THE COLUMBIA CORE

Columbia’s core curriculum is almost a century old. When today’s GS students enroll in core courses, therefore, they know they are taking part in one of the University’s longest-lasting and most-imitated educational traditions.

The Core is, at its heart, an invitation to participate in the ongoing interpretation and construction of Western culture. With courses focusing on philosophical inquiry, artistic expression, and scientific investigation, the Core transcends disciplinary boundaries and asks students to pursue themes across national frontiers and historical epochs. All GS students pursue academic specializations in their major fields; thanks to the Core, they also learn to situate this knowledge within the age-old tradition of Western thought. At the same time they learn to reflect critically about this tradition and its place in global history.

One of the distinguishing features of core courses is that they foster direct encounters with the great productions of the past. Whether analyzing Homeric poetry, listening to Baroque fugues, or reading Enlightenment manifestos, students learn to grapple directly with works of unparalleled suggestiveness and complexity. They gain practice in formulating questions, positing interpretations, and defending positions which they then enrich through arguments drawn from the texts. With enrollment in core classes generally limited to 22 students, classroom discussions are intense and engaging, allowing participants to form bonds with each other that often endure throughout their undergraduate years.

By promoting a personal encounter with works of enduring importance, the Core changes students’ outlook on learning. In doing so, it lays the foundation for a lifetime of continued reflection and discovery.

Core Requirements

Contemporary Civilization

One of the two courses (along with Literature Humanities) that constitute the essence of Columbia’s tradition of liberal education, Contemporary Civilization gives students the chance to engage directly with some of the key political and philosophical texts in the history of Western thought. Students discover how, across the centuries, thinkers have struggled with certain central questions: What does it mean to be human? What constitutes a good society? What is the relationship between power and authority? How can we reconcile our aspirations to justice and our lived experience of inequality? When is revolution justified, and what happens when and if it goes awry?

Literature Humanities

The second of the two courses (along with Contemporary Civilization) that make up the essential liberal arts curriculum at Columbia, Literature Humanities exposes students to some of the most influential literary works in the Western tradition. In works of drama, history, and epic, among other genres, students see how writers across the centuries have explored the great themes of human life. The course’s chronological approach introduces students to literary works in the order that they were written, allowing them to trace the development of philosophical ideas alongside the development of literary forms, and to discover how the works of one era will often anticipate the concerns and achievements of a later age.

*Art Humanities: Masterpieces of Western Art

The goal of Art Humanities is to teach students how to look at and think about works of art. Embracing architecture, sculpture, and painting, the course gives students practice in analyzing the formal structure of individual works and in placing them within their historical context. Frequent visits to New York’s museums bring students face to face with many of the world’s most celebrated masterpieces, thereby encouraging them to develop an ongoing relationship with this aspect of Western culture.

*Music Humanities: Masterpieces of Western Music

Music Humanities fosters students’ appreciation of music as a distinctive art form with its own expressive resources, historical evolution, and national traditions. By listening to recordings and by attending live performances in New York’s famous concert venues, students gain exposure to the wide range of forms, from the Renaissance motet to the improvised jazz solo, that make up the Western canon. In classroom discussions and writing assignments, students then gain practice in analyzing how these forms use specific techniques to convey feeling and to embody different conceptions of the human experience.

*University Writing

The mission of University Writing is to impart a set of skills essential for success in academic life. Students learn how to formulate arguments, support them with evidence, and set them down in clear and persuasive prose. The course emphasizes that writing is a process, one in which research, analysis, composition, and revision all have their necessary place. NB: Special sections of this course are devoted to such themes as American studies, sustainable development, and gender and sexuality.

Frontiers of Science

The goal of this course is to introduce students to the way scientists think. As they delve into questions drawn from fields as varied as neuroscience and astrophysics, students learn why scientists cultivate a sense of scale, why they like to convert data to graphs, and why they are so careful to differentiate correlation from causation. Along the way, students are invited to think about how science might contribute answers to old questions (what is the place of our species in the universe?) and new ones (is continued industrialization an environmentally sustainable proposition?).

*Global Core

In contrast to the other offerings in the Columbia Core, the Global Core courses ask students to stand outside the Western tradition and encounter cultures that have flourished in other parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East. Drawing on primary texts and artifacts – including texts, films, ritual performances, and oral sources—the offerings in the Global Core invite students to think deeply about the predicates and values of different societies and systems of belief.

NB: While only some core classes are required of GS students, all students are urged to register, if possible, for the full Core Curriculum in order to ensure the greatest breadth to their general education. *Indicates required.