During a meeting in neutral territory — an inn in a Swiss canton well endowed with wines and other spirits —, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei discover a time machine, stored up in the attic of the Inn. It’s a two-seater of early British design, which may or may not have been temporarily parked there by H.G. Wells. The adventuresome duo decide to take it for a spin and, given their lack of driving skills, their time–space trajectory is somewhat messy. They first land in Princeton, NJ, in 1954, where they meet Albert Einstein and learn about Newtonian Mechanics, General Relativity and Hubble’s discovery of the expansion of the Universe. Lucky you, their next unscheduled stop is in your room in Ithaca, N.Y., in December 2006. Fortunately for you, they understand English, so you won’t need to communicate in Italian, German or Latin. They ask about modern Cosmology; they wish to learn what your contemporaries know about the “System of the Heavens”.

In 1500 words or so, you are to present them with a rendition of modern Cosmology in words that they can understand. You will thus need to pick up “from 1955 on”, so to speak, all the way through the hot big bang, cosmic microwave background radiation, primordial nucleosynthesis and the dark side of the Universe (dark matter and dark energy). A tour de force, no doubt, but you are up to the task.

Your essay will be graded in terms of its balance and clarity, as well as your choice of what’s to be given relevance in a 1500 words summary. Needless to say, the use of unexplained terms that Galileo and Kepler would not understand will detract value from your presentation. Judicious bibliographical reference of any sources used is required.

Electronic submission is not encouraged, but if you must use that avenue, make sure that the paper is a plain text file, and that it is mailed to rg39@cornell.edu, no later than the stated deadline of 4 pm, Dec 12.