

Introduction to Digital Humanities - Tufts University, Fall 2025



Figure 1: Bandeau de Manifest des Digital Humanities by Michael Cixous, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Details

Time: T 6–9pm

Location: Eaton Hall 371

Instructor: Charles Pletcher (charles.pletcher@tufts.edu)

Instructor Office Hours: TTh 5-6pm or by appointment: <https://cal.com/pletcher>

Prerequisites

None

Description

In a recent article in the *New Yorker*, Princeton professor D. Graham Burnett observes, “But to be human is not to have answers. It is to have *questions*—and to live with them. The machines can’t do that for us. Not now, not ever” (“Will the Humanities Survive Artificial Intelligence?”, April 26, 2025). For us to grapple with what “the machines” mean to us—or, in bleaker terms, what business-types want artificial intelligence (AI) to mean for their bottom lines—we must first understand the limits of what the machines can do.

This course explores the so-called “digital humanities” with a view towards the role of computational methods, including AI, in the humanistic disciplines. This exploration will entail learning to view textual and material objects of study from new angles, but it also involves learning how to scrutinize each angle of interpretation.

Beginning with workshops on textual encoding, students will gain exposure to diverse disciplines at the intersection of data science and the humanities, from Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to Natural Language Processing (NLP), generative art and music, and network analysis.

Students will gain familiarity with the Python programming language, as well as tools like Voyant, TEI XML, ArcGIS, and Gephi. Through readings ranging from antiquity to the present, students will learn about the history of the digital humanities and engage in code criticism.

Assessments include weekly quizzes or discussion posts, collaborative projects, and a final cumulative project of each student’s design.

Learning objectives

Successfully completing this course will equip students to

1. Explain what the digital humanities are and how they relate to other forms of humanities research;
2. Write and execute basic Python scripts;
3. Pre-process a text/corpus in preparation for natural language processing;
4. Parse complex data structures such as Python dictionaries and Pandas data frames;
5. Apply digital methodologies of various kinds to humanities related data;
6. Evaluate the methodologies and results of digital humanities projects.

Textbooks

Required

(These are all either open-access or available through the Tufts Library's digital subscriptions.)

- William Mattingly. *Introduction to Python for Humanists*. 2022. <https://python-textbook.pythonhumanities.com/>
- James O'Sullivan, ed. *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities*. Bloomsbury, 2022.
- Plato. *Statesman. Philebus. Ion*. Translated by Harold North Fowler, W. R. M. Lamb. Loeb Classical Library 164. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925. <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL164/1925/volume.xml>

Recommended

- Dennis Yi Tenen. *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2024.

Other readings will be provided through the course website.

Schedule

See the file located at `schedule.md` for the most up-to-date list of assignments.

Grading

- 1/6 Attendance and participation
- 1/6 Reading quizzes
- 1/3 Labs
- 1/3 Final project

This class will use the following grading scale, after applying the above weights:

- $\geq 90\%$: A
- 80–89%: B
- 70–79%: C
- 60–69%: D
- $< 60\%$: F

Plusses and minuses will be appended to letter grades at the instructor's discretion.

1/6 Attendance and participation

As we only meet once a week, missing even one class could leave you far behind. Although much of the material will be posted online, class time will be used to troubleshoot, debug, and debrief (read: “vent about how hard programming is”).

Obviously emergencies happen, and everyone is allowed one (1) unexcused absence. Further unexcused absences will result in a deduction of half a letter grade *from your final grade*.

Excused absences are easy to obtain: please just give me as much notice as possible. (I try to keep track of religious holidays, but a heads-up is always appreciated.)

1/6 Reading quizzes

Starting in Week 2, we will have a reading quiz approximately every other class. These quizzes are not meant to be punitive. Rather, think of them as 10 minutes or so to reflect, as cogently as you can, on specific aspects of the reading.

At the end of the semester, I will drop the lowest one (for graduate students) or two (for undergraduates) reading quiz scores when calculating your average for the term.

1/3 Labs and midterm projects

We will start a lab in class approximately every other week; the lab will be due at 11:59 p.m. following the next class.

Each lab will also ask you to write a short but detailed reflection on your process and what you have learned. These short essays are meant to help you as you decide on your midterm and final projects.

Think of the labs as the final project in miniature. These are opportunities for you to experiment with a methodology or take the next logical steps with a lab. If one works, take the project even further for the final; if it doesn't, the final project gives you a mulligan. **Null results are valid here.**

1/3 Final project

The final project is a chance for you to demonstrate your mastery over some aspect of digital humanities that we have covered during the semester. Start thinking early about what experiments you might want to run or what tools/resources you might want to build for your final project, and feel free to send me an email or come to office hours as soon as you have ideas.

Statement on AI

(Adapted from “Artificial Intelligence” by the Tufts’ Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching)

In this class, we will adhere to the following guidelines regarding the use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI):

1. **NEVER** submit AI-generated work as your own. To do so is considered a violation of Tufts’ [Academic Integrity Policy] (<https://students.tufts.edu/community-standards/academic-integrity/academic-integrity-overview>).
2. Familiarize yourself with the limitations of GAI tools. These tools all come with inherent biases, and they all make mistakes. Be aware that no matter how “confident” the AI seems, it does not actually “know” anything.
3. Cite all uses of AI. See suggestions from the Chicago Manual of Style and the MLA.
4. In addition to citation, please identify *how* the GAI contributed to your work. (Your explanation need not be more than a sentence or two.)
5. If have any questions, please contact me by email, during office hours, or in class.

Policies

Attendance

Emergencies arise. Everyone is permitted one unexcused absence. If you will need to miss additional classes, please let me know as soon as possible.

Each subsequent unexcused absence will result in a deduction of half a letter grade from your final grade (i.e., an A will become an A-, an A- will become a B+, etc.).

You are responsible for catching up on any work that you have missed, either by coming to office hours or working with a classmate. As a rule, I will not share lecture notes outside of what is already available on the course website.

Heads-up about Thanksgiving We will be having class on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. As a once-weekly class, each session is too important to miss. Please make your travel plans accordingly.

Food and drink

Please eat only during breaks. (We'll have one about halfway through each class.)

Otherwise, please stay hydrated.

Sharing

This course is designed for everyone to feel comfortable participating in discussion, asking questions, learning, and facilitating the learning of others. In order for that atmosphere to be maintained, the recordings of our conversations will only be shared with the enrolled students in the class (not posted publicly) and it is prohibited for any of us who have access to the video to share it outside the course. Similarly, I have specifically designed the exams, handouts, and lectures for the people who are enrolled in the course this term and those may not be shared outside this course. All of this content is freely available on GitHub under a Creative Commons license — attribution is all that is required.

Resources

Religious accommodations

Tufts University faculty, staff, and administration highly value and acknowledge the religious diversity of its student body. Students seeking religious accommodations related to their holy days are encouraged to collaborate with faculty to make arrangements during the first week of each semester. Consult the Multifaith Calendar for upcoming holidays, links to the University Religious Accommodations Policy, and members of the University Chaplaincy who are available to respond to questions on religious observances.

Accommodations for students with disabilities

Tufts is committed to providing equal access and support to all qualified students through the provision of reasonable accommodations. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations, contact the StAAR Center at StaarCenter@tufts.edu or 617-627-4539. Please be aware that accommodations cannot be enacted retroactively, making timeliness a critical aspect for their provision.

Academic support at the StAAR Center

The StAAR Center offers a variety of FREE resources to all students. Students may make an appointment to work on any writing-related project or assignment, attend subject tutoring in a variety of disciplines, or meet with an academic coach to hone skills like time management and navigating procrastination. Students can make an appointment for any of these services by visiting <https://students.tufts.edu/staar-center>.

Student support, including mental health

As a student, there may be times when personal stressors or difficulties interfere with your academic performance or well-being. The Dean of Student Affairs Office offers support and care to undergraduates and graduate students who are experiencing difficulties, and can also aid faculty in their work with students. In addition, through Tufts' Counseling and Mental Health Service (CMHS) students can access mental health support 24/7, and they can provide information on additional resources. CMHS also provides confidential consultation, brief counseling, and urgent care at no cost for all Tufts undergraduates as well as for graduate students who have paid the student health fee. To make an appointment, call 617-627-3360. Please visit the CMHS website: <http://go.tufts.edu/Counseling> to learn more about their services and resources.