

Medium Matters: How to Make Books, Cuneiform to Kindle

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Monday and Wednesday, 1:45 – 3:15 PM

Course Description

This course is a hands-on historical and theoretical investigation into diverse media of textual and literary expression from clay tablets to digital texts. Through the direct examination of rare books and various textual oddities from Penn's Special Collections and Archives and the Penn Museum, we will inquire into the history of the book and the history of writing. We will focus on different textual technologies and modes of composition, circulation, transmission, and reception of texts (from antiquity to the present day). By engaging in such topics as the transition from manuscript to print, from scroll to codex, and from book to Kindle, we will consider the history of literacy and literature in relation to other forms of expression (oral, visual, networked) and analyze different practices of organizing textual materials (from punctuation to annotation). We will examine paratextual elements (titles, forewords, afterwords) and various forms of verbal and visual accretion (from commentaries to illustrations). We will survey shifting notions of authorship, intellectual property, creativity, and originality and explore different systems of storage (libraries, archives, museums). By questioning the multi-faceted, non-deterministic interplay between textual artifacts and the media by which they are formalized and materially formed, we will conduct a critical reflection on the nature of textuality, writing, literature, and media. Readings will set essays in the history of the book and media studies alongside key case studies from various periods and geographical areas. And we will engage with textual materiality through the creation of book-objects of our own (at Penn's Common Press). All readings will be uploaded on Canvas.

Course Objectives

- 1) Acquire knowledge of the material foundations of textuality and literature.
- 2) Investigate the diversity of reading and writing practices from antiquity to the present.
- 3) Incorporate theories concerning textuality, writing, and media into the understanding of texts.
- 4) Develop skills in analyzing the material migrations of textual and literary expressions through media.
- 5) Develop the ability to construct and express coherent critical arguments regarding literary communication, authorship, and literary property.
- 6) Create original, creative research projects that consciously use media to convey their message.
- 7) Create material book-objects.

Course Assignments and Grades

Course Citizenship: Preparation, Attendance, Participation (20%)

Attendance is required. You are expected to arrive in class on time (and every time) having closely read the texts assigned for that week. Be an active reader. Make notes, underline and circle words

and phrases. Complete the reading before each session and arrive with a handful of points for discussion (or with problems you encountered). Bring your notes to class.

Show and Tell (5%)

A recurring feature of this seminar will be the presentation and discussion of textual (not necessarily literary) artifacts you (and I) bring to class (materially or virtually). Classes begin with a brief and informal conversation prompted by “show and tell” presentations of everything: pamphlets, scrapbooks, printed oddities, receipts, etc. Please feel free bring weird (if not implausible) textual materials.

Presentation (15%)

Each student will present—and circulate a handout on—one of the readings assigned for class. A sign-up sheet will be available the second day of class.

Book Biography (25%)

Each seminar participant will adopt a book object—broadly intended—from Penn’s Special Collections and Archives and articulate a material review of the work it embodies, exploring its appearance, proliferation, and effects in terms of the media and materials through which it has been expressed. You should focus on a single literary work / textual object, contemplate the history of the editions of that work, and look at the work’s material transformation across time, form, and genre. Please note that no formal paper is assigned for this class, but this assignment includes some writing. Some of the exercises will be turned in in class, some others will be posted directly on the digital exhibition publishing platform we will use for our Digital Collection and Exhibit.

Digital Collection and Exhibit (25%)

The Book Biography assignment will find its natural fulfillment in a virtual annotated exhibition of the work you studied. You will present your findings in class at the end of the course. Over the first weeks of class, we will discuss options for open-source web-publishing platforms and select one among those used to display of library, museum, archives, and scholarly collections and exhibitions.

Syllabus Entry (10%)

This assignment asks you to think about syllabi as arguments about a particular thematic, period, or problem rather than definitive lists of sources. Ideological reasons—and implicit biases—play a huge part in writing a syllabus. Availability of certain texts does too. For this assignment you will have to design an additional one-week entry to our existing syllabus. This entry should include one or more book objects currently not on the syllabus, an accompanying secondary source, and a robust (if brief) rationale for the inclusion of this unit in our syllabus.