Recommended Guides to Theory

Temple University Graduate English Association

One of the most difficult aspects of transitioning to graduate coursework is the feeling that one suddenly has to know everything about that amorphous body of texts, thinkers, and terms that goes by the name of “theory.” Professors (and fellow students) are tossing around names and words that aren’t exactly right there on the tip of your tongue, even if they’re not completely unknown to you. What follows is a brief guide to the many resources that can help you get a handle on the history, major figures, and key terms in literary theory.

Guides to Theory

Single-Author Introductions

*Literary Theory: A Brief Insight*, Jonathan Culler (Sterling, 2009)
This book offers a short introduction to theory with lots of nice pictures. Culler’s approach is deeply indebted to deconstruction, and his book’s emphasis on breaking down binaries demonstrates this tendency.

*Literary Theory: The Basics*, Hans Bertens (Routledge, 2007)
This volume prides itself on covering the “latest schools of thought,” and from the publisher’s description, this assessment seems accurate.

*Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry (Manchester UP, 2002)
A little longer and more comprehensive than the other books on this list, Barry’s book takes on a slightly British flavor which, while not significant, is noticeable.

*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton (U of Minnesota P, 2008)
You should know before reading this that Eagleton is a Marxist critic. You’ll certainly know it after you’ve finished the book.

Multi-Author Introductions

Thirty-nine essays on individual aspects of theory, the majority of which focus on the twentieth century. Rather expensive.

*Critical Terms for Literary Study* (U of Chicago P, 1995)
Lives up to its title: essays by major figures on key terms such as “discourse,” “race,” and “desire,” with the added benefit of learning about major critics while reading about major terms.
The book is now outdated, but the quality of the essays is still strong.

Here’s where the heavy lifting happens: same principle as the Nortons you used in undergrad (key texts, with intros) but for theory, from the pre-Socratics to the present. The department’s history of critical theory exam list includes many selections from this anthology.

**Dictionaries**

The emphasis of this dictionary is **formal**. This wide-ranging reference volume features short entries on genre studies, literary movements, narratology, poetics, and other technical matters. Examples include *Apollonian/Dionysian, Booker McConnell Prize, carnivalesque, Künstlerroman, Gothic, novel/fiction, irony, little magazines, negative capability, Nō (Noh), ode, revenge tragedy, terza rima,* and *zeugma.* Every graduate student of literature or creative writing should own a copy of this book, Chris Baldick’s *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms,* or a comparable dictionary for use as a desk reference. It’s essential for quickly glossing technical terms that come up in seminar discussions, criticism, and some literature and film, especially meta-.

The main thrust of this dictionary is **political, psychological, and philosophical**. This volume places greater emphasis than the above-listed one on schools of thought, such as gynocriticism, the linguistic turn, New Criticism, psychoanalysis, the Prague School, and Western Marxism; individual philosophers and critics, including Benedict Anderson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi K. Bhabha, Simone de Beauvoir, Aimé Césaire, Henry-Louis Gates, Ferdinand de Saussure, Elaine Showalter, and Derek Walcott; influential journals, including *Critical Inquiry* and *Radical Philosophy*; and such politically charged critical terms as *anxiety of influence, dead white European males, fragmented body, practico-inert, and representamen.* Owning this dictionary, Ian Buchanan’s *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (below), or a comparable reference work is recommended for incoming graduate students, since name- and jargon-dropping is an inescapable form of shorthand in English departments, given the breadth of critical theory and its influence. As Jonathan Culler points out, a corpus of theoretical works that every doctoral-level student of English can be expected to have read no longer exists, if it ever did. Thus, reference works are not just convenient, but necessary, since the theory reading of English and creative writing students tends to diverge with increasing levels of specialization. Though intellectual collaboration is one of the most important aspects of grad school, you will never read all the theory that your colleagues do and vice versa. Dictionaries and introductory guides help make collaboration happen.

This dictionary shares the format and emphasis of its Penguin rival but is more up to date. It’s thus more comprehensive about such hot topics as biopolitics, cosmopolitanism, cyborg theory, diaspora studies, eccocriticism, disability studies, material cultures, queer theory, whiteness studies, globalization, masculinity studies, internet, Film, and media studies, spatial approaches to art and culture, and new developments in continental philosophy. Both the Penguin and Oxford critical theory dictionaries feature useful guides to further reading.

**Paley Library Resources**
(these links should direct you right to the log-in page through the library portal)

**The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism**
Helpful encyclopedia-style entries on key figures and topics. The secondary sources lists at the bottom of each entry are a gold mine.

**Blackwell Reference Online**
Simply tons of free, easy to access information, including but by no means limited to Michael Payne’s *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* and Temple English professor Peter Logan’s *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Michael Ryan is a professor of Film and Media Arts at Temple’s School of Communications and the co-editor of a text used in advanced undergraduate courses, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). He’s thus well-placed to edit this encyclopedia, which will likely remain the resource of record for some time. It’s strong in social and political approaches, especially cultural studies.

**The Cambridge Companions to Literature and Classics**
Yes, that’s right: access to 240 collections of “comprehensive and accessible essays on major authors, periods and genres, written by experts and designed for student readers.” These pithy essays are clutch for beginning a research paper or studying for exams.

**Audio / Visual**

*Introduction to Theory of Literature* (2009), Paul H. Fry (video and audio lectures)
This lecture course, created for advanced undergraduates, is available for free though Open Yale Courses. Since the lectures are available for download, they’re ideal for on-the-go listening! Paul Fry uses the children’s book *Tony the Tow Truck* as a test case for applying theories grouped into three broad categories: **formal, psychological, and social**. In about 24 hours, the lectures survey the field from twentieth-century theory’s roots in the writing of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud to pragmatist attacks on theory in the 1980s-1990s. Such important paradigms as feminism, gender theory, critical race theory, queer theory, New Historicism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism are considered, though lectures on formal approaches, including hermeneutics, Russian formalism, structuralism, and deconstruction, are what make this
course stand out. While Fry doesn’t cover schools of thought developed in the past ten years, the range of approaches he does discuss lines up with the theoretical background of many current literature professors. Fry’s clarity and scope make this online course an excellent overview for students new to theory, as well as a comprehensive review for those with some background in the field. Film students might consider looking elsewhere, since Fry focuses on language and literariness rather than visuality and media studies.