Project 2: Popular Narratives, Scholarly Frames

The Context: As we've seen, intellectual writing is about joining existing conversations. For scholars, those conversations are most often bounded by an academic discipline, which affects the way a scholar frames the topic: what she focuses on and how she approaches it. Take, for example, the topic of Twitter: a political scientist might focus on the ways political movements are shaped by the technology, while a gender studies scholar might explore the different ways men and women use Twitter, and an economist might look at how Twitter affects trends in purchasing specific products. Our second project will let you follow this academic pattern.

The Project: The essence of this project is quite straightforward, really: Your aim is to investigate a pop culture topic through the framework of a specific academic discipline, using its approaches and tools. The end goal of this investigation is to add an argument to the conversations in that discipline, through a scholarly research article shaped for that discipline.

The Process: Where the assignment gets less straightforward is in the process. Research, as we've seen, is a complex and recursive process, often quite unpredictable. We will emphasize the processes of research, thinking, and writing necessary for a scholarly research article by focusing our attention in class, and your work outside of class, on each step as it arrives. You will, therefore, get the details as they unfold in real time. For now, the barebones process will be: choosing a topic; developing a direction based on the topic; choosing a discipline and writing a scholarly framework to use for the rest of the project; researching intensively about and around the topic; writing a literature review to assess part of the scholarly conversation; devising an argument to add to that conversation; and developing the draft in stages up to the finished product.

The Constraints: In order to fulfill the basic task of this assignment – that is, in order to actually *be* what this assignment calls for – your project **must** do all of the following:

- It must have **a thesis**, a claim about the topic that adds to the work of the discipline in some way.
- It must **support** that thesis with evidence from research, as well as clear reasoning and analysis, and application of discipline-specific tools.
- It must connect the thesis to **existing conversations** by using **at least 10 sources**. The sources should be varied enough to suggest the conversation on and around the topic, including views you can forward and counter, but **at least half of the total sources must be scholarly**.
- It must be written for **an audience** of academics in your chosen discipline, who are familiar with the field and look to your work to add to what they do and think.
- It must be **long enough** to fully develop the argument and be acceptable to the standards of the discipline. (Hint: It's gonna be a long one.)
- It must be formatted in a style suitable to your discipline, with sources documented in a **discipline-appropriate citation style**.

The Affordances: Within the possibility space created by those constraints, you have the following *choices*:

- You will choose the **pop culture topic**, as well as **problems and questions**, to start with.
- You will choose the **scholarly discipline**, including a **specific framework** within it.
- You will choose the **sources** you want to use, and thus the **conversation** you want to join.
- You will choose how to develop your thinking into an **argument**, centered around a **thesis**, also of your choosing.

- You will choose how to use the sources to **support** the argument.
- You will choose the **"so what?"** significance of your argument for your scholarly discipline audience.
- You will choose the **organizational structure** that best delivers your ideas for your scholarly discipline audience, with special attention to how the introduction, conclusion, transitions, and other metacommentary can serve that choice.
- You will choose what **style** might best reach your scholarly discipline audience.

The Rationale: This project is primarily designed to help you further cultivate your skills with: framing good questions to guide research; understanding the ways of thinking and doing in a specific discipline; conducting diverse, wide-ranging research; critically assessing and engaging with research, including scholarly sources; constructing an argument that adds meaning to an ongoing academic discussion; and developing that argument for the needs of an academic reader. It will also give you the chance to practice the broader-based skills of organization, source use, style and correctness, citation and format.

The Assessment: Project 2 is worth 300 points, and I will grade it based on the WSP grading criteria in the syllabus and the specific constraints and affordances listed on this sheet. While the project should be a strong piece of writing overall, as suggested by the WSP criteria, I will primarily be looking for application of the skills we've worked on in class and in various assignments in this sequence:

- a clear sense of exigent project, of making a contribution to an ongoing academic conversation;
- evidence of exploring the topic through the frame of a specific discipline and its approaches;
- a specific, arguable, original, non-agonistic thesis that unifies and propels the essay;
- strong, clear argument to support the claims conversationally, not confrontationally;
- effective, active use of evidence to support the claims, including thoughtful integration of source material;
- treatment of the sources as the specific ideas of specific writers in specific contexts;
- a variety of moves involving sources, including forwarding and countering in apt ways;
- a clear organization, suited to content and discipline, with strong structure and movement;
- an introduction that establishes context, project, and thesis, engaging interest, appropriately for the discipline;
- transitional strategies and other metacommentary to actively link ideas and paragraphs;
- a conclusion that sums up the argument and answers "so what?" appropriately for the discipline;
- careful consideration of all stylistic choices: word choices, sentence variety, tone, etc.;
- absence of grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors, and correctness of format and citation;
- genuine revision: evidence of real development from the exercises, process assignments, and drafts.

The Due Dates:
Scholarly Framework Due: Friday, March 23   Draft 1 Due: Tuesday, April 17
Literature Review Due: Friday, April 6   Draft 2 Due: Tuesday, April 24
Pre-Draft Due: Friday, April 13   Workshop Draft Due: Friday, April 27
Workshop Memos Due: Tuesday, May 1 (emailed to peers and me no later than 7 p.m.)
          Final Draft Due: Tuesday, May 8 (no later than 11 a.m. in my office)

Appendix: Pop Culture Topics

Pop culture topics come from all areas of daily life: the trends and fads, texts and artifacts, and recent phenomena. They can be a specific text (such as a film, game, or album) or specific activity. They can be a category or genre of text or activity. They can be trends within a category. Some of the most common categories of pop culture would include:

FILM (Examples: specific films; found-footage horror movies; neo-noir films; films with man-child leads; actors using motion capture; the films of Wes Anderson.)
TELEVISION (Examples: specific shows; historical dramas; wedding-themed reality shows; adult-targeted animation; baking-themed competitions.)
MUSIC (Examples: specific artists, albums, songs; self-esteem pop songs; patriotic country music; the prevalence of autotune; "visual albums.")
POPULAR BOOKS (Examples: specific titles or authors; supernaturally transformed literature; teen paranormal romance; religious finance books.)
SPORTS AND GAMES (Examples: specific sports, teams, athletes; military-themed video games; fantasy football; hot yoga; soccer fan clubs.)
FOOD TRENDS (Examples: kale; cupcake stores; Sriracha sauce; pop-up restaurants; farm-to-fork dining.)
PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY (Examples: GoFundMe campaigns; iPad art apps; GPS devices; fitness trackers.)
FASHION TRENDS (Examples: skinny jeans; unusual-colored nail polish; sexy workout wear; lumberjack beards.)
MEMES/INTERNET FADS (Examples: funeral selfies; dank memes; inspirational Upworthy videos; specific hashtags.)
HOBBIES (Examples: knitting; collecting vinyl records; Bronies; LARPing.)
PUBLIC FIGURES/CELEBRITIES (Examples: Betty White; celebrity scientists; YouTube celebrities; Lin-Manuel Miranda.)
LANGUAGE TRENDS (Examples: YOLO; vocal fry; word shortening (e.g. totes adorbs); specific slang)

But notice that all of the topics listed above have one crucial characteristic in common: They reflect something specific you could point to or even hold in your hand. For example:

- You can hold a pair of skinny jeans in your hands.
- You can show us a stack of found-footage horror movie DVDs, or even play the movies for us.
- You can show us pictures and video clips of Betty White.
- You can play CDs or MP3s of self-esteem pop songs.
- You can show video clips of people knitting or demonstrate your own kitting.
- You can demonstrate the websites for fantasy football leagues.

You don't want something abstract or conceptual; aim for something concrete and show-able. So, nothing like "religious faith in America." Instead, you could zoom in on a pop culture expression of it: such as Islamic-themed TV shows or Christian pop music or Amish romance novels.

Also, don't think about issues and questions yet, only specific pop culture texts, trends, and phenomena. We'll worry about the issues and questions later. So, your topic at this stage will not be "race in British TV detective dramas"; it will simply be "British TV detective dramas." Not "damaging messages in teen fashion magazines," but just "teen fashion magazines." Nothing but the thing itself for now.

The Scholarly Framework

You've settled on a topic and done some presearch to uncover the issues and questions you want to explore about it. Now, you need to come up with a more solidified framework to guide your research and writing. To do this, you will first need to make a final decision about the academic discipline you're using. Then, for this assignment, you will need to use a range of resources to explore what members of that discipline do in their work:

- Investigate such resources as the Wikipedia pages on your discipline, AU departmental websites, AU faculty members in the discipline, the library subject guides, the sites of the discipline's professional organizations;
- Search in subject-specific databases – look at the lists of results and individual sources – to get a handle on how your discipline explores your topic and related ideas;
- Look into the various theories and methods of the discipline that seem useful to your topic and project. And make sure to look up terms you don't fully understand.

Then, use all that you learn to type answers to the following groups of questions, one by one:

1. What **discipline** have you finally chosen and why? What do you think makes this choice best suited to your research interests? How do you think it will shape your work with the topic and the ideas around it?

2. Set aside your topic for now and consider: **In general**, how do scholars in this discipline study the world? What kinds of topics do they focus on? What kinds of questions do they ask about the world? What kinds of issues do they explore? What do they find exigent? *Cite the sources where you learn this information.*

3. What **specific theories** used by this discipline will be most relevant for your work? What's your basic understanding of these theories? Which specific scholars' versions of these theories will you use? [Remember: a *theory* is an intellectual construct, such as different versions of feminism, post-colonialism, semiotics, critical race theory, social constructivism, terror management theory, etc.] *Cite the sources where you learn this information.*

4. What **specific methodologies** used by this discipline will be most relevant for your work? What's your basic understanding of these methods? [Remember: a *methodology* is a specific way of performing work, such as interview, content analysis, participant observation, statistical analysis, close reading, etc.] *Cite the sources where you learn this information.*

5. Now use the answers to the previous questions to make a **focused framework** for your project: How will you apply or use the theories and methodologies? What conversations and exigencies in the discipline will you connect your work to? What challenges might you face in trying to join this discipline and its conversations, and how will you strategically confront these challenges? This is a plan for how you'll use the discipline's tools.

6. Include a bibliography of sources you consulted to learn about the discipline, including the ones you cited in the answers above.

You should use this assignment to familiarize yourself with the discipline's approaches to give you the tools you need for Project 2. So the answer to the question "How long should these answers be?" is: "As much as

it takes for **you** to be fully confident that you can research and write well within this framework." *(Hint: Given your status as primarily first-semester college students, you're going to need more than a single page.)*

The Scholarly Framework is worth 50 points and will be due in class on **Friday, March 23**, using the submission rules in the syllabus. I will evaluate it based on how well it demonstrates a thorough and specific grounding in the discipline and crafting of a framework, through the quantity and quality of the answers to the questions.

Why Are You Doing This Assignment? As I said above, in the short term, you are educating yourself about the workings of your chosen discipline and concocting a framework for researching your topic. In the long term, this assignment further refines your research skills, familiarizes you with how scholars work in a discipline, and gives you practice with such critical thinking skills as synthesis and application.

Literature Review

For the Project 1 sequence, you wrote a brief annotated bibliography. For Project 2, you'll practice a smaller version of another common scholarly research tool, a literature review. At first glance, these two forms of writing might seem very similar, as they both list your current research, but the fundamental difference is this: *An annotated bibliography treats a list of sources as separate, individual voices, whereas a literature review looks at a set of sources as an interconnected conversation.* Typically, a literature review is extensive, overviewing as much conversation on a topic as possible, all of it, in fact, both current and historical. Yours will be much more modest and focused.

The goal of this assignment is to synthesize the conversation **about** or **around** your topic as revealed in the sources you've found. First, you need to decide which type of conversation is most plausible based on your sources:

> ● The conversation **about** your topic involves sources that either discuss your specific pop culture topic itself (e.g. *Stranger Things*, man buns, or *Inside Out*) or discuss the larger category your topic fits into (e.g. science fiction TV shows, hairstyles, or animated movies).

> ● The conversation **around** your topic involves sources that discuss the issues and ideas you're exploring through your topic (e.g. parenting styles, constructions of masculinity, or girls' emotional development).

After choosing which direction makes more sense for you, look over your array of sources and select **at least 6 scholarly sources** to become the basis for the review, ones that demonstrate your conversation.

Consider the sources as the specific voices of specific writers in specific contexts, bearing in mind the advice of Rosenberg and Harris. Then, put these voices into conversation with each other. Rather than a list-like summary of each source, consider some of the following questions:

- What ideas and questions do these scholars collectively identify as important?
- What are the controversies or points of contention among scholars?
- What approaches do these scholars take to the topic and how do those approaches intersect?
- How do the scholars respond to each other, either directly through citation or indirectly through discussing the same ideas?
- Where do the scholars tend to agree? Where do they tend to disagree?

- What further research still needs to be done on the topic (in the sources' view and yours)?

In effect, what happens when you look at these sources as a representative sample of the scholarly discussion on the topic, rather than as separate entities? Find whatever connections seem apt in your case.

Turn your thinking about these sources into a **500 to 750-word overview** of the conversation as you find it, **before you join it**. A literature view should read as a unified and purposeful piece in its own right, with an introduction that establishes the goal of the review, a body that develops the conversation for a reader, and a conclusion that sums it up somehow. The best literature reviews use some sort of organizing principle or guiding idea, such as tracing the history of the conversation or looking at particular threads of idea in the conversation. And, of course, this assignment is another chance to practice coherent and cohesive paragraphs, effective transitions, and clear prose. You will also need to include a page listing the sources used in the review, using the citation style preferred by your chosen discipline.

The Literature Review is due **Friday, April 6.** As ever, it needs to be emailed as an MS Word file before class time, then I need a printed, double-spaced, and stapled copy to grade. It is worth 100 points, and I will grade it primarily based on how clearly it has established the sources as specific voices and put them into conversation with each other to give a sense of this portion of the research. Secondarily, I will consider organization and style.

Why Are You Doing This Assignment? In the short term, the literature review helps you to get a handle on the conversation forming in your research, so you can find a space for your own ideas in it. In the long term, it further refines your skills with finding and reading scholarly sources, synthesizing ideas between sources, finding and making meaning out of connections, and, as ever, expressing ideas with coherence of structure and clarity of style.