

# The Social Life of Paper

## ENG G41.2944 & MCC E58.2344 (16509 & 16715)

Profs. [Lisa Gitelman](#) and [Juliet Fleming](#)

Wednesdays 10:00-12:45

244 Greene St., room 306

Office hours: After class and always by appointment

Those who are careful (as they call it) to principle children well, instill into the unwary and as yet unprejudiced, understanding (for white paper receives any characters) those doctrines they would have them retain and profess.  
—John Locke (1690)

It is unfortunately the prerogative of this papering age of the world that, since the universe has fallen into the hands of the merchants of book and images, thousands of authors and artists, now blinded by the direct light of nature, see however quite well, as soon as this light is reflected from a piece of paper.  
—Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1795)

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.  
— Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1803)

Susie, what shall I do—there isn't room enough; not half enough, to hold what I was going to say. Won't you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I haven't the slightest respect for him!  
— Emily Dickinson letter to Susan Gilbert (1853)

Common Sense on a Roll™  
—Kimberly-Clark Worldwide (2008)

"Off and on," [Claude] Shannon wrote to Vannevar Bush at MIT in 1939, "I have been working on an analysis of some of the fundamental properties of general systems for the transmission of intelligence."  
--James Gleick, *The Information* (2001)

Where you stand on the question of who wants eBooks really does heavily depend upon where you sit.  
--Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen* (2015)

**Course Description** What is the cultural work performed by or with the technology of paper? How can a history of paper supplement and enrich recent histories of printing technology and printed artifacts like "the book"? Or of "the literary"? What kinds of writing does it preclude? What would it mean to imagine a paperless future? What, finally, is paper? Organized around discussions of readings in common, this course considers the history, production, circulation and use of paper in the social production of knowledge, the shared imagination of value, and the mutual relations of consumers and commodities.

**Course Requirements.** Written work will consist of one shorter essay (10%) and a final project due in at the end of the semester (70%). Informed participation in class discussion is an additional requirement worth 20% of the final grade and will include at least one in-class presentation. Written work is due in class as indicated on the syllabus and will be graded for both insight and effectiveness. All work must be your own, and any plagiarism—no matter how accidental—will result in failure for the course. Late papers will be penalized and may not receive written comments. The majority of the course readings will be available as PDF files, either in the “Resources” area of the course Classes site or via persistent links in the syllabus. (Make sure you are logged into the NYU Libraries when clicking on links in the syllabus.) We recommend buying two books, Ben Kafka’s *Demon of Paperwork* and Kristen Weld’s *Paper Cadavers*. Readings should be completed for the class sessions indicated. Also, please bring the assigned reading to class with you for discussion. If you notice any dead links on the syllabus or in Classes, please email us a.s.a.p., and we will try to help. Attendance is expected in this course: Absences may have a depressing effect on your grade.

## Calendar of Class Meetings and Assignments

(any changes will be announced in class or via Classes)

Wednesdays

January 27 Introductions

Readings: “Adventures of a Quire of Paper” (1779) with [Robbins, “Commodity Histories”](#) (2005)

February 3 Paper Theory I

Readings: Levi-Strauss, “Family Life,” “On the Line,” and “A Writing Lesson,” From *Tristes Tropiques*; Derrida, “The Violence of the Letter” from *Of Grammatology*

February 10 Paper Theory II

Readings: Latour, “Visualization and Cognition”; Derrida, “Paper or Me”; Freud, “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad”

February 17 Substrate/Aesthetics

Readings: Craig Dworkin, No Medium (excerpts); Jonathan Safran Foer, “[The First Empty Page](#)”; Fleming, “Whitewash.”

Short Essay Due (details TBA)

February 24 Scholarly Journal I

Readings: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (September 2015), Fleming, “[Introduction](#)”; Smyth, “[Little Clippings](#)”; and Knight, “[Needles and Pens](#).” Please try to read one additional article you will describe to the class.

March 2 Paper Histories: Antebellum U.S. I

David Henkin, *City Reading* (excerpt); Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837* (excerpt); and Greenberg, “The Era of Shinplasters: Making Sense of Unregulated Paper Money”

March 9 Paper Histories: Antebellum U.S. II

Readings: Ryan Cordell, "Taken Possession of: The Reprinting and Reauthorship of Hawthorne's Celestial Railroad" [DHQ](#) (2013); McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* (excerpt).

Explore: <http://viraltxts.org/>

Spring Break

March 23 Paperwork I

Reading: Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing* (Zone Books, 2012)

March 30 Remediation/Circulation

Readings: Paul Duguid, "Inheritance or Loss: A Brief Survey of Google Books" (2007); Whitney Trettien, "A Deep History of Electronic Textuality," [DHQ](#); Bonnie Mak, "Archaeology of a Digitization" [JASIST](#).

Guest interlocutor: Whitney Trettien

April 6 Paperwork II

Reading: Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of A Dictatorship* (Duke 2014); please read *at least* pp. 1-88 and 236-256.

April 13 Scholarly Journal II

Reading: [Critical Inquiry](#) (Autumn 2004); please read the introduction, articles by Liu and Guillory, and at least one additional article you will describe to the class.

April 20 Reproduction/Circulation

Reading: Gitelman, "Xerographers of the Mind" and "Afterward: Amateurs Rush in"; and Latour and Lowe, "Migration of Aura"

April 27

Reading: TBA

May 4 Final thoughts

Abbot, "[The Future of Knowing](#);" and Jabr, "[Why the Brain Prefers Paper](#)"

May 12 Papers due via email to both professors. No late papers!

## Highly Selective Bibliography of Relevant Works

Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Augst, Thomas. *The Clerk's Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Baker, Nicholson. "Discards" *New Yorker* (4 April 1994) 64-86.

Basbanes, Nicolas A. *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History*. New York: Knopf, 2013.

- Bayard, Pierre. *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.
- Becker, Peter and William Clark, eds. *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Blair, Ann M. *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Brown, John Seely and Paul Duigud. "Reading the Background" 173-205, *The Social Life of Information*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.
- Calhoun, Joshua. "The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper" *PMLA* 126.2 (2011) 327-344.
- Casper, Scott E., Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds. *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880. A History of the Book in America*. Vol. 3. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Derrida, Jacques. Archive Fever [TK]
- Duguid, Paul and John Seely Brown, "The Social Life of Documents"
- Febvre, Lucien and Henri-Jean Martin, "Preliminaries: The Introduction of Paper into Europe" Chapter One, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*. Trans. David Gerard. Ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton. London: Atlantic Highlands, [TK].
- Fleming, Juliet. *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Groebner, Valentin. *Who Are You?: Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- Guillory, John. "The Memo and Modernity." *Critical Inquiry* 31:1 (Autumn 2004) 108-132.
- Henkin, David M. *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Hull, Matthew S. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Kafka, Ben. "Paperwork: The State of the Discipline." *Book History* 12 (2009) 340-353.
- Kaiser, David. *Drawing Things Together: The Dispersion of Feynman Diagrams in Postwar Physics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- King, William Davies. *Collections of Nothing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Lau, Estelle T. *Paper Families: Identity, Immigration Administration, and Chinese Exclusion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Levy, David M. *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*. New York: Arcade, 2001.
- Lupton, Christina. *Knowing Books: The Consciousness of Mediation in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Luskey, Brian P. "Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability and Work in the Antebellum City" *Journal of the Early Republic* 26:2 (2006) 173-219.
- Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- McGaw, Judith A. *Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change In Berkshire Paper Making, 1801-1885*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- McLaughlin, Kevin. *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Melville, Herman. "Bartleby the Scrivener" (New York, 1853).

- Mihm, Stephen. *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Mueggler, Erik. *The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Pellegram, Andrea. "The Message in Paper" *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, ed. Daniel Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Poovey, Mary. *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- William Powers, "Hamlet's Blackberry: Why Paper Is Eternal"
- Price, Leah. *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Robertson, Craig. "A Documentary Regime of Verification" *Cultural Critique* (June 2006).
- Rosenberg, Daniel. "Early Modern Information Overload" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (January 2003) 1-9.
- Sellen, Abigail J. and Richard H. R. Harper. *The Myth of the Paperless Office*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Sherman, William H. *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England*(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
- Trollope, Anthony. *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson by One of the Firm* (London, 1870)
- Tudge, Colin. *The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees Are, How They Live, and Why they Matter*. Three Rivers Press, 2007.
- Vismann, Cornelia. *Files: Law and Media Technology*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- Weber, Max. "Bureaucratic Authority," *Sociological Writings*. Ed. Wolf Heydebrand and trans. Martin Black with Lance W. Garmer. New York: Continuum, 1994.
- Yates, JoAnne. *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.