

Writing Assignments

All essays should be formatted accordingly: 12-point-font, 1" margins on all sides, double-spaced, in a serif typeface (Times, Garamond, Baskerville). Citation style should follow Chicago. For clarification on using sources, see the Chicago Manual of Style. For general issues with American English speech and writing, please refer to our course Style Guide.

0a. Thesis Practice: What Makes a Classic? (Diagnostic Essay, 2 pages)

Primary texts: Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*; Charles Martindale, "Chapter 1," *Redeeming the Text*.

From the tax-bracket definition of Aulus Gellius to the *opinio communis* of today, our understanding of what constitutes a "classic" has shifted significantly over time. We have "classic rock," "classical music," talk of "instant classics." In this essay, use Gellius and Martindale to think through how something gains "classical" status. Things to consider include:

- **Objectivity vs. Subjectivity:** Do Gellius and Martindale suggest that a "classic" is an inherent, objective quality of a text, or is it a product of individual and cultural taste?
- **Context:** How does cultural context affect our definition of a classic, and can you think of examples where classics either defy their context or remain tethered to it? Why do you think these examples function as they do?
- **Relation to the Archon:** Who are the arbiters of taste who determine what is classical? Consider how curators and archivists—even those of pop culture—shape what constitutes a classic.

NOTA BENE: The purpose of this assignment is diagnostic. I should get a sense of how you think through our readings and what the voice of *your* writing sounds like (!). Before you start writing, please consult the "Thesis Writing Guidelines" below, which are relevant to every assignment in this class.

Thesis Writing Guidelines

The purpose of this essay is to practice writing theses. Your thesis is the backbone of any analytical essay. Indeed, theses are the engines driving all opinions, ideas, and expressions. Without a thesis, ideas crumble, speech rambles, . In our course, your theses must tick a few boxes.

1. Your thesis should be **open to debate**. If a thesis does not express an idea that can be defended with evidence (or refuted with evidence), then it is not satisfactory.
2. Your thesis must use **one or more texts** to construct an argument. These texts are your **evidence**. You must then argue *how and why* your evidence supports your thesis.
3. Your thesis should make some gesture toward "cui bono," Latin for "to whose benefit." *Why should we care?* Your essay should argue the relevance of your thesis by reminding us that this discussion goes beyond the texts themselves. Here it is helpful to recall texts by Martindale (and later Derrida). In their hands, the thesis becomes a thinking machine that has translatability beyond their discussion. E.g., Martindale's definition of a classic expands beyond ancient texts, just as Derrida's reading of the archive applies to more than libraries. Over the semester, please note how *other* scholars whom you read situate their arguments in relevant terms.

Formulating a thesis

Writing a good thesis **must** precede any essay. You can certainly begin writing to uncover your thesis, as most good thinking begins from writing down ideas. However, once you have your thesis in mind, you *then* must begin outlining your paper. Never—never ever ever—write a paper without an outline. It will show and I will call it out. Instead, in your outline, list the different rhetorical arguments you intend to make, then arrange them by a logical order. I have ample examples of this from my own work, so please ask for them if helpful.

As Diana Hacker writes in *The Pocket Style Manual*, “Within the guidelines of your assignment, begin by asking questions that you are interested in exploring, that you believe will interest your audience, and that will contribute to an ongoing debate or to existing knowledge in the field. For any type of assignment, you should make sure that your questions are *narrow* (not too broad), *challenging* (not too bland), and *grounded* (not too speculative).”

Too broad: “How does Martindale differ from Gellius in his definition of a classic?”

Narrow: “How does Martindale’s use of hermeneutics complicate Gellius’s notion of classical authorship?”

Too bland: “How has the concept of a classic changed over time?”

Engaging: “How did a TV show such as *The Sopranos* come to be regarded as a high brow classic even though TV was largely regarded as inferior to film throughout the twentieth century?”

Too speculative: “Do classics retain their classical status in any context?”

Grounded: “How does Akira Kurosawa’s film, *The Throne of Blood*, reformulate Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into a Japanese historical drama?”

Before writing, you may have several questions in mind. Consider how they relate to each other. What answer do you have for these questions, and what texts or case studies can you synthesize to support your answer?

Each paper should combine an analysis of a theoretical text with a close reading of a literary or historical source; or, compare two periods alongside each other via a theoretical text; or, present a theoretical approach of your own design that builds on a conversation between a theorist and the primary texts from our course.

0b. Personal Essay: Writing & I (Diagnostic Essay, 1 page)

Think through your writing process. Do you write in the mornings or evenings? With music or in silence? Do you start writing longhand or on a computer? Do you dictate before you write? How many drafts do you do? Do you color-code your writing as you work? You do not need to address these topics, but I list some here to get the ball rolling:

- Do you write for pleasure? What genres do you write?
- What is the longest academic writing you’ve so far submitted? What course was it? Did you like it or dislike it?
- What do you like most about writing?
- What do you most *dislike* about the writing process?
- Any other insecurities or points of pride regarding writing?

NOTA BENE: While this essay is, in some sense, informal, I do not want to read a blog post. I want to read an essay. You have only one page, which does not mean that the assignment is easier, but that it is harder. Less space means each word has more value upon it. Your essay should be tight and focused. While it will not have a thesis in the traditional sense (“In this essay, I argue...”), it should nevertheless have a *focus*, which you build out through two to three exempla.

1a. Thesis Practice: Archive Fever and Alexandria (1-1.5 pages)

First, see the prompt below (1.b). Then, in this short diagnostic essay, please write an outline of your essay by constructing an overarching thesis statement and outline. Your thesis should, briefly:

1. Introduce the texts you will review (1-2 sentences)
2. Introduce an issue/contradiction/problem (2-3 sentences)
3. Propose a way of solving that problem (3+ sentences).
4. Conclude by outlining, briefly, the arguments and rhetorical moves of your essay (generally one sentence for each step in your argument, so ~3 sentences total).

1b. Essay #1: Archive Fever and Alexandria (5 pages)

Overview & Core Task

Drawing on Plato's *Phaedrus* and Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, write an argumentative essay that examines the drive to collect, organize, and control knowledge. Consider the tensions between media and knowledge, recording and forgetting, and preserving alongside destroying. In addition to examining the Library of Alexandria, you should put Ptolemaic archival ambitions into conversation with other periods ancient (Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Palestine) and our contemporary landscape of digital algorithmic searches, massive digitization projects, Archive.org, AI training models, or the bizarre resurrection of the library in the twenty-first century. You should not treat these periods as merely identical or opposite; rather, explore what how the enduring fantasy of knowledge and preservation (or loss and destruction) reiterates synchronically and diachronically.

Core Texts

- Plato, *Phaedrus* (specifically the myth of Theuth and the critique of external writing)
- Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (*Mal d'Archive*)
- Freud, Mystic Writing Pad

Secondary Texts

- Anything we have read thus far is fair game including ancient texts (Gilgamesh, Callimachus) and scholarship (Neudecker on how Roman libraries were supported, e.g.).
- You may also use secondary sources which we have not read in class. You can find something on your own (I suggest checking with me first), or use the secondary sources I have provided below.

Possible Framing Lenses (Choose One)

Rather than trying to answer every question about archives, anchor your thesis in **one** of the following thematic tensions. You do not need to replicate these, but I offer them as windows into your own possible argument.

1. Money and Power in the Archive

The Alexandrian project was tied to Ptolemaic imperial ambition, just as its revival was supported by specific regimes. It may seem counter-intuitive for a regime to foreground knowledge and free-thought; but what are the in/tangible benefits for rulers when they bolster such archives? How are modern digital archives also tied to geopolitical or corporate monopolies? How does political or institutional power use the archive (what is preserved, what is discarded, who has access) to achieve its aims? A caveat: avoid the pitfall of conflating Greece with Rome.

Secondary texts:

- Jump ahead in the syllabus read Candida Moss.
- Chapter 1 (“Conceptualizing Egypt”) in Stephens, Susan A. *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*. 2003.
- Schultz, Alexandra Leewon. “Collection.” In *Writing, Enslavement, and Power in the Roman Mediterranean, 100 BCE–300 CE*, edited by Jeremiah Coogan, Candida R. Moss, and Joseph A. Howley. Oxford University Press, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197769997.003.0016>.

2. The Impossibility of Completeness

Why does the fantasy of a “total library” persist despite being structurally impossible? How does the historical reality of Alexandria differ from the mythic ideal we continue to reconstruct in the digital era? Here you might consider, too, the role of writing in Gilgamesh. Consider, too, the prevalent fallacy that the Library of Alexandria was destroyed—why do we perpetuate such a lie? Why is it more palatable than the truth—people stopped caring, copying, and reading.

Secondary texts

- Chapter 1 (“Conceptualizing Egypt”) in Stephens, Susan A. *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*. 2003.
- Introduction (pp. 1-10) in Hunter, Richard L. *Theocritus and the Archaeology of Greek Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [Letter of Aristaeus](#)

Key Essay Requirements & Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Make a specific, arguable claim:** State clearly what the desire to archive *does* to human thought or social power.
- **Engage the theoretical texts directly:** Integrate Plato’s critique of writing and Derrida’s reading of Freud/the archive into your close readings. You are not responding *to* Derrida and Plato, but arguing by means of their texts.
- **Balance continuity and contrast:** Arguments come from lens readings, i.e. using one text to illuminate material in another. Your thesis will thrive when you find structural differences and paradoxes. Derrida is not fool proof, and praxis contradicts theory as much as it adheres to it. Find ways to compare and contrast temporalities, traditions, and texts.

WA 2: Too Much to Know, Then and Now (4 pages)

Overview & Core Task

You are among the intellectual elite. Through your technological devices which grant access to the sum of human information—and your position at an elite college with extraordinary library resources and training in assessing sources—you have an amount of knowledge and art that would have been unimaginable to many throughout history.

But you are not the first generation of intellectuals to confront information overload. First, as we have seen, ancient ruling classes depended upon slaves to copy and quote for them: Gellius and Seneca note the issues facing the intelligentsia who want to seem learned but have no time to consume that information. Secondly, the boom of print in the Early Modern period initiated an information overload which Ann Blair calls “too much to know.” The problem propelled these Early Modern readers to develop new ways of sorting and accessing printed media. We have seen the rise of philology to find and copy authentic texts. We have noted how imperialism and the

Enlightenment created a boom in the sciences, including mathematics, anthropology, biology, botany, geography, and so on. All of this is anticipated by Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* as well.

In this essay, consider information overload as both a historical phenomenon and a feature of your own life. What happens when the amount of information available to us exceeds our capacity to read, remember, evaluate, or organize it? Drawing examples from at least two historical periods which we have studied (antiquity, the late Middle Ages, the Early Modern period), develop an argument about the ramifications of information and abundance.

Using examples from at least two historical periods we have studied, develop an argument about the consequences of information abundance; then, connect those periods to your own time in the present. You might consider: What is gained when information becomes more plentiful and accessible, and what is lost? Does greater access to information actually produce greater knowledge? How have people responded to the realization that there is simply "too much to know"? And to what extent are contemporary experiences of distraction, burnout, or informational anxiety genuinely new?

Ultimately, is information overload a problem of information itself, or a problem of our expectations about what we ought to be able to know?

Core Texts

- You will continue to be served by Derrida, but especially Freud's theory of the subconscious as articulated in his "Mystic Writing Pad" essay.
- Candida Moss and the role of slave labor in handling large amounts of information.
- Ann Blair: You have read the introduction, but I encourage you to thumb through the entire book to find ways to support your argument.
- Eisenstein: as above with Blair, consider skimming chapters that catch your eye.
- Steinhorst as a means toward considering our current information overload.

Framing texts to consider

- Pliny the Elder's preface, Pliny the Younger, Seneca.
- Revisit Gellius's preface to *Attic Nights*.
 - Compare with John Locke's *Method for Common-place Books* (1685)

WA 3. Autotheory Essay: Memory and Media (5 pages)

Autotheory is work that engages in thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and peculiarities of one's lived experiences, as processed through or juxtaposed against theory—or as the basis for theoretical thinking. It strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice. Often discursive, it offers us a thought-provoking, multivalent kind of hybridity, one unafraid to mix theory with creativity and lyricism, and with the graphic details of one's very specific physical experience. Lauren Fournier, whose dissertation investigates autotheory, defines it as "contemporary works of literature, art, and art-writing that integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries" ("Autotheory"). The term was used, if not coined, by Stacey Young in a chapter of her 1997 *Changing the Wor(L)D: Discourse, Politics, and Feminist Movement*, where she investigates writing that attempts "to counter discourses that homogenize 'women,' and that reify the concerns and strategies of relatively privileged women, with other discourses that center on the experiences and perspectives of women traditionally marginalized on the grounds of race, class, ethnic or religious background, sexuality, physical ability, and so forth" (61).

— Arianne Zwartjes, *Under the Skin: "An Exploration of Autotheory"*

How do you see media as shaping memory?

When I was little, my head was awash in phone numbers; later, it was awash in passwords, credit-card numbers, and other sequences of digits that are now more or less irrelevant—saved and encrypted in the cloud. And so I have forgotten them. I no longer memorize such things. Media and technology have thus shaped not only what I remember, but also how I practice remembering. To offer another brief example, I often remember through my Photos app rather than my diary. Optimistically, I might say that my brain is now freed to remember other, more valuable things: philosophy, language, poetry. Pessimistically, I might wonder whether the disappearance of these little mnemonic exercises has left my memory weaker or less plastic. Is it harder for me to memorize anything now?

Throughout this course, we have seen that memory and media are deeply entangled: from Plato's anxiety about writing and the invention of writing in *Gilgamesh*, to the extraordinary mnemonic capacities of Greek bardic culture and its transformation as writing became dominant; from the proliferation of textuality in Alexandria to the new speed and abundance of information brought about by print—and with it piracy, bad copies, and what we might now call *slop*.

In this essay, consider what happens to memory when media change. New media can preserve things that would otherwise disappear, but they also produce new forms of loss and forgetting. Begin with your own experience of a media transition or memory technology: personal habits of memorization, photographs, physical notebooks, social media, disappearing files, cloud storage, search engines, passwords, old computers, or some other encounter with remembering and forgetting. Use this experience as an entry point, then move outward toward the theoretical and historical problems we have studied this semester.

Your essay should develop an argument about the relationship between memory and media, rather than simply cataloguing examples of technological change. Some possible questions include:

- How have shifts in media coincided with shifts in media? How do you see that shaping recollection? You might compare two different historical transitions—for example, the shift from papyrus roll to codex in Christian late antiquity and the Middle Ages alongside the movement between print and manuscript in Heian Japan.
- What happens when individuals or cultures externalize memory into a new medium? What capacities are gained, and what practices or abilities are diminished? How does this make information vulnerable, and what are some examples when the trade-off worked or failed?
- Pursuant to the above point, what does the apparent permanence of digital media actually make memory more precarious? What does the possibility of a “digital dark age” reveal about earlier episodes of cultural loss?
- While writing of course preserves memories in some sense, in what ways does the preservation of a memory in writing overwrite our ability to recall events themselves?
- Does having information constantly available change the value or meaning of knowing something by heart?

Your goal is to move from personal experiences toward the theoretical and historical frameworks we have studied in class. The personal should provide a problem or question (>1 page) that the

rest of the essay investigates; it should not become the essay's sole subject. Draw connections between your own habits of remembering and the historical instances of preservation, transformation, and loss we have encountered—from Alexandria and the transmission of ancient texts to print culture and the possibility of a digital dark age.

Core Texts

- Kittler, Introduction, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*
- Bernhard, "Shining a Light on the Digital Dark Age"
- Steinhorst, "Lost in the Scroll"
- Freud, Mystic Writing Pad

Supplementary Texts

Anything we have read thus far is fair game. I encourage you to keep Derrida in mind, as well as Gilgamesh and Borges. Keep in mind, too, changes in book formats and the reasons those changes took hold.

Secondary Sources

You must use one of these but you are welcome to use more, though given your limited space I would use no more than two (maaaaaybe three).

- Too, Yun Lee. "Inside and Outside the Library: The Memory of Canon." In *The Idea of the Library in the Ancient World*, edited by Yun Lee Too. Oxford University Press, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577804.003.0007>.
- Keenan, Catherine. "On the Relationship between Personal Photographs and Individual Memory." *History of Photography* 22, no. 1 (1998): 60–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.1998.10443918>.
- Hoskins, Andrew. "The Forgetting Ecology: Losing the Past through Digital Media and AI." In *The Remaking of Memory in the Age of the Internet and Social Media*, edited by Qi Wang and Andrew Hoskins. Oxford University Press, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197661260.003.0003>.
- Storm, Benjamin C., Dana-Lis Bittner, and Jeremy K. Yamashiro. "The Changing Dynamics and Consequences of Memory Retrieval in the Age of the Internet." In *The Remaking of Memory in the Age of the Internet and Social Media*, edited by Qi Wang and Andrew Hoskins. Oxford University Press, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197661260.003.0006>.

Expectations

- **Integrate Personal Reflection and Close Reading:** An effective essay here will blend first-person philosophical reflection with direct, engaged reading of our theoretical texts. Ground your personal insights in the terminology and concepts of Ong, Kittler, Derrida, or Bernhard. Your introductory anecdote should be less than one page, though you can (and should) continue to blend your opening anecdote with your subsequent arguments.
- **Maintain Intellectual Nuance:** Avoid simple binary conclusions (e.g., "*Technology is entirely bad*"). Embrace the tensions and paradoxes inherent to archival media and memory.

- **Form & Style:** Let your writing be essayistic in the truest sense. (The French verb *essayer* means “to try” or “to attempt.”) However, you must develop a thoughtful perspective while remaining textually grounded in our readings.