

**Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara**  
**RUSS 224: The Meaning of Life and the Russian Novel**  
**Bryn Mawr College**  
**Fall 2022**

“José is truly one of the most inspiring instructors I’ve ever taken a class with in my life. His classes have absolutely changed my life, as have his creative pedagogy and his method of self-grading. Contrary to what some people might initially assume, the fact that this course was self-graded made me even more motivated and inspired to work on the papers for this class, because I knew that the grading would come from me (in dialogue with José) and it really encouraged me to think about what is the best possible work that I could produce, not just doing enough so as to get a certain grade. His open-minded way of leading discussion and his openness to letting student interests drive the direction of the discussion is like a breath of fresh air, especially in comparison so some of my other classes this semester (in different departments). I could not recommend José’s classes, and José as a professor, enough!”

“Major strengths include making an effort to get to know every student. He also is good at leading discussions and providing questions that help us reflect deeper on the text. He does seem to hear what we say in evaluations and adjust accordingly, which is appreciated.”

“Professor Vergara always seeks to find a better way to present information and to involve students in his classes. The presentations, slideshows, and playlist were all excellent ways to get us involved.”

“José is a great discussion facilitator and unlike any other classes I’ve taken, makes class enjoyable with fun activities. This really promotes engagement. I appreciate the self grading, it promotes discussion and learning rather than unnecessary authority. He is an amazing teacher.”

“Good at leading discussions. I love his grading system.”

“Jose is a very understanding and informative professor. It is very much a student-led discussion course, as it functions best that way, but when Jose stepped in to give guidance it was always helpful and never leading.”

“Understanding, available outside of office hours, good discussion moderation.”

“Professor Vergara was absolutely understanding throughout the whole course and really catered toward students and their needs/interests in learning. He was able to always maintain insightful, inclusive and yet respectful discussions and also motivated students to have fun and be interactive in their own way, such as encouraging memes and using a class playlist.”

“Professor José Vergara was conscious of how long the work would take students and always set reasonable deadlines. His assignments were beneficial to class discussions and consistently improved my understanding of the texts, so I never felt that our assignments were only there to fill time. The weekly schedule with homework and classes was logical and easy to follow; when we had papers or presentations due, time management was more challenging but not impossible.”

- “Professor Vergara was very good at facilitating class discussions and fostering a class environment in which it seemed most, if not all, students felt at ease contributing to discussions. I appreciated that Professor Vergara would switch up the warm-up activity/discussion each day/week. Professor Vergara’s instruction was very insightful, as was his feedback on writing assignments.”
- “Professor Vergara is extremely intelligent and approachable as a professor, and clearly very passionate about Russian literature. One of the best parts of this class has been his extensive help and feedback on writing assignments.”
- “The atmosphere of the class was definitely a high point. Jose just has a way of making discussion flow and making students feel comfortable speaking up and sharing ideas. He also played an active role in discussions, but never dominated them, just added in his own point of view to help us keep the conversation going. Discussions in the class always feel academic, but casual in a friendly kind of way. He always lets the class take the lead, so if the discussion questions posed send us in a different direction, there is no pressure to stick directly to the letter. Jose's grading system also meant that I felt a lot less pressure when writing essays and doing presentations in class. Instead, I was able to take risks and submit ambitious work, knowing that I wouldn't be penalized and that I was being evaluated instead on growth and learning across the course. For example, I willingly signed up to present twice, which I would never do in any other class. I think Jose is one of the best professors I've had in college so far and I can't think of any improvements needed: I would take this class again for sure.”
- “José is such a wonderful and inspiring instructor. His manner of leading discussion and willingness to truly let discussions be student-led and student-driven is commendable, and often allows for really interesting insights to come through in ways that sometimes otherwise wouldn't be possible in stifling environments where the professor insists on being in charge of all of the discourse. His choice of readings was excellent; they were all so interesting. José was very approachable and willing to help, particularly about papers, but also just in general.”
- “He is very patient and does his best in helping students develop writing skills. The structure is very organized. The discussion questions are helpful for me in terms of pushing me to do the readings and reflecting. The playlist is also fun.”
- “I would say that Professor Vergara’s extensive knowledge of and passion for Russian literature is very evident in this course. He draws upon a variety of outside sources to enrich our class discussions, and encourages us to explore the aspects of the field of literature that interest us; our individual presentations give us a chance to share these interests and takeaways with our peers, too. I also found him to be an excellent moderator of class discussions, facilitating and sparking conversation when needed, but never overstepping or overshadowing our own analyses and takeaways.”
- “I have no experience with college humanities classes. Yet I learned a lot and this is due to José’s ability to teach and discuss. I am more confident in myself because of this course.”
- “It is good for students from many different backgrounds/majors and for all class years. The course is listed at the appropriate level.”

“I mostly felt prepared, but I was a little nervous in the beginning since I had no prior knowledge of Russian literature or history besides the few snippets I’d learned in high school. However, this was not a problem at all in class, as Jose made sure that everyone was up to speed on the basic historical context, and I learned about the conventions and characteristics of Russian literature as I went along. I think the course is listed at the right level and I didn't feel the need for any prerequisite course.”

“Even though I have never studied Russian language or literature before this semester, I felt adequately prepared for this course. There were a number of students in the class who do study Russian, but there were just as many, I think, who don't; I found this to be a beneficial combination, as I was able to learn from my peers who have read Russian novels or thought about these literary themes before without feeling left behind or out of place.”

“I appreciated that he not only has a zoom in option [for when students are sick], but that he also makes an effort to include the person on zoom in class as much as possible. I also like that he switches the partners in class since it is a way to meet and include everyone.”

“Professor Vergara actively brought up aspects of the book that were problematic, racist, or colonialist in Russian Literature. He included articles and outside sources to help with this. He was very flexible about deadlines and wanted us to do our best work.”

“Amazing. Can't say anything else. no improvement.”

“I appreciated our discussions of colonialism.”

“Jose is very understanding and communicative, and very open in terms of office hours and responding to emails.”

“Professor Vergara had self-evaluations and questionnaires throughout the course that allowed students to express any difficulties, thoughts on the course and the professor, suggestions, etc that made the class truly accessible and inclusive. He used the answers he got from these questionnaires and improved based on the feedbacks from students.”

“Our class values list was an effective way to remember the importance of a diverse and inclusive class, especially since we all contributed to it. Professor José Vergara was committed to an accessible classroom environment, so he continually reminded us to work together, speak to the whole class and not just the instructor, and respect and uphold differing opinions.”

“I believe most, if not all, readings for this class were provided in accessible formats. I use text-to-speech on my computer to help with readings, and I believe the readings for this class all worked fine with that. Other than that, from my perspective, Professor Vergara's course was accessible and inclusive.”

“Professor Vergara was very good about incorporating students on Zoom into class discussion and making sure they didn't feel isolated from class participation. We had online [written] discussions [on a Google Doc] to supplement our in person class discussions, so he made sure that everyone participated in some form every week. I think he's doing a very good job at making his class accessible and inclusive already.”

“The class was always accessible in that Jose always offered a Zoom option, and students who

participated over Zoom were encouraged to actively join the discussion as much as physically present students were. He made sure that everyone was heard and had someone to talk to in class. At the beginning of the semester we could choose if we wanted to be connected with another student who could be our go-to person if we ever had questions. I didn't end up using this person as a resource, but I really valued having them there in case I needed quick clarification on something. Jose is also very reachable by email, so I never felt that he wasn't available outside of class."

"José was always very attentive to whether students wanted to participate but perhaps were nervous about it: one could often make eye contact with him as a way of indicating that one has something to say, and his receptivity to this was very helpful and attentive. He also encouraged everyone to speak up around the table so that everyone could hear in a way that was really helpful while also being understanding. And his willingness to let students Zoom in when certain circumstances arose displayed an excellent commitment to accessibility and inclusivity, since it enabled students who otherwise would not have been able to attend class in-person that day (for various reasons) to still participate in the class. And when students were on Zoom, he always sought to include them in the class discussion as full participants, which is commendable, as that doesn't always happen."

"He is very understanding and kind. Very flexible with accommodations and will make things work for you if you tell him that you're having trouble."

"Professor Vergara is very approachable and highly values — and acts upon — student feedback. Our mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluations provide students an opportunity to communicate their concerns, questions, and suggestions to Professor Vergara, regarding their own individual performance, the structure of each class, and the classroom environment, too. He responds thoughtfully to each answer we provide on these surveys, and noticeably enacts the changes and improvements that students propose. Throughout the semester, I felt assured that if I ever felt uncomfortable in any way — with the amount of work, with the dynamic between students in the class, with my progress on assignments, etc. — I would be able to communicate my thoughts to Professor Vergara without judgement."

"I would recommend this course! The texts were all unique in their own ways, and the class was always fun to go to."

"Yes! I loved it so much!"

"Yes! He's an amazing professor and a person. I don't think you can be a good teacher without being a good person."

"Yes, of course. It was a really interesting course and Jose is a lovely professor."

"Yes; good foundation, reasonable workload, but lots of reading."

"I would recommend this course because it doesn't make you feel lost even if you've never read Russian literature before and even if you have, it would maybe make you appreciate/enjoy it more."

"I would absolutely recommend this course taught by José Vergara. I think my knowledge of

Russian literature, authors, and history improved greatly by taking this course and engaging with the material in the holistic way that Professor José Vergara taught it.”

“I would recommend this course, as taught by Professor Vergara, to other students. I think that the discussions we had in this class about Russian literature, philosophy, history, and contemporary relevance of 19th century literature were very fruitful and would be interesting and enriching to all kinds of students.”

“Yes, definitely. I think that anyone who likes discussing/analyzing literature would really enjoy this class, regardless of whether their interest is specifically Russian literature or otherwise. The workload was manageable and the readings were interesting, and discussions were lively and easy to speak up in. I feel that my writing skills have improved, as Jose offers very helpful feedback on paper drafts that push my writing to the next level without making me feel like I’m struggling to make revisions. Most of all, I could just tell that he wanted to hear our thoughts and enjoyed learning from us as much as we learn from him. Honestly, I think I’d even recommend the class to people who don’t like literature, just because I think Jose might inspire them to like it a little more.”

“Wholeheartedly, yes! I would recommend any class taught by José to anyone and everyone. This one in particular was really wonderful — I appreciated the balance between longer novels and shorter texts; I personally definitely found that to be helpful. And I loved the selection of texts! *A Double Life*, as a text, changed my life and is one of my favorite books I’ve ever read.”

“This course was by far my favorite class I took this semester, and is definitely overall one of my favorite classes I’ve taken in college. I enjoyed every single reading, and every single class discussion was interesting and thought-provoking. I can’t recommend this course — and, in general, taking a course with José — highly enough, honestly.”

“He is a great professor and always wants to help you learn.”

“Professor Vergara is great—kind, engaging, very smart, and sympathetic to students.”

“I enjoy the group discussions and the powerpoints are very helpful.”

“I think having to write discussion questions and posts has made me think about the reading more than I may have. I also like the discussion leading aspect because my peers often bring up really interesting aspects related to the texts that I would not have considered or known about otherwise. I also like the collaborative playlist -- I think it’s a fun way to encourage comparative analysis.”

“I’ve found that the intro-presentation and activity has been more productive/engaging for my learning as I felt it was an effective way to begin each class and help me focus and also they provide me with new/different information regarding what we’re reading.”

“I find the partner discussions paired with the whole-group discussion most productive, since I sometimes struggle to work up the courage to speak up in the large group discussions. The partner discussions also help me solidify my thoughts before deciding to share them with the whole group.”

- “The discussion questions and responses are helpful because it makes sure everyone has something to say in class. I also won’t come to class empty-headed.”
- “I really enjoy the readings!! And I appreciate having the opportunity to engage with the texts through our discussion questions that we offer each week. I also have felt that the essay was an experience that really enriched my learning and understanding of the text I wrote about, and was very helpful for my personal learning and growth as a reader/student/thinker!”
- “I have found our class discussions to be more engaging for my learning – even though I am normally hesitant to share my thoughts out loud in my classes. I really appreciate and gain a lot from the partner discussions we have, and I feel as though the atmosphere of our full class discussions is fairly low-pressure. It feels okay to share a thought even if it isn’t necessarily fully-formed or if I have unresolved doubts about it; others will genuinely take the idea into consideration and add on their own thoughts to further the class dialogue.”
- “I think class discussion has been good and productive for my learning. One thing I appreciate a lot about class discussion is how people will point out passages and give page numbers that they found interesting and significant, so it gives me some places to go back to in the text and illuminates aspects that I didn’t notice as much on my first read-through.”
- “It was very helpful to get feedback on the draft of our essays, which I’ve never had in another class. It helped me spend more time with my ideas and really refine my thoughts and writing style. I really appreciated the extensive comments and time that you spent looking at each essay.”
- “I find the discussions helpful. I think that discussions help to further my understanding of the text. I like that you give us less reading from Monday to Wednesday and more from Wednesday to Monday. I think talking with partners before a big discussion helps because a lot of the time I am confused about what the question asks.”
- “I have found the discussion questions to be very productive as they encourage me to think more directly about the text. I also enjoy using combinations of the questions during class in order to produce more conversation, as I feel that it’s easier to respond to questions that people have already been thinking about.”
- “I really like the playlist idea! It adds more fun while also making me think about wider themes or characters. It also helps be consolidate major themes or characterization.”
- “The discussions we have in class, helped by the questions that you present and our peers’ questions, are very productive since we are encouraged to express our thoughts while using textual support.”
- “I think that this class is structured well, and I haven’t found anything not productive or engaging.”
- “I can’t think of something that I have found less productive.”
- “I haven’t found anything particularly less productive. I find myself often engaged in this class.”
- “Yes, I appreciate having so much time to get things done.”
- “I think that the spacing and number of assignments has been very reasonable. The amount of pages to read is never exhausting, and the sections of the paper that are due have been well spaced so I don’t feel like I’m rushing or that this class’ work is competing with my other homework. I really

appreciate the amount of thought put into the spacing so that we aren't overwhelmed on weekdays.”

“Yes! I think it’s definitely appropriate. When we first started reading *Demons*, I initially felt that it was a bit of a struggle to keep up with all of the readings, but once we got to about 200 pages in, I felt that I got into the rhythm of Dostoevsky’s writing and that it’s now flowing a lot easier. But regardless, even when I did feel that I was having to be really intentional and attentive in order to keep on top of the readings, I never felt that it was unreasonable in amount or pacing. I think it makes sense as an amount of work for a 200 level course!”

“I think the spacing and number of assignments has been appropriate. The expectations for weekly discussion questions and responses are appropriate, and the paper writing process is paced nicely.”

“Yes. The spacing has been good as the multiple opportunities to give discussion questions had allowed me to taper my work flow to when I can do it. It also has allowed me to focus on what I’m academically interested in. I think the reading and post correspond to the level, as well as the paper.”

“I really appreciate that the longer readings are saved for the weekends. I think the spacing is good.”

“I think the readings for each class are manageable and still allow us to have a good amount of text to discuss.”

“I found them a useful learning tool especially the discussion doc.”

“I like that we do our writing in stages. I appreciate peer review as well, and the fact that we aren’t doing it face to face but via a form.”

“I do appreciate the drafting process and peer review for our essays and think they really help with improving them.”

“Writing questions and responses pushes us to think about what we read and form our own arguments, which is helpful when transitioning into writing an essay. I appreciate the peer review because of how in-depth it is, and I got a lot of good advice that I wouldn’t have noticed when editing my paper myself without anyone else’s influence.”

“I’ve really enjoyed them! I like getting to offer discussion questions in the Google doc every week, as I think it’s a fun way to articulate some of our own individual thoughts/questions/impressions on what struck us. I think that the fact that the assignment (write a question in the Google doc) is open-ended helpfully makes space for the text’s multiplicities and complexities that can get drawn out through the fact that every person notices and is struck by something different with each reading.”

“The essay was a great experience! I really appreciated that José was willing to let me write about a slightly different topic, and that made it truly a lot of fun for me as an explorative and creative exercise. I appreciate that drafting is built in to our writing process, since otherwise I honestly probably would not have been able to build in the time to draft and revise it, but it really is helpful for producing a better, more carefully thought-through and written paper.”

“I enjoyed part of the peer review assignment -- I love the act of doing peer review, so I enjoyed reading and commenting on my peer’s paper.”

“I found the drafting and peer review process to be really helpful in writing my essay. I appreciated the opportunity we had towards the beginning of the process to discuss our ideas with a partner, as I felt more secure in my thoughts and how I wanted to communicate them as I began writing.”

“I already said a little about this, but as for the questions/responses, I like that reading what others have written about the books helps to illuminate aspects/themes/readings of the text that did not jump out at me right away. I’m not used to the drafting and peer review process for writing a paper (I’m so used to just writing a paper, submitting it, and getting a grade), but I like it so far, I appreciate the feedback and chance to refine my work, and find the pacing on the process good.”

“I enjoy commenting on the online questions because I get to pick and choose what I’m interest in.”

“I have found the writing assignments to be well-structured, and I think we are given enough time to do them.”

“The questions/responses are engaging and help look at the reading again, since sometimes the language of the novels we read are difficult to comprehend. The essay was also a good way to see the text from a new perspective, especially when reading our partner’s essay, so I enjoy the peer review process.”

“It’s a great and productive atmosphere. I think people respect each others’ view points. I think we are able to speak freely.”

“I think the atmosphere in the classroom is really comfortable and conducive to good class discussions. I get really nervous in group settings like this often, but I have found myself speaking up almost every class, which for me is an improvement from past classes here and something I’m proud of.”

“I like that in class we spend time discussing both as a class and in smaller breakout groups! I think that it enhances discussion, in my opinion.”

“I really enjoy that we have opportunities during class discussions to share our thoughts with one or two other students before jumping into the full class discussion. I find that this type of collaboration eases the atmosphere of our discussions, and receiving peer feedback personally helps me to formulate my ideas more clearly with the confidence that they are relevant to the discussion at hand and worth sharing.”

“I enjoy discussion with the class. There’s a lot of things to talk about, but we tend to stretch it over a good period of time.”

“The classroom is both committed to literary analysis and excited to have fun when talking about the novels, which I think is a perfect blend for a literature course to have.”

“Yeah, feedback has thus far been constructive.”



“I liked the way we did essay feedback a lot. My partner was very thorough and made suggestions that were clearly well thought out and very constructive, which is so helpful when editing a paper.”

“Yes, the detailed feedback in the Word document is very helpful.”

“José's feedback has been extremely helpful, both written and from meeting in office hours! I honestly don't think that it could be improved in any way -- I really appreciate the comments in the margins, the rubric (with poor/good/excellent) and the paragraph at the end in response to our writing. I think that all three of those come together to offer really helpful and constructive feedback that pushes my writing and thinking further ahead!”

“So far, the feedback I have received in this class has been helpful and constructive to me. I appreciated how comments on our essays in particular were delivered in a variety of ways (with comments and suggestions in the margins, through a rubric, and with more fleshed-out suggestions at the end).”

“Yes, I was really impressed by the amount of attention and detail in the feedback on writing assignments, both from you and my peer reviewer. They really helped me hone my essay and take it in a better direction.”

“The feedback I have received helped me a lot. I like that we have a rubric, because it gives me specifics on what to work on rather than me having to discern what a random number grade means.”

“I think the instructor has provided feedback in an appropriate and fair amount of time.”

“Yes, definitely. I appreciate that we got our papers back so quickly even though there are many of us in this class and the comments were in depth, which must have taken a lot of time. I also find the communication through email prompt and helpful.”

“Yes, most definitely! José is really responsive over email, and willing to meet, and very prompt with providing feedback, especially in terms of turning around comments on our initial paper drafts.”

“Yes! On all of my assignments so far (and with any questions I have relayed via email), I have received helpful responses very promptly.”

“Feedback is usually very prompt and constructive.”

“No complaints :)”

“I think our discussion of colonialism in *A Hero of Our Time* was enlightening.”

“Someone responded to a question I wrote on the online discussion doc and the response was very insightful and I really appreciated and loved their answer.”

“I think for me, an aha moment was when we talked about materialism vs romanticism, and after that class, I was able to directly recognize these ideas in the text. I've always had trouble pinning down when different movements are being referenced if it isn't super direct, so I felt proud to be able to see the undertones in characters' words.”

“I never considered about using Imperialism and Romanticism to interpret *Hero of Our Time*. It's nice to fill in the gap of historical background. Also in reading the “The All-Slavic Union” I get to understand how important these ideas are to a novel.”

“I felt like I’ve had quite a few "aha" moments! One that sticks out to me was during our discussion of *A Hero of Our Time*, when we were talking about "Bela," I believe. We discussed how the travelogue format of the text itself perpetuates Orientalism and imperialism by objectifying the native peoples of the Caucasus and turning them solely into objects to be consumed, by the Russian reading public, and marveled at. I also definitely felt that I had an aha moment (or multiple!) when writing my paper, which I developed in response to and from our class discussions, as well as when revising my paper, which I am in the process of doing in response to the really helpful, generative, and thought-provoking feedback José offered!”

“Going into this class, I felt nervous about my relative lack of knowledge about the 19th century Russian political climate as I knew that context would be important in analyzing and understanding our texts. After reading sources like Nechaev's “Catechism” and “The All-Slavic Union,” I feel considerably more comfortable in my understanding of the political landscape of the period of history we have been focusing on, and every time I identify or make connections between political sentiments brought up in the texts, it feels like a small but significant ‘aha’ moment.”

“This class has helped me nail down/solidify some of the vague ideas/history about 19th c. Russia that I had accumulated throughout my studies. I can’t think of one discrete "aha" moment, but kind of just this general feeling of becoming more confident in my knowledge of Russian history and literature.”

“My ‘aha’ moment was when we were talking about the physical, spiritual, and the conflation of the two in *A Hero of Our Time*. It sparked some ideas for my essay and continues to interest me as we discuss *Demons*.”

“One of the moments that I had an ‘aha’ moment was the realization of Varvara’s lack of power, even while Stavrogin sleeps, and the corresponding enfeeblement that is felt over the course of the novel by her. Stavrogin's power (and the revolutions) is so great it can extend through unconsciousness.”

“I had an aha moment when I learned more about nihilism in terms of our characters. It allowed me to recognize certain characteristics and beliefs that I initially struggled with, since nihilism has a different definition in modern times.”

“When the history of the time the novel was written in is included, I think many ‘aha’ moments have come up. Knowing about the origins of Romanticism and the Byronic hero especially changed my perspective on *Hero of our Time*.”

“Thank you for being such a good professor so far! This is my favorite class I’m taking this semester!”

“I really like the class so far and am looking forward to the second quarter!”