DIGITAL LITERARY ANALYSIS
Or, How To Read A Million Books

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ENGL 391W-01 (41427): Fall 2014
Tu/Th 10:45AM–12:00PM, Klapper 708
http://dlaf14.qwriting.org
[pASSWORD: dlaf14]

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This senior seminar will introduce students to central debates in the digital humanities that inform literary study and allow students to practice some of the basic tools of digital literary analysis. We will begin by framing the problems that the digital humanities poses to the study of literature, specifically how digital technologies upset deep-seated notions of something as basic as what it means to “read” a text. By considering the limitations of interpretive strategies like “close reading,” we will come to appreciate the argument made by Franco Moretti and others for a computer-aided “distant reading.” Next, we will practice some basic digital literary analysis and visualization using tools like Wordle, Google’s N-gram viewer, TextArc, Voyant, TAPoR, and MALLET’s topic modeling tool. These are free, mostly web-based programs that will allow us easily to do things like compare authors’ writing styles, analyze a novel’s themes, and even “read” a million books, all without cracking a page. Last, we will work together using what we have learned to create online group projects analyzing an author, text, or corpus from a digital perspective. No special knowledge of computer programs is required.

English 391W explores in depth significant historical, critical, methodological or theoretical issues within the study of literature, enabling students, as they complete the English major, to reassess their previous work in the field. Readings might be drawn from, for example, a range of historical periods, a variety of genres, or a mix of canonical and non-canonical writings. The course also asks students to think creatively and analytically about literary texts alongside other media, discourses, or modes of critical inquiry and to reflect upon the broader implications of literary studies in relation to other academic disciplines and the world beyond. The course differs from the typical elective in being taught as a small seminar for students with senior standing, allowing for increased student participation and more ambitious individual projects.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

In studying key texts in digital humanities, students will be able to . . .

- Demonstrate a familiarity with central theories and terms of digital humanities that relate to English studies, such as n-grams, topic modeling, LDA, and data visualization.
- Understand and use relevant digital tools to perform basic literary analysis.
- Describe both advantages and problems in using digital methods for literary study as compared to using traditional methods.

In completing research-based writing assignments, students will be able to . . .

- Identify genuine intellectual problems and conduct scholarly research that recognizes the conventions of literary criticism and academic essays.
• Find and evaluate appropriate secondary sources (including visual, graphic, or numerical information), to select quotation for use as evidence, to integrate quotation, and to properly cite quotation using MLA style.
• Develop and use strategies for improving writing and critical thinking through recursive practice, self-reflection, and the process of revision.

In creating a final online research project, students will be able to . . .
• Effectively use web-based technologies in order to publish and present academic writing.
• Understand the conventions and rhetoric of online presentations; prepare and deliver them; lead discussions based on such presentations.
• Take advantage of a range of appropriate scholarly resources such as books, journals, indexes, online catalogs, web search engines, and libraries.

REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS: All course readings are available as pdfs on the course website: http://dlaf14.qwriting.org [password: dlaf14]

Bring a printed copy of the readings to class, unless you use a tablet device to annotate readings.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Learn Things: You’re going to no-joke come to every class and participate every time. This means: you will always have read the text or played with the software before class, thought about it enough to have either one brilliant or three mediocre things to say, will actually say those things in class or at least think them very hard at other people, and will do your utmost best to learn something new. I will ask what you have learned, so be ready to say something.

2. Peer Conversations: Twice a semester you will record a conversation with a classmate about the course material. You will then transcribe and edit your conversation in the form of an interview that you post on our course website. Before the interview, you should prepare some questions about ideas from that week’s assigned readings. You should also be ready to ask your subject to elaborate on their answers. You do not need to discuss every reading, and you should not just summarize the readings. Instead, do things like: identify a conflict between two authors, present a question that builds on an author’s argument, or connect the readings to a real-world situation. These should be about 1000–1500 words. These will follow a schedule to be made the first week of class, and are due Sundays by midnight. Everyone in the class will then read these interviews and leave a substantial comment (~100 words) before the next class.

3. Investigative Proposal: In small groups, you will submit a research proposal that guides an end-of-semester research project analyzing a text of your choice. In four paragraphs, present a specific text and investigative question to pursue, examine the purpose of the investigation and how it contributes to the study of literature, consider a method for approaching the subject, and identify possible resources that you would need to explore the topic.

4. Annotated Paragraph: Select a paragraph of around 100 words from your adapted text. Perform a “close reading” of the paragraph by first annotating it. Using html, you should offer
commentary on every relevant word or phrase; this might include identifying rhetorical
techniques, defining unusual words, noting repetition, or identifying images or symbols.
Accompany your annotated paragraph with your close reading: an essay (~1000 words) that
analyzes how the author’s word choice and syntax (word order) create literary meaning (not
just literal meaning).

5. Self-Guided Conference Presentation: Imagine you have been asked to present at an on-
line academic conference on Digital Literary Analysis. The keynote speaker is Franco Moretti,
who we have been studying. Drawing on your previous assignments, create a brief slide show
presentation that applies one theoretical concept from Moretti’s text to your chosen text. Your
presentation should quickly introduce the concept to reasonably educated viewers, and then
spend most of its time on supporting an argument about how your chosen text does or does not
reflect an aspect of digital literary analysis that Moretti raises.

6. Final Project: For your final project, you will work in groups to create a section of the class
website devoted to a digital analysis of your group’s chosen text, described in your proposal.
You will individually be responsible for writing one or two pages on the site, finding Creative
Commons images to use, and organizing your content. The centerpiece of your page should
be a 1,750–2,000 word essay that offers a literary argument about your text supported by
digital methodology, whether this is text analysis or visualization. Together, you will
collaboratively write an introduction to your group’s section. In addition to using some of the
writing from earlier assignments, your group might also add subpages with historical context,
analyses of the story from other perspectives, or visual information like graphs or images.
More details to come.

PARTICIPATION: Since participation is crucial to your success, you should not miss more
than three classes. I do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. If you come
unprepared to class, you are not present; “coming unprepared” includes such things as not doing
the reading, not bringing the text to class, sleeping during class, not making an effort to
participate, arriving late or leaving early. If you know you cannot attend, contact mebefore to ask
about submitting homework; I do not accept late assignments.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:
<http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>
Violations of academic integrity include: cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty,
plagiarism, and denying others access to information or material. It is the student’s responsibility
to be aware of what constitutes academic dishonesty; students who are unsure of whether their
work meets criteria for academic integrity should consult with their instructor. Students should
look at the full policy, which provides further examples and possible consequences for incidences
of academic dishonesty.

I have a zero-tolerance policy towards plagiarism and academic dishonesty. The minimum
punishment for plagiarism is an F as a final grade and being reported to the campus officer.
**SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION:** If you have a learning, sensory, or physical reason for special accommodation, please inform me and the Office of Special Services at 718-997-5895.

**EVALUATION / GRADING:**

Students will be evaluated in three broad areas:

1) their ability and diligence in completing all writing assignments on time, reading and reflecting on assigned readings before class, and participating in class discussions.

2) their competence in meeting the learning objectives identified above.

3) their ability to demonstrate, through the pieces in their final web project and their meta-reflective cover letter, that they have made thoughtful and careful revision from earlier drafts.

In practice, the final grade will be more of a “negotiation” than a reward. Sometime during the final third of the semester, students should meet with me one-on-one. During this time we will discuss their current strengths and weaknesses and establish a set of expectations for the remainder of the semester. The student and instructor will agree on what is an appropriate final grade, dependent upon their completing a list of expectations. This list might include specific revision of certain assignments, good faith effort to participate more, or mastery of certain recurring problem areas. Students will submit a short memo outlining our conversation, to serve as a grading contract.
# COURSE CALENDAR

## Section I: Trends and Theories in the Digital Humanities

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>8/28</td>
<td>Course Introduction</td>
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| 9/4    | **No Class Meeting**  
Read Patricia Cohen’s Humanities 2.0 series from the *New York Times* (six articles): [Online version](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/features/books/series/humanities_20/index.html)  
*Leave three comments* on the post about Cohen (at least two will reply to classmates).  
*Sign up* on blog for interview assignment. |
| 9/11   | Read Moretti, “Maps,” 35–64. |
| 9/16   | Read Sarah Allison *et al.*, “Quantitative Formalism: an Experiment” (Stanford Literary Lab <http://litlab.stanford.edu/>). |
**Due: Draft Investigative Proposal [email]** |
| 9/23   | **NO CLASS (classes follow a Friday schedule)** |
| 9/25   | **NO CLASS** |
*Discuss Investigative Proposals* |
| 10/7   | Read Jockers, “Style,” 63–104. |
Section II: Practicing the Tools

10/14: Study Wordle <http://www.wordle.net/>
Due: Revised Investigative Proposal

10/16: Study Ngram Viewer <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>
Read “What Does the Ngram Viewer Do?” <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>

10/21: Study TextArc <http://www.textarc.org/>

10/23: Study Voyant <http://voyant-tools.org/>

10/28: Explore the projects on Visual Complexity <http://www.visualcomplexity.com/>
Discuss TextArc and Voyant

10/30: Read Ted Underwood, “Where to Start with Text Mining,”
<http://tedunderwood.com/2012/08/14/where-to-start-with-text-mining/>
Due: Annotated Paragraph

11/4: Study TAPoR <http://taporware.ualberta.ca/~taporware/>

11/6: Study MALLET <http://mallet.cs.umass.edu/topics.php>
“A graphical user interface tool for Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic modeling,”
<https://code.google.com/p/topic-modeling-tool/>
Read Miriam Posner, “Very basic strategies for interpreting results from the Topic

11/11: Discuss MALLET
Read Matthew L. Jockers, “The LDA Buffet: A Topic Modeling Fable,”
<http://www.matthewjockers.net/macroanalysisbook/lda/>

11/13: Discuss MALLET

Section III: Making a Digital Project

11/18: Discuss Final Projects
Read Vandendorpe, “Linearity and Tabularity,” 22-27 and “Giving the Reader
Control,” 125-128.

11/20: Search <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/> for any two articles relevant to your project.
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/25</td>
<td>Discuss Self-Guided Conference Presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Due: Self-Guided Conference Presentation</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>11/27</td>
<td>NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Recess)</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/2</td>
<td>Work on Final Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/4</td>
<td>Work on Final Projects</td>
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<td><em>Due: Draft of Essay with Cover Letter</em></td>
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<td>12/9</td>
<td>Read Peer’s Essay and write Response Letter</td>
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<td>Peer workshop on Essays</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/11</td>
<td>Work on Final Projects</td>
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<td><em>Due: Revised Draft of Final Essays</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>12/18</td>
<td>Final Projects due by noon [online]</td>
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