



CHIEF INVIGILATOR

by Nathan R. Elliott

Procedures for the Conduct of Examinations in Central Locations.

The invigilator whose name appears first on the invigilation list is the Chief Invigilator. She/he is responsible for the general conduct of the examination, for the layout of the examination room and for obtaining the examination papers. Examination papers will be available one hour before the commencement of the examination. The Chief Invigilator must present to the Registrar's official the Chief Invigilator's Authorization Card before any examinations will be released.



OKAY, so, I'm supposed to read these rules. I'm supposed to read at least some of them out loud to you all.

They're mostly bullshit.

We're here for 150 minutes, which in layman's terms is two and a half hours. If you need to take a pee, you're supposed to ask my permission like a kindergartner. There's language here for 'escorting' you to the rest room, but guess what, I'm not following you to the john to make sure you haven't stuffed some definitions for 'trochaic tetrameter' or 'Occam's Razor' in your underwear or your shoes. Turn off your phones: that's common sense. I really shouldn't see anything except pencils and pens and papers.

Yes, you can keep the 'Hello Kitty' pencil set out. It's cute. Disturbingly immature, hopelessly twee, but whatever.

There's some more material here about what I'm supposed to do if I suspect that you're cheating. Exactly how you cheat on my exams is kind of beyond me; I guess you could stuff that date reminding you that the Corn Laws were passed in 1815 and the first Reform Act was in 1832 into your briefs, but dude, if that's what you need to remember the Corn Laws and

the Reform Act, you do what you gotta do. A couple of months ago I did hear a story making the faculty gossip rounds about some girl who had actually managed to memorize most of an essay on the graphic novel *Persepolis* and then managed to put that memorized essay into the exam.

She actually *plagiarized* a fucking essay exam.

Yeah, I'd bust her.

But there's a strong part of me that admires the sheer audacity of a stunt like that. It's mostly a stupid thing to do, but to take it that far—to sit there for hours studying an essay so that you could *cheat*—strikes me as a kind of admirable dedication to rule breaking. I caught that same student last year plagiarizing a paper—she just copied and pasted some blog-level crap about a play we were reading—but plagiarizing an exam?

I mean, that's the stuff of outlaw legend.

She kind of became the Butch Cassidy of academic dishonesty to me at that point. Bon Jovi's "Blaze of Glory" should be playing in the background every time she walks into a classroom.

Anyway, here are *my* rules for the final exam.

1. You are forbidden to take the final results of this exam, or the final results of this course, as a serious reflection of who you are as a person in any way shape or form.

Here's the truth from someone who has graded a lot of exams and papers since he first started doing gigs like this in 1997: grades are 93.9% bullshit.

Oh, sure. I know, I know. That thing where you need to get into nursing school or grad school or zookeeper school or whatever. I get it.

I had to pull some grades down too, to get into the grad schools that eventually let me earn the degrees that credential me to teach the course you're just about to finish. I got into a pretty good graduate school too, by the way, so don't feel like this is all sour grapes. I've got the PhD from the big school—the diploma is even in Latin and shit, made from actual lambskin, if you can believe it. I've got publications. Hell, I published the very first paper I wrote for graduate school: it was on a short story by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins that was just sitting, more or less completely unknown, in an archive in a Jesuit school in that runty little town on the Eastern side of the Washington state desert that goes by the name of *Spokane*. You can't make shit like that up, and, if you don't know what it means, it means I announced my presence in graduate school as a bit of a

gunslinger. Fuck, last week the province of Newfoundland gave me a literary award for a grant proposal I wrote. Not a book. They liked the fucking manuscript pages I turned in so much they gave me an award. So don't even begin to think I'm bitter because I couldn't get the grades, get the award, get into the school, or kiss the pretty girl.¹

I'm pissy because I got the grades *and* the distinguished passes *and* the publications in the big peer-reviewed journals and I now I give the grades and I discuss who gets the awards and sometimes I even sit on the committees behind the curtains at Oz where the wizard is chair and my contract ass decides who gets a grant and I can see just what a steaming pile of dog shit a certain variety of academic and creative success actually is.

Look: if you tried hard, if you did the work, you'll more than likely get the mark you can live with, and one that will let you get past the gatekeepers you're supposed to get past.

¹In the past seven years my wife has: (a) given birth to our son, (b) defended a PhD dissertation from one of the best graduate schools in Canada, an English department often ranked quite high internationally, (c) published two collections of poetry with two different national level presses, and (d) published a limited run chapbook that became the subject of a CBC documentary, all while (e) surviving the unethical, immoral, exploitative labor practices of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

She's also incredible in bed. Really. Earth-shattering, window-rattling, Ragnarok-is-happening-level sex. So there's that.

I am *not* saying don't work hard or don't take this class seriously. Do those things. But there are a lot of people out there who want to convince you that if you got an A- instead of an A, or a 79 instead of a 69, that you're either worth more or less based on those numbers and letters. That, I know from experience, is also bullshit. A lot of really smart people got Cs in my class. A fair number of really screamingly—just, absolutely shockingly—stupid people got As. They knew how to complete a paper, work the syllabus, and show up on time. But that makes someone a good bureaucrat; it doesn't make them smart, moral, or talented, and it sure as hell doesn't make them sexy. A lot of immoral people managed to pull down a B+. Some real saints came in with Ds, even Fs. I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a famous artist, writer, scientist come back and tell me that I gave them a C-. I plan on laughing about it with them.

Yes, some of your teachers will remember that number, that letter that they gave you, every time they see you. I don't, and the teachers who do are dumb. Four months of your life when you were eighteen, trying to meet the arbitrary demands of one teacher: not worth taking seriously as a measure of your worth in any way.

Why do we even have grades? Because they allow professors to take themselves seriously for a few moments. Because they comfort us with the

illusion that learning can be quantified. Because soulless corporations like to use grades to justify hiring their inbred Harvard-educated cousins for the six-figure salaries at the top.

Look, most of my rural farming students in Georgia, taking the first university course offered to their entire family, got Seamus Heaney's "Digging" in a way that your professors—who have never dug up even a single potato—never will.² My students from some of the rougher neighborhoods in Atlanta could teach me a thing or two about 'critical thinking' and 'rhetoric;' it's likely they had to bathe in that shit since the age of three just to survive. Or the rural students from outport Newfoundland whose Nans might still be illiterate? They often have a sense of aesthetics that puts most of their professors to shame; when every morning you frolic in a land, sky, and sea absolutely stiff with beauty, you tend to take beauty pretty seriously. There is also that wickedly sharp, half-lyrical Newfoundland wit that I actually find just a bit scary. Newfoundlanders take to poetry the way seals dive into the water.

²Well, most of them. This particular professor is from Idaho, and yeah, I've dug up one or two potatoes in my time; Dad made sure to grow some in the backyard even when he was going to law school.

Your professors *do* have expertise. They *do* have something to teach you. I'm not being anti-intellectual here, and neither should you: learn about Plato's Cave, damn it, and learn it well.

It's just that you have something to teach them, too, and I don't want you to forget that.

Take the exam seriously *for the next 150 minutes*. Then go have a beer, go play a game, see if the cute guy across the residence hall wants to take you to a movie and make out, and forget this thing ever existed.

2. In about ten minutes a breathless student is going to come through that door, panicked that he or she just about missed the exam. Ignore her, and get on with your own life.

You'll recognize her.

She's the one you thought I was coddling, the one you called 'pet' or 'brownoser' or 'apple polisher' (if you're the age of my Grandma) or whatever it is that people come up with to tear people like that down. You might be a bit irritated that they are a bit late, a bit noisy, a bit strange, breathing a bit hard, wearing something that is just a bit weird.

Cut it out. I'm not coddling them, and I'm not playing favorites, and her (or his) tardiness certainly was not my idea.

I recognize one or two students like him (or her) every term. They are extremely interesting and interested, and that very interest—an authentic curiosity about art and life and the universe around them—often gets them in trouble with the institution and with their peers.

Perhaps as a result of that consuming interest, they have this really hard time with clocks; they might recognize, on some very high intellectual level, what the strange devices with the glowing numbers are for, but they have almost zero ability to use them in everyday life the way that the rest of us do. Or they have a difficult time sitting still, raising their hands, speaking in a reasonably pitched voice. Others are so incredibly, painfully shy that they have a hard time speaking at all; oppressive gender expectations often render impossibly beautiful girls and painfully overweight girls and just plain everyday average girls all equally silent. Still other students of this genre find it almost impossible to turn their—often brilliant—papers in on time.

These students get urgently obsessed with Flannery O'Connor in the middle of the term; they put off all other assignments while they read four books about the short story writer from Georgia, they end up with one

brilliant paper and a B in my class.³ They answered most of my discussion questions, in class—sometimes a little too quickly, a little too eagerly to be cool—and they got on your nerves. Or they sat in the corner, with their head theatrically on their desk, and they got on your nerves that way.

It's possible that they have been diagnosed with some reductive category like Asperger's. It's possible that you call her "that goth chick." It's possible that they have a funny accent; they are from a culture that hasn't quite figured out that the best way to make sure hipness is communicated is to affect ignorance and keep those peculiar idioms and twangy vowels to themselves. They might be quite considerably older than you, and because of two decades of military experience overseas—some of which might include getting shot at on your behalf⁴—they just cannot quite manage to give a flying fuck about whatever it is your arcane social codes dictate is or is not an acceptable response to class discussion.

They might get an A in my class. They might get a C.

³Quite literally the story of one of the most brilliant students I have ever had sit in my classroom.

⁴I was teaching *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; I made the point to my undergrads that they were all going to die (this is at least a part of Tolstoy's point in that novella); a vet from Afghanistan pointed out that he had spent the better part of a year pretty convinced he could die at any moment, that the guys on the other hill were pretty sure they could make that happen for him.

That vet made an impression. All the vets I taught did.

Their interest in the subject matter will endear them to me forever, and I will remember their names—not their grades—ten years from now.

Rest assured, I'll make sure that they follow the rules that matter.

Then I'll try to give them a pass on the dumb rules. Yes, I'll wink at some regulations, because that personality just doesn't adapt to hospitals, prisons, schools, and other forms of institutional coercion terribly well,⁵ and I don't feel like being the guy who defended the institution and threw the individual into solitary because she occasionally felt the need to howl at a full moon.

3. Yes, you're in a separate room today; it's no biggie.

The rest of the students taking your first-year courses are down in the gym, taking the exam with 400 of their closest friends, monitored by a roving band of English, History, and Humanities Professors.

⁵What about the guy in the military, you say? Actually, he's had enough institutional discipline for one lifetime, can't we agree? *She* has PTSD, she has an injury; *he* is taking care of the child that his spouse left him with when she couldn't take the long deployments anymore.

Lighten up and cut them some slack.

And yes, all of this is based on students I've actually taught in Georgia, Indiana, and Newfoundland.

You're in here, with me, and it's quite possible we're breaking the rule where there is supposed to be a monitor for every 50 students.

Fuck that stupid rule. The huge gym, the long columns of those uncomfortable desks, the professors stalking up and down like concentration camp guards: the whole fucking situation appears deliberately designed to produce as much exam anxiety as can possibly be stuffed into one 150-minute period.

So I opt out. For you. We'll be in this room, with me, the guy you've seen two or three days a week for the past four to eight months, and my hope is that you'll feel a bit more comfortable, a bit readier to do your best, a bit more inclined to remember that *The Taming of the Shrew* is a funny and disturbing and challenging play, and a little less likely to dismiss Elizabethan theatre as just another round of pointless hoop jumping.

Well, that's what I tell you. It's mostly true.

The other truth: I hate being with the other professors at the end of the term.

I'm an eight-month contract employee.

You likely don't know what that means, so let me spell it out for you: in two weeks, give or take, I'm going to be unemployed. I'll have to apply

for Employment Insurance from the Canadian government. Three weeks later those patronizing bastards will give me a paycheque that's just barely half as much as what I would typically make as an underpaid contract employee. I'll have to report to them every two weeks, tell them that, yes, I'm still looking for work, and no, I haven't left the country. Then, if anyone has paid me so much as a dime for say, my writing, or for doing some other menial task someone has given me, I'll have to report that dime so that they can subtract that one fucking thin dime from the meager sum they are giving me, and thus keep my already humbled ass exactly where it is supposed to be: on the dole, drinking cheap beer, waiting for the new term to start.

A lot of the faculty down there in the gym will not be thinking about that shit. They'll be thinking about the summer, their research, getting some rest, reading some books, what summer programs they are sending their kids to. So. They either will (a) not be thinking about my situation, which will piss me off, or they will (b) be pitying my situation, which will also piss me off, or, in some cases, they will (c) decide that this entire situation is my fault for not being a better scholar, writer, teacher, human being, etc. The last is especially insulting, if it happens, and I have reason to think that it does: you can see it on their faces when contract employees do

have some success, because that means it's more difficult to blame us for the problem, and thus it becomes more difficult to escape the notion that their own position may be due to the right combination of luck and circumstance. Then they might have to confront their own complicity in an immoral, unethical set of exploitative labor practices.⁶

Whatever. I actually like those people, I really do, and we get on well enough most of the year.⁷ This exploitative employment situation isn't really their fault. I still don't feel much like being around them this time of year, and exchanging good-natured jokes and 'have a good summers' and blah blah, fucking blah. Inevitably some self-involved tenured insensitive who teaches one-third as many students as I do will make some 'funny' remark about how many exams I have to grade—as I stagger around the halls with that stack of exams—and I'll have to find some new way to keep myself from telling that particular professor—who is, to be fair, just trying to be friendly and funny—to rot in fucking hell. Because I've read and taught Dante several times, I'd probably suggest circle eight. Yes, goddamn

⁶Yes, I already used that phrase in footnote one. Basically, after the past few years I've just started using that phrase reflexively every time the subject comes up. When I'm convinced someone in a university administration has actually really *heard* it, I'll consider changing the phrasing.

⁷Well... most of them. There's always at least one total asshole out there. I still have to be nice to him/her; he/she might be on the hiring committee for next year's contracts.

it, in Bolgia 8, with the fucking fraudulent bankers: trust me, I have my fucking reasons.

So, we're up here. In a different room. To keep Dr. Elliott from saying all the things he shouldn't say to people who might have some power over whether or not he has a job next year.

4. You're supposed to have your ID out, so that I can make sure that it's really you.

That should insult most of you, by the way. If I didn't know that you were one of my students after four months together, then there is a problem. Sometimes that problem is self-involved professors. Yes, it's difficult to keep track of everyone's name, especially when, due to 'budget cuts'⁸ overfed deans and humorless provosts and undersexed vice

⁸I put this in scare quotes because it's just such utter bullshit. Just about every single university administration I've ever been under going back to the late '90s has been subject to 'budget cuts.' We're in the middle of a massive war against higher education: know-nothings, morons, and rich people (and, no, the three groups are not mutually exclusive) have decided that university people are lazy and privileged, and have been trying to take tax dollars away from your education.

That's irritating enough.

But what really chaps my hide is the way that university administrators at the top, most of whom get paid in six figures, seem to do little but show up at photo ops for new buildings (which, oddly, cost a lot of money).

presidents and badly dressed presidents keep inflating class numbers far beyond the ability of even the most enthusiastic instructor's ability to teach in any kind of reasonable or moral or engaged way.

But for Christ's sake, we should be able to keep some track of 80 or 90 faces, after four whole months, shouldn't we? I think so, at any rate.

But of course, it's not all down to the professors' memories, is it? Some of you idiots out there have not been to a single class since way back there in September/January. Every term, at every single school I have ever taught, there are anywhere from 1 to 10 students who show up for the final exam who I just *know* I have never seen in my life.

And yes, then I need to see your fucking ID. Because I don't know if it's you or your cousin Vinny, or your kid sister Christina, or your genius dog Bozo dressed up in a cartoon human suit taking the exam for you.

And you—you small select number of absentee jerks—you really piss me off. It's not that you're going to fail the course,⁹ it's that you don't really mind making a farce of the class.

You—o absentee student who finally found the will to sober up, shower, and came to this exam in a last desperate bid to keep your scholarship—you are actually just like the professors who go around remembering every one's goddamn grade from two decades ago: you think those letters and numbers are what matters. You care not a whit about the strangeness of the poetry of Robert Browning, or how Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* assaults your complacency about gender or race, or how weirdly erotic Emily Dickenson's poem about death is. You can't even be bothered to appreciate the pop feminist fun that is *Bitch Planet*. You clearly think what I teach is bullshit, have made it clear that it wasn't worth it to show up to hear even so much as one fucking lecture on Sylvia Plath. You

⁹Because of course you are going to fail the course. Sorry to break it to you, but one final exam, even if it was an A++++, and you got the all the bonus points, and even if you went to the extra credit earning art flick/poetry reading/interpretive dance event I told you about last week: this not going to make up for the other six assignments you didn't turn in, for three and a half months of complete neglect. To paraphrase Darth Vader, I find your lack of math skills disturbing, and I'm the hippy-dippy, flower-wearing, poetry-spewing English major in this conversation, for the love of every god in every human culture, ever.

But look. That really isn't what irritates me. You're what, eighteen, nineteen, twenty? Horny as hell, confused as all daylights, still working out some Mommy or Daddy issues? You get to blow a course or two when you're this age, and not have it held against you. Your 'F' is what is called, in some circles, a 'learning experience,' and I don't even use that as a euphemism.

want to pull off a grand slam in the bottom of the ninth after spending the entire off-season eating hot dogs and washing them down with sticky sweet hard lemonade.

You shit on the game, and in this case the game is not baseball, it is poetry and art and theater and novels and life itself.¹⁰

And to you, I say this: show me your goddamn ID.

5. This is the part where someone tells me I'm too angry.

Here's the part where I tell you you're not angry enough.

An illiterate trust fund brat is President of the United States.

Much of the Western Hemisphere is descending into unlettered idiocy.

A class of wealthy aristocrats that can hardly muster up the energy to wipe their asses in their gilded toilets without the help of three servants standing by is poisoning the planet with corporate-produced food and factory-produced meat, selling that same planet billions of dollars worth of

¹⁰That's a metaphor, by the way. I gave an hour-long lecture on that concept back in September/January that involved references to Plato, Aristotle, and *The Walking Dead*.

Yes, for fuck's sake, it's on the exam.

city-devastating, orphan-making weapons, all while hollowing out every educational institution it possibly can so it can make a deliberate point to ignore any reasonable science about global warming, fracking, or even vaccinations for children.

This fresh new oligarchy: they *want* you to be illiterate, and they *want* to make your parents feel good about the tax cuts and other abhorrent fiscal decisions that support your ignorance.

And now you're going to try and make me feel bad about noticing.

You know what my real problem is?

It's not that I'm angry. (Well, okay, I am, you got me. But it's not *just* that I'm angry.)

It's that I believe; it's because I have hope.

It's that I think that the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins actually matters, that the novels of Ursula K. LeGuin are actually brilliant masterpieces, that *Medea* has something to say to you.

It's that I think the university—including the scientists and the social scientists and the moral philosophers and the gender studies professor your roommate thinks is just *so weird*—actually does have something to teach you. I'm idiot enough to keep believing that your life, both individually and

corporately, could be better because of the university if we—as a society—could find it within ourselves to wrench this flawed but socially crucial institution back out of the Nazi bonfire we have collectively launched it into for the past several decades.

The problem is that I keep being a dope and having some hope for humanity, and that makes me a bit angry, but it's the hope, the *actual goddamn hope* that is the root cause of that anger.

I'll go home, I'll have a beer, watch some baseball until my son yells at me to put on cartoons, and my anger will ebb. I'll make a clumsy pass at my beautiful wife after the gorgeous boy I feel so lucky to have any part of goes to bed, and generally the world will stagger on the way it has for millennia.

Hope takes many forms, and someday it's reading a story to your kid and making love to your spouse.

Other times hope takes the form of screaming at people to do better.

6. Most of you are *not* going to follow your passion after you finish this exam, and that's a good thing: I'm the cautionary tale here, not you.

You know that cliché, that one so many of you like to spew at me in the cliché-ridden essays I have to read every term, the one about following your passion?

Well here he is.

Someone who followed their goddamned accursed blood-soaked passion until Act 5, where, in any good ancient tragedy, the corpses start to stack up like cordwood, and the audience feels a moment of profound catharsis (right before, of course, they go home and open up a nice well-chilled Chardonnay).

Get on with it, finish the exam, and become a fucking accountant or physician's assistant or whatever the fuck. Do yourself a favor if you want to have a comfortable, well-paid life: take those passions into the backyard and metaphorically shoot every single one of them in the head until you're really at peace with that middle-manager career mired in a socially acceptable level of corruption.

Caring has a funny way of making you miserable.

On the other hand, caring makes you feel alive.



Well, that's it. Circus time is over, and the dancing bear's feet hurt.

Leave your exams on the table over there, the test booklets on this table, and those little sheets with your names on them in this basket.

I'll have grades for you by Friday.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After being born in Boise, Nathan Elliott grew up in logging and paper-mill towns in the panhandle of Idaho. That childhood did not really prepare him to earn a PhD in Victorian Literature, but nonetheless that's what he insisted on doing. Nathan has worked as a professor in Georgia and on the island of Newfoundland. Currently he makes his home in Montréal, Quebec with a poet and the eccentric seven-year old boy

they collaborated to bring into the world. Nathan has published creative non-fiction, fiction, and peer-reviewed research in a variety of venues, and serves as a creative non-fiction editor for *The Citron Review*.

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