

Composition Paper Topics
English 206.2
Spring 2006

We will write four composition papers this semester on four assigned topics relevant to our exploration of new media and the forms of new media composition. I want you to address each topic critically and thoughtfully in at least 4-5 pages. Research is requisite as it will certainly help you compose the paper in a more thorough manner. While not wanting to act as a hypocrite vis-à-vis the theme of the class, I do want to see a range of resources used in each paper: internet resources, monographs, journal articles, &tc. The final, instructor copies of the papers can be emailed to the instructor, posted on the student's blog, or turned in to the instructor in class before the first five minutes of class have elapsed. Concerning the former two options, students should be aware of the possibility of communication and electronic errors. Thus papers emailed or posted are subject to the same "five minute rule," i.e., if the timestamp of the email and/or the blog posting does not reflect a time before 2:36pm on the date due, I will not accept the paper. This rule stands fast no matter the circumstance so take great care to get me each paper before this deadline has elapsed, whether via email, blog posting, or hand. Should you want to do some sort of alternate project (hypertext, creative/philosophical inquiry, &tc.) in place of the "standard" sort of English paper, chat with me about it. While I cannot promise all ideas will be acceptable for credit, I will take all suggestions under advisement as long as they involve textual composition and incorporate the topic at hand.

Please note that all papers must be composed according to the current edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Leid Library has several copies of this handbook, and I've ordered some for our class. These are available in the UNLV bookstore. I've also posted many links on our class website to help with MLA style and grammar and punctuation. See the website or visit this URL: <http://oqm4.home.att.net/mla.htm>

Concerning the following paper topics, students should not feel they have to address every issue presented or answer every question posed. In writing the following blurbs, I merely wanted to build a framework big enough to allow for free intellectual movement and exploration while giving some starting touch points. In other words, don't choke on the information. Each paper topic offers students a big bite, but you can nibble from that offered without fear of incurring a quarrel with the instructor.

Cumulatively, the four composition papers are worth 64% of your final course grade. Thus, each individually accounts for 16%.

Paper 1

- freewrite/exploration draft due on blog 1/26 @ 12noon
- peer edit draft due in class 2/2 (bring 4 copies)
- final draft due in class, via email, or on blog by 2:35pm on 2/9

Topic: What constitutes plagiarism in a blog vs. other, traditional forms of textual composition (monographs, novels, essays, news stories, &c)? In Blogs and other forms of new media, how can we draw a line between “plagiarism” as it has been traditionally conceived and the sorts of hyperlink/textual/media incorporation common to blogs and other websites? Are hyperlinks inherently plagiaristic? For example, if one were to go out and copy/“save as” a picture from a website and include it on his/her own site or blog without credit, is that plagiarism? What if I copy and paste text in a similar fashion? To put this topic another way, how do we know when we’ve compromised intellectual integrity and not merely participated in the integrated and communal nature of the WWW? Can an information sharing network like the internet and plagiarism avoidance ever capably exist together?

Remember, we’re living in a post-Stephen Glass/Jayson Blair/Fox News world where fabrication, bias, and plagiarism are making inroads into traditionally “unbiased” media and posing new threats to intellectual and journalistic integrity. Who’s to say this isn’t a result of the rise of new media and widespread information sharing? Perhaps it’s our values and morals that are changing. In places like China it’s fairly common for academics to compose entire theses or dissertations from earlier works, sometimes lifting wholesale to satisfy the requirements of academic degrees. Do you see the US moving towards this sort of model?

An effective way to approach this topic might be to first define what plagiarism has meant traditionally and what it continues to mean in traditional forms of media. Perhaps find one or two respected definitions of plagiarism, from the APA, *Chicago Manual of Style*, and/or the MLA, state this/these definition(s), and then proceed to play them against the rise of new media and widespread information sharing. You could modify or revise these definitions to represent the pressures new media brings to bear on them, offering a revised definition of plagiarism and new codes of conduct per the nature of new media.

Paper 2

- freewrite/exploration draft due on blog 2/23 @ 12noon
- peer edit draft due in class 3/2 (bring 4 copies)
- final draft due in class, via email, or on blog by 2:35pm on 3/9

Topic: Via blogs, podcasts, and webpages, artists, intellectuals, and musicians are able to reach audiences more directly than ever before. We might say the internet and new media offer the artist-audience relationship an immediacy rarely seen in human history. Jongleurs roaming the *campagne provençal*, Homer reciting the *Iliad* to eager Athenians – such are the precedents of the artist-audience relationship offered by the internet. As 21st century Americans we're used to a mediation process: writers compose novels that agents sell to publishers who edit them and sell them to a public; musicians write songs they sell through a manager to a label that produces the album and sells it to the public; academics compose ideas into monographs that are edited and sold by academic presses to libraries and peers in the field.

The internet, though, breaks down these well defined roles and many of the economic concerns associated with them. Because of podcasts, unsigned artists may be featured either collectively or individually on free internet programs; because of websites, experimental poetry is free to flourish unbound by the concerns of sales; and because of blogs academics and intellectuals are able to share their ideas freely without the interference of the peer editing process or the politics of the publishing process. In this model, all jobs associated with disseminating art and ideas fuse into one another. The artist-intellectual can suddenly become his/her own publisher, producer, editor, graphic designer, &tc. Film, of course, is right in the middle of this as well.

We've traditionally relied on the economic and multi-party model of artistic/intellectual dissemination to separate "the wheat from the chaff," as it were. In other words, what sells gets published/produced; what gets published/produced sells and enters the cannon. What new forms of accountability and judgment might arise in the absence of this economic and multiparty model? Is there now a great pressure put on the audience to evaluate the quality of art and ideas? Is such a democratic space ultimately harmful or beneficial to/for art and ideas? Will vanity press literature and self-produced music podcasts suddenly cease to look less than equal with the latest novel from Knopf and the favorite album from Def Jam? Finally, will capital/economic concerns ever really withdraw from the artistic/intellectual landscape or have they merely taken on new forms? For example, does the consumer finally have an upper-hand on the thieving music industry since we can buy our songs piecemeal?

In it's most general sense, this paper topic inquires into: (1)the ramifications of conflating the traditional multi-party roles of the artistic and intellectual exchange; (2) the negation (if not outright dissolution) of the economic superstructure attached to artistic and intellectual dissemination; and (3) the future landscape of musical, literary, and visual art output vis-à-vis the internet and new media.

Paper 3

- freewrite/exploration draft due on blog 3/23 @ 12noon
- peer edit draft due in class 3/30 (bring 4 copies)
- final draft due in class, via email, or on blog by 2:35pm on 4/6

Topic: A recent ad campaign by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) takes great pains to emphasize the connection between downloading movies for free on the internet and stealing cars, jewelry, and other material objects. You can review this campaign at the MPAA website: <http://www.mpa.org/> (There's also a link to this site on our website). This paper topic wonders what exactly constitutes file stealing vs. file sharing on the internet? It expects students to look beyond the rhetoric of the entertainment industry embodied by such ad campaigns and ask whether or not downloading a movie or a song without paying for it is equal to stealing money or jewels or a car.

If I download a piece of freeware someone has made using Apple or Microsoft code, am I complicit in the larceny? Was there any larceny in the first place? If I film a movie and then post the file on the internet, have I stolen something? If I download .mp3 files without paying for them, have I stolen? If I buy .mp3 files or download .mp3 files without paying, burn them to a disk, and sell the CD to a friend, has a theft and fence occurred? Does the recent settlement between consumers and Bertelsmann; EMI; Warner-Elektra-Atlantic; Sony; Universal; Trans World Entertainment; Tower Records; and Musicland Stores regarding inflated CD prices between 1995 and 2000 influence your opinion or is this issue a red herring? Is it acceptable to "steal" from them since they "stole" from us, or is this far too simplistic a line of reasoning.

For the bold and the intellectually curious (and especially for those looking out to law school), you might like to consider the differences between the quite abstract notion we call "intellectual property" that protects intellectual and artistic production and the more material/concrete notions of tangible property larceny. Is there any essential difference between the two, and will the internet and new media break down our intellectual property convictions? One way to sum this up might be to ask whether there's a difference between stealing a book from a bookstore and downloading the text of a book from a non-rights protected corner of the internet? Does the media's form determine the protection and the larceny? What does the law say, and what do you think?

Paper 4

- freewrite/exploration draft due on blog 4/20 @ 12noon
- peer edit draft due in class 4/27 (bring 4 copies)
- final draft due in class, via email, or on blog by 2:35pm on 5/4

Topic: In her essay "What are masterpieces and why are there so few of them?" (1936), Gertrude Stein references a statement she made about her sprawling novel *The Making of Americans*: "I write for myself and strangers." This idea seems oddly prescient when we consider the blog form of composition. Certainly, there are blogs meant to be read in a journalistic and reportage context. Leaving those aside for the moment, though, and focusing on the more personal weblogs common to the internet, it does seem peculiar that we "write for ourselves and strangers" in this way.

The weblog form is essentially a journal or diary form marked up, posted, and managed on the internet. My question, though, is as follows: why take a form we've kept private for centuries (from political party leaders, from spouses, from little brothers, from parents, &c.) and make it public? Not only have we made the form public, though. We've not bought space in a local newspaper, after all. Instead, we've taken the form in 180° of difference by making what was among the most private of our expressions into the most public. Blogs are accessible 24/7 around the world making them, like other expressions on the internet, among the most public documents in the world.

In this paper, write about why you think this private-public shift occurred and what is to be gained by making our private thoughts so public. Is there any privacy inherent to blogs? Via anonymity? (No one has to know who keeps the blog, after all.) English majors might want to address the lyric quality of blogs in the sense that lyric poetry is "an overheard utterance" (see Jonathan Culler, "The Modern Lyric: Generic Continuity and Critical Practice." In *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*. Ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. **ON RESERVE @ PN 863 C597 1988**). Are blogs inherently lyrical? To use Culler's phrase, are they "Modern Lyrics?"

Other questions this topic might address follow:

How do blogs straddle the public and private spheres; in what way(s) do they interact with, exist in, and affect each? Is there any real difference between blogs and traditional forms of publication in terms of one person writing and being read by strangers? If not, why not? If there is a difference, though (which is my sense), what is it that makes blogs so different as unique texts written for oneself and strangers?

Finally, considering all we've discussed in this class, are blogs ultimately dismissed as mere solipsism and narcissistic texts or do blogs, even in their most personal and "lyrical" form, have some value beyond the self that makes them worthy to write and share on the WWW? Are blogs and the blogosphere they form many individual voices crying in the electronic wilderness or do they form a macro-structure of many voices, experiences, and expressions?