

# Digital / Material Reflection

---

Sarah Noonan  
Saint Mary's College

**Artifact type:** Assignment

**Developed for:** Upper-level English class

**Audience:** Advanced English literature majors

**Time required:** One 1-hour class session on Voyant + outside work

**Method and tool:** Text analysis with Voyant

## **Description:**

This assignment was situated in a senior-level undergraduate capstone course which guides students through the composition of a 15-20 page senior thesis project. Students in the course had previously taken a semester-long course on literary theory, and I built on this foundation by assigning short, complementary scholarly essays alongside the literary works we read. These scholarly works offered students a variety of critical and methodological perspectives (from postcolonial and feminist theory to book history and computational analysis) to inform their readings of the course's literary works.

This assignment was given before students had begun drafting their theses, and it asked them to approach the work(s) of one of our assigned authors from either a material or digital perspective. During a class session in my college's Rare Book Reading Room, I introduced students to the type of close material and typographical analysis that often undergirds the work of book historians as they analyze particular copies of a text. I then used a later class period to introduce students to Voyant and the types of distant computational analysis accessible through this platform; this hands-on session was paired with a discussion of Lisa Rhody's short essay, "[Why I Dig](#)." While leading discussions during these class periods, I encouraged students to consider how the close material analysis of a particular copy of a work and the distant textual analysis of a textual corpus—although seemingly opposing analytical perspectives—might both generate new questions regarding the literary text(s) being studied.

After these in-class discussions, students were tasked with exploring one of these methods in greater depth through this assignment. Because this was not a course focused on the Digital Humanities, I allowed students to focus on the methodological approach (material or digital) of their choice; I then asked students to consider what new questions might be asked of the work(s) they were exploring as a result of their chosen method—a key outcome of this assignment since students were, at this point in the semester, formulating research questions that would eventually motivate their senior theses.

Roughly two-thirds of the students chose to pursue the digital reflection assignment. In general, students asked productive questions of the corpora they explored, although some of the usefulness of this exercise didn't emerge for students until later in the semester when they were tasked with producing a poster presentation of their theses for a college-wide research symposium. Visualizations produced with Voyant were used by multiple students on their posters and provided them with an accessible, visually engaging method of conveying their claims to the broader campus community. Overall, I was pleased with the outcome of this assignment, and I intend to repeat it in the coming year. The one substantive change I will be making during this second iteration is that I plan to guide students through Voyant's tools in a more structured way by reducing the amount of

time devoted to exploring various tools and increasing the time spent on modelling how a selection of tools can be applied to an assigned data set with differing results.

**Supporting materials:**

Assignment and rubric

### **Digital or Material Reflection**

For this assignment, you are asked to compose a 3-4-page written reflection on either the type of information that can be gained from the digital analysis of the work(s) of an author (a distant reading, digital focus) *or* the material contexts in which a work occurs (a material, archival focus). While these approaches need not be mutually exclusive, I am asking that you focus on just one approach in this reflection. The digital or material approach discussed in this assignment by no means necessitates that you must use that approach in your Senior Seminar Essay.

#### **For the Digital Reflection:**

During our class discussion of Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*, I introduced you to Voyant and how this site provides you with a variety of digital tools for the analysis of large textual corpora. For this assignment I ask that you:

- Upload the .txt files to Voyant that I have provided you of either Margaret Cavendish's or Virginia Woolf's works (if you want to explore some other textual data set – let's talk to see how that might be possible).
- After exploring how different tools allow you to analyze distinct features of these works, pick 2-3 tools that seem to you most useful. Spend some time manipulating your search terms, changing your data sets, and, in general, exploring the potential benefits and drawbacks of these selected tools and how they might enable you to notice new features or characteristics of the corpora you are exploring.
- Write a 3-4 page response essay that describes what you have discovered in the course of your digital explorations. I encourage you, in particular, to ask how the results and goals of reading from a distance might extend or deviate from the practice of close reading with which you are familiar. Such an essay might note a recurrent theme in *Orlando* and then seek to establish the continuity of that theme over time throughout Woolf's works; or such an essay might focus on a particular word or combination of words in *Blazing World* to consider how that novel might depart from the concerns of other works by Cavendish. As you reflect upon the data you examine, articulate how thinking about these works in digital and distant contexts allows you to ask new questions of the work we read in its entirety.

#### **For the Material Reflection:**

During several of our classes, including our classes on the *Inferno* and Chaucer and our forthcoming class on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, we examined / will examine copies of works in the Rare Book Room that demonstrate how those works have circulated in varied material forms among readers at different historical moments. For this assignment I ask that you:

- Locate an archive that contains material pertinent to a course text in which you are interested. This archive might be one you can visit in person (SMC's Rare Book Room or ND's Special Collections) or one you can visit digitally.
- Identify 2-3 items in that archive that you deem significant in some way (printed editions of a work from a single historical period or across multiple periods; manuscript editions; digital editions or reinterpretations; early drafts; subsequent reinterpretations of a work by another author, etc.).
- Examine the material features of those items with an eye to considering how those features might influence how modern and/or past readers have interpreted, understood, and/or navigated your selected work. You might, for example, consider how the material context (size of a book, textual layout, qualities of materials used, number and type of images included, etc.) in which your author's work appears shapes our understanding of that work. Or how these material contexts or later textual additions (such as marginal comments, doodles, corrections, etc.) might reveal how past audiences responded to this work. You might even ask if any evidence of ownership can be found that would enable you to identify where a copy of a work was at a certain time and who its historical readers might have actually been.
- Write a 3-4 page response essay that introduces the archive that you are focusing on and provides an analysis of what you deem to be the most interesting characteristics of the material contexts of your chosen archival items. As you reflect upon the items you examine, articulate how thinking about your selected work in its varied, material contexts allows you to ask new questions of it.

All papers should be typed, using 12-point Times New Roman font, and have 1-inch margins. Please use MLA citation styles. You are not required, for this assignment, to reference secondary sources, but, if you do so, they must be included in your bibliography.

**Rubric for Digital / Material Reflection**

**Scale** **Nascent** **Developing** **Competent** **Accomplished**

**Key Components of the Assignment**

Essay organized purposefully and developed persuasively (clear thesis, precise topic sentences, effective transitions, and focused paragraphing)

---

Demonstrates a detailed, sustained engagement with archival material / digital methods of textual analysis

---

Uses archival material / digital methods of textual analysis to reflect productively upon the work being discussed

---

Archival inquiry / digital methods of textual analysis used to ask questions of the work being discussed that might be pursued in future research

---

**Style**

Ideas are expressed clearly and concisely

---

Tone is consistent and appropriate

---

Word choice is appropriate & effective

---

Authorial voice clear and displays confidence

---



---

**Mechanics** (check problem areas)

- |   |                                      |   |   |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Proofreading                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Modifiers   | <input type="checkbox"/> Parallel Structure | <input type="checkbox"/> Tense Agreement  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pronoun Agreement              | <input type="checkbox"/> Antecedents | <input type="checkbox"/> Sentence Fragments | <input type="checkbox"/> Run-on Sentences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Format (title, pp. #, margins) | <input type="checkbox"/> Possessives | <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other:           |

---

**COMMENTS (continue on back if necessary):**

**GRADE** \_\_\_\_\_