

# Dear (My) Data

## Assignments

### Assignment Overview

- An online composition that incorporates data-driven evidence
- Students will work individually
- Window for assignment opens Wednesday, October 31st



### The Nitty-Gritty

This assignment will build on the readings in our “Data” unit—and particularly Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec’s *Dear Data* blog, book, and postcards—to help you interrogate the ways people use data to think about the world. Like

Lupi and Posavec, you will choose an aspect of your daily life to record as data, and you will then design a visualization to help you identify patterns in the data and present those patterns to readers.

This project will require you to make a number of important decisions at each stage:

1. First, you will need to identify some aspect of your life that you believe would be revealing in aggregate. You might record each time you say “thank you” through the week, but what would you hope to learn by doing so? You should choose some *regularly recurring* aspect of your daily life that you suspect would, if collected, *offer new introspective, interpretive purchase* for self understanding. Now, it’s possible that you will collect data that ultimately does not offer such purchase. This is always a possibility when researchers collect data. But you should choose something that might even be telling in its absence of interpretive power: e.g., “I thought recording each time I said ‘thank you’ would reveal something about my own gratitude and outlook toward other people, but instead...”
2. Second, you will need to decide what specific aspects of your chosen phenomenon you will record, and determine how you will do so. For “thank you’s,” for instance, would you record the precise wording of each one? The words or actions that prompted you to say “thanks?” The responses of the people thanked? Would you seek to characterize your tone, or that of your interlocutors? Once you decide what you will record, you will need to determine how. Will binary recording (making a mark for each instance) be sufficient, or will you require text, or numbers? Will you carry around a notepad or use an app on your phone? How will you remember to record your chosen phenomenon, particularly if it’s very common in your daily life?
3. Once you have recorded your data, you will need to decide how to represent it visually. You might do this analog, following the model of Lupi and Posavec, or you might use a digital platform. Either way, however, I would *strongly encourage* you to avoid out-of-the-box visualizations, such as the graphs in Excel. If you are engaged actively with the questions above, your data will likely be too individual and nuanced for such solutions. How can you convey the unique contours of your data in ways that are revealing for you and your readers? Can you balance clarity and complexity in your visual design, using the affordances of visual media to make your data more, rather than less, legible? Does your visualization do interpretive as well as aesthetic work?
4. Finally, you will write up what you learned about yourself and your data in a 4-5 page analysis, which can be presented as a typical paper or published digitally. This piece should include your visualization(s), and potentially draft versions that you abandoned as well. You should use this written piece to reflect on how your data did (or did not) illuminate the aspect of your life you sought to better understand. You should analyze the choices you made throughout the process and consider how those choices

served (or failed to serve) the interpretive ends you hoped they would meet. Finally, you should use this piece to consider how you might rethink your choices in a hypothetical future iteration of this project.