

IDH2930: (Un)Common Reads: *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis and the Beauty of Sports Journalism*
University of Florida, Honors College, Spring 2026

Course Information:

Instructor: Tomas Curcio (tomascurcio@ufl.edu)

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Douglas Gabriel (douglasgabriel@ufl.edu)

Class Meetings: Fridays, Period 6: 12:50pm to 1:40pm

Room: Little Hall 117

Office Hours: Zoom by appointment

Phone Number: (352) 392-0201

Course Description:

In 1996, acclaimed fiction writer David Foster Wallace proclaimed, “Tennis is the most beautiful sport there is.” Wallace’s works, both his fiction and non-fiction, trap readers in disparate locations: a Caribbean cruise ship, the Illinois State Fair, an IRS office, a halfway house, and many more. But, throughout his career, Wallace’s mind always wandered back to the space of his youth: that is, the tennis court. Its geometry, both visible on the ground and in the flight patterns of balls above the net, entranced him throughout his career, making them the subjects of his early personal essays, as in 1991’s “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” and even of his most seminal works, as in the 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*. *String Theory*, the 2016 posthumous collection of Wallace’s non-fiction tennis writing, brings together the thoughts that he continually mulled over until his untimely death in 2008. The collection of works, intensely personal and yet universal, are some of the most esteemed pieces of sports writing ever created. This course will analyze these pieces on journalistic and literary metrics to discover the magic behind these works as well as the beauty of tennis both on paper and on the court. While doing so, students will also get the opportunity to create tennis profiles of their own, exploring the same process Wallace went through decades prior.

Course Objectives:

- To explore the role of sports journalism within the ecosystem of tennis.
- To create profiles of tennis players that utilize interviews and research methods.
- To enhance an understanding of the literature of tennis journalism.

Course Materials:

Required Book: Wallace, David Foster. *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (Library

of America, 2016).

Additional required readings will be provided via Canvas.

Course Grading and Assignments:

Grading Scale:

Grade	Grade Points	Percentage
A	4.0	93.5-100
A ⁻	3.67	89.5-93.4
B ⁺	3.33	86.5-89.4
B	3.0	82.5-86.4
B ⁻	2.67	79.5-82.4
C ⁺	2.33	76.5-79.4
C	2.0	72.5-76.4
C ⁻	1.67	69.5-72.4
D	1.00-1.33	59.5-69.4
F	0.00	59.4 or below

A minimum grade of B is required to earn Academic points towards Honors Completion Requirements. Once you have earned your final grade in this course, please upload the course information and final grade from your Unofficial Transcript into your Honors Canvas Cohort: Honors Requirements module to earn Honors Milestone / Completion credit.

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

Participation in Discussion: 25%

Attendance: 25%

Reading Comprehension Assessments: (3) 30% (10%, 10%, 10%)

Profiling a Tennis Player: 20%

Attendance and Participation in Discussion

The objective of these grades is to assess involvement in the course.

Attendance will be graded based upon the student's appearance for lectures. If the student knows they will be absent from class, they should inform the instructors ahead of time, and if an emergency barred them from going to class they may inform the professors after the fact. If no

information is communicated to the professors relating to an absence, then students will be marked down in their attendance grade.

Participation will be graded based on the student's active involvement in seminar discussions. If students appear to be uninterested, distracted, not contributing to discussion, or purposefully inhibiting discussion, then their grade will suffer. In a small seminar, participation is extremely important to facilitating an intellectually engaging environment.

Reading Comprehension Assignments

The objective of the Reading Comprehension Assignment is to ensure the comprehension of the required texts and to prepare for class discussion. They will solely revolve around ideas presented within the coursework.

The prompt for each assignment will be posted a week before it is due and detail what is expected of student responses. Answers should be at least 300 words and include specific references to topics discussed in class or in the readings. These assignments will be posted on discussion board posts so that students can see each other's responses, but responding to one another is not necessary.

Profiling a Tennis Player

Students will be put in contact with a high-level player on the University of Florida's club tennis team, and, through interviews and research, students will complete a profile of the student based on their relationship with tennis.

Profiles are expected to be at least 500 words and include an appropriate title. On top of this, the profile shall include three quotes of the subject and one anecdote, elements that are essential in building colorful reporting stories. This will give students the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Wallace while still allowing them to find their own voice. Through this creative process, students will mold their own profiles through individual problem solving to devise the most appropriate way of conducting their interviews, and to decide on what questions to ask, what information to include in their profiles, and how to structure their profiles. Upon contacting their subjects, students may consult with the instructors on how best to fulfill the assignment's requirements.

Due Dates (submit work by 11:59 pm):

Thursday, January 29th: *First Reading Comprehension Assignment*

Thursday, February 26th: *Second Reading Comprehension Assignment*

Thursday, March 26th: *Third Reading Comprehension Assignment*

Thursday, April 16th: *Profiling a Tennis Player*

Course Schedule:

- **January 16th**
 - Course Introduction: A Jumble of Tennis, Literature, and Journalism.
- **January 23rd**
 - The One Who Perspires Creepily on the Subway
 - Please Read:
 - Gale Walden, “Diary: David’s Presence,” *London Review of Books* 45, no. 21 (2023): <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n21/gale-walden/diary>.
- **January 30th**
 - The Personal Essay
 - Please Read:
 - David Foster Wallace, “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” in *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (Library of America, 2016) pgs. 1-22.
 - Discussion of *First Reading Comprehension Assignment* Responses
- **February 6th**
 - The Sports Memoir
 - Please Read:
 - Andre Agassi, “The End” in *Open: An Autobiography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), pgs. 1-35.
- **February 13th**
 - How to Grapple with the Sports Memoir
 - Please Read:
 - David Foster Wallace, “How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart” in *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (Library of America, 2016), pgs. 23-40.
- **February 20th**
 - No Class Today
- **February 27th**
 - The Profile:
 - Please Read:
 - Sean Manning, “Andy Roddick’s Open Era,” *GQ Sports*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.gq.com/story/andy-roddick-us-open>.

- *Profiling a Tennis Player* Assignment is Explained and Profile Subjects are Assigned
 - Discussion of *Second Reading Comprehension Assignment* Responses
- **March 6th**
 - The Profile or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Subject
 - Please Read:
 - David Foster Wallace, “Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness” in *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (Library of America, 2016), pgs. 41-86.
- **March 13th**
 - The Sport and All of its Systems Writ Large
 - Please Read:
 - John Feinstein, “The Agents” in *Hard Courts* (Villard Books, 1992), pgs. 130-143.
- **March 20th**
 - No Class Today: Spring Break
- **March 27th**
 - Making Money Moves
 - Please Read:
 - David Foster Wallace, “Democracy and Commerce at the U.S. Open” in *String Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis* (Library of America, 2016) pgs. 87-114.
- **April 3rd**
 - Point by Point by Point by Point by Point
 - Please Read:
 - John McPhee, *Levels of the Game* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), pgs. 1-16.
 - Discussion of *Third Reading Comprehension Assignment* Responses
- **April 10th**
 - How to Write Tennis
 - Please Read:
 - David Foster Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not” in *String*

Theory: David Foster Wallace on Tennis (Library of America, 2016), pgs. 115-138.

- **April 17th (Last Day of Class)**

- Why Tennis?

- Please Read:

- Andrea Petkovic, “If You Want to See Who Someone Really Is, Get Them on a Tennis Court: Professional Tennis Player Andrea Petkovic on Reading Philip Roth and Finding Hard Truths,” *Literary Hub*, August 20, 2020, <https://lithub.com/if-you-want-to-see-who-someone-really-is-get-them-on-a-tennis-court/>.

- Discussion of *Profiling a Tennis Player*

This syllabus is subject to change with advance notice

Honors Program Contact Information:

- Honors Program, Honors Village Building 4 (our new location starting in late fall 2025), 352-392-1519
- Quick questions for an Honors advisor? Email advisor@honors.ufl.edu
- Need an Honors advising appointment? Schedule via Microsoft Bookings: <https://bit.ly/UFHonorsAdvising>
- Honors Program Event Calendar: <https://www.honors.ufl.edu/news--events/calendar-of-events/>

For the latest UF academic policies and resources, as well as campus health and wellness resources, please visit <http://go.ufl.edu/syllabuspolicies>.