



## Close Reading: Digital Archives

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### Introduction:

This activity, which guides students through using and analyzing a digital archive, was originally taught in a 300-level English course at Rutgers University to students with little previous experience with the digital humanities. The course focused on theories and methods in book history with a particular attention to using physical and digital archives. That being said, the activity itself unfolds in three parts: (1) exploring an online archive; (2) comparing your findings to those of a partner; and (3) writing a reflection paper on the experience. Depending on the course the activity is taught in—and how much time can be spent on the topic—instructors might choose to use only one or two parts of the assignment, rather than all three.

Before students completed parts 1 and 2 of this activity in class (and part 3 outside of class), the class read and discussed [“Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What’s in a Name?”](#) by Kenneth Price for an introduction into what digital archives are and the terms we use to describe them. I also assigned [“On Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from Mythical, Imaginary, Impossible Standpoints”](#) from *Data Feminism* by Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein to help students consider how the design of data and digital content is always rhetorical. Our discussion of this text, in particular, was useful in terms of how it helped students begin to identify ways of close

reading design, organizational, and other choices for their implied arguments. If this activity is to be adapted for use, instead, for a class more focused on digital methods, in particular, more readings for a critical framework on digital archives could be assigned.

Finally, in the class session before teaching this activity, I modeled the process of using and analyzing a digital archive by walking us through a collaborative demonstration and discussion of the Emily Dickinson Online Archive. We'd read Dickinson recently, so they were familiar with the archive's existence. With the archive projected onto a screen, we searched for poems and key words together, explored the site's navigation, and then discussed what kinds of design choices the site's team had made in creating and organizing the archive in the ways it did. This discussion, even more so than the readings, were helpful in preparing students to do this work themselves during the following class.

During the activity, I provided students with a list of digital archives to choose from that was based on online archives that had already been mentioned briefly in the course (see the list in [Appendix A](#)). Depending on the course, instructors can choose different archives to populate this list, but I found that providing specific archives was helpful in giving students choice while still providing useful parameters. During part 2 of the activity, I also made sure to pair each student with someone who had chosen a different digital archive from their own to make sure they explored two different sites during the activity as a whole. I found that their ability to identify contrasts between their findings and experiences helped them to later pinpoint rhetorical choices site designers were making and what effect those choices had on their overall experience of the site.

Students expressed excitement about the discoveries they made while exploring their archives in part 1, which helped produce a rich discussion in part 2 of the assignment. During part 2, I found it was very important to start encouraging students to reflect more on the design of the website itself, as well as the discoveries they made, to prepare them for part 3. While the reflection papers that resulted did make a good deal of rich observations and began to pursue the implied arguments digital archives were making, they would have been stronger if I'd worked in a rough draft/final draft version of the paper. Perhaps, if there's time in the course, future instructors would consider giving feedback to students on the reflection paper that questions some of their assumptions about what a design or technical decision might mean. Then, instructors could give students the option of submitting a revision or a full analytic paper, instead of a reflection paper, at the end of the course.

I would also like to give my very sincere thanks to Andrew Goldstone, who shared another version of an activity that helps students critically analyze digital archives. The questions included in this activity's appendices are particularly indebted to him.

## Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
  - Become acquainted with important digital archives and exhibitions in the field of transatlantic nineteenth-century literature
  - Engage in archival research on prominent digital archives to uncover materials that could become the subject of future analytic and research projects in this course and beyond
  - Learn to close read and question the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive
  - Collaborate with classmates to analyze your close reading observations about a digital archive
  - Reflect, in writing, on how the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive might speak to a site's larger, implied arguments about authorship, literary genres, publication formats, socio-cultural contexts, etc.
- **Task:**
  - Part 1: Explore an online archive
    - Choose a digital archive from the list provided.
    - Click around the website and take notes on its design and functionality based on the questions provided (see [Appendix A](#)).
    - Use the search function to locate one object (a letter, a page from a magazine, an image, etc.) and take notes on it based on the questions provided (see [Appendix A](#)).
  - Part II: Share findings with a partner
    - Take turns walking your assigned partner through your chosen archive. Make sure to share both the key features of the archive and its organization as well as your specific archival find.
    - Note specific similarities and differences between the sites and how these similarities and differences frame your experience of the site and what you found on it.

- Participate in a whole class debrief on your findings both individually and as a pair.
- Part III: Write a reflection paper
  - Use the thought-provoker questions provided (see [Appendix B](#)) to help you write a brief (2-3 page, double spaced) reflection paper on your experience of your chosen digital archive.
- **Purpose:** This activity not only serves as an introduction to online archival research, but it also helps you develop stronger digital literacy skills. This gives you the opportunity to identify a specific archival object that might spur you on to further research, but it also prompts you to think critically about *how* archival information is organized, framed, and made accessible, as well as what kind implied arguments websites and archives both can be making in their design, structure, and technical specifications.
- **Criteria/Grading:** The in-class portion of this activity (parts 1 and 2) are graded P/F as part of the course's overall participation grade. The rubric for the reflection paper portion of this activity (part 3) is provided below as part of [Appendix B](#) and focuses on a student's ability to make form-based observations that lead them to the beginnings of larger, analytical arguments. Because this paper is a *reflection* paper only, the writing can be more informal and the grade does not focus on formal structure or thesis statements.

### Further Reading:

- D'Ignazio, Catherine and Lauren Klein. "[On Rational, Scientific, Objective Viewpoints from Mythical, Imaginary, Impossible Standpoints.](#)" *Data Feminism*, MIT Press, 2020, pp. 1-32.
- Price, Kenneth. "[Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What's in a Name?](#)" *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3.3 (2009): chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=englishfacpubs>
- Flores, Leonardo. "Reimagining Critical Practices for E-Poetry." Prezi Presentation: [Close Reading 2.0: Reimagining Critical Practices for E-Poetry by Leonardo Flores on Prezi](#) (see [Appendix C](#) for a handout drawn from this work to facilitate students identifying rhetorical elements of digital designs)

# Appendix A: Assignment Sheet for In-Class Activity (Parts 1 & 2)

## Exploring Digital Archives: In-Class Activity

### Part 1 Learning Outcomes:

- Become acquainted with important digital archives and exhibitions in the field of transatlantic nineteenth-century literature
- Engage in archival research on prominent digital archives to uncover materials that could become the subject of future analytic and research projects in this course and beyond
- Learn to close read and question the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive

### Part 1 Instructions:

(1) For class today, you will be exploring in depth one of the online archives we've referenced briefly already in this course. Start by picking one archive from the list below:

- [The Walt Whitman Archive](#)
- [The Willa Cather Archive](#)
- [The Cassey & Dickerson Friendship Albums Online Exhibition](#)
- [The Winnifred Eaton Archive](#)
- [The Women's Literary Club of Baltimore Archive](#)
- [The Modernist Journals Project](#)
- [The Vault at Pfaffs](#)
- [Charles Booth's London](#)

(2) After you've chosen an archive, briefly click through to get used to its functionality, and take notes on the following questions:

1. What does the archive's interface look like? What are some specific aesthetic choices the archive's team has made? What's the effect of those choices on you?
2. Try navigating to different pages, playing around with the search functions, etc. How does the site feel to you as a user? What is easy to find and what's hard? What surprises you about how it's organized? Or what annoys you about it? Why?

3. Read the archive's "About" page and any descriptions it has of its mission. What do they highlight as most important? How does this compare to what you expected might be important for a project like this?
4. Who appears to maintain this archive? Is there anything that suggests its source of funding? Are there broken links or other roadblocks that seem to need updating? How dated does the interface feel?
5. What does this archive look like on your mobile device? Is it just as accessible? How do you navigate it? What changes about your experience of it when you use it on your phone?

(3) Now, select one archival object (one specific page in an album, a single letter, a manuscript version of one poem, etc.) to focus on. You can use the search function to choose a particular object you have in mind (from class, say) or you can select one at random. (TIP: don't belabor the decision too much; just pick something that seems interesting, fun, strange, or otherwise stands out to you!)

(4) As you explore the object, take notes on the following questions:

1. What type of object do you think this is? How do you know? How is it meant to be used or read? Who might be the intended audience?
2. What are you most drawn to about this object? What about it made you pick it in the first place? Make sure to consider both formal and content-based things here.
3. What about this object surprises you? Confuses you? Make sure to consider both formal and content-based things here.
4. What is the platform like for displaying this object? For example, how easy is it to look at, navigate, zoom? What about it is exciting to you? Annoying to you? Confusing to you?
5. What extra information does this archive provide about this object (if any)? Does this change the way you think about or interpret the object? How?
6. What are you curious about that *isn't* accessible about this object in this format? This could be extra information/context or this could be more physical knowledge about the object that you might get if you were to view this object in person. What is or is not accessible about your object on your mobile device as opposed to on the computer?

## **Part 2 Learning Outcomes:**

- Become acquainted with important digital archives and exhibitions in the field of transatlantic nineteenth-century literature
- Learn to close read and question the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive
- Collaborate with classmates to analyze your close reading observations about a digital archive

## **Part 2 Instructions:**

(5) Next, I will assign you a partner who chose a *different* archive from yours (or, at the very least, a different object on your archive).

(6) Discuss your findings with that partner by:

1. Describing the archive and the object you chose to them
2. Comparing and contrasting the archives and objects you both looked at
3. Talking through the different responses you had to these differences and starting to develop some conclusions or claims about why this might be and why it matters. Make sure to take notes on these discussions as they will help you in the next part of this assignment.

(6) Stand by for class discussion/debrief!

## **Appendix B: Assignment Sheet for Reflection Paper (Part 3)**

### **Digital Archives: Reflection Paper**

**Logistics:** 2-3 double spaced pages (about 750-1000 words); due on Canvas by 11:59 p.m. on July 3.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Become acquainted with important digital archives and exhibitions in the field of transatlantic nineteenth-century literature
- Learn to close read and question the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive
- Reflect, in writing, on how the design, technical, and organizational features of a digital archive might speak to a site's larger, implied arguments about authorship, literary genres, publication formats, socio-cultural contexts, etc.

### **Instructions:**

Write a short paper critically reflecting on your experience of looking at a digital scholarly archive and one of its objects. Your paper can be informal in style (and can use the first person "I" to describe your experience on the interface), but it should still (a) incorporate a close reading of some element of the site/object that came up in class, and (b) begin to arrive at some potential interpretations or claims about the site based on these observations/close readings. A successful paper will demonstrate that you have given time to exploring a scholarly website seriously and reflecting on it in terms of the questions we have been discussing in the course. Consider the following questions as some potential topics or through-provokers (NOTE: you are not required to answer all these questions in your paper!):\*

1. What particular capacities does the website have? What was your experience of using it like?
2. What claims, implicit or explicit, does it make for itself?
3. What was exciting or frustrating about the design, by comparison with other possibilities (especially those you uncovered in conversation with your partner)? Cite specific evidence to support your interpretation—specific language from webpages on the site; specific aesthetic details; specific descriptions of your interactions with the site; even screenshots, if they support your argument.



4. How is knowledge organized? What is exciting, frustrating, or confusing about that organization? How *should* large amounts of information be sorted and synthesized? What would have changed your experience of it?
5. What specific problems and opportunities does digitization create? When do you follow links, and where do they take you? When do you hit brick walls? What do you try next?
6. Pay special attention to framing material that explains what the site's creators think their creation does: the home page, any "About" pages, information about the personnel, the institutional backers, and so on. Which of these felt most exciting and important to you versus to the creators themselves?
7. After reflecting on your experience of using this site and comparing it to your partners' site, imagine others using it. Based on this, what kinds of users are envisioned by the site and its design? Are there different possible types of use (expert, educational, casual, hobbyist, private...)?
8. Who does the labor to keep up this archive? How is it funded and sustained? How often does it seem to be updated and maintained? What do you think might be the challenges facing this particular site, as a result? How might these challenges reflect on larger, systemic issues of funding, labor, sustainability, and value?

Your paper should not include every detail of your exploration; instead, you should select from your observations to build up your interpretive argument.

The archive you discuss should be the archive you began exploring in class. You are not expected to be or become an expert on the subject of the archive; rather, you should think hard about how the digital medium is shaping the presentation of the subject, your reactions to it, and what alternative possibilities (digital or otherwise) there might be. There is no need to cite outside sources. Your focus should be on personally reflecting on the digital archive itself via close reading.

### **Grading criteria**

A successful paper concisely and clearly describes the archive of choice (who made it, what it is for, how it works); demonstrates your own personal reflection on your experience of using the site; effectively cites and discusses particular evidence from the site to start to develop claims about the site and its objects; convincingly connects its discussion to major themes from the course so far; is written and organized clearly.

The paper will be graded on the GPA (4-point) scale. In general, A-range papers (3.5–4.0) make interesting claims/reflections and are well-supported by evidence; B-range papers

(2.5–3.5) cite and analyze evidence without necessarily reaching a striking claim; C-range papers (1.5–2.5) make only superficial observations and generalizations. D and F grades (less than 1.5) go to papers that ignore the assignment or demonstrate little to no effort to fulfill the requirements.

\*This framing of this reflection paper assignment is indebted to Dr. Andrew Goldstone, particularly in terms of these thought-provoker questions, many of which derive from the useful question Dr. Goldstone asks in his own classes on digital archives and the humanities.

## Appendix C: Handout to Facilitate Student Close Reading

### Features of a Digital Source

As Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein remind us, "Any communicating object that reflects choices about the selection and representation of reality is a rhetorical object... It *especially and definitively* includes those so-called neutral visualizations that do not appear to have an editorial hand" (D'Ignazio and Klein 7). Just as we might analyze form-based elements of a text (repetition, syntax, figurative language, tone, etc.), we can analyze form-based elements of a digital source as rhetorical choices. But how do we identify these aesthetic, organizational, and technical elements, especially when they "do not appear to have an editorial hand"? This handout provides a non-exhaustive list of features you might begin to consider as you identify these elements for analysis.

- **Data set:** What information is being used as data? What parameters are being set on it? What is included and what is left out based on these parameters?
- **Formatting:** How does the data look on the page? Consider visual elements like color, size, placement, etc.
- **Documentation and Citation:** How is the data documented? What sources are cited (if they are)? How does the site document or cite components like funding, labor, process, etc.
- **Structure:** How is information organized and subordinated on the site? On a particular page? Identify patterns and variation in how data, images, text, and other elements are arranged. What is made to seem most significant and why?
- **Text:** What is written out explicitly and what is implied? Which data has text explaining it and which doesn't? How does the text craft what you are seeing? Is there metadata? How does that compare to what you think you are seeing? What does it emphasize or de-emphasize? What titles does the site use and for what? [Note: you can always use your regular close-reading skills to analyze text here, too.]
- **Interactivity:** Which data, text, images, or other elements are static and which are kinetic? Can you move or influence it yourself through interaction? What is required to do so and what does it cause? How responsive are these elements to user interactivity?
- **Aurality:** Are there sound reality to the site's visual components? What is the tone, rhythm, volume, or text of the aural component? How does it relate to the visual components? What prompts it and when does it stop?

- **Graphic Elements:** What fonts are used? What are the background images? The color palate? The kinds of images chosen? Does it use videos, and for what?
- **Navigation:** How do you experience the larger site's organization? What inputs do you need to use to get quality results? What kind of search function does the site allow or disallow? How easy/hard is it to find or use this navigation? What frames of reference would make this navigation easier to use? What does it make easy to find? Hard to find?