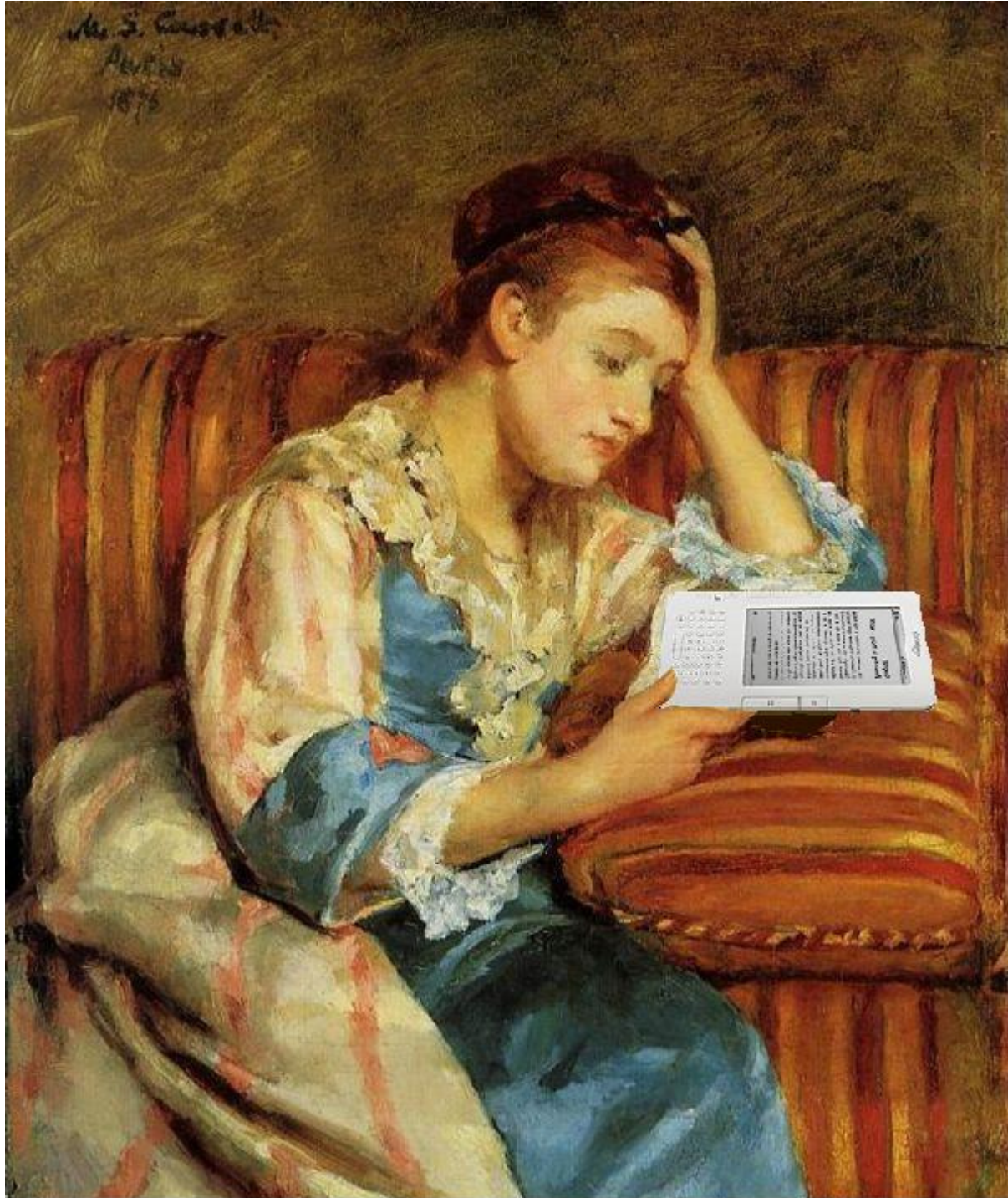# Reading and Writing in the Digital Age

ENGL 1450: A first-year course at Northeastern University

"Mrs. Duffee Seated on a Striped Sofa, Reading Her Kindle, After Mary Cassatt" by Mike Licht

Course Description

This seminar explores how we tell stories and make arguments in the age of the internet and "big data." We will investigate literary works from a variety of eras and genres—including fiction, poetry, film, and video games—to see how writers and readers have grappled with the implications of new reading and informational technologies throughout history. We will also study the ways writers have produced new kinds of writing in response to such changes. We will analyze historical interplays among technology, new media, culture, and literature in order to better understand the social and literary upheavals of our own technological moment. Students will develop skills for making sense of textual data, as well as for writing *about data* and writing *with data* through a variety of media. Students will weave together code and prose in multimodal, online publications; analyze texts using computational tools; and develop projects, such as literary "bots," that explore the boundaries between digital technology and creative expression.

Note: "Reading and Writing in the Digital Age" presumes no prior experience with computational methods and thus is well suited for students interested a "hands-on" introduction to the medium that underlies much of early-twenty-first-century life. The class offers all students an opportunity to develop their abilities analyzing, interpreting, and creating texts in a range of media through a blending of traditional and computational methods.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you will:

1. Understand many of the ways that literature helps society grapple with the meaning and implications of new technologies;
2. Expand your skills of critical reading and interpretation, with a particular eye to navigating and filtering information available online;
3. Improve your writing skills in a range of media;
4. Create, analyze, and employ data in support of your ideas;
5. Compare typical genres of literature with new forms of interactive media and videogames;
6. and Reflect on your own relationship to IRL and online aspects of life in the digital age.

Assignments

Grading Overview

- In-class Work: 15%
- A Domain of Your Own: 5%
- Blogging: 25%
- Writing Assignments: 55%
  - No Digital Day: 10%
  - Essay: 10%
  - Wiki: 10%
  - Dear (My) Data: 10%
  - Unessay: 15%

In-class Work (15%)

Assignment Overview

- Includes written reflections, quizzes, and/or group work
- Students will sometimes work individually and sometimes with classmates
- Due during most class periods

The Nitty Gritty

This course relies on active, engaged participation in class activities and discussions. There will be few lectures. You should come to every class having read all of the required texts (or watched the required videos, played the required games, &c.) and prepared to discuss them with your colleagues. I plan to assess your reading and course engagement through writing exercises, reading quizzes, and group work. Assuming you all seem to be reading with engagement, I will usually ask for in-class writing or group exercises, but I reserve the right to quiz if reading seems to be slipping.

In-class writing

You should be prepared to write in any class session and have appropriate materials (e.g. paper, a table, a laptop) available to you. Not all in-class writing will be collected, but when it is such work will be graded on a five-point scale. I do not expect your responses to in-class writing exercises to reflect the same polish as papers. I do expect your writing exercises to reflect real thought about our course topics and readings. Entries will receive full credit if:

- They refer to specific aspects of our assigned reading. The more specific you can be, the better. For instance, if you can quote or paraphrase from a course text to illustrate the point you hope to make, you should do so.
- They draw connections between the day's assigned reading and the broader themes of the course, recent topics of class discussion, or your personal research.

- They demonstrate depth of thought about the topics on hand.

- Writing that demonstrates a firm command of the day's reading through summarizing its ideas will receive a 4/5 while writing that *connects ideas across readings* and *ventures creative (or even risky) interpretations* will receive 5/5. Lower marks are reserved for writing that does not demonstrate familiarity with the day's readings, fails to address the prompt, and/or lacks clarity.

Individual and Group Work

In addition to discussion of course texts, our classes will frequently ask you to complete small projects and exercises that will help you apply course concepts, learn new software, and/or contextualize course materials. For group exercises, I will ask each group member to assume a specific task related to the project; I expect each group member to contribute in significant ways to their team's effort. The outcome of group work will be various and thus will be assessed in diverse ways.

Reading quizzes

I would prefer not to resort to reading quizzes, which test basic comprehension rather than synthesis and analysis. However, if it becomes clear that significant portions of the class are not completing the readings (which will be obvious by the resultant lulls in conversation) then I will turn to quizzes to motivate closer attention to the readings. Reading quizzes are intended to reward careful reading, not to test your recall of obscure facts from our texts. If you read the assigned texts attentively—*if you read the assigned texts attentively*—you should do well on the quizzes. Each quiz will have six questions; if you correctly answer five of them you will receive full credit, while all six garners extra credit.

"Internet" by The-Samizdat

A Domain of Your Own (5%)

Assignment Overview

- Requires students to secure a domain and server space, install web software, and customize their sites
- Students will work individually, though they can help each other if they encounter rough patches
- Due in two stages: steps 1-5 by Friday, September 15 and steps 6-8 by Friday, September 28
- Must be completed in order to finish many other assignments, particularly the blog

This assignment was adapted (barely) from the sterling model developed by Brian Croxall.

Rationale

So: the internet. It's kind of a thing, and it doesn't appear to be going away. It is the new media of our historical moment. There are many things that are important about the internet, but most importantly for our class: the internet is a space where writing happens. A ton of it, actually. For at least this one very important reason, learning how to make use of the internet is important for students working in humanities fields, especially in the context of a writing-intensive class. You of course know how to use the internet for finding information, but you will now get some experience creating information: about yourself and your investigation of technology, literature, and new media. I have four primary goals in asking you to build your own website:

1. Becoming facile with web publication (including managing a domain, deploying content management systems, and using HTML and CSS) is a good first step toward gaining skills you could use in your college career, co-ops, and beyond.
2. Having your own website provides you a platform to begin doing and sharing that work with others in the academic and professional communities.
3. Having your own website will enable you to complete [your blogging assignment for this class while beginning while building a portfolio of work for use after and outside this class.
4. Finally, I believe it's important to have a voice on the web that's *yours*, not your content you contribute freely to a commercial platform (though those platforms have their place). By the end of the semester you may agree with me about this or disagree, but I would like you to experiment with having a domain of your own, at least for a little while.

The Nitty Gritty

1. Purchase a domain from www.reclaimhosting.com and **send me an email letting me know your domain name**. You are not required to use your own name in the domain; there are certainly arguments to be made for anonymity. If you think you might turn this domain into a professional site in the future, however, consider domain names that will convey the right image. *Note: if you already use another host, or if you prefer to start using another one for this assignment, let me know. I won't require you to use Reclaim Hosting to complete this assignment successfully. I strongly recommend Reclaim because they grew from the Domain of One's Own iniative from the University of Mary Washington, they support academic users phenomenally, they offer the cheapest hosting and domain service I know for students, and their customer support is phenomenal.*
2. Install WordPress on your domain.
3. Choose a new theme to install on your site and activate it.
4. Install Akismet as a plugin. Get an API key and activate it.
5. Post first blog entry for the blogging assignment **by Friday, September 15 at 5pm**. Email me your domain, the name of the theme you installed, and, a screenshot of Akismet active on your site by this deadline.
6. Create an "About" page. On that page write a brief paragraph or two about yourself that includes the following information: a brief paragraph about yourself. You might discuss what you're studying

(generally) in school and what your educational or career goals are, or you might choose to describe some other aspect of yourself. You do not have to name yourself here, either—personae are allowed.

7. Create one other static page about *something*. It could be where you post an assignment you do for class. It could be about a hobby.
8. Find one thing that you wish your website could do. Find a plugin to do it. Install that plugin **by Friday, September 28**. Email me with links to your two pages and the name of the plugin you installed.

An Alternative

Maybe you've built a website before. Maybe Wordpress is old hat for you. There are lots of other ways to build a website. Recently flat HTML platforms like Jekyll have been getting lots of buzz: they load quick and don't have all the overhead of a database-driven platform like Wordpress. Once the system is set up they're remarkably easy to use, but the setup is more complicated than WP. If you'd like to challenge yourself in this assignment, consider building a Jekyll site, perhaps hosted through Github. If you'd like to go this route, come chat with me and we'll lay out the options and necessities.

"Blogging" by Daryl Lau

Blogging (25%)

Assignment Overview

- Students will work throughout the semester developing ideas in writing
- 10 weekly posts are due through the semester, each week's by Friday at 5pm

Rationale

Throughout the term, we will engage with the ideas of the course through public writing on your blogs, which I will aggregate on this course blog. I ask you to blog for a number of reasons:

- All writing—even academic writing—is being reshaped by online modes of publication. Many academics maintain personal research blogs in which they try out their ideas and get feedback before developing articles or even books. Outside of academia, public, online writing plays an increasing and essential role in many fields. I believe its essential for modern college students to develop skill crafting an online writing persona and I want to foster that development.
- In a related point, blogs give you the opportunity to experiment with your writing, composing arguments that integrate links, quotations, images, video, and other online media as evidence.
- Blogging allows for a broader spectrum of participation in the class. Even shy students can contribute to a course blog.
- Blog posts give you the chance to learn from each other. You'll read your colleague's writing and, hopefully, learn from it or be challenged by it.
- Public blogging allows us to connect to larger communities outside of our classroom. Who knows? Perhaps the author of an article you blog about will respond directly. . .

You should not treat blog posts like a secondary assignment. Indeed, I consider your blog post the central assignment of the semester. Instead, *think of your blog posts as an evolving research paper.* They have the same importance and weight and seriousness.

The Nitty-Gritty

Each post must begin from our course readings and demonstrate your further engagement with those readings. In general, then, your blog posts should:

1. There are approximately 14 weeks in our semester and *you are responsible for writing 10 blog posts.* You may not submit (for credit) more than one blog post per week, though you're free to write more if you wish. I cannot emphasis more strongly that **you should not wait to start writing posts**. Let me repeat that: **do not wait until week 3 or 4 to begin writing your blog assignments**. I assign 10 posts to give you some flexibility during the semester. It is up to you to make that flexibility a boon rather than a bane.
2. Blog posts for a given week are due by Friday at 5pm. Anything submitted later than this will count toward the next week, and I do not give credit for more than one post submitted per week.
3. Each post must be 300-500 words long. This gives you enough space to make some keen observations or ask some pressing questions, but not enough space to write a full paper. Your blog posts should be concise. The point is not to write everything you might in one week, but instead to develop a set of ideas and questions over the course of many weeks.
4. Each post must *refer specifically to class reading*, often through *direct quotation.* Your posts should continue and further develop conversations that began in class, demonstrating your evolving understanding of our class themes. I strongly encourage you to read, cite, and link to each other's posts.
5. I highly value posts that link our class to the wider world. I encourage you to use your blog posts to bring outside texts into conversation with our class: an article you found interesting or relevant, say, or something you uncovered while doing research.

Commenting on Posts

I cannot comment on every blog post, though I will occasionally interject when something in a post catches our attention. You should interpret such a comment as engagement, not (necessarily) sanction. Conversely, you should not interpret lack of comment as criticism.

Grading Blog Posts

Each week I will review and grade blog posts according to the following rubric, adapted by Creative Commons license (CC BY 3.0) from Mark Sample.

Exceptional.	Satisfactory.	Underdeveloped.	Limited.	No Credit.
The blog post is focused and coherently integrates examples with explanations or analysis. The entry demonstrates awareness of its own limitations or implications, and it considers multiple perspectives when appropriate. The entry reflects in-depth...	The blog post is reasonably focused, and explanations or analysis are mostly based on examples or other evidence. Fewer connections are made between ideas, and though new insights are offered, they are not fully developed. The entry reflects moderate...	The blog post is mostly description or summary, without consideration of alternative perspectives, and few connections are made between ideas. The entry reflects passing engagement with the topic.	The blog post is unfocused, or simply rehashes previous comments, and displays no evidence of student engagement with the topic.	The blog post is missing or consists of one or two disconnected sentences.

| Exceptional. | Satisfactory. | Underdeveloped. | Limited. | No Credit. |

Writing Assignments (65% total)

No Digital Day (10%)

"Amish Buggy" by Ted Van Pelt

Assignment Overview

- A short, personal reflection of 3-4 pages
- Students work individually
- Substantial planning required (see below)
- Due anytime between semester's beginning and Monday, November 13
- Must start planning ASAP!

This assignment is lightly adapted from Prof. Amanda Gailey's "No Digital Day" assignment for her "Being Human in a Digital Age" course at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln.

Rationale

Human beings have interacted with illuminated screens for a portion of the species' existence that is so small it's hard to calculate as a percentage. If humans have existed for 200,000 years, we've used screens for about 0.05% of that time. A stricter definition of "human," requiring symbolic thought, etc., would make the species 50,000 years old, in which case screens have been familiar for about 0.2% of our existence. Should we feel so cognitively dependent on them now? What does your brain do without the distraction and convenience of the screen?

Sometime between the beginning of the semester and Wednesday, November 8, you will pick a single 24-hour period—which must include an entire waking day—in which you will dramatically reduce your use of screen-based technology and interactive media, according to guidelines below. This activity is meant to encourage you to think about a few things:

- How cognitively dependent are you on screen technologies?
- How frequently are you tempted to distract yourself with various digital technologies? What triggers prompt you to want to distract yourself? Without familiar devices, what do you do instead? What do you think about or do with your hands?
- How much do these technologies aid you in your schoolwork?
- How do you communicate differently with people when these technologies are not available to you?
- What do you do for entertainment?

The Nitty-Gritty

Each student may choose from the following "No Digital" scenarios, depending on how austere you want to be. Since you're doing this anyway, I recommend you go big.

To Prepare

1. Think ahead when picking your 24-hour period. If you need to get syllabi or assignments off the web, do it ahead of time. If our class falls during your 24-hour period, make sure to print out any readings or other required online materials before the day begins.
2. Consider writing a vacation response for your email and changing your voicemail so that you won't worry that people are wondering why you haven't written or called back.
3. If there are people in your life who will worry about you if they don't hear from you, let them know what you're doing ahead of time.
4. Get a watch (or at least scope out working clocks in your environment). Phones in 1992 did not have clocks in them.
5. Be aware of how to reach people by phone. You'll need a phone book or you'll need to write numbers down ahead of time.

On the Day

1. Carry a notebook and pen with you. Whenever you feel tempted to check your email or social media, make a check mark in the book.
2. Take notes on your thought process. What triggers you to seek distraction? What do you do instead?
3. Take notes on other aspects of the day. In what ways were you inconvenienced? Did this assignment alter the way you interact with people you care about?

By November 13

Write a 3-4 page reflection about your No Digital Day. What did you learn about yourself? Would you do this again or for a longer period of time? In a final act of irony, post the reflection to your blog.

Option A: 1992

Just before the web became widely available. You probably would have had a phone at home, cable TV, and a word processor. If you choose this option, the following are not allowed:

- Texting
- Web browsing
- Any use of your phone as something besides a phone—that is, you can dial a number and talk to someone, but that's it. Realistically, you wouldn't have carried a phone around with you, but you can do that as long as you only use it as a phone.
- GPS
- Streaming video
- Streaming music, MP3s, etc.
- Online video games, even through a console

Option B: 1922

Before most screen-based and communication technologies we use today were developed or in wide use. If you choose this option, the following are not allowed:

- Any use of phones whatsoever, except for true emergencies (death, injury, natural disaster)
- Any use of any web-based technology
- Any use of any screen-based devices, television included

A Note on Honesty

Your job is to remain true to the spirit of this assignment. You aren't expected to dress like a turn-of-the-century dandy or avoid refrigerators—the point is to eliminate the kinds of recent technological advances that arguably lead to cognitive dependence and an alteration of your thinking. Similarly, there are many ways you could violate the spirit of the assignment, such as having a friend look up information for you. I trust you to use your judgment about what violates the spirit of the assignment.

This assignment also depends on the honor system. I'm not interested in policing you to make sure you really did this. It's an exercise in self-awareness and you're really cheating yourself by cheating on the assignment. If you can't go 24 hours without a few modern conveniences, is it time to admit your cognitive dependence?

Essay (10%)
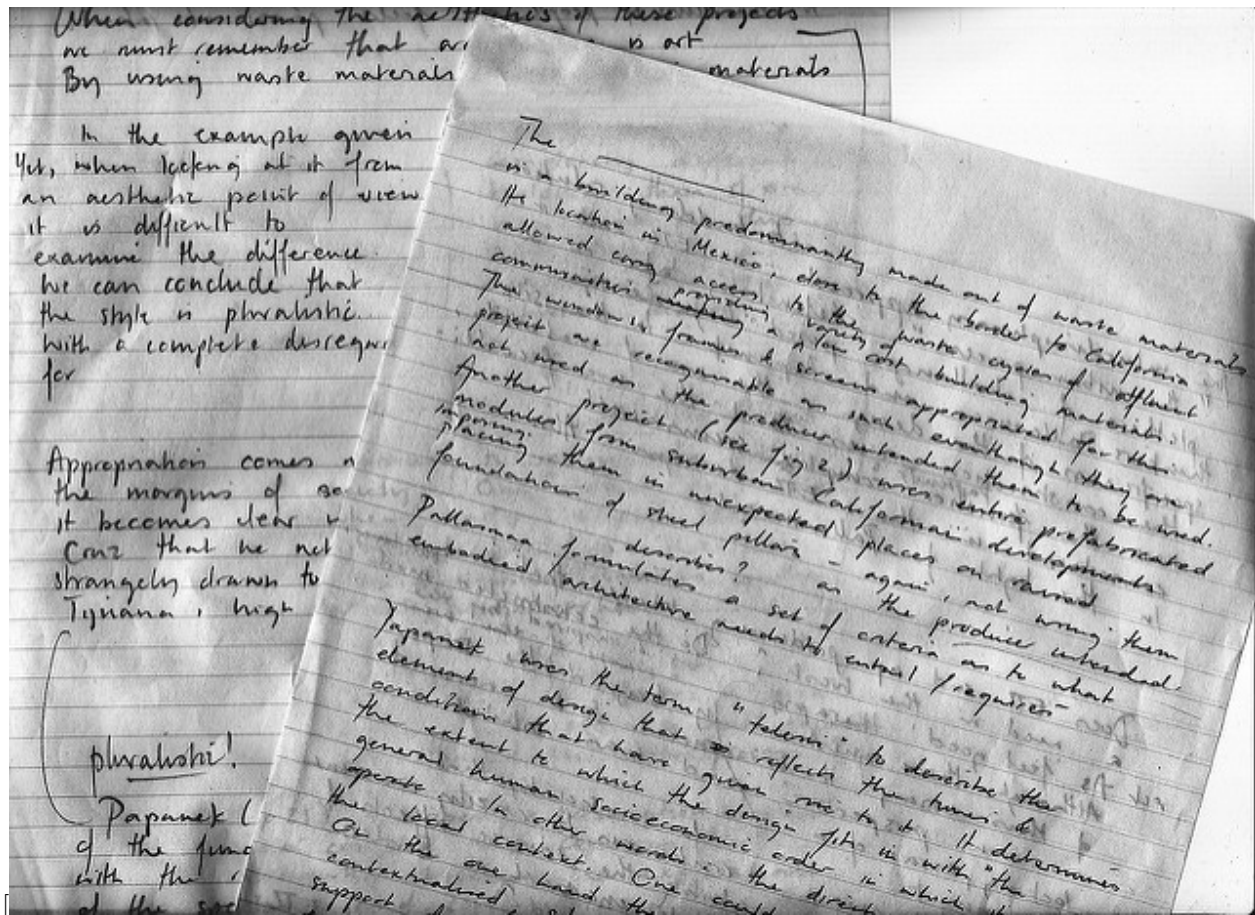
"Essay" by Pleuntje

Assignment Overview

- An academic paper of 5-6 typed pages
- Students will work individually
- Drafts due for worshop Wednesday, September 20
- Essay due Friday, September 22 by 5pm
- Revisions will be encouraged

The Nitty-Gritty

We will begin the semester's writing assignments with a typical academic essay of 5-6 pages. In the first weeks of class we will discuss the expectations for this paper, brainstorm essay topics, and outline the elements of effective academic argument. You should expect to:

1. Make a specific, debatable claim;
2. Defend that claim with reasons and evidence drawn from external sources;
3. Acknowledge contrasting points of view and respond to them.

You may use whatever citation system you wish (MLA, APA, Chicago) but you must cite your sources and do so consistently.

We will workshop these papers together in class on Thursday, September 21st. Your essays will be due to me by Tuesday, September 26th, and you will have a chance to revise for a better grade after I review your essays.

What to Write About

You will develop your own essay topics, though they should be related to our theme in the first weeks of class: digital and analog modes of reading. From that broad mandate, however, you should choose a specific aspect of contemporary reading that you find interesting and coduct additional research into it. You might choose to write a literary analysis of 1-2 of the short stories we've read in class, for instance, or to take a side on a "real world" debate. Ideally, your paper will extend our class discussion into territory we did not cover in class itself.

Either way, your essay should not be descriptive, but instead critical. Your central claim (or thesis) must be debatable, meaning a reasonable person could in fact disagree with it. You will conduct research and defend your claim with evidence drawn from *at least four distinct sources*, three of which much come from your own research rather than materials we read as a class.

If you are struggling to come up with a topic or craft an argument, please come see me during office hours to discuss. Also, schedule an appointment with the writing center, where they are happy to help with writing at any stage in the process.

We're All Wikipedians Now

[

"Wikipedia" by cea +

Assignment Overview

- A new Wikipedia article or substantial improvements to an existing article
- Students can work individually or collaboratively
- Ideas well developed in advance of workshop October 18-19
- Articles due Friday, October 27
- Revisions possible

The Nitty-Gritty

TBA

Dear (My) Data (10%)

Assignment Overview

- An online composition that incorporates data-driven evidence
- Students will work individually
- Ideas will begin in a workshop Monday, November 6
- Drafts due
- Revisions expected

Unessay (15%)

"Buckle Up (Altered Book 2011)" by robfos

Assignment Overview

- Form can vary *widely!!*
- Students generally work individually, though I am open to collaborative proposals.
- Drafts due for workshop on Monday, December 4
- Unessay due Friday, December 8 by 5pm

The Nitty-Gritty

As your final assignment this semester you will develop an unessay project.

1. I *highly prize* creative takes on this assignment. Before jumping into typical paper writing mode, consider other media, presentation styles, and modes of critical engagement you might employ instead.
2. This is a hands-on course about media and technology: I would be thrilled to see unessays that do rather than simply describe. Consider using your unessay assignment to get your hands dirty (perhaps literally) with one of the mediums we discuss in class.
3. Take advantage of my advice and help as you develop your unessay ideas. That's what I'm here for!

You may complete your unessays on your own schedule, but they must be turned in by the listed due dates. I would strongly advise you not to put the assignment off. To motivate you to work earlier, we will schedule workshops in advance of each deadline, and I am happy to offer feedback on drafts submitted at least one week in advance of a given deadline.

I will also show you some stellar examples of unessays in the weeks leading up to the first deadline, and would be happy to show you others during office hours. I have a growing collection of stunning student unessay work that I love revisiting.

Assignment Background

Thanks to Daniel Paul O'Donnell for this brilliant assignment, which I've only slightly modified for our class. For more on the research behind the Unessay assignment, see the work of Emma Dering and Matthew Galea.

The essay is a wonderful and flexible tool for engaging with a topic intellectually. It is a very free format that can be turned to discuss any topic—works of literature, of course, but also autobiography, science, entertainment, history, and government, politics, and so on. There is often something provisional about the essay (its name comes from French essai, meaning a trial), and almost always something personal.

Unfortunately, however, as Wikipedia notes,

> In some countries (e.g., the United States and Canada), essays have become a major part of formal education. Secondary students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills, and admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applicants and, in the humanities and social sciences, as a way of assessing the performance of students during final exams.

One result of this is that the essay form, which should be extremely free and flexible, is instead often presented as a static and rule-bound monster that students must master in order not to lose marks (for a vigorous defence of the flexible essay, see software developer Paul Graham's blog). Far from an opportunity to explore intellectual passions and interests in a personal style, the essay is transformed into a formulaic method for discussing set topics in five paragraphs: the compulsory figures of academia.

Enter the Unessay

By contrast, the unessay is an assignment that attempts to undo the damage done by this approach to teaching writing. It works by throwing out all the rules you have learned about essay writing in the course of your primary, secondary, and post secondary education and asks you to focus instead solely on your intellectual interests and passions. In an unessay you choose your own topic, present it any way you please, and are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are. Here are the guidelines:

1. You choose your own topic.

The unessay allows you to write about anything you want provided you are able to associate your topic with the subject matter of the course and unit we are working on. You can take any approach; you can use as few or as many resources as you wish; you can even cite the Wikipedia. The only requirements are that your treatment of the topic be *compelling*: that is to say presented in a way that leaves the reader thinking that you are being accurate, interesting, and as complete and/or convincing as your subject allows.

2. You can present it any way you please.

There are also no formal requirements. Your unessay can be written in five paragraphs or twenty-six. If you decide you need to cite something, you can do that anyway you want. If you want to use lists, use lists. If you want to write in the first person, write in the first person. If you prefer to present the whole thing as a video, present it as a video. Use slang. Or don't. Write in sentence fragments if you think that would be effective. In other words, in an unessay you have complete freedom of form: you can use whatever style of writing, presentation, citation, or media you want. What is important is that the format and presentation you do use helps rather than hinders your explanation of the topic.

Perhaps most importantly, the unessay allows you to use media deliberately and thoughtfully. You can create a digital unessay, or you can create an analog project—in fact, many of the most compelling unessays I've seen have been entirely analog.

3. You are evaluated on how compelling and effective you are.

If unessays can be about anything and there are no restrictions on format and presentation, how are they graded? The main criteria is how well it all fits together. That is to say, how *compelling* and *effective* your work is.

An unessay is compelling when it shows some combination of the following:

- it is as interesting as its topic and approach allows
- it is as complete as its topic and approach allows (it doesn't leave the audience thinking that important points are being skipped over or ignored)
- it is truthful (any questions, evidence, conclusions, or arguments you raise are honestly and accurately presented)

In terms of presentation, an unessay is effective when it shows some combination of these attributes:

- it is readable/watchable/listenable (i.e. the production values are appropriately high and the audience is not distracted by avoidable lapses in presentation)
- it is appropriate (i.e. it uses a format and medium that suits its topic and approach)
- it is attractive (i.e. it is presented in a way that leads the audience to trust the author and his or her arguments, examples, and conclusions).

Why Unessays Are Not a Waste of Your Time

The unessay may be quite different from what you are used to doing in English class. If so, a reasonable question might be whether I am wasting your time by assigning them. If you can write whatever you want and present it any way you wish, is this not going to be a lot easier to do than an actual essay? And is it not leaving you unprepared for subsequent instructors who want you to right the real kind of essays?

The answer to both these questions is no. Unessays are not going to be easier than "real" essays. There have fewer rules to remember and worry about violating (actually there are none). But unessays are more challenging in that you need to make your own decisions about what you are going to discuss and how you are going to discuss it.

And you are not going to be left unprepared for instructors who assign "real" essays. Questions like how to format your page or prepare a works-cited list are actually quite trivial and easily learned. You can look them up when you need to know them and, increasingly, can get your software to handle these things for you anyway. In our class, moreover, I will be giving you separate instruction on what English professors normally expect to see in the essays you submit to them.

But even more importantly, the things you will be doing in an unessay will help improve your "real" ones: excellent "real" essays also match form to topic and are about things you are interested in; if you learn how to write compelling and effective unessays, you'll find it a lot easier to do well in your "real" essays as well.

Model Unessays

I will bring some physical model unessays to class to discuss, or you can peruse them during office hours. Below are some fantastic digital unessays that students have submitted. These examples don't necessarily model the *content* of your assignments, as some were completed for classes covering very different topics, but hopefully they will give you a sense of what kinds of work you might complete.

- Operation Critique
- Beyond the Words: Text in Art
- Programming a Medium
- Know Code (music available on request)
- ESSAIS1580
- The Evolving Album Cover
- Ada on Ada: A Programmer's Manifesto
- The Best Story I Ever Wrote, Annotated

- Skeuomorphic
- Graffiti and New Media
- Which Text(s) Work(s)?

Course Policies and Expectations

Shadow Syllabus

Really, all I *want* to write here can be found in Sonya Huber's Shadow Syllabus. There is a lot of truth in this list for your college careers and beyond. Read it and believe it.


Required Texts

Most of the texts we will use in this class are freely available online, or in the course packet (I will give you the password for this zip file in class). There are just a few you'll need to buy (depending on what you choose as your second game in our final unit on "Play"). *Ready Player One* can be found at the Northeastern University Bookstore or purchased from any bookstore of your choosing, IRL or online. How you play *Portal* will depend a bit on whether you need to play on your computer, or if you have a console for gaming. It doesn't matter to me where you play it, but find the game as soon as possible. If you have trouble finding it, let me know and I'll help out.

Required:

- Ernest Kline, *Ready Player One*
- Valve, *Portal*, for Windows or OS X through Steam

Recommended:

- Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec, *Dear Data*
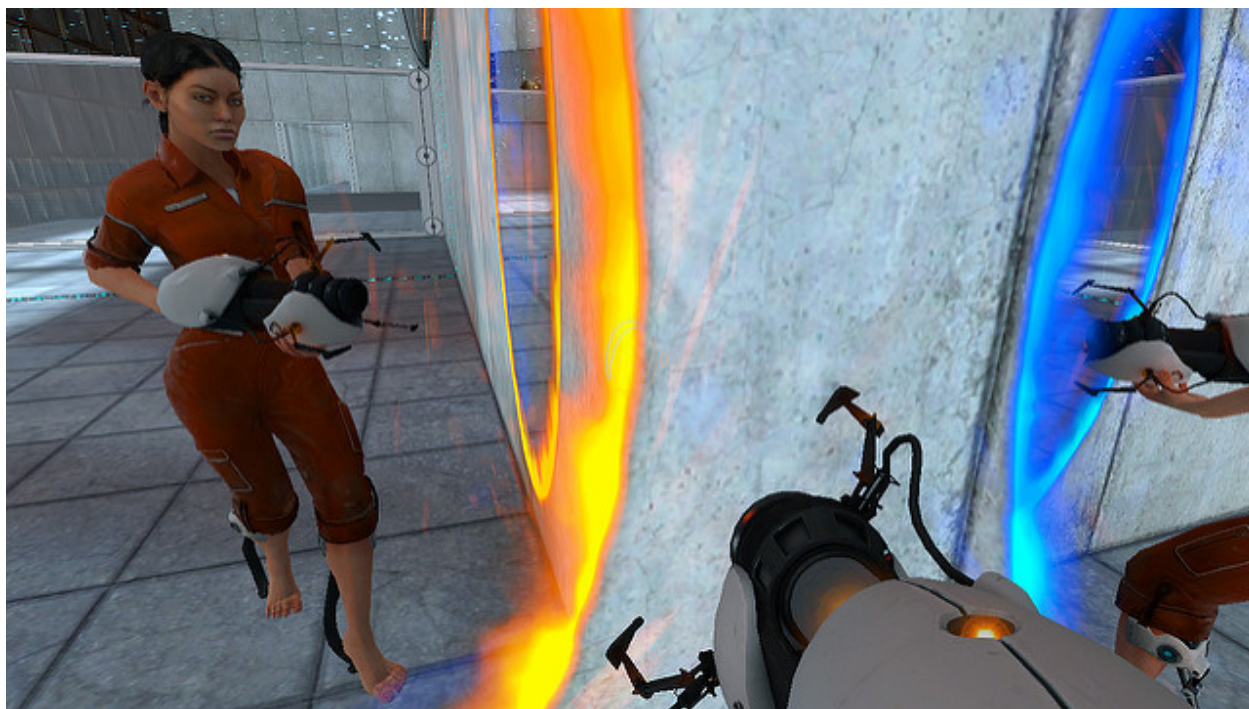
"Portal" by Sir Mildred Pierce

Communication

The best way to get in touch with me is to visit during my office hours. If you're unsure about our readings, struggling with an assignment, or just want to talk, please visit. During the Fall 2017 semester, I will be in my office (Nightingale 415) on Mondays from 3-4:30pm and Wednesdays from 11am-noon. I'm also happy to make appointments at other times—just email me with **at least three possible meeting times** for me to choose among. I can schedule in person or virtual meetings.

The next best way to get in touch with me is by sending me an email. When you write to me: consider your tone and your audience. An email to your professor shouldn't read the same as your emails to friends. For help, see this guide to emailing your professors. I will respond to an email within 48 hours. Often I will respond more quickly, but you should not send me an urgent email, for example, the night before an assignment is due. If for some reason I have not responded to your email within two days, please do follow up—my delay is likely inadvertent and I will welcome a reminder.

Participation

This course relies on active, engaged participation in class activities and discussions. There will be few lectures and we will not be building toward an exam. Instead, we will work together to build our facilities for thinking critically literature, new media, and technology. You should come to every class having read all of the required reading, watched the required videos, played the required games, and so forth. You should enter the classroom prepared to discuss these materials with colleagues and complete both individual and group in-class assignments.

I will not explicitly grade participation in this course (i.e. "participation = 20% of final grade"), but I will take account of your reading and course engagement through our in-class work, discussions, and related activities. In-class work will regularly be graded, while other contributions can influence that grade (see "Participation Bonus" below). There are many ways to participate in a college class. Just a few of the most valuable contributions are:

1. Raising ideas from our assigned materials for class discussion, including directing our attention to specific moments you found evocative, inspiring, infuriating, or otherwise salient;
2. Asking questions about materials or ideas you found puzzling or difficult (I cannot overstate how valuable good questions are to a thriving class, and how desperately I wish more students were courageous in asking them);
3. Sending pertinent materials discovered outside of class to the course email list, or bringing them to our attention during discussion;
4. Assisting classmates with lab assignments or other in-class work amenable to cooperation;
5. Visiting during office hours to extend course conversations around subjects or questions you find particularly interesting.

Maintaining an active class conversation requires that the class be present, both physically and mentally. To that end: you may miss two classes without penalty. "Attendance" does not simply mean that your body can be found in proximity to those of your classmates. You must also be mentally present, which means you must:

1. Be awake and attentive to the conversation of the day;
2. Prepare assigned texts before class begins;
3. Bring your assigned texts to class. If we're reading online articles, you should either bring a device on which to read them or print them and bring that hard copy. For some of our "texts" such as videogames this will be a bit harder to accomplish, but we will discuss what precisely to bring before those sessions;
4. *Bring your assigned texts to class!*
5. and, finally, **bring your assigned texts to class!!!** I mean it. Seriously. If you come to class without the day's reading on hand, I reserve the right to count you absent.

If you fail to meet these requirements, I will consider you mentally absent, though you may be physically present.

Please note: I make no distinction between excused and unexcused absences, so use your allotted absences wisely. You may not miss two classes early in the semester and then petition for additional excused absences afterward. When you must miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed and to make up any pertinent assignments. You may not make up quizzes or in-class work. If you take one of your excused absences, I simply will not grade any in-class work you missed. If you miss a lab due to an excused absence you should attempt to make up the work. Once beyond your allotted absences you will receive a zero for any in-class work or labs missed.

"Overload" by Sir Mildred Pierce

"Information Overload" Days

I do understand that the semester can get hectic. The reading load for this class is often challenging, and you must balance it with the work in your other classes. Most likely you will have days when you simply

cannot—for whatever reason—complete the assigned reading. To that end, you may take *two "information overload" (IO) day* during the semester. On these days you will not be expected to contribute to class discussion and you will receive a pass on any in-class work (the work will be ungraded and not factored into your final "In-Class Work" grade). In order to take an IO day, you must follow these rules:

1. You must attend class, listen attentively to any lectures or class discussions, and take part in any activities or group work not dependent on the day's reading. **Your IO days cannot be used as additional excused absences**.
2. You must inform me before the beginning of class that you are taking an IO day. You may not wait until I call on you or until you see day's the in-class assignment. **I will deny any IO requests made during class**. To that end: take special care to be on time if you plan to request an IO day, as you won't be allowed to request one if you arrive late.
3. You may not extend an IO day into another class session. If, for instance, you take an IO day during our first class on a novel, you will not then be excused from discussing the book during subsequent classes, unless you take your second IO day.
4. You may not take an IO day to avoid completing on a major assignment. IO days will excuse you from reading quizzes, group work, or reflections, but nothing of more serious import. If you are unsure whether an assignment is "major," the syllabus is a good guide. If a given assignment has it's own "assignment" page on the course website, it is a major assignment.

IO days are intended to help you manage the inevitable stresses of your individual semester. Use them wisely.

Attendance and Participation Bonus

At the end of the semester, for an allowed absence and/or IO day you did not use, I will drop your lowest in-class work grade. So if you attended all sessions prepared and did not require an IO day, I would drop your two lowest in-class work grades from my final grade calculations. I will also drop one low grade to acknowledge exceptional engagement and participation through the semester.

Digital Etiquette

In-class Devices

Some of this section and much of the rubric below were inspired by and adapted from this cell phone use rubric from Zombie Based Learning.

This should go without saying, but let's say it anyway: while in class, you should be focused on class. You may think that you are an excellent multi-tasker, but there is a growing body of evidence that argues multitasking is a myth: trying to do multiple things simultaneously means you do all those things worse than if you focused on them serially—the act of multitasking literally drains your brain's energy reserves In a discussion-focused class like this one, it's usually pretty easy to tell when a student is checking in and and out of class an other on-screen activities.

In your professional lives, people will have their phones and other devices with them at their jobs, in meetings, at conferences, and so on. Adults do not have their devices taken away from them. They are expected to manage their own use.

You may have your phone and/or laptop on hand during class, but if so you should use them only for accessing our readings, class resources, or for finding outside materials pertinent to our discussions and activities. You should not use them to follow a game, message your friends, check your friends' Tumblrs, commit (non course related) code to Github. Though it may seem unthinkable, your friends and family may actually survive three hours each week without direct updates as to your whereabouts and doings. They probably won't call

the police to report you missing. They will no doubt pine for your witty banter, but that longing will only make your 2:41pm updates all the sweeter each Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday this semester.

Periodically during the semester I may ask folks to put screens away. This means I want everyone—myself included—to focus attention on another aspect of class. In fact, it would be a very good idea to have a physical notebook available for classes when phones and laptops cannot be used.

Device Use Rubric

The rubric below outlines my expectations for device use in this classroom. We can discuss these expectations in our first days together and edit them if the class agrees on amendments. I will not be recording marks for device use in every class. Instead, I will assess your use periodically and include these measures in my assessment of your class contributions.

1. Unacceptable	2. Below Expectations	3. Meets Expectations	4. Exceeds Expectations
Use is *inappropriate.* Device is a distraction to others. **Examples**: A student uses their device to play games, view material unrelated to the course, OR hold social conversations.	Use is *distracting* to the student, their colleagues, and/or the instructor. Student frequently checks devices for information unrelated to the class. **Example**: A student takes out their phone to look at text messages several times in	Device is *not used* except during designed times, or device use is limited to quick checks during times of transition. **Example**: a student receives an important text from a parent, which they check quickly during our transition between group work and full-class discus-	Device *only used* as an efficient academic tool for a direct purpose. Device is not a distraction. but used at appropriate times as an extension of work or learning. **Examples**: A student uses their phone to do research during a research project, or uses their laptop to

1. Unacceptable	2. Below Expectations	3. Meets Expectations	4. Exceeds Expectations

"Glitch" by 622

Technical Snafus

This course will rely on access to computers, specific software, and the internet. **At some point during the semester you WILL have a problem with technology**: your laptop will crash, a file will become corrupted, a server will go down, a piece of software will not act as you expect it to, or something else will occur. These are facts of twenty-first-century life, not emergencies. To succeed in college and in your career you should develop work habits that take such snafus into account. Start assignments early and save often. Always keep a backup copy of your work saved somewhere secure (preferably off site). None of these unfortunate events should be considered emergencies: inkless printers, computer virus infections, lost flash drives, lost passwords, corrupted files, incompatible file formats. It is *entirely your responsibility* to take the proper steps to ensure your work will not be lost irretrievably; if one device or service isn't working, find another that does. When problems arise in the software I have assigned for you to learn, we will work through those problems together and learn thereby. However, I will not grant you an extension based on problems you may be having with the specific devices or the internet services you happen to use.

TRACE Evaluations

Students are expected to complete a TRACE (Teacher Rating and Course Evaluation) toward the end of the semester. I will set aside some time during a class period for students to complete their TRACEs.

Academic Integrity

In this class you will abide by Northeastern University's Academic Integrity Policy at all times:

> A commitment to the principles of academic integrity is essential to the mission of Northeatern University. The promotion of independent and original scholarship ensures that students derive the most from their educational experience and their pursuit of knowledge. Academic dishonesty violates the most fundamental values of an intellectual community and undermines the achievements of the entire University.

If you have any questions about what constitutes academic integrity in this class—particularly as the concept applies to digital course projects—please talk to me. We will also discuss the ethics of digital scholarship in class.

Writing Center

The Northeastern University Writing Center is located in 412 Holmes Hall and in Snell Library (for current hours call 617-373-4549 or see http://www.northeastern.edu/english/writing-center/) and offers free and friendly help for any level writer, including help with reading complex texts, conceptualizing a writing project, refining your writing process (i.e., planning, researching, organization, drafting, revising, and editing), and using sources effectively. You can receive feedback face-to-face during regular hours or via email/online response. I strongly recommend that you make appointments to go over drafts of your work—including your digital work—before turning it in. Questions about the Writing Center can be directed to neuwritingcenter@gmail.com.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

"Reading Book Study Student," by ThoroughlyReviewed

Note: this will be an unusually busy travel semester for me. I've tried to indicate on the schedule when I will be traveling. Not all of these trips will affect class itself. I've tried to minimize cancellations and develop alternative activities for those days I cannot avoid missing. However, traveling might affect my responsiveness to email and so forth. I will strive to answer emails in a timely fashion, but if you do write while I am away from town please allow an extra half day or so before worrying about a lack of response.

Most of the texts we will use in this class are freely available online, or in the course packet (I will give you the password for this zip file in class). See the the policies page for the few texts that must be purchased.

Wednesday, September 6: Introductions

Introduction to the class and to each other

Keyword 1: Reading

Thursday, September 7: Novelties

Read:

- Leah Price, "You Are What You Read"
- 19th-Century Commentaries on Novel Reading:
    1. "On Novel Reading", *The Guardian; or Youth's Religious Instructor* (1820)
    2. "The Reading of Young Ladies", *American Magazine of Useful Knowledge* (1836)
    3. "Devouring Books", *The American Annals of Education* (1835)

Monday, September 11: Paper or Plastic?

Read:

- Ferris Jabr, "The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens"
- Maria Sachiko Cecire, "Massively Open"

Wednesday, September 13: Past Futures

Read:

- Octave Uzanne, "The End of Books" (1894)

Prof. Cordell traveling September 14-16; regular classes

Thursday, September 14: Reading Machines

- Craig Mod, "Future Reading"
- Paul La Farge, "The Deep Space of Digital Reading"

Friday, September 15: First Blog Post on Your Domains DUE!

Monday, September 18: 17776

Read:

- Jon Bois, "What Football Will Look Like in the Future"

Wednesday, September 20: Essay Workshop

Prof. Cordell traveling September 21-24; regular classes

Thursday, September 21: The Library that is the Universe

- Jorge Louis Borges, "The Library of Babel"

Friday, September 22: Essay DUE

Interlude: *Ready Player One*

Monday, September 25: RPO I

Read:

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*, 0000 and Level One

Keyword 2: Writing

Wednesday, September 27: Writing as Technology

Read:

- Ted Chiang, "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling"

Thursday, September 28: Writing as Programming as Writing

Read:

- Stephen Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell, "Untitled Number 4: A Brechto-Socratic Dialogue"

Monday, October 2: Programmatic Writing I

Watch:

- Jetson et al, *Sunspring*

Browse (choose at least 1 you'd like to discuss in class and get to know it):

- Helen J. Burgess, "Love Notes and Intimate Circuits"
- Electronic Literature Collection: Bots
- Any of the bots mentioned in this *New Yorker* article (there's some overlap from above)
- Amaranth Borsuk, Jesper Juul, and Nick Montfort, "The Deletionist"
- Computational Poems by Nick Montfort:
- "The Purpling"
- "Shivers"
- "Modern Perverbs"

Wednesday, October 4: Programmatic Writing II

Read:

- Samuel Woolley, Danah Boyd, Meredith Broussard, Made, "How to Think About Bots"

Browse:

- Resistbot
- @burnedyourtweet
- @congressedits
- @Every3Minutes
- @NSA_PRISMbot
- @NRA_Tally
- @FBIbot

Thursday, October 5: Internet Famous

Read:

- Abby Rabinowitz, "The Meme as Meme"
- Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery" (make sure to read each of the sections in the table of contents at the top)

Monday, October 9: Holiday—No Class

Wednesday, October 11: It's Pronounced 'Gif'

Read:

- Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF"
- Lauren M. Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in GIFs"

Prof. Cordell traveling October 12-14; early dismissal on Oct. 12

Thursday, October 12: Wikiworld

Read:

- Joseph Reagle, "Nazis and Norms", "The Pursuit of the Universal Encyclopedia", and "Encyclopedic Anxiety"
- Gender Bias on Wikipedia

Monday, October 16: Fake News

Listen:

- 99% Invisible, "The Age of the Algorithm"

Read:

- Robert Darnton, "The True History of Fake News"

- Tom Standage, "The True History of Fake News"

Prof. Cordell traveling Oct. 17-21; virtual classes on Oct. 18 & 19

Wednesday, October 18: Wiki assignment workshop

Thursday, October 19: Wiki assignment workshop

Keyword 3: Data

Monday, October 23: That's So Meta

Read:

- Alexis C. Madrigal, "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood"

Wednesday, October 25: Don't Be Evil

Read:

- Naomi Kritzer, "Cat Pictures Please"

Prof. Cordell traveling Oct. 26-29; regular classes

Thursday, October 26: Quantified Selves

Read:

- Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec, from *Dear Data* (find 3 posts you find compelling and bring them with you to class prepared to talk about why)
- Gary Wolf, "The Data-Driven Life"

Friday, October 27: Wiki assignment DUE

Monday, October 30: Data Afterlives

Watch:

- Owen Harris, "Be Right Back" episode of *Black Mirror*

Wednesday, November 1: Data Transcendent

Read:

- Ted Chiang, "The Lifecycle of Software Objects"

Interlude: *Ready Player One*

Thursday, November 2: RPO II

Read:

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*, Level Two

Monday, November 6: Dear (My) Data planning workshop

Prof. Cordell traveling Nov. 8-11; no class Nov. 9

Keyword 4: Attention

Wednesday, November 8: What Gorilla?

Read:

- Cathy Davidson, from *Now You See It*

Thursday, November 9: No class

Monday, November 13: #Unplug

Read:

- Baratunde Thurston, "#Unplug: Baratunde Thurston Left The Internet For 25 Days, And You Should Too"
- Ian Bogost, "Hyperemployment, or the Exhausting Work of the Technology User"

Wednesday, November 15: That's Uncanny!

Read:

- Virginia Heffernan, "The Internet Is the Uncanniest Valley. Don't Get Trapped in It"

Thursday, November 16: OPEN DAY

Friday, November 17: Dear (My) Data Draft Due

Interlude: *Ready Player One*

Monday, November 20: RPO III

Read:

Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*, Level Three

Thanksgiving Holiday

Keyword 5: Play

Monday, November 27: This Cake is Great

Play:

- Valve, *Portal*

Read:

- Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas, "The Algorithmic Experience: Portal As Art"

Wednesday, November 29: Choose Your Own Adventure

Choose one of the following to play. You need to get far enough into the game that you can talk about it in detail during class, so start well in advance of this session:

- *Braid*
- *A Dark Room* (the app provides a fuller narrative)
- *Gone Home*
- *Papers, Please*
- *Passage*
- *Save the Date*
- *The Stanley Parable*
- *The Walking Dead*
- *Thomas Was Alone*
- *To the Moon*

Thursday, November 30: Arcade

Read:

- Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce, "The Hegemony of Play"
- Elizabeth Losh, "#GamerGate 101"

We'll play these in class:

- merritt k, *Lim*
- Molleindustria, *Unmanned*
- Porpentine Charity Heartscape, *With Those We Love Alive*
- Jordan Magnuson and Kevin MacLeod, *Loneliness*
- McKinney, *Spent*
- GOP Arcade, *Thoughts and Prayers*
- Jason Nelson, *i made this. you play this. we are enemies*
- ——, *Nothing You Have Done Deserves Such Praise*

Monday, December 4: Unessay workshop

Wednesday, December 6: TBD