Let’s take care of some of the bureaucratic matters first:

- **Who am I?** Dr. Patrick Bahls (please feel free to call me Patrick).

- **When and where is our class?** 11:15 a.m. to 1:45 p.m., Monday through Thursday in the Laurel Forum. Bring a lunch or be ready to make it in the Forum’s kitchen! (We’ll probably meet somewhere for lunch or potluck it now and then, too...)

- **What texts will we be using?** There are only two texts you’ll need to pick up:
  - the general catch-all reference, *The Oulipo Compendium* (ISBN-13 978-097-4355436), and

- **What do I bring to class?** Yourself, mind intact, as well as a notebook, journal, or electronic device that will serve as your writing portfolio (see more on this below) and something with which to write in it. Please bring your books, as well.

- **Where and when are your office hours?** I will generally be available before class, from 8:00 to 11:00, in my Karpen Hall office (Room 140). I will also be available at those times on Fridays. I will also be around on some afternoons after class. Please feel free to make an appointment if you’d like to guarantee a meeting with me.

- **How can I get a hold of you?** My phone number is 828-232-5190 and my e-mail addresses are pbahls@unca.edu and patrick.bahls@gmail.com. E-mail’s typically the best way to get a hold of me. Drop me a line!

- **What about other electronic media?** My website is located at faculty.unca.edu/~pbahls, and from there you can access just about any course-related information you need (notes, exams, a copy of this syllabus, etc.).

  I also have a blog, *Change of Basis* (http://blogspot.changeofbasis.com), on which I frequently write openly about my ideas regarding teaching and learning. I encourage you to read and comment on this blog to help you understand what goes through my mind as I put our course together. Many students have found the blog to be an entertaining and enlightening read.

  Finally, I should mention my Facebook policy: I am happy to be your friend on Facebook, but it is my policy not to actively friend my students. I will, however, warmly accept your friend requests. If you do wish to be my friend on Facebook, I only suggest that you think carefully about the sorts of things you’d like your professor to be able to see about you when you update your status, post pictures, etc.

**What will we be studying?** The word *Oulipo* is a (French) acronym for the phrase “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle,” which translates roughly (and cognately) as “Workshop for potential literature.” As we’ll soon talk about at length, the word “potential” refers to the fact that much of the literature produced by the Oulipo movement’s members exists only in a “potential” form, as a by-product of the rules and constraints governing the potential literature’s construction. Indeed, Oulipo’s practitioners were far more concerned with developing these rules than they were with writing literary works that
demonstrated the rules’ functioning, except to show that it could be done. Having shown that one can indeed write a 35,000-word novel without the letter ‘e,’ for instance, an Oulipian would be content to move on to a new challenge.

In our work this summer we will study the history of the Oulipo movement and its fellow-travelers. We will spend more attention, however, on the methods Oulipians and others developed for constraining literary invention. We’ll study these methods, toy with them, tweak them, and apply them to make our own works of poetry and fiction...and we’ll invent our own constraints, applying them as Oulipian constraints have been applied in the past. Our work, therefore, will be both analytical and inventive, and I hope it will prove challenging and delightful to us all. Perhaps most importantly still, our work will shine a light not just on constrained writing but on all writing, through a foregrounding of writing as a process. I anticipate that this course will help us all to become more intentional and more effective writers, no matter the genres we typically write in.

What do you expect me to get out of this course? Think of the following list as a set of skills I’d love for you to have five years after taking this course. You should be able to...

- describe the philosophy of the Oulipo movement,
- identify some of Oulipo’s luminary members and their contributions,
- explain and apply several Oulipian literary constraints, and
- invent and apply your own literary constraints.

It might not hurt you to go back over this list every so often and ask yourself (and me!), “am I making progress in developing these skills?” If at any time you feel the answer is “no,” please come and talk to me about it; one or both of us might be able to change our ways to help you better reach these goals.

What kind of work will I do in this course? Your grade will be based upon the following activities:

- regular creative composition, both formal and informal, both polished and exploratory, in a portfolio,
- an end-of-course project for which you invent and apply your own constraint,
- active participation in an ongoing collaborative project related to our reading, and
- active participation in in-class discussions (including participating in in-class workshops of your creative work).

Below is a bit more information about each of these components of the course.

Portfolios. Your portfolios will not be portfolios in the traditional sense but instead will be more of a hybrid of a traditional portfolio and a journal or daybook, a catch-all compendium of your ongoing creative processes. Not only will I ask you to include in these portfolios preliminary and finished versions of whatever more formal writing assignments you’re given; I will also often ask you to perform in-class low-stakes writing in the portfolios. For instance, in any given class period I might ask you to complete some sort of writing activity in your portfolio, or to include in it some image, excerpt, or clipping from elsewhere.

Besides collecting your responses to specific formal writing assignments as due dates arrive, I will also collect your portfolios once a week to see that you’re using them as I’ve asked you to. Furthermore, I hope you’ll go beyond the requests I make and begin using your portfolios as repositories for your
thoughts more generally: mark them up, fill them up, draw doodle paint poem compose in them! I want to see what you’ve got.

I should note that the means by which your creative writing will be assessed and graded will depend on the nature of each individual project. Informal projects may simply be graded on completion; more elaborate projects may be assessed based on composition, completeness, and adherence and attention to the rules according to which you’re writing. I will always make my expectations for any given assignment clear in advance. You will also have frequent opportunities to read and react to one another’s work, offering assessment of your colleagues’ work through peer review. Please note that if you choose to use an electronic device to compose in class, I will ask you to compile all of your in-class musings into a single folder which I may peruse easily each week.

I would like to propose that, taken together, the contents of your portfolio be worth 40% of your overall grade.

**Individual projects.** Roughly halfway through our brief course, I’ll ask you each to begin designing a constraint all your own and writing in response to it. It might be one modeled after an existing rule or algorithm (in which case, however, it should show a clear departure from existing constraints; it should be clearly your own), or it may be one you’ve made up out of thin air. You should be able to explain clearly the origin of your constraint and your reasons for developing it. Here, your reasons could be philosophical, highlighting this or that ontological or epistemological aspect of language or thought; or they could simply be fun, offering an opportunity for invention and play.

In any case, once you’ve come up with your constraint, it will be up to you to apply it, using your constraint to produce one or more pieces of poetry or prose. While your creative work here should stand on its own as meritorious writing, what’s more important is that you apply your constraint consistently and produce writing which obeys the rules which you yourself have set out. I’ll have more to say about this project as the summer grows older.

I would like to propose that your individual constraint project, as a whole, be worth 20% of your overall grade.

**Collaborative project.** As you will soon see, Georges Perec’s novel *Life: A user’s manual* is a truly singular piece of literature. The product of numerous interwoven structural and stylistic constraints, this book offers a cornucopia of cleverness and fun. The tales it tells is are engaging ones, and the manner in which they’re told is equally engaging, inviting the reader into a world where the line between fact and fiction is deftly blurred.

In this blurring, Perec’s novel also makes an excellent target for our own inventive cannons. In order to engage more actively with the book, I’d like you all to collaborate to create a “companion piece” of sorts. Namely, beginning in the first days of the class and continuing until the term’s end you’ll all work together to craft a wiki dedicated to the novel, one in which the real and the unreal are as tightly interlaced as they are in Perec’s universe. The content and structure of the wiki will be up to you all, but I suspect it might include (but not be limited to) pages dedicated to people, places, and things mentioned in the novel...and anything else these people, places, and things inspire in you. We’ll be using the platform provided by Wikispaces, which hosts free server space for wikis dedicated to educational causes. We’ll talk more about this on the first day of class, along with my expectations for the wiki project.

I would like to propose that your contribution to this collaborative project be worth 20% of your overall grade. Please note that I will assess your contribution, in part, through both self- and peer-evaluation throughout the semester.

**Participation.** If there are no changes to our roster after my writing this syllabus, there will be 5 people (counting me) in our class on most days we meet. Moreover, the classroom is a wide-open one, and there aren’t any easy corners to hide in. I fully expect every one of you to hold your own in class
conversations and other activities. I don’t anticipate that this will be difficult: you’re all intelligent and highly motivated, and you’ve all chosen to take part in this class, after all. So, speak up!

Participation will also encompass your involvement in peer review and workshop activities that will go on (almost daily!) in class. You will often be called on to read and respond to one another’s work, and I expect you to take these tasks on with alacrity…or at least with kind and courteous resolve.

It’s not always easy to quantify “participation,” but I know it won’t be hard to tell who’s contributing to our class regularly and who isn’t. I’m not asking you to lead every conversation to get credit for participation, but I would like you to say something at least now and again every day (again, there won’t be many of us), and to openly share your writing with other folks when you’re asked to do so. I’ll let you know if I don’t feel you’re carrying your share of the load, but as long as you’re reasonably active, you’ll get full marks for participating.

I would like to propose that your active participation in class be worth 20% of your overall grade.

The astute reader will note that I’ve listed the “point values” for the various components of our course as “proposals.” This is because I feel strongly that you all should have a hand in designing this course (it is, after all, our course and not merely mine), and so early in our time together this summer I will lead us in a discussion on the matter of assessment and grades…we might decide, as a class, on different point values; those listed above are meant as a starting point for negotiations.

That’s all that I have to say about our class for now. Please don’t hesitate to let me know at any time if you have questions, or if concerns arise. Let’s go ahead and dive right in!