Perhaps no single activity defines college more than reading. We read textbooks and text messages, perform “close readings” of literature and “read between the lines” of course descriptions. Some readings are dense, and we struggle to discern their meaning; other texts are skimmed quickly. We take our literacy for granted, giving barely a thought to the complex neurological processes that enable us to interpret these lines. In an age of artificial intelligences, even machines “read.”

In this seminar, we explore the histories, sciences, and technologies of reading. Guest lectures and visits to libraries and labs introduce different disciplinary approaches, as we ask: How did people read in the past? How do novelists, poets, and book artists conceptualize the act of reading? What happens in the brain when we read? And how do machines read differently from humans? Our investigations culminate in a multimodal exhibit, produced collaboratively.

Learning Objectives

During this course, students will:

- investigate the history of reading, tracking the emergence of different modes (silent, oral, intensive, extensive);
- explore how technology has influenced reading practices;
- consider the relation between texts and readers, both human and machine;
- learn how scholars from a diverse array of fields approach and conceptualize the study of reading;
- collaboratively design and produce an online exhibit that demonstrates this knowledge;
- and speculate about the future of reading in the digital age.

Required Books

Assignments

Blogging
Ten times throughout the semester, you will write one short post for our class blog. You should aim to write roughly a post a week; if you wait until the last few days of class and suddenly add 10 posts to our class website, you will not receive full credit for the assignment. Each post may contain a brief reflection on the readings or share an item from the news related to the course content. It should be roughly one page in length and should be appropriate to the format of the blog. It is worth 2 points (10 posts or 10 pages of writing throughout the semester x 2 points each = 20 points total). In addition, 10 responses to another post are required during the course of the semester (1 point each x 10 = 10 points total). All posts and responses must be completed by 4/28, 5pm.

“Close Reading” annotations
You have probably heard the term “close reading.” It is a form of analysis or interpretation applied to texts. To “close read” a text, you read it as if through a magnifying glass, examining not simply what the text says, but how it says. When you “perform a close reading,” as we often say in literary studies, you want to ask yourself questions like: how is the grammatical structure and syntax contributing to the author’s message? Why did she choose this word instead of others? Is language being used metaphorically? Who is speaking, and who is her audience? How is awareness of that audience influencing or motivating the author’s language? All written texts contain in them many different multiple layers of meaning. Close reading is the detail-oriented process of picking apart and revealing that meaning.

In this assignment, you will leave one annotations on our Uzanne reading (due in class on 1/18, worth 5 points) and one annotations on our Coover and/or Bush readings (due 1/23 in class, worth 5 points). To complete this assignment, we will be using Hypothesis, a web annotation tool. See our course website for further instructions.

“Distant Reading” research proposal
“Distant reading” is the term used by an emerging and growing group of humanities scholars to describe the process of applying computational, sociological, and quantitative methods to “reading” an unreadably large number of cultural artifacts. For instance, scholars have used distant reading methods to track the growth of various literary genres, analyze “sentiment” in novels, and understand the culture of the selfie. Although scholars who use distant reading methods do so for different purposes, they share an interest in using machines to
read a very large amount of data (text, image) — larger than they themselves could ever read in a single lifetime.

In this assignment, you will write a 3-5-page research proposal. In it, you will propose a research question, justify the significance of the question, and outline how you would go about using distant reading methods to solve it. The entire assignment is worth 15 points. It is due 2/20 before class. To turn it in, please email me your proposal (trettien@email.unc.edu).

“Reading History” presentation
How does one study the history of something like reading? Very few readers leave traces of their actions on the books or documents they examine, and those that do often seem to be idiosyncratic or just plain weird in their habits. Yet to discover the history of reading is to discover the history of how humans have processed information. It is a history of both culture and cognition. What could be more important than that?

In this assignment, you will work directly with an original document to discover the traces of its readers. These may take the form of marginalia, but the book may also contain evidence that is less textual and more material: the grime at the edge of the page left by multiple readers’ thumbs, or the arrangement of texts in a compiled volume. During the process, you’ll research the book’s “provenance” (a word that librarians use for the history of a book’s ownership) and examine closely the physical evidence left on its pages, reading creatively through and across history. Every old book is a puzzle that, once solved, tells a story. Your task is to solve the book’s puzzle.

As you do so, you’ll be entering the role of the professional historian, asking questions like: how does this book’s readers reflect their particular time, its culture or society? Is she a resistant reader, or do her habits reflect the dominant ideology of her time? How much historical meaning can be extracted from ambiguous markings, and when are they simply opaque to us?

Your original research will result in a short conference-style presentation (8 minutes), outlining 1) the book’s history and its readers, 2) what that history tells us about various historical moments, and 3) what methods you used to reach your conclusions. Presentations will be 4/12, 4/17 and 4/19.

Collaborative Digital Exhibit
Imagine you are the curator of a new exhibit on reading. The goal of this exhibit is to defamiliarize this seemingly mundane, ordinary action for the public. You want your audience members — the people who encounter this exhibit — to better understand their own reading habits in relation to the past and future of reading. What concepts or themes would you highlight? What objects, images, or texts would you display?

Collectively answering these questions is the task of this assignment. Each student is responsible for curating one portion of the exhibit. Whatever object or topic you chose, your task is to situate it within the various reading cultures we
have explored throughout the semester. I will be grading your contribution on the quality and depth of your research and how successfully you curate your idea for a general audience. This project is worth 25 points, or 25% of your final grade.

Policies

Attendance
Each class, we will be learning, practicing, making things, and discussing new ideas together. If you miss class, you will quickly feel lost and behind, and you may be impacting your classmates’ ability to learn. Attendance is imperative. That being said, I understand emergencies. You may miss two classes this semester, no questions asked and no notice needed. If you require additional absences, you must email me before the missed class to excuse yourself. Although there is no formal participation grade, I reserve the right to reduce your final grade for unexcused absences, and to require additional work from you in the case of an excused absence.

Late assignments
If you anticipate that you will not be able to finish an assignment on time, be in touch with me well before it is due to set an alternative deadline. Not doing so will result in a 2-point reduction of your grade for each day that it is late.

Technology
You may bring and use your laptop to class to take notes. Please turn your cell phones to silent during class.

Plagiarism
You must never copy someone else’s work and pass it off as your own under any circumstances. Not only is doing so a violation of the Honor System and academic integrity, it also results in the loss of credibility and respect. Always err on the side of caution. If you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism, speak with me or review this handout on the topic from the Writing Center: http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/plagiarism/

Honor System
The community and culture of our classroom is a microcosm of the much larger community of UNC Chapel Hill as a whole. As such, it must reflect and embody our institution’s standards of academic integrity, as dictated by the student-led Honor System. You can read more about the Honor System at the website of the Office of Student Conduct: https://studentconduct.unc.edu/honor-system

Accommodations
If you have a disability that may prevent you from fully participating in any of the activities of this course, please contact Accessibility and Resources Services as soon as possible via its website: https://accessibility.unc.edu/

Getting in touch
I’m here to help you learn and improve as a writer and critical thinker. Please approach me with any questions, comments, or concerns. The best way to get in touch is through email (trettien@email.unc.edu). Please give me 24 weekday hours to respond. I’m also available to you on Twitter (@whitneytrettien) or during my office hours (M/W 1-2pm in Greenlaw 518).

Schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Changes will be posted to the schedule on our class website and announced in class.

W 1/11: Entrances and Introductions

• Mara Mills, “What Should We Call Reading?”

M 1/16: NO CLASS (Holiday)

W 1/18: The End of Reading (I)

DUE TODAY before class: Your “close reading” of a passage of Uzanne’s text, left as a Hypothesis annotation (see “Close Reading” annotations on the assignments page for details).

• Octave Uzanne, “The End of Books” (1894)
• Bob Brown, “The Readies” (1929)

M 1/23: The End of Reading (II)

DUE TODAY before class: Your “close reading” of a passage of the texts, left as a Hypothesis annotation (see “Close Reading” annotations on the assignments page for details).

• Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think” (1945)
• Robert Coover, “The End of Books” (1992)

W 1/25: Hypertext Reading

• Judy Malloy, Uncle Roger http://www.well.com/user/jmalloy/uncleroger/unclerog.html
• “Judy Malloy’s Uncle Roger” chapter in Pathfindershttp://scalar.usc.edu/works/pathfinders/judy-malloy

M 1/30: Close/Machine/Hyper Reading

• Katherine Hayles, “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine”
• Watch this video about the optophone

W 2/1: Reading Now (I)
• Robin Sloane, *Penumbra’s 24-hour Bookstore*, to “Maxiumum Happy Imagination”

M 2/6: Reading Now (II)
• Robin Sloane, *Penumbra’s 24-hour Bookstore*, to “The Ultimate OK”

W 2/8: Reading Now (III)
• Robin Sloane, *Penumbra’s 24-hour Bookstore*, to the end

M 2/13: Distant Reading Workshop with Grant Glass

*Please bring your laptops to class.*

• Kathryn Schulz, “What is Distant Reading?,” *NYTimes*
• Matthew Jockers, Foundations, from *Macroanalysis*

W 2/15: Distant Reading

*(Read the blog posts in order. They are records of an active scholarly debate. You may not understand everything — that’s fine. Observe the way participants communicate with each other and how they collectively problem solve [or not]. You may want to follow links in the various posts to other critiques, too.)*

• Matt Jockers, “A Novel Method for Detecting Plot”
• Matt Jockers, “Revealing Sentiment and Plot Arcs with the Syuzhet Package”
• Matt Jockers, “The Rest of the Story”
• Annie Swafford, “Problems with the Syuzhet Package”
• Matt Jockers, “Some Thoughts on Annie Thoughts about Syuzhet”
• Annie Swafford, “Continuing the Syuzhet Discussion”
• Matt Jockers, “Requiem for a Low Pass Filter”
• Matt Jockers, “That Sentimental Feeling”

M 2/20: Machine Reading

**DUE TODAY before class:** Email me your “Distant Reading” research proposal (trettien@email.unc.edu).

• Explore videos on cultural analytics
• Ray Kurzweil, short excerpt from *The Age of Spiritual Machines*
• Dan Richman, “Machine Reading?” — short article in Geekwire; please follow the links to MS MARCO, the dataset discussed
• Explore NELL
• Explore VIV

**W 2/22:** Visit from Dr. Mohit Bansal (tentative)

**M 2/27:** Workshop

**DUE TODAY before class:** Email me a research proposal for your contribution to our digital exhibit.

**W 3/1:** Art & Reading

• Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read*

**M 3/6:** Sloane Art Library visit

_We’re going to be looking at artists’ books. Please meet in the Sloane Art Library. When you enter the library, turn right and go all the way to the back._

• Johanna Drucker, “What is a Book?”

**W 3/8:** The Reading Brain

• Maryanne Wolf, Chapters 1, 4, 5 6, *Proust and the Squid*

**M 3/13 & W 3/15: SPRING BREAK**

**M/ 3/20:** Visit from Dr. Jennifer Arnold

**W 3/22:** Workshop

**DUE TODAY before class:** Upload a working draft of your exhibit contribution to our Sakai folder (“Digital exhibit drafts”).

**M 3/27:** The History of Reading

_In class exercise: Searching catalogues for evidence of past readers._

• Heather Jackson, “Introduction,” “Physical Features,” and “History,” in *Marginalia*

**W 3/29:** Wilson Library Workshop

**DUE TODAY:** Email me (trettien@email.unc.edu) the item you would like to work with for your “Reading History” project. I will submit your request to Wilson Library, where librarians will retrieve and have it ready for you to view during our Monday workshop.
Please meet in the Special Collections Classroom on the main floor of Wilson.

• Heather Jackson, “History and “Motives for Marginalia,” in Marginalia

M 4/3: Wilson Library Workshop

Please meet in the Special Collections Classroom on the main floor of Wilson.

• Ann Blair, “Early Modern Information Overload”

W 4/5: NO CLASS

M 4/10: Workshop

**DUE TODAY before class:** Drafts uploaded to our exhibit website.

W 4/12: Presentations

M 4/17: Presentations

W 4/19: Presentations

M 4/24: Workshop

**DUE TODAY:** Final exhibit contributions.

W 4/26: Exits