put together at first. However, it was very clear what our main issues were after we received our feedback, so revising was a straight-forward process. I will be sure to focus on cogency and readability in future assignments, too.”

“I enjoy our discussions. I like the mixture of breakout rooms and whole class conversations. I feel like there has been plenty opportunity for me to express my ideas.”

“I enjoy the discussions. I like how they are often motivated by questions posted in the discussion doc. For the most part discussion feels productive, and the mixture of break-out rooms with group discussions is nice.”

“I think our classroom atmosphere is better than any other class I am taking right now. Perhaps the students are just extra nice, but I never feel judged or looked down upon. I think the moderating works very well and I get the feeling that everyone feels comfortable sharing. I know that I feel very free to share, and I probably would not be able to develop my thoughts so well if not for our class atmosphere.”

“I think the discussion aspect has been great, really not that different from the normal way. If anything, I’m getting to know more people this way since in a physical classroom, everyone kind of picks their seat and sits there for the rest of the semester. The breakout rooms also do a good job of simulating group discussions.”

“I believe that the discussion atmosphere is very productive and positive. I always feel like I am able to express my ideas, but also do not ever think there is a dull moment in the group discussions both online with the discussion posts and on zoom during class.”

“I like the classroom atmosphere because it is laid back and people aren't afraid to respectfully disagree, which has been super interesting to see and I feel adds more depth to discussions.”

“I’ve been very impressed and pleased with the feedback that I have received thus far.”

“The feedback both for writings and the post-book evaluations has been really helpful and constructive. The feedback is in-depth, and tips are always provided on the bottom of the page.

“The instructor did a wonderful job with feedback, especially with emails and assignments. The feedback I received for annotations and author biography was in-depth and I can tell that each sentence was heavily scrutinized. They really help me improve myself as both a reader and a writer.

I really also enjoy the email exchanges between me and my instructor. Sometimes, I have lingering questions, comments, ideas, etc. that I didn’t have a chance to pose in class (either because I didn’t want to interrupt the current flow of the conversation or because it didn’t fit the themes the class were discussing about), so I often send emails to my professors. The emails really help me approach the books better and really help shed light on some of the contexts of the text. Thanks for writing back such detailed responses.”

“I had an aha moment when I learned that Nabokov and Sokolov write for the art and less to prove a point, because I feel like up until now I have only read things that are meant to allude to a larger meaning. It is cool to think that a book is about the art, the beauty of the actual language and writing and not necessarily the profound lesson or meaning that extends beyond the book.”

“During our Nabokov discussions, I definitely had an ‘aha’ moment when we were talking about character forking. That was something I had never heard of before that kind of blew my mind.”

“The best ‘aha’ moment I had so far was the discussion surrounding how *Dog* should be approached and what it meant for a book to have a plot. I was extremely confused going into the book and had such a difficult time reading that I had to physically read out-loud (sorry to my upstairs neighbors). Though it helped a little bit, I was still relatively confused: the English was all over the place, ideas are bounced around left and right, the narrator seem to go on all sorts of random tangents, etc. Once that discussion took place, I started to read into the book not as a novel, but as an art piece, a display of what could be done with the English (or I guess Russian) language. Though I’m still questioning why the author would add certain aspects of the text and what the purpose of each section is, the discussions on how to dissect this book helped. Additionally, discussions on interpreting the events that happened helped a lot too.”

“I enjoyed our discussion about Nabokov’s inconsistencies throughout *Invitation to a Beheading* as I realized how valuable rereading passages and texts can be. There is so much detail and emphasis laying in plain sight, yet I didn’t even notice their constructive (and narrative) importance until we discussed it during class.”

“Thank you professor for a lovely semester!”

“I just wish we were able to meet more often and dissect more of each book.”

“Thank you for such a fun class!”