



## Oral Responses Using Digital Archival Work

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### Introduction:

This assignment has been very successful in an upper-division undergraduate course for senior English majors focused on the continued literary recovery of Pacific Northwest author Ella Rhoads Higginson (1862?-1940). Though this context is crucial for a certain level of critical sophistication, the assignment could be modified for both higher and lower levels of student accomplishment.

In my experience, this assignment consistently engages students. Students locate multiple published reviews of the author's work that appeared during the author's lifetime and they respond with great interest to the range of reviews that they locate and the differences among those reviews. Reviews may vary significantly regarding length, specificity, close reading of the work being reviewed, and comparison to other works by the author or by other authors. The process of choosing which review they will use for their oral response helps students to consider what information or approach in any given review most draws their attention and how that will shape the response that they write.

The digitized nature of these reviews has been especially key to student analysis. For instance, students are asked to consider the context of the review: the publication in which it appeared (national or regional publication, newspaper, literary magazine); the date when it was published (some reviews appear shortly after a work's publication, others may appear many months or even years later); the material surrounding the review (illustrations, advertisements, other reviews or articles); and the place of the review in the publication (for instance, on the front page of an issue or several pages into the issue). A copy of the review isolated from its published context would certainly be valuable but would not allow students to examine and learn from the place of the review in a larger literary and cultural context. Here is [one example](#) from the front page of the August 1899 issue of *The Critic: An Illustrated Monthly Review of Literature, Art, and Life*:

In this case, the front-page review of Ella Higginson immediately followed by the review of fellow White female author Kate Chopin provides students with a sense of Higginson's literary prominence. The review minus the other authors discussed and its prominent location would exclude students from such larger context.

In the first week or so of classes, I instruct students in the use of databases. I approach this instruction with awareness that students may have widely different skills and comfort levels regarding various online tasks. In order to accommodate and ease possible student hesitation, I begin my instruction by loading any given database on the classroom screen and doing a few quick searches myself so that students are able to watch what I'm doing and see the results but are not yet being asked to perform such searches themselves. I then ask the class to suggest various subjects, texts, or names for me to search, so that we may all see the results. In this way, students experience the satisfaction of the results (or lack of them) without having to worry yet about navigating a database on their own. I next put the class in groups and have them do sample searches together on their own devices. This is a collaborative activity, one that again eases discomfort and also provides for a degree of curiosity and playfulness (depending on the topics they decide to search). This initial instruction does not, of course, make students fluent in database searches but it does get them started in a low-stakes community way.

This assignment is more geared toward the use of online databases than it is of the online Higginson archive. I will also note here that Higginson's papers are located near my institution in the Washington State archives. Thus, in addition to work with Higginson's digital archive, students also work with Higginson's physical manuscripts, drafts, correspondence, photographs, and ephemera when our class meets in the archives.

The Ella Higginson website [Ella Higginson \(www.wvu.edu\)](http://www.wvu.edu) is an ongoing project that features information, articles, images, and recent events regarding Higginson's literary recovery. The

website contains transcriptions of many of Higginson's poems, divided into categories for easier searching. The website helps students explore and locate poems, identify the titles of Higginson's books, and learn more about Higginson, her life, and her works. Using the website often leads students to then search for reviews in the other databases we will be using (listed below).

## **Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:**

### **Learning Outcomes:**

- Practice independently locating and selecting digital material.
- Practice distinguishing among publications in which reviews appear.
- Practice skills regarding effective reading of critical responses aloud in class.
- Practice distinguishing between interpretation and summary.
- Help students to research, publicly present, and think critically.

### **Task:**

In this exercise, each student is required to write and read aloud to the class a three-page response to a review of any of Ella Higginson's texts and to consider how and why the review evaluates (or fails to evaluate) the text as it does.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this assignment is to introduce students to digitized periodical publications from earlier centuries; to help students discover the ways that literary reviews helped to promote an author's published work; to distinguish among the types of reviews and the publications in which a review appeared; and to lead students to recognize that reviews of literary works may shift dramatically from when the work is first published to the present day.

### **Criteria:**

1. Each student is required to write and read to the class a three-page response to a digitized literary review of any of the texts assigned for class reading. Below are the steps the student will follow:
2. Locate and select a review of a text assigned in class using the sites and databases with which we have been working. Please keep in mind our discussions of inclusivity and how Higginson's work was reviewed by/for certain audiences.

## **DATABASES/SITES:**

- [Google Books](#)
- [Old Fulton New York Postcard](#)  
This site is very helpful but a little unusual (you'll see what I mean). The reviews you'll find here will be almost all from publications in New York State.
- [North American Women's Letters and Diaries](#)
- [RSAP](#)
- [Ella Higginson website](#)  
The website contains a list of Higginson's books, especially the titles of her books of poetry, as well as a wide range of her poetry. Though we will be covering various poems in class, we will not be using the actual poetry collections. The Higginson website can help you begin your search by choosing the titles of the books and/or poems and then searching in the other databases we have been using.
- [Newspapers.com](#)  
This website will enable you to search for reviews from various audiences of Higginson's work. For example, you may select newspapers from different regions of the nation. You may search by newspaper title, for example, or by state. Because Higginson's work was so widely reviewed, you will find a range of reviews from almost every state in the nation.

You may also search for reviews in, for instance, African American or Asian American newspapers. Here is a [review of Higginson's novel \*Mariella, of Out-West\*](#) from the 5 April 1912 issue of the early twentieth-century Pacific Northwest's most successful African-American newspaper *The Seattle Republican*.

Though this is a very brief review, it is notable because it is a very positive review for an African-American audience and it is the only review of the hundreds of national and international reviews of Higginson's *Mariella, of Out-West* that recognizes the novel's connection to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

3. After you choose your review, select a lengthy paragraph or so from the review and consider how and why the review evaluates (or does not evaluate) the text as it does. Because Higginson's works were so celebrated in her time, most reviews will be at least a lengthy column and often a half or whole page. Occasionally, there may be a very brief review of several sentences. However, unless that brief review is especially spicy in some way, it will probably not provide enough material for your oral response.

4. Begin your response by reading the review paragraph aloud to the class. (Note: the review paragraph will not be part of the required length of your oral response.)
5. For more a more in-depth description of the assignment's criteria along with tips and guidance for students, please refer to the sample handout in [Appendix A](#).

### **Grading:**

This is an ungraded assignment that applies toward student participation. Students are required to complete the assignment. After their classroom presentation, the instructor provides written feedback regarding what was best about their response.

### **Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:**

- <https://wp.wvu.edu/ellahigginson/>
- We have already read and discussed Robert Darnton's wonderful essay "What is the History of Books?" and [his revisitatio](#)n of that essay, especially with a focus on his "communications circuit." The essay is on our course Canvas page, but here is [the link](#) again for convenience and in case you want to check in with it as you think about your oral response:

## **Appendix A: Sample Activity Handout**

### **RULES AND GUIDELINES FOR 3-PAGE ORAL RESPONSE**

Each student in this class is required to write and read to the class a three-page response to a digitized literary review of any of the texts assigned for class reading.

You are asked to locate and select a review of a text assigned in class using the databases with which we will be working. You will then choose a paragraph or so from the review and consider how and why the review evaluates (or doesn't evaluate) the text as it does. You will begin your response by reading the review paragraph aloud to the class. However, the review paragraph will not be part of the required length of your oral response.

In general, the best responses will be ones where the student has genuinely engaged the review on some level (love it, hate it, praise it, criticize it), that provide evidence or examples to support their stance, and—best of all—that provoke class discussion afterward.

Individual responses will differ, but all responses will share the following:

1. Each response will be on a text assigned for class.
2. The response will be read to the class during one of the discussion days on the specific text.
3. Each response will be read aloud. That means that although you may pause in your reading and speak informally to the class, your response will indeed be a written one that you will read.
4. Reading aloud in public may provoke insecurity in all of us but the ability to read aloud well in public is a skill that will be useful for you throughout your life. With that in mind, no apologies or disclaimers (“This may be really random”; “I’m not sure about this”; ” “This isn’t very good”) are allowed before, during, or after you read. I also strongly suggest that you practice reading your response aloud privately or to friends before you read it in class. This way, though you may be nervous, your presentation will be practiced and familiar to you.
5. In-class readers often opt for the very fast and very low volume reading style. Please try not to do this. You’ll want to read loudly and fairly slowly, so that everyone in your audience may both hear you clearly and be able to follow your argument. So that your response will be fully accessible to everyone in class, you will be asked to post it to our course Canvas page before class. In this way, students in class may also follow along on Canvas while you read.
6. It is up to each student to decide which text they wish to write their response on. Choosing, writing, and presenting your response are all your responsibility.
7. Your oral response should concern your reading and your interpretation. Because of this, the following strategies are not available to you:
  - Your oral response should not be a summary of the work; a summary of the author’s life; or a miniature research paper where you talk about what other critics have thought of the work. Rather, I want to know what you think, which means that the only texts you consult are the review, the text of Higginson’s that is being reviewed, and your own wonderful brain.
  - Your oral response should not be a series of unconnected or only loosely connected observations on various parts of the review you have chosen. A sign that your response is too loosely connected is, for instance, a paragraph

beginning with “Another thing I noticed” or something along those lines. You want a unified, coherent, and specific response.

- While your oral response does not necessarily have to be aligned with formal academic style, please try not to be too informal with your style (so, for instance, no matter how much you love her, no ‘Dear Ella’ letters).
- Please be prepared for me to ask you questions after you have finished reading your response to the class. I will ask you how you located the review that you chose, why you selected it, and how your thoughts about reviews of an author’s work have changed or been influenced by your response. I will also ask you to provide any comments or suggestions for your classmates regarding your experience searching databases.