Your position papers should be approximately 500 words (they should be no more than two typed pages), so you’ll have to think carefully about what you want to say and make every word count. You’re required to turn in 5 position papers over the course of the semester. Remember that late position papers are not accepted.

_Slaughterhouse-Five (Due Date: Wednesday, September 3)_

Possible Topics:
--Do you believe this is an anti-war book or not? Vonnegut concedes in the opening chapter that trying to stop wars is like trying to stop glaciers. Is he a fatalist, as some critics have charged, or does he think change is possible?
--Comment on the book’s style. How would you characterize it? What makes it unique, interesting? Does the style seem to underscore the content? Or does it detract from the content?
--What are we supposed to think about the Tralfamadorians and their world-view? Does Vonnegut believe (and want us to believe) that the Tralfamadorian philosophy of life is more sane and reasonable than that of earthlings? Or do you believe that Vonnegut satirizes the Tralfamadorian view—that he presents it ironically?

_White Noise (Due Date: Monday, September 15)_

Possible Topics:
--What do you think the “white noise” of the title refers to? Where in the book itself do we see this white noise manifested? What does the white noise suggest about contemporary American culture?
--Do you think DeLillo critiques or appreciates our media-obsessed, consumerist society? Or does his vision involve a more complicated mixture of the two? Cite particular scenes, instances in the book to support your view.
--Choose a particular supporting character (Heinrich, Denise, Stephie, Wilder, Murray Jay Siskind, Babette, Orest Mercator, etc.) and discuss what role this character seems to play in the book.
--Look one of these particular scenes in the book and provide a close reading of what you think’s going on here:

1) The scene beginning in Chapter 39 when Jack confronts Willie Mink.
2) The scene at the hospital with the German nuns.
3) The scene at the very beginning of Chapter 40, in which Wilder rides his tricycle across the highway.
The Things They Carried (Due Date: Wednesday, September 24)
 Possible Topics:
 -- Discuss the book's form—did it make you feel uncomfortable? Were you frustrated about the difficulty of sorting out truth from fiction? Speculate about what you think O'Brien gains by the way he plays with audience expectations in the book.
 -- How do you think O'Brien defines courage in the novel?
 -- Discuss the theme of storytelling as O'Brien explores it. Why all the metafictional commentary about telling stories?
 -- Why do you think O'Brien chooses to end the novel with the story about Linda set mostly in his childhood?

Wolfe/Didion Essays (Due Date: Wednesday, October 1)
 Possible Topics:
 -- Look at “Radical Chic” and/or “Mau-mauing the Flak Catcher” and discuss how Wolfe himself uses the four specific techniques that he says the New Journalists learned from the realistic novelists. How successful do you think he is?
 -- How legitimate do you believe the New Journalism is? Can it really be called “journalism,” as Wolfe claims? Or do you agree with critics who claim it’s a form much too subjective to call non-fiction? Is it useful or cumbersome to retain old distinctions between fact and fiction anyway?
 -- Why do you think Didion chooses the particular sort of brief snapshot-type style she uses for her essay? What, according to Didion, has happened to traditional plot, narrative?
 -- Does Didion present a slightly darker view of the 60’s than you are used to? How so? Why? What seems to be her overall take on that decade?

The Executioner's Song (Due Date: Monday, October 13)
 Possible Topics:
 -- In a review of The Executioner's Song, Diane Johnson writes that the novel may be considered "literary ambulance-chasing." Other readers have criticized Mailer for writing a basically and fundamentally "immoral" novel because it devotes so much dispassionate attention (over 1,000 pages worth) to a cold-blooded murderer. Other critics, though, argue that the novel is Mailer's best work to date. Which view do you take? Is the novel immoral and exploitative? Does it glorify Gilmore? Or does it manage to be a "true-crime" story that works, that rises above the status of "literary ambulance-chasing"?
 -- Does your view of Gilmore change as the novel progresses? Does he become more monstrous the more we see of him? Or does he, as at least one critic argues, become increasingly heroic, especially after he’s arrested and imprisoned again?
 -- What are we to think of Lawrence Schiller? How does Mailer present him?
 -- What do you think of Mailer’s depictions of Gilmore’s victims? Does he treat them fairly or condescendingly?
 -- What do you think about some of the admissions Mailer makes in his afterword to the novel?
**Song of Solomon** *(Due Date: Monday, October 27)*

Possible Topics:
--Look at either Macon Dead II, Ruth, or Pilate and talk about this character’s function in the novel.
--Examine a particularly memorable image or recurring motif in the novel (Ruth’s watermark, eggs, gold/ginger, the rose petals sewn by Lena and Corinthians, the peacock, etc.) What function does this symbol seem to serve?
--Discuss the emphasis on names and naming in the novel. Perhaps examine individual character’s names? Talk about the relationship between names and history?
--What are we supposed to think about Guitar Baines and The Seven Days? Is Guitar an appealing character or a appalling character? Explain.
--Provide a close reading of the very end of the novel. How are we supposed to read and interpret what happens here?

**Tracks** *(Due Date: Monday, November 10)*

Possible Topics:
--What do the "tracks" of the title refer to? Are there literal "tracks" in the novel? How do tracks work as a metaphor? Why do you think Erdrich chose to title this novel *Tracks*?
--Discuss the structure of the novel. Why does Erdrich choose two alternating narrators? How does this form relate to the novel’s content?
--What are we to think of Pauline Puyat? Is she simply crazy? Are we to feel any sympathy/admiration for her at all? What does her function in the novel seem to be?
--Look at Erdrich’s prose style. Is it lyrically beautiful, as many readers believe? Or is it overwrought, too writing-schoolish as some critics have charged? How does Erdrich’s style affect you? Do you think it works or not?
--Why doesn’t Fleur tell her own story? What are we to think of Fleur? Why does she hasten her own destruction at the end?

**A Thousand Acres** *(Due Date: Wednesday, November 19)*

Possible Topics:
--Consider the novel’s epigraph from Meridel Le Seur. How does this quote shape and inform the book?
--Is Ginny an entirely reliable narrator? Can we completely trust her perception of events? Why do you think Smiley chose Ginny to narrate the story? How would the book have been different with a different narrator?
–If you’re familiar with *King Lear*, talk about Lear parallels in the novel. How well do you think these work?
--Some reviewers argued that Smiley went too far in her depiction of Larry Cook and what he does to his daughters—that she robs the Lear character of his majesty, making him unambiguously bad. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment?
--What are we supposed to think about Jess Clark? Is he a villain or a victim?
--How do you read the ending of the novel? Is it entirely tragic? Does Smiley leave us with any hope for the future?


**Fun Home (Due Date: Monday, December 1)**

Possible Topics:

--Why do you think Bechdel engages with so many literary texts in the memoir? Perhaps choose a single text, such as *Ulysses* or *The Great Gatsby*, and talk about why this particular text is significant to the memoir.

--Discuss the importance of place in the book. You might, for instance, focus on the small-town Pennsylvania setting (for which Bechdel includes a map) versus trips to New York. Or you might look at more specific places such as the funeral home itself or the Bechdel house that Alison’s father works to restore so lovingly.

--Choose a particular panel or page to analyze closely, especially in light of how the drawings and text work together.

--Finally, do you think Bechdel judges her father or resists judging him in the book? Where do you specifically see this struggle illustrated?