COMS 639: Crafting Research in Media, Culture and Technology Studies
Fall 2025
Wednesdays 2:35-5:25pm
Arts W-220

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Image description -- "a black and white line-cut print illustration of a hand holding a plant pulled up by its roots. Above and below in bold text reads 'radical simply means grasping things at the root'," a quote from Angela Davis. Posted by @mybodyisnotanapology on Instagram.

Course Description: This is a course in how to think about and practice interpretive methods and critical inquiry in media studies, science and technology studies, and cultural studies, for the purposes of social change and cultural intervention, broadly conceived. COMS 639 aims to demystify the processes that shape critical inquiry: from how you transform scholarly intuition and gut feeling into inventive research questions that, with the help of theory, you can use to craft concrete objects of study and conduct purposeful interpretations and analysis of them. The seminar aims to build your imaginations of, and capacities for, what meaningful research can be, and what you might want it to be, by centering questions, and examples, of what makes for interesting and meaningful research. Readings draw from Cultural Studies, gender and

sexuality studies, STS, media studies, affect theory, Black studies and indigenous studies, disability studies, medical anthropology, and more. Our texts present concepts and research practice that centers relationality, collectivity and transformation in the context of study, including oppositional research from Black Studies, "articulation" and "conjunctural analysis" in Cultural Studies, and ways of working with affect and the "felt" as key sources of queer, feminist and disability studies inquiry, among others. The seminar questions default, ready-made objects of study and forms of analysis in our field(s), turning to key theories and texts on methods and methodologies that model inter-disciplinary inquiry, the significance of empirical, interpretive research (*all* research is interpretive), and the practice of scholarly experimentation. Come to the seminar with an open mind, a willingness to try things out (even if they don't work in the end), a desire to explore new ways of thinking and doing things, and curiosity about what research on culture, media and technology can be.

Questions to orient this seminar:

- What is research for? What are different models for doing socially engaged research in our fields? How can we nurture our research imaginations around these questions?

- How can research transform us and other people? How does knowing our own motivations for doing research fuel transformative possibilities for research? How does engaging with different kinds of materials, ideas, and people enable such transformation?

- How do we translate research ideas into concrete practices of inquiry and analysis? What makes a research project *interesting* and/or *meaningful* (to you, to others, to larger intellectual and social concerns)*?*

- How do we not confuse the politics or prestige of objects of study with their significance (just because something is prestigious doesn't mean it's necessarily good or important)?

- What challenges lie in studying things we love or hate?

- What is theory *for*? And how do we avoid the theory effect – of only finding the things that neatly fit into a particular theoretical framework?

- How do we determine which methods and forms of analysis will best answer the questions that orient your thinking and research?

- How do we cultivate and nurture good relations with the materials, people, and other beings with whom we conduct research?

- What is "interdisciplinarity" and what are we talking about when we use this term?

Texts: Texts for the course are available in MyCourses as pdfs or links to online versions/copies of the readings. A few books have been ordered for the seminar at Paragraphe Books, corner of Sherbrooke Street and McGill College (just out the front gates of McGill). They include Katherine McKittrick's *Dear science and other stories* (Duke University Press); Mullaney and Rea's *Where Research Begins* (University of Chicago Press)*,* Paul Rabinow's 1997 edited volume of essays, lectures and interviews by Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (The New Press)*;* and Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* (W.W. Norton).

Image description – Bald and bespectacled French theorist Michel Foucault cuddles a black cat in a room with full bookshelves in this black and white photo.

Learning Objectives/Common Learning Goals: Students in the seminar will learn to:

Develop analytic concepts and practical approaches to inquiry in media studies, cultural studies, and the study of technology.
Comprehend and explain key approaches to research in these areas.
Build a critical vocabulary to discuss inquiry in media, culture, technologies, their environments, and practices.
Think with key concepts and strategies to **interpret and analyse** media, technology, and culture.
Develop critical deep reading skills to assess and annotate major texts in the field.
Formulate questions and comments that foster discussion and directly engage with seminar materials and other seminar participants.
Build skills in discussion facilitation that include active listening, re-direction, and on-the-spot synthesis.
Develop effective writing strategies for constructing strong critical reviews and analytic essays.
Work both independently and collaboratively to build rapport and community together as scholars.

Assignments: In addition to attendance at every seminar session, students are expected to come to seminar ready to discuss assigned readings in-depth. Bring copies of the readings with you to seminar. You can submit written work in either English of French. Discussion facilitation should be done in English.

Weekly Reading Annotation [15% of final grade]: Each week starting September 10 you will annotate a reading using the program Perusall in MyCourses. Annotation means commenting upon and asking questions about a reading, directly on the PDF text itself. Perusall enables you to see each other's annotations and respond to them, fostering collective reading practices and discussion before seminar has even begun. Everyone will annotate the same reading each week. Annotations are **due by 5pm Tuesdays (you can do them earlier!)**. They will be evaluated either as 1 or 0. A "1" means the annotation is completed and offers constructive comments, feedback and questions that help foster discussion. A "0" indicates the annotation was not completed OR that the comments and questions were obstructive, disruptive, unconducive to

constructive discussion, or too general or unrelated to the reading. **A minimum of three posted comments per annotation assignment is required**.

Discussion Post and Facilitation [15% of final grade]: Each week a seminar participant will help prompt and facilitate discussion of one of the course readings and subject matter. This will involve making a discussion post before seminar and helping to actively facilitate the discussion during seminar. **This is not a formal presentation. You are not delivering a lecture!**

The Discussion Forum post should:

1) Identify a focus with appeal to the seminar group. The goal is to invite us into a conversation through the texts we have read.
2) Make direct use of at least one of the texts we've read. Make clear reference to a few key textual passages (**3 maximum**) and prepare to facilitate discussion about them. This will help us get close to the text.
3) Offer prompts to help seed discussion: pose questions, ask fellow students what kinds of questions they have about the text, or come up with an activity that helps us figure out and explain a concept, an argument, a conversation, from the text under discussion. Avoid questions that can be answered by "Yes" or "No." **Propose no more than 3 prompts – keep it do-able**.

In the seminar session (where the "live" facilitation happens):

4) Your job is to help stimulate discussion and cultivate it in productive ways. Draw people into the conversation. Attend to who is speaking and who isn't and try to bring in those who aren't already in the discussion. Listen closely to other seminar participants, what they say, and what they are trying to say (with an eye toward generosity and intentionality), and, in turn, help pose questions, restate ideas that others have articulated toward a question or connection to the text or what someone else has said, and ask for clarification, where needed. Good facilitation often means not being beholden to what you have prepared and be able to pivot and go in other directions that are useful/conducive to the group and the materials at hand.

Facilitation requires you to think and prepare like a moderator by taking on extra responsibility for a small body of material and to the other course participants. It requires close listening: to the texts, what they say, and what they are doing, and to other seminar participants. The goal is to cultivate directed discussion that meaningfully engages with the texts and issues at hand, and with one another. While facilitators seed, orient and re-orient the discussion, everyone shares in responsibility for fostering conversation and ensuring that those discussions are engaging, meaningful, and respectful. This is an important set of skills for everyone to develop.

You will be evaluated on your ability to help facilitate the discussion using strategies of listening, re-direction, re-orientation, and posing queries aimed at getting everyone involved, the clarity of your engagement with the text upon which you focus, and the quality and clarity of your discussion prompts and questions. **You will submit a brief self-assessment of your facilitation to me after seminar, by 5pm the next day, Thursday.**

For some helpful material on discussion facilitation see How to Prepare, Questioning, Listening, and Responding, and some Tip Sheets (under "more information"). There are many good teaching and learning websites geared toward skill building in discussion facilitation linked to the sites included here.

You will indicate your top three preferences for facilitation days during our first seminar meeting. Please note that if you run into a scheduling problem around a facilitation date, you will need to find another seminar participant with whom to switch. Since we are a large group, most facilitations will involve two people. In that case, facilitations are most effective when they are done together – as a duo, rather than 2 separate facilitations. Plan accordingly!

Seminar Essay Proposal [20% of final grade]: On **Friday October 11, 2025, at 5pm**, seminar participants will submit a 5-6 paged double-spaced seminar paper proposal (@1500-2000 words) via MyCourses. The proposal should indicate which of the seminar paper options you have chosen (see below). Describe the subject of your paper, what you plan to study, the research questions you seek to answer, and why they are significant or interesting. Assert the reason why you propose to write this essay. Present what you know of the key literatures in the area and include a bibliography of work that you have consulted; it should reflect preliminary research and reading you have done. Some guides for how to prepare a proposal will be posted in MyCourses.

Seminar Paper [50% of final grade]: The course will culminate with seminar paper that is approximately 25-pages, double-spaced (@7000 to 7500 words). The seminar paper will be due on **Monday December 15, 2025, at 5pm Montreal time** in MyCourses. I will provide comments on the papers through the assignment portal in MyCourses.

There are four options for the seminar paper.

> *Option #1: Review of a particular methodological approach and/or method of inquiry*. In this option, your task is to familiarize yourself more deeply, and critically, with some of the key writings on method/process/research design in a particular area of critical research inquiry in which you are interested. Reviews require significant library research and reading, so choose this option if you are committed to doing the extra reading that is required. Part of the task of doing a review of literature is defining an area of scholarly practice and method and determining which texts/works are significant to it. The review should include a description of the area of research practice or methods, a discussion of the exemplary texts and how they construct and articulate their forms of inquiry (with citations for additional texts in the area which you have chosen not to discuss in much detail), blind spots or limitations of the existing literature, and ways scholars expand on and/or open practice in this area. Be critical but also recognize what researchers have accomplished. The review should build from course material that is relevant to the approach and/or method. Note: you are encouraged to draw on and expand from course materials we have already read. Consider this option as an opportunity to go deeper into an area of scholarship or research practice we've discussed; that way, you are not starting from scratch.
>
> *Option #2: Construct an Object of Study and write an essay on it.* In this option, your task is to write an essay that presents/conceives/constitutes/crafts an object of study: that does what our course has been proposing and offering models of all along. This is the kind of writing one often does for an introductory chapter to a longer work, or in an article or essay that offers a new way of thinking about an area of research, different research materials and ways of combining them via study. It is also useful for trying out the process of crafting an object of study and figuring out an approach. Look for some models of this in our readings, examine the citations in the materials we read, read the citations of articles/essays/books you are particularly interested in, and use that to help direct the route you take for this option. Ask others for examples too! The essay should draw, where relevant, from course readings.

Option #3: Major Revision of a recent project or paper. This option enables you to develop and substantially revise a current or former project **around and in direct relation to this course and its focus on crafting and, in this case, re-crafting research inquiry you have already done**. The revision must be significant, meaning that the final paper offers a *substantially different* analysis than the original. Revisit your research materials. Conduct additional review of the literatures, examine other models or frameworks, reconceive (if relevant) the ways you construct and approach your object of study, and engage directly with relevant course readings. This is a particularly good option for those of you looking to revise a paper you have written for conference presentation and/or publication but is not limited to this purpose. For folks who choose this option, be sure to read the chapter on revision in Graff and Birkenstein's book *They Say, I Say.* Bill Germano, former book editor, has also recently published a book about revision. He also wrote the book *From Dissertation to Book,* which might come in handy for some of you interested in that process, eventually.

Option #4: Make Your Own. Propose an alternative that engages substantially with the course, its focus, and its material. Any proposals submitted under this option will need to be approved, to ensure they fit the course and are do-able.

Grading: Your final grade for the semester will be based on the quality and clarity of your performance in presentations and your written work. While not graded, your participation in seminar discussion is a crucial aspect of your work over the semester, and you will be expected to share your thoughts and participate in conversation. If you turn in work late, you may not receive written comments, and your grade could be reduced. If I deem your work unsatisfactory, I may ask you to do it again. Taking an incomplete or "K" grade for this course is greatly discouraged, unless you have a truly exceptional reason that can be supported by documentation.

How to Interpret Graduate-Level Grades:

A:	Good work.
A-:	Satisfactory.
B+:	There is a problem with what you submitted.
B:	There is a substantial problem with what you submitted.
B-:	Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure.
C+ or lower:	Officially considered a ""failure"" by the Graduate Studies Office.

Expectations and Policies: There are several expectations that I have of participants in a graduate seminar. I expect that you will: attend every seminar meeting and come prepared to discuss each of our readings, do the readings and have something to say about them, bring your readings with you to seminar, turn in your seminar work on time and in completed fashion, and openly communicate with me about anything of concern to you in the course (e.g. if you know you will have trouble meeting a deadline or if there is anything that will prevent you from fully participating in the seminar).

Devices: As much as possible, we will limit our time looking at personal screens in this course. Where possible, please bring print outs of readings to seminar with you, or if you use an e-reader, bring that. Avoid email, social media checks/posts or surfing the internet during our seminar session. If you need a device to take notes during discussion, for the purposes of discussion facilitation, or for accommodation purposes, that is okay. Otherwise, in the spirit of engaged face-to-face dialogue and active listening, we will limit our use of internet connected devices during seminar time.

Statement on Academic Integrity and LLMs/Chat GPT: McGill University and I take academic integrity very seriously. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see https://www.mcgill.ca/deanofstudents/students/student-rights-responsibilities/code for more information). Writing for the course should not use ChatGPT or other large language models. ChatGPT and other large language models will not be accepted as sources for assignments or any coursework in this seminar.

Nondiscrimination Statement: As a professor at McGill University, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial, ethnic, sexual, physical, and cultural diversity. I will work to promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with university policy, we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment based on race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, civil status, familial status, gender identity, sexual orientation, size, and/or disability. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, we do not discriminate based on political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with your peers in seminar or me to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, and a willingness to engage with it, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I will also make every effort to avoid discrimination based on class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable and accessible, please let me know.

Accommodations: If you require any accommodations for your assignments or other classroom modifications due to special circumstances, challenges, or disabilities, please notify your professor and the Office for Students with Disabilities, ideally by the end of the first week of class. The OSD provides a broad range of support and services to assist students, faculty, and staff with disabilities. Their offices are in Suite 410 (4th floor) at 1010 Sherbrooke Street West. To get in touch with the Office for Students with Disabilities, you can call (514) 398-6009 (voice), (514) 398-8198 (TDD) or email disabilities.students@mcgill.ca to speak with an adviser there. Please note the above commitment to accommodate applies equally to survivors of sexual assault and/or harassment on or off campus.

Sexual Assault Survivor Support and Allyship: Should you or someone you know need support as a survivor of sexual assault, harassment and/or discrimination on campus, please contact McGill's Sexual Violence Response Advisor, Émilie Marcotte, for assistance at 514-398-4486 or by email at: osvrse@mcgill.ca, situated in the Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support and Education (located at 550 Sherbrooke, suite 585). They also offer drop-in hours during the school year (the schedule is online). For more information on their office, sexual violence support and reporting options visit: www.mcgill.ca/saap. The Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Student's Society (SACOMSS) offers peer counseling and support to students who have suffered sexual violence and their allies, as well as outreach and education. Their hotline number is: (514) 398-8500 and they offer drop-in hours as well (the schedule for which is online). The SSMU website also contains additional information on resources available to survivors.

Other Key Resources: The Writing Centre offers individual consultation on all aspects of writing. Appointments are required. We highly recommend this university resource if you want to work on your writing (514-398-7109). Queer McGill provides social, political, and informational support for queer students by queer students (514-398-6913). First People's House provides a home away from home for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students, promoting academic success as well as community connection (514-398-3217). The Black Students' Network provides support for Black students, and also works to raise awareness at McGill of issues that Black individuals face; they also work to make the campus safer and more accessible for Black students. Additionally, the McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life is available as a nondenominational religious and spiritual hub on campus.

Discussion Etiquette: Our seminar time is dedicated to in-depth discussion. Following a few basic discussion guidelines will help ensure that this time is productive, enlightening, and fun.

1. Ideally, our seminar is a space in which we can grow as scholars, critics, writers, analysts, and for some, activists. In this space, we try out ideas, even if we might abandon them later.
2. We should expect disagreements, but they should not shut down dialogue. Learning is a process: we make mistakes, change our minds, and may even come to regret some things we've said. I know I have. In this seminar, our aim is to work together to learn and *un*-learn some of the things we take for granted, while sharpening our analytic skills in the process. Learning and unlearning are processes that require space to work through. In this setting, we give ourselves and other people permission to transform their thinking, change their minds, and make mistakes. We will not seek a purity of ideas, nor should we expect others' ideas to be; quite the opposite. Contingency, contradiction, mutability, uncertainty, partial knowledge: each makes up how we think and what we believe. Amid all of this, *clarity of expression* becomes especially valuable: this is what we are here to help each other develop.
3. Arguments are not contests. Grant your fellow seminar participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not. In arguments, you must make your case persuasively. Consider other viewpoints. Avoid attacking someone's character or personhood in the process. What someone thinks or says is not *reducible to* who they are and/or where they are.
4. Our goal in discussion is to understand the texts we read and how they might be useful to us – in addition to cultivating our skills in thinking with them and critiquing them. Work to avoid purely negative critique in your comments. Understand first; criticize second. Extend the same consideration to your peers. The point is to build knowledge together, not to look good or act smarter than everyone else or, relatedly, endlessly talk about yourself.
5. Listen to what other people are saying and think about how you can respond to them and build on the conversation. Talk to each other, and not just to your professor. A big part of my job as your professor is to facilitate our discussions. I will pose questions, I will follow up with someone's line of commentary, I will re-direct conversation when and where necessary, and I will bring in material from our text(s) to help us think through the issues with which we grapple. Our classroom is a space in which we put the ideas posed to us to work. My job is to manage and direct how that work happens, but this also requires your active participation and preparation.
6. Try to avoid interrupting others (this is something your professor also works on!).
7. Pay attention to when others want to speak; invite them into the conversation. Avoid monopolizing the conversation.
8. Experience and anecdote do not constitute evidence in a scholarly argument. While you each bring interesting experiences to the seminar, consider whether and if you want to bring them up. Is it relevant to class discussion? Think carefully about this before you speak. If you bring up your own experience in seminar, recognize that it becomes a topic for discussion. Ask yourself what point you want to make by talking about yourself. Do you want others to know this about you?
9. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

For those of you for whom speaking in seminar is challenging, identify some goals around your participation in this course. For instance, you could aim to make at least one comment during each seminar meeting. Some people find it helpful to sketch out a few notes to help organize their thoughts before they make a comment.

For those who tend to speak a lot in seminars, pay close attention to point #7 above. Identify some other ways in which you can engage with the materials and each other without feeling the need to talk all the time. We can discuss other strategies for managing and maximizing one's time in seminar.

Special Required Emergency Clause: In extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Schedule of Readings

This schedule of readings is subject to change over the course of the term

Note: our graduate seminar is based in direct discussion with and through the texts we read. We will turn to sections of the text to probe and discuss their meaning and purpose throughout our seminar meetings. Be ready for this!

Image description: A young black cat takes a nibble of a book in a stack on a table. The color photo has a peach and beige-colored background, and the cat sits on a blue paisley tablecloth.

First Things First

Wednesday August 27, 2025: Some Advice on Reading and Writing in Grad School

Content Note: It's important to demystify the things we spend our time doing as scholars, and two of the **big things** we do is read and write. Yet students often do not get trained in either of them – it's often assumed that if you get admitted to grad school, you must know the best ways to read and write. You *do* know how

to do both but there are different expectations for how to read and write in different fields and contexts; and we read in different ways depending on what we are reading *for.*

Today's session will focus on reading different kinds of texts in COMS 639, what to read for, and paying attention to how reading and writing go together. We'll discuss five short pieces, with an additional one recommended. Two offer advice for how to read and plan one's reading in graduate school -- a blog post written by historian Julia Haager with some good tips (the comments are also very useful), and a piece by Paul Edwards (Prof. of Science and Technology Studies at Stanford University) on how to effectively read a book as an academic endeavor. A short chapter by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, "Reading for the Conversation," explains how to read an academic text for the conversation it is in, and how to recognize signs of that conversation. Kate Manne's blog post – an address she delivered to graduating PhD students – explains writing as a practice of being in dialogue, and community, with others. Max Liboiron's article critiques the academic claim to being "first" as a colonial logic, offering advice to both readers and writers around this assertion and the motivations that underlie it. Sociologists Hannah Wohl and Gary Fine's recommended article reports on grad student reading practices in History, Sociology and Economics to understand what is missing in graduate education about reading, including training in how to read deeply and how to read quickly. As they say, "Reading is not a single act."

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein (2021). What's motivating this writer? Reading for the conversation. In *They say, I say: The moves that matter in academic writing.* W.W. Norton, 187-202.

Edwards, Paul (2008). How to read a book, v 4.0. University of Michigan: School of Information Studies.

Haager, Julia B. (2019). Surviving graduate school – How to read and take notes efficiently. *Clio and the contemporary* [blog]. https://clioandthecontemporary.com/2019/09/23/how-to-read-and-take-notes-efficiently/

Manne, Kate, (2025), You do not write alone. *More to Hate* [blog], May 23. https://open.substack.com/pub/katemanne/p/to-the-graduates-of-today?r=2x7hu2&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Liboiron, Max (2021). Firsting in research. *Discard Studies,* January 18. https://discardstudies.com/2021/01/18/firsting-in-research/

Recommended: Wohl, Hannah and Gary Alan Fine. (2017). Reading rites: Teaching textwork in graduate education. *American Sociologist, 48,* 215-232. DOI 10.1007/s12108-016-9322-0.

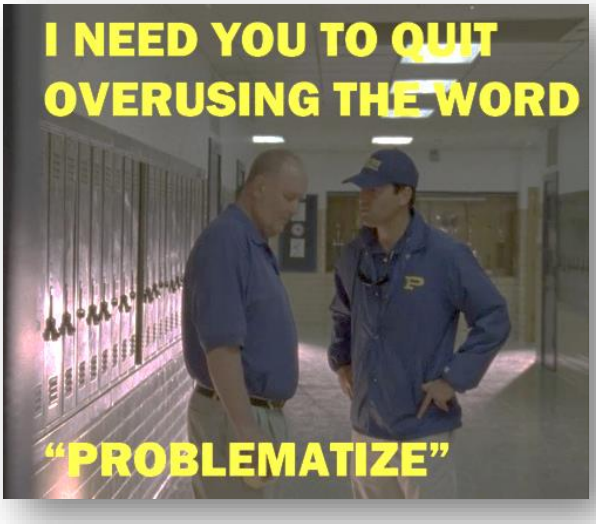


Image description: Academic Coach Taylor meme from the TV show "Friday Night Lights" circa 2012 on the academic overuse of the verb "problematize," with a photo of the middle-aged white male coach and an assistant coach talking in a high school hallway in front of a row of beige-colored student lockers.

Wednesday September 3, 2025: Demystifying How to Come Up with a Research Project

Content note: This week's readings come from the book *Where Research Begins.* We will read the first four chapters: the Introduction, and Part 1 ("Questions," "What's Your Problem" and "Designing a Project that Works"). This book unpacks and demystifies the work that happens before you start to do research, including knowing the difference between "having a topic" and having questions that specify something to learn about that topic; knowing how to identify what the "problem" is that drives the inquiry you're laying out (the thing that nags at you that you're trying to figure out); how to identify and determine what your primary and secondary source materials are (it's in how you use them!). The readings are more fun than you might initially imagine them to be. As you read, take note of their advice like "write things down" (see also C. Wright Mills on keeping a personal file as a form of intellectual production) and "don't exclude sources that seem unrelated to your topic," as well as their approach to research as "creating puzzles that are nontrivial, not preordained, open-ended, and significant (no matter what the answer ends up being)," among other gems. **The three chapters in Part 1 ask you to try some things out – please do and come to seminar ready to discuss them and your process.** Those of you applying for grants/fellowships this fall will likely find this book to be of great use (see pp. 108-116 for some direction). The recommended piece by C. Wright Mills comes from his classic (and of its time) text, *The Sociological Imagination;* he calls for more fluid, contextual, and flexible ways of conducting social analysis and inquiry. The Mullaney and Rea book is available for purchase from Paragraphe Books, at the corner of McGill College and Sherbrooke Street, if you'd like a hard copy; pdfs of each chapter are in MyCourses. **[Reading amount: 116 pages]**

Mullaney, Thomas & Rea, Christopher. (2022). *Where research begins: Choosing a research project that matters to you (and the world)* (pp. 1-116). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Recommended: Mills, C. Wright (1959). On intellectual craftsmanship. In *The sociological imagination* (pp. 195-226). London: Oxford University Press.

Theory in/and the Shaping of Research

Wednesday September 10, 2025: Getting Oriented and Situated

Content Note: The readings over the next three weeks situate theorizing as a practice in the shaping of what and how one studies. Theory helps us create objects of study and formulate questions we want to research; it also helps us answer the question of "so what?" It also helps us see relationships between things we might not otherwise have noticed ("connecting the dots," as Mullaney and Rea discuss), giving us tools for conceptualizing how to make something researchable, and situating us in the process.

This week's readings focus on how all knowledge is situated (located, partial; see Haraway), the way habits and imposed norms of orientation toward certain objects and subjects are established and maintained (Ahmed), the scientific offerings of indigenous knowledge and epistemologies (Kimmerer), and the very idea of what "theory" is (Cary Wolfe). The chapter by Graff and Birkenstein sets out good practices for seminar discussion – read it and practice what they advise. Two of these pieces are *really* short. **[Reading amount: 82 pages]**

Haraway, Donna. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 14(3),* 575-599. **[we will annotate this piece]**.

Ahmed, Sara. (2006). Orientations: Toward a queer phenomenology. *GLQ, 12(4),* 543-574.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. (2013). Asters and goldenrod and *Mishkos Kenomaagwen:* The teachings of grass. In *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants* (pp. 39-47, 156-166). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Wolfe, Cary. (2016). 'Theory', the humanities, and the sciences: Disciplinary and Institutional settings. *Journal of Literature and Science, 10(*1), 75-80.

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. (2021). 'I take your point': Entering class discussions. In *They say, I say: The moves that matter in academic writing.* W.W. Norton, 172-176. [need to add to MyCourses]

Recommended: Markham, Annette. (2020). Qualitative research is…. [blog. Post], March 25. https://annettemarkham.com/2020/03/qual-research/

Wednesday September 17, 2025: What Does Theory Do and What is Critique For?

Content Note: This week's readings build from last weeks to examine the role, and practice of, theorizing as something one does; a diverse set of practices rather than a style of writing (associated with "Theory"), or a kind of text. As Julia Wood argues, theory is the "self-consciousness of practice" (1995, 160), articulating a necessary relationship between theory and practice. Or as Stuart Hall suggests quite provocatively, "The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency." Our readings are drawn from Black feminist literary theory (Christian), feminist applied communication research (Wood), queer theory (Sedgwick), cultural studies (Hall), and French theory (Foucault). Attend to what each says about theory, what it is, and what it does. Note, too, the ways they talk about the relationship between critique and theory, and how disciplinary cultures shape and define it. Give yourself extra time for the Sedgwick and Foucault **[Reading amount: 77 pages]**

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. (2003). Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, you're so paranoid you probably think this essay is about you. In *Touching feeling* (pp. 123-151). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. **[we will annotate this piece]**

Wood, Julia T. (1995). Theorizing practice, practicing theory. In Kenneth Cissna, ed. *Applied communication in the 21st century* (pp. 157-167). Routledge.

Christian, Barbara (2007). The race for theory (1987). In Barbara Christian and Christina Bowles, eds. *New black feminist criticism, 1985-2000* (pp. 40-50). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Hall, Stuart. (2013). Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies. In *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 261-274), ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel (1997). What is enlightenment? In Rabinow, Paul, ed. *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth. The essential works of Michel Foucault (1954-1984): Volume One* (pp. 303-319). Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: The New Press.

Recommended: Butler, Judith. (2002) What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue. In David Ingram, ed., *The political: Readings in continental philosophy*, London: Basil Blackwell.

Wednesday September 24, 2025: Challenging the Pre-Givenness of What One Studies and Why, and What "Study" Is

Content Note: This week we examine how the uses of theory we discussed over the past two weeks help unsettle the "pre-givenness" of areas of study and forms of inquiry, e.g. how objects of study and areas of inquiry are constructed for us already and often function as defaults in fields. Our readings aim to open space to think and do research inquiry otherwise. We will read Pierre Bourdieu's lecture from his Paris Workshop on how to conduct research not already pre-determined by work that has been done before; he writes within sociology, and the social sciences are his target of critique. Kadji Amin's piece examines how (primarily) U.S.-based 1990s queer theory overdetermines and constrains the field of queer studies, calling for more transnational, emergent forms of queer research not already defined by 1990s literature. Ada Jaarsma's chapter critiques how pre-constituted problems and categories do not work for disability studies methods. Two chapters from STS scholar John Law's book *After method* programmatically articulate an approach to social research that holds onto mess, ambiguity, fluidity, contingency and multiplicity in the context of research. Finally, I've included a long interview between Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, and Stevphen Shukaitis, which is a great read. For our purposes, pay particular attention to their discussion of "study."

Law, John (2011). After method: An introduction **[we will annotate this piece]**, *and* Conclusion: Ontological politics and after. *After method: Mess in social science research*. Routledge, 1-17, 143-156 (full book is available in pdf in MyCourses).

Bourdieu, Pierre (1992). The practice of reflexive sociology (the Paris workshop). In Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant ed. *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (pp. 218-260). University of Chicago Press.

Amin, Kadji (2019). Haunted by the 1990s: Queer theory's affective histories. In Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim, ed. *Imagining queer methods* (pp. 277-293). New York University Press. (a pdf of the whole book is in MyCourses)

Jaarsma, Ada (2020). Critical disability studies and the problem of method. In Carol Taylor, Jasmine Ulmer, and Christina Hughes, ed. *Transdisciplinary feminist research: Innovations in theory, method and practice* (pp. 16-28). London, Routledge. (a pdf of the whole book is in MyCourses)

Harney, Stefano & Moten, Fred (2013). The general antagonism: An interview with Stevphen Shukaitis. In *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and Black study* (pp. 100-159). Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions. [see, specifically, their discussion of "study"]

Recommended: Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. 2021. 'But as several sources suggest': Research as conversation. In *They say, I say*: *The moves that matter in academic writing* (pp. 203-231). W.W. Norton.

Historicizing the Present as Spaces of Struggle

Wednesday October 1, 2025: Conjunctural Analysis in Cultural Studies—Studying Conditions of Cultural Struggle

Content Note: The next three weeks examine some key approaches to culture, media, technology, power, discourse and subjectivity, and their inter-relations (a lot, I know!). We start this week with cultural studies for a definition and approach to culture via conjunctural analysis central to that field's inquiry – or one special iteration of it. Our readings focus on what this analysis is, what defines a "conjuncture," and how this framework historicizes the present (with more on this by Foucault next week). Conjunctural analysis is conducted at a "certain level of abstraction," as Grossberg describes, and keeps relations of power and fields of struggle at the heart of inquiry. Jennifer Daryl Slack's reading on articulation focuses in on the strategies for analyzing the connections between things in the context of conjunctures. Stuart Hall's 1983 lecture "Culture, Resistance, and Struggle" articulates his thesis on the significance of Black cultural struggle as not predetermined nor is it politics guaranteed. The co-interview by Hall and Massey (a feminist geographer)

offers a compelling update to the conversation. As you read these texts, note citations to Antonio Gramsci, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Georg Lukacs, and others from Marxist theory. **[Reading amount: 86 pages]**

Hall, Stuart, and Doreen Massey (2010). Interpreting the crisis: Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall discuss ways of understanding the current crisis. *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture, 42,* 57-71.

Hall, Stuart (2016/1983). Culture, resistance, and struggle. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History,* ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 180-206. **[we will annotate this piece]**

Grossberg, Lawrence (2019). Cultural studies in search of a method, or looking for conjunctural analysis. *New formations, 96-97,* 38-68.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl. (1996). The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies. In *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies,* ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley. Routledge, 113-129.

Recommended: Grayson, Deborah and Ben Little (2017). Conjunctural analysis and the crisis of ideas. *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture, 65,* 59-75.

Gilbert, Jeremy (2019). This conjuncture: For Stuart Hall. *New Formations, 96-97,* 5-37.

Halberstam, Jack (2011). *The queer art of failure.* Duke University Press. [see his discussion of Hall and "low theory" in the introduction]

Wednesday October 8, 2025: Michel Foucault – Historical Genealogy, Subjectivity and the Production of Discourse

Content Note**:** Build some space into your schedule to properly work through Foucault's materials. This week will be reading a series of lectures written by Foucault that have been translated and published in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* including some key essays of his on biopolitics, discourse, and power. Tune into how Foucault writes about how power works, what discourse does and what historical analysis is and can be. Pay attention to how he makes his arguments, the materials and evidence he uses, and how he builds concepts. **There will be no facilitation this week because seminar paper proposals are due. [Reading amount: 162 pages]**

Rabinow, Paul (1997). Introduction: The history of systems of thought. In Rabinow, Paul, ed. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault (1954-1984): Volume One,* trans. Robert Hurley (pp. xi-xlii). New York: The New Press.

Foucault, Michel (1997*). "Society Must Be Defended," "Security, Territory, Population," "The Birth of Biopolitics," "On the Government of Living," "Subjectivity and Truth," "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," "Technologies of the Self" **[we will annotate this piece],** "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress," "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom." In Rabinow, Paul, ed. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault (1954-1984): Volume One,* trans. Robert Hurley (pp. 59-108, 223-302). New York: The New Press.

Recommended: Foucault, Michel & Bouchard, Daniel. (1980). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 139-164.

Butler, Judith. (2002). What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue. In David Ingram, ed., *The political: Readings in continental philosophy*, London: Basil Blackwell.

Deleuze, Gilles (1992) What is a dispositif*? In *Michel Foucault, philosopher: Essays translated from the French and German,* Ed. Timothy Anderson. Routledge, 159-168.

Friday October 10, 2025: Seminar Paper Proposal due at 5pm

Wednesday October 15, 2025: No Class/Thanksgiving/Reading Break

Wednesday October 22, 2025: Mediation and Its Enactments*

Content Note: Building on the readings so far and coming out of our last two seminar discussions on Foucault's work and Cultural Studies' approaches to context, history and culture as a site of struggle, this week we turn to texts that orient us to, and help shape the meanings and materialities, of relations we study in culture, media and technology. We will focus on several key concepts and some key examples of how they have been theorized: that of "culture," "medium," "mediation," "technology," "prosthesis," and "interface." This week's readings draw from disability studies and popular music studies, Cultural Studies, and a piece by STS scholar Bruno Latour on actor-network theory. **[Reading amount: 66 pages + Born's chapter]**

Alexander, Neta (2025). Enabled/disabled. In *Interface frictions: How digital debility reshapes our bodies* (pp. 1-24). Duke University Press.

Jain, L. J. (1999). The prosthetic imagination: Enabling and disabling the prosthesis trope. *Science, Technology and Human Values,* 24(1), 31-54. **[we will annotate this piece]**

Gilbert, Jeremy (2015). From signification to affect. In Shepherd, John, & Devine, Kyle. *The Routledge reader on the sociology of music* (pp. 369-376). New York: Routledge.

Born, Georgina (2015). Mediation theory. In Shepherd, John, & Devine, Kyle. *The Routledge reader on the sociology of music*. New York: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno (1996). On actor network theory: A few clarifications. *Soziale Welt,* 47(4), 369-381.

*I'm considering focusing this session completely on disability studies frameworks. This is something that we can discuss as a group.

Recommended: Samuels, Ellen (2023). Twenty-seven ways of looking at crip autotheory. In Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, ed. *Crip authorship: Disability as method* (pp.203-209). New York: New York University Press.

Dokumaci, Arseli (2022). *Activist affordances: How disabled people improvise more habitable worlds.* Duke University Press.

Mills, Mara, & Sterne, Jonathan. (2017). Dismediation: Three propositions and six tactics (Afterword). In Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick, eds. *Disability media studies: Media, popular culture, and the meanings of disability* (pp. 365-378). NYU Press.

Parikka, Jussi. (2020). To media study: Media Studies and beyond. *The Journal of Media Art, Study and Theory*, *1*(1), 59-63.

Galloway, Alex. (2012). *The interface effect.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Sobchack, Vivian. (1995). Beating the meat/surviving the text, or how to get out of this century alive. *Body & Society*, *1*(3-4), 205-214.

Crafting/Delimiting Objects of Study

Wednesday November 5, 2025: It Starts with a Feeling

Content Note: This week's readings focus on the transition from gut instinct, intuition and having a feeling about an issue of concern/interest to building research inquiry and analysis from sources of embodied knowledge and information. We will read some classic essays on the topic, including Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" and "Poetry is not a Luxury," Joan Scott's "The Evidence of Experience" and some more recent work on embodied, first-person research: not only as an end, but as part of larger processes of doing research about things that are not (always, or even centrally) about you. Thanem and Torkild draw from their own personal motivations for conducting research and how they use it to formulate practices of inquiry. Jonathan Sterne writes about impairment phenomenology as a way of writing *not* based in the author as fully knowable to, or always trustworthy, to oneself, as it is (always) for everyone. **[Reading amount: 87 pages]**

Lorde, Audre. (1984). "Poetry is a not a luxury" and "Uses of the erotic." In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 36-39, 53-59). Berkeley, CA: Crossings Press.

Scott, Joan W. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry,* 17(4), 773-797. **[we will annotate this piece]**

Thanem, Torkild, and David Knights. (2019). Initiating an embodied research process. In *Embodied research methods* (pp. 40-53). Sage.

Sterne, Jonathan (2021). Degrees of muteness. *Diminished faculties: A political phenomenology of impairment* (pp. 1-40). Duke University Press.

Recommended: Ferguson, Roderick. (2012). Of sensual matters: On Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" and "Uses of the Erotic." *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 40(3&4), 295-300.

Levina, Marina (2018). Whiteness and the joys of cruelty. *Communication and critical/cultural studies*, *15*(1), 73-78, DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2018.1435079

Ruckenstein, Minna. (2023). *The Feel of Algorithms.* University of California Press.

Wednesday November 12, 2025: The "Case" – On Representativeness, Attunement, and Scale

Content Note: This week's readings examine the specific role that "representativeness" plays in our choices of objects of study and our analysis thereof: that is, what they come to (and can) represent. Issues of scaling objects of study and attunement to materials that will make up one's corpus (your "stuff") are fundamental to this work. To prompt this conversation, we will read Lauren Berlant's short article on what makes something a "case" to be studied along with Robert Stakes' piece on what makes a case unique, media studies scholar Anna McCarthy on the politics of scaling objects of study in Cultural Studies, and Dylan Mulvin's chapter on how human and technological proxies serve as stand-ins. Give yourself plenty of time to do the readings for this week! **[Reading amount: 113 pages]**

Mulvin, Dylan (2020). Samples of the world *out there:* The surrogate logic of proxies. *Proxies* (pp. 1-33). MIT Press. **[we will annotate this piece]**

Berlant, Lauren. (2007). On the case. *Critical Inquiry, 33(4),* 663-672.

McCarthy, Anna (2006). From the ordinary to the concrete: Cultural studies and the politics of scale. In *Questions of method in cultural studies* (pp. 21-53), ed. Mimi White and. James Schwoch. Blackwell.

Stake, Robert E. (1995). The unique case. In *The art of case study research.* Sage Publications, 1-14.

Manning, Erin. (2020). Introduction: In a minor key. In *The minor gesture* (pp. 1-25). Duke University Press.

Wednesday November 19, 2025: Object Status -- Boundary Objects, Devices, and the Relations Between Communities of Practice

Content Note: This week's readings dive into STS scholarship, feminist and queer concepts of object status, such as boundary objects, devices, documents, and technological concretions (if you will). In addition to Star and Griesemer's key article on boundary objects, we will read an article by Ballestero and Oyarzun conceptualizing feminist devices, Cait McKinney's chapter on the politics of care documented in telephone phone logs in a New York City lesbian hotline from the 1970s-1990s, and Sumanth Gopinath's chapter on the history of digital watches and the Casio "beep" as a historically specific sonic and technological concretion of standardized watch temporalities and temporary US tech dominance. **[Reading amount: 132 pages]**

Star, Susan Leigh, and James R. Griesemer. (1989). Institutional ecology, 'translations' and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. *Social Studies of Science, 19,* 387-420. **[we will annotate this article]**

Daston, Lorraine & Galison, Peter. (2010). Epistemologies of the eye. In *Objectivity* (pp. 17-54). New York: Zone Books.

Ballestero, Andrea & Oyarzun, Yesmar. (2022), Devices: A location for feminist analytics and praxis. *Feminist Anthropology*, 3, 227-233. https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12108

McKinney, Cait (2021). Calling to talk and listening well: Information as care at telephone hotlines. In *Information activism: A queer history of lesbian media technologies* (pp. 67-104). Duke University Press.

Gopinath, Sumanth (2021). Beep: Listening to the digital watch. In Axel Volmar and Kyle Stine, ed. *Media infrastructures and the politics of digital time: Essays on hardwired temporalities* (pp. 221-240). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Recommended: De Laet, M., & Mol, A. (2000). The Zimbabwe bush pump: Mechanics of a fluid technology. *Social studies of science*, *30*(2), 225-263.

Mol, Annemarie (2002). *The body multiple.* Duke University Press.

Star, Susan Leigh. (1994/2018). Misplaced concretism and concrete situations: Feminism, method, and information technology. In G. Bowker, S. Timmermans, A. Clarke and E. Balka, eds. *Boundary objects and beyond: Working with Leigh Star.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 143-170.

Wednesday November 26, 2025: Black Feminist Method in Science and Technology Studies (last day of class)

Content Note: This week we are reading Katherine McKittrick's work, including several book chapters from *Dear science and other stories,* and an article she published in the geography journal *Antipode* on Black method. As she states, "Black knowledge is a method, which means it is an activity. Black knowledges are spirited, energetic and operational, rather than discursive flattened artefacts that we study." (2022, 5) The pieces we read consider the study of black miscellanea, the everyday interdisciplinary agency in Black lives, Black aesthetics, and much more through which McKittrick maps a series of actions, approaches and orientations to study, grounded in Black feminist (and geographical) articulations of what Harney and Moten call "study." **[Reading amount: 114 pages]**

McKittrick, Katherine. (2022). Dear April: The aesthetics of black miscellanea. *Antipode*, *54*(1), 3-18. **[we will annotate this piece]**

McKittrick, Katherine. (2021). "Curiosities (My Heart Makes My Head Swim)," "Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor," "Consciousness (Feeling Like, Feeling Like This)," "Something that Exceeds All Efforts to Pin it Down," "Failure (My Head Was Full of Misty Fumes of Doubt" and "(Zong) Bad Made Measure," "Dear Science." In *Dear science and other stories* (1-14, 14-35, 58-70, 71-74, 82-100, 104-129, 165-168). Duke University Press.

*** Wednesday December 3, 2025 – It follows a Monday Class schedule, so we are not scheduled to meet.**

But, for those of you interested in the material, I will leave this here in case you want to read it at some point and have a conversation with me about it – anytime.

Ethnographic Relations -- The Constructive, Constitutive, Contextual Work of Field Research and Interviewing

Content Note: After nearly a full semester of readings and discussion, and many discussion facilitations, we are well-primed for this week's topic of ethnographic relations and interview methods – ideally, we've already been practicing some of this as seminar participants, and moderators/facilitators. There are two kinds of seminar readings for this week: 1) texts on doing/refusing ethnographies, and 2) texts on how-to conduct interviews. We will be talking about both in conversation. The first set of readings centre on power in ethnographic research, with a focus on studying elites. Two readings are about "studying up": one by Jan Radway, and Carol Cohn's classic feminist essay on studying defense intellectuals. Enloe's three-page essay in dialogue with Cohn articulates the need for feminist approaches to ethnographies of militarized systems (she is speaking primarily to International Relations scholars and those who study systems of violence). Audra Simpson's essay examines indigenous ethnographic refusal and its significance in disrupting systems of power in anthropology and ethnography. The other set of readings articulate the practice of interviewing. They include James Spradley's classic text on ethnographic interviews (and the centrality of asking descriptive, structural and contrast questions—these are particularly good models), and Brinkmann and Kvale's book on the research interview as itself a substantive research context.

Cohn, Carol. (1987). Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, *12*(4), 687-718.

Radway, Janice (1991). Ethnography among elites: Comparing discourses of power. *Journal of Communication Inquiry, 13*(2), 3-11.

Enloe, Cynthia. (2004). 'Gender' is not enough: the need for a feminist consciousness. *International Affairs*, *80*(1), 95-97.

Simpson, Audra. (2007). On ethnographic refusal: Indigeneity, 'voice' and colonial citizenship. *Junctures: the journal for thematic dialogue*, *9,* 67-80.

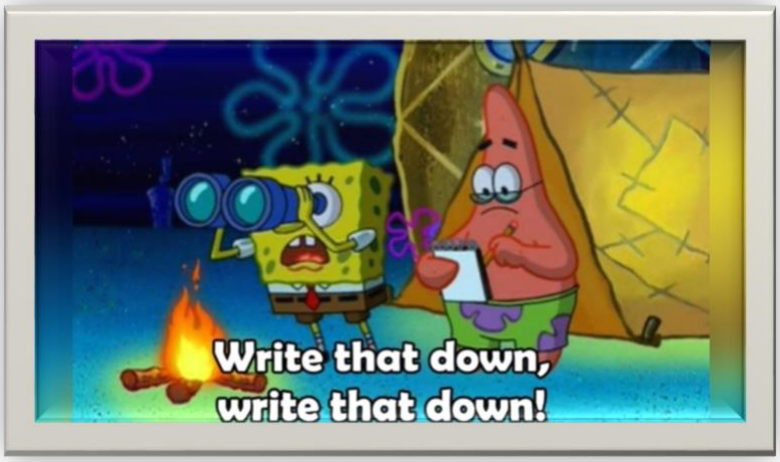
Choose one of the following to read (on the practice of interviewing):

Brinkmann, Svende & Kvale, Steinar. (2015). "The qualitative research interview as context" and "Conducting an interview." In *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing,* 3rd edition. Sage Publications, 103-122, 149-166.

OR

Spradley, James (1979/2016). “Asking descriptive questions,” “Asking structural questions,” and “Asking contrast questions.” In *The ethnographic interview.* Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 78-91, 120-131, 155-172.

Recommended*:* Alcoff, Linda Martin (1991/92). The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural critique, 20*, 5-32.



[image description: a Spongebob Squarepants meme with the caption “Write that down!]

Final Essay Due: Monday December 15, 2025
Submit via the Assignment Portal in MyCourses