Collecting and Using Data to Generate a Research Question: Death in the *Iliad* as a Case Study

Robyn Le Blanc
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Artifact type: Workshop and Assignment
Developed for: Upper-level undergraduate survey course, but can be scaled for lower-level and large lecture courses
Audience: Both majors and non-majors in a Classical Studies course
Time required: Approximately 1.5 hours, depending on the size of the groups and access to computers; step 4 can be done as homework
Method and tool: Integrating data into the humanities research process with Google spreadsheet (optional: Voyant, WTFCSV, RawGraphs)

Description:
This workshop is intended to help students practice moving from a research topic to a research question through the collection, organization, and analysis of textual data using Homer's *Iliad* as a case study. Students begin with a topic or theme (in this case, death in the *Iliad*) and then think about how to organize the salient pieces of information and detail related to that topic (i.e. "data") into a spreadsheet, where data can be collected and compared, and then analyzed. With this dataset, students then look for trends, patterns, or interesting features and gaps that will help generate a research question that can be addressed by further research and data collection. This assignment was created for an upper-level Classical Studies course with an enrollment of both majors and non-majors, and was the first step in putting together a research proposal where students explained their research questions and how they would go about answering them. The data collection portion, however, is scalable, and with some modifications in group size and time, could be implemented in a large lecture class where students have access to computers and an internet connection.

Supporting materials:
Workshop overview as well as:

1. Appendix I: *Iliad* example (homework)
2. Appendix II: suggested basic list of criteria for spreadsheet, and notes for instructors
3. Appendix III: Research Project Proposal assignment sheet, rubric

NB: If students have been instructed in the use of Voyant, WTFCSV, and RawGraphs, they may use those programs to illustrate a particular trend or theme at the end of Steps 3 & 4, but this is not required. This step may be unnecessary if scaled for a large class.

WORKSHOP:

Collecting and Using Textual Data to Generate a Research Question

Workshop details:

We'll practice organizing large amounts of information and identifying themes or trends in that "data" in order to generate a research question. You'll eventually move on to doing this with your own research project later, but this is a group trial run to think about the decisions that go into the collection and organization of data. If a research project does not begin with a question, it typically begins with a topic. The goal here is to move from topic to research question through the collection of data on a topic which can highlight trends, themes, or problems that you can then tackle as a question.

We'll be looking at death in Homer's *Iliad* for this assignment. That's the kind of topic that might inspire a student to write a paper—but it's not (yet!) a research question. In order to move from death in the *Iliad* to a research question *about* death in the *Iliad* we need to collect some evidence on that topic! For our purposes, we'll be working in groups, but you'll eventually do this on your own.

Step 1: ESTABLISHING CRITERIA

1. Get into your assigned group.
2. Discuss the passage from Book 6 (lines 1-36) assigned for homework, thinking carefully about this question: When discussing depictions of death in this poem, what are the most important or prominent details or features that repeat or seem significant across examples? Remember that this will ultimately go into a spreadsheet, so it needs to be something focused and precise. Each person should take notes, as we'll share these features shortly.
3. After 5 minutes, you will pair up with 2 people from different groups and compare lists. Then, come up with a new list composed of what your group believes are the most important or significant categories of features. Work on redefining, narrowing, focusing your list of shared criteria.
4. After 7 minutes, we'll get back into our original groups and share again—identify all common features (to be shared in a minute with the class), and then (if you can) identify 2-3 additional criteria that you think are the most compelling/strongest that were not shared across lists.
5. One person from each group will write their list of criteria on the board.
6. Then, we'll identify and discuss common criteria, and then (as a group) decide which features should go into our spreadsheet.
7. As a group, we'll compare those criteria with some identified by me before meeting— we'll have the opportunity to tweak the criteria together before moving on.

Step 2: DATA ENTRY

1. Each group will be assigned several books from the *Iliad*. Please note! The number of books will vary depending on the content of that book.
2. The group will split up the book(s) and skim through their selection with a partner. At each death, the pair will discuss how the event fits in with the criteria we have identified and note any problems/disagreements/decisions that needed to be made. Please indicate these as a "comment" added to the applicable entry on the first column.
3. Students will then input each death event into the spreadsheet for their book.
4. Once the assigned books are all put into the spreadsheet, compare notes with the other pair in the groups, focusing on areas or moments of uncertainty, or where a decision needed to be made. Go back and revise based on these conversations.
5. Once completed, your group should combine the data from your assigned books into a single spreadsheet. One person from your group should volunteer to copy and paste that information into the shared class Google spreadsheet at the end of the working period.

Step 3: ANALYSIS

1. The results from all books will now be combined into a single, awesome spreadsheet.
2. Look at the spreadsheet **on your own**. Do you notice any major trends, themes, gaps, problems, interesting bits, etc.? Come up with a list of **5** of these.
3. Discuss your results in your group: did you come up with common ideas? Which ones?
4. Each group should pick **TWO** trends, themes, etc. to now try to quantify and visualize. How might you visually represent those trends using a map, graph, etc? What data would you display on that visualization, and which would you choose to not represent? Why?
5. Each group will pick **ONE** of their themes/trends and discuss what this trend/theme is, and use one of the visualization tools we have practiced (Voyant, RawGraphs, WTFCSV) to supplement the presentation of the data from the spreadsheet.
6. Each group will present their trend/theme and visualization in a short 2-3 minute presentation.

Step 4: CRAFTING AN ARGUMENT

1. On your own: Identify a theme, trend, pattern, or gap that you noticed in the spreadsheet. Use that as a jumping off point to create a research question; it shouldn't just be something easily answered with data ("how many people die in the *Iliad*?") but rather a question that hints toward an argument that needs to be developed ("X is not the real hero in the *Iliad* because he does not kill the most Trojans/Greeks").
2. Write down your rough draft of your research question (2-3 sentences).

3. Now, write a summary of the data and evidence from the spreadsheet that provoked your question; make sure to provide details and citations for your evidence! This should be 1-2 paragraphs.

4. Now, write a short paragraph explaining how you obtained this information. It will feel strange! But this is your methodology and is an important component of project design. Readers need to understand how you got your material and think about why you chose to isolate particular features of criteria.

5. Think carefully about the criteria and numbers attached to the trend you are interested in. Would seeing this data outside a spreadsheet help support your point? What would be the best way to visualize this data for your reader? Explain what tool you would use to do this (optional: you could design your own visualization; explain how you would do this).

6. Turn in this material at the beginning of our next class!

The goal of these workshops is to prepare you to:

1. Identify a text or material group from which you can extract data (this will be your "data set").

2. Identify a topic or theme that you will use to find information or details about in your data set.

3. Think consciously about the details, criteria, bits of information that you believe are relevant in understanding individual pieces of data.

4. Think consciously about how decisions and methods impact your identification and implementation of criteria for inputting data.

5. Begin to understand how the organizational tools we use impact the types of data we can work with, and the types of criteria we can isolate and assess.

6. Work with a large collection of data to identify trends, patterns, themes, or gaps to provoke a research question and serve as a data set to help answer that question (with the use of supplemental/complementary primary and secondary sources!!)

7. Practice these skills in preparation for your research proposal assignment!

Appendix I: Iliad lines assigned for homework

Iliad, Book 6, lines 1-36

Now the grim war between Trojans and Achaeans

was left to run its course. The battle raged,

this way and that, across the entire plain,

as warriors hurled bronze-tipped spears at one another,

between the Simoeis and Xanthus rivers.

Ajax, son of Telamon, Achaea's tower of strength,

was the first to break through ranks of Trojans,

punching out some breathing room for his companions.

He hit Acamas, son of Eussorus, a strong brave soldier,

best of the Thracians. Ajax's spear struck him first   10

on the peak of his horse-plumed helmet. The sharp bronze

drove right into his forehead—dead in the center—

straight through bone into the brain. Darkness fell on his eyes.

Diomedes, expert in war cries, killed Axylus,

son of Teuthras, a rich man, from well-built Arisbe.

People really loved him, for he lived beside a road

and welcomed all passers-by into his home.

But not one of those men he'd entertained now stood

in front of him, protecting him from wretched death.

Diomedes took the lives of two men—Axylus   20

and his attendant charioteer, Calesius.

So both men went down into the underworld.

Euryalus killed Dresus and Opheltius,

then charged after Aesepus and Pedasus,

whom the naiad nymph Abarbarea bore

to noble Boucolion, son of high-born Laomedon,

his eldest son. His mother bore Pedasus in secret

Bucolion had had sex with the nymph

while tending to his flock. She became pregnant,

then gave birth to two twin sons. Euryalus,   30

son of Mecistus, slaughtered both of them,

destroying their strength and splendid bodies.

Then he stripped the armour from their shoulders.

Next, fierce warrior Polypoetes killed Astyalus.

With his bronze spear Odysseus killed Pidytes from Percote.

Teucer slaughtered lord Aretaon, and Antilochus,

Nestor's son, with his glittering spear killed Ableros.

Agamemnon, king of men, killed Elatus,

who lived in lofty Pedasus, beside the banks

of the fair-flowing river Satnioeis.   40

Heroic Leitus knocked down Phylacus, as he was fleeing.

And Eurypylus then slaughtered Melanthus.

Johnston translation [http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/homer/iliad6.htm]

Appendix II: Suggested Basic List of Criteria for Spreadsheet

1. Each death = 1 line
2. A-Z etc:
    a. Name of attacker
    b. Affiliation of attacker (Greek, Trojan, etc.)
    c. Name of attacked
    d. Affiliation of attacked (Greek, Trojan, etc.)
    e. Attacker weapon
    f. Location of wound
    g. Notes/interesting points

Notes:

A. The list above is the most basic set of criteria for the activity; students will likely suggest additional criteria that you can add to this.
B. There is much room for discussion about vocabulary—for example, what if the attacker is a god? Is their affiliation, then, for whatever side they are aiding (i.e. Aphrodite on behalf of the Trojans), or is there an additional option for "god" or "divine" in that box? This is a good opportunity to talk about the creation of a controlled vocabulary, and the importance of being explicit about the decisions you make as you collect data
C. Some elements are not listed in a given death scene, i.e. the location of the wound or weapon. It may be desirable to allow students to figure out what to do in these scenarios, and then to clean up the master spreadsheet afterwards, as a way of discussing decision-making (i.e. some students will leave a box blank if there is no information, while others may enter "n/a" or "N/A")

D. Encourage students to pick focused, succinct criteria that does not necessitate phrases or sentences, which will make comparison of large amounts of data more difficult.

Appendix III: Research Proposal Assignment Sheet & Rubric

Research Proposal and Data Collection Assignment

Assignment: This project continues our exploration of using evidence to generate an argument. The goal of the project is for you to identify a set of texts or material culture (sculpture, coins, etc.), collect that evidence, organize it, and then analyze that evidence for patterns/trends/themes/gaps which you will use to stimulate a research question. This research question (and your organizational methodology) will be at the heart of a research proposal based in form on UNCG's Undergraduate Research and Creativity Award (URCA) proposals (see: utlc.uncg.edu/ursco/funding/urca/).

URCA proposal: An URCA proposal is a research proposal. The proposal's main goal is to earn the writer funding to carry out the research project outlined in the proposal. A key component of a research proposal is *research design*, i.e. how you will go about conducting the research and answering the research question you have generated*. The proposal identifies a set of evidence, outlines the methods used to collect, organize, and analyze that evidence, and explains how the evidence informed your research question. Then, it outlines a plan for using the evidence to *answer* or *address* the research question using your dataset and additional source material. This is NOT a research paper or project; instead, it is a plan to conduct a research project. You don't need to be able to answer your research question at the end—you just need to develop a plan or design that would enable you to address or answer your question (note that I didn't say *prove*, but *address* or *answer*.)

Key steps:
1. **Review the sample URCA proposals** to establish the conventions of the genre, and key components of a research proposal (we'll do this in class)
2. **Review the URCA proposal instructions**; these lay out the expectations of each component (we'lll do this in class). You MUST format your proposal according to these instructions—there is also a STRICT page requirement that you must follow!
3. **Practice**: we'll practice identifying a theme or topic, collecting evidence on that topic and organizing it in a way that we can identify patterns and trends, and then use those patterns/trends/themes to generate a research question during an in-class workshop.
4. **Identify your own "dataset" and a theme or subject** related to that dataset to "mine" for information; a primary source or collection of primary sources that you will organize into a database/spreadsheet/data collection. Then you will extract the evidence you need and organize it according to the categories or criteria that you think will be the most meaningful in teasing out trends or themes.

5. **Organize your data using an informed and thoughtful method** that reflects meaningful and deliberate choices about what types of information/details to include, and which to ignore.

6. **Use your data to generate a research question**.

7. **Identify 4-5 *secondary* sources** that will help establish the historical and/or literary/material context for your research question, and help you answer it.

8. **Write up your proposal** according to the URCA proposal guidelines.

9. **Submit**!

<div align="center">

URCA FORMAT AND LENGTH

=5 PAGES TOTAL + DATASET

</div>

1. TITLE PAGE (1 page)

    A. Title of the project (centered)

    B. Student's name (centered, at bottom)

2. THREE-PAGE PROJECT DESCRIPTION (3 pages) : should be **three pages** in length, **single spaced.** Cannot go over or under! Logistics: standard 1-inch margins on all sides. You must use the font "Calibri" (no smaller than 11 point, no larger than 12 point). The project description should be written in jargon-free English, and include the following sections:

    A. Project background: historical and literary or material context, background information, date, etc. **B. Project methodology**: what evidence did the researcher identify? How many pieces of information? How was it organized, i.e. tools/methods used, but also the criteria used (and why that criteria).
    C. Topic to Research question: what pattern/theme/gap did you identify, and what is your research question based on the data collection?
    D. Objectives: how will you answer your question? What will you DO? (use ***VERBS***)
    E. Significance: What will answering this question achieve? How will it change your (our) understanding of the material, period, work?

3. LITERATURE CITED PAGE (1 page): 4-5 sources (in addition to your primary source(s)). This page should only contain a list of cited works in your project description. Your citation method is up to you, but you must be consistent!

4. Dataset. Format and number of entries/individual pieces of data will vary.

RUBRIC

DATA SET   22.5 points

Data set is based on primary source evidence and organized in a meaningful manner; criteria are thoughtfully selected, even if not ultimately relevant to final project. Data set is clearly both inspired by a topic and connected to the generation of the project's ultimate research question.

PROJECT BACKGROUND   22.5 points
Project background establishes appropriate context (historical, thematic, genre, etc) for the reader in order to understanding the research project and question. Background provides relevant details and descriptions.

RESEARCH QUESTION, OBJECTIVES, SIGNIFICANCE   22.5. points
The research question is clearly generated from the data set, and is a question that needs to be explored more fully with additional data/secondary source material, and displays nuance and details beyond a simple statement or yes/no question. The project goals moving forward are clearly defined and achievable given the project outline. The researcher has a sense of the importance of the project as it relates to our understanding of the past.

METHODOLOGY   20 points
Methodologies--including the description of how the dataset was compiled, and how the researcher will move forward in answering their question--are clearly stated and appropriate to the project.

SOURCES   7 points
Primary sources and literature cited are appropriate for the project and properly cited in the proposal and (in the case of secondary sources) on the literature cited page. Secondary source material is referenced in the proposal itself and contributes to the conception of the project, rather than simply appearing on the literature cited page. Secondary sources are scholarly and appropriate for the project.

MECHANICS   5.5 points
Proposal is the correct length, with a format following the URCA Assignment sheet (rather than the sample URCAS); grammatical, spelling, and mechanical mistakes are minimal.

=100 points total