

English 3396. The Nature of Houston. Spring, 2012.  
Dr. Dixon.

Our subject is Houston, the nation's fourth largest city and an interesting, complex urban area. Our approach focuses on two definitions of the "nature" of Houston. We look first at the human character of the city. How have Houstonians, past and present, responded to the opportunities and the challenges that this particular place—its geography, topography, geology, climate, etc.—offers? How have Houstonians shaped the city's economy, its government, and its culture? We will learn in part by comparing Houston to other major American cities. How are we similar to and different from other American urban areas in the state and the region and elsewhere in the country?

Our second major line of inquiry will examine the 'nature' of Houston in a more narrow sense. How does our city choose to deal with the natural world? Is it true, as many national (and some local) observers argue, that the nature of Houston is manifest solely in its flatness, heat, and humidity, that the place is notable only as a (unpleasant) backdrop for the business of earning a living? Or is it possible to argue that Houston nature affords some quality of life benefits for its citizens?

Tools for our work will include major urban theorists of our time such as Richard Florida (excerpts from The Rise of the Creative Class) and Joel Kotkin "The Opportunity City." We will also consider how imaginative writers see the city, especially those featured in the David Theis anthology Literary Houston. We will also make use of sociological studies such as the ongoing Rice chronicle of population and attitudinal changes, The Houston Survey.

Class members are invited to bring their own questions and observations about our city to the semester. Papers will be written.