**The Social Life of Paper**

ENG G41.2944 & MCC E58.2344

[Lisa Gitelman](mailto://lg91@nyu.edu)

Mondays 2:00-4:30

244 Greene St. 306

Office hours: After class and always by appointment (239 Greene St. #720)

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 telltale 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 MS letter to Susan Gilbert (1853)

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

“Off and on,” [Claude] Shannon wrote to Vannevar Bush 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* (2011)

After [Kim Il-sung’s] death, and as his son Kim Jong-il’s rule became established in the Institutions of state, the status of novelists changed. Poetry became the literary vogue. This was not due solely to Kim Jong-il’s preference for the form. The phenomenon was reinforced, if not triggered, by a shortage of paper when the North Korean economy collapsed.  
–Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee* (2014)

The history of paper only turns into a media history as it serves as a reference system for the analysis of bureaucratic or scientific data processing.

--Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques* (2015)

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, that most excellent of all Chinese inventions? How might a history and theory of paper supplement recent accounts of media, formats, and genres? What does a focus on paper stand to tell us about artifacts like “the book” or constructs like “the literary,” for instance? What is the work of paper in the production of knowledge, the shared imagination of value, and the persistence of inequalities? What would it mean to imagine a paperless future? Organized around discussions of readings in common, this course offers students an opportunity to think creatively about their own methods and objects of study.

**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 brief 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. Attendance is expected in this course: Absences may have a depressing effect on your grade. If you have to miss more than one session due to quarantine, we’ll figure out a makeup tutorial of some kind.

Many of the course readings will be available as PDF files, either in a “Resources” area of the course Brightspace site or via persistent links in this syllabus. (Make sure you are logged into the NYU Libraries when clicking on links in the syllabus.) Weeks 2, 7, and 12 address books that (so far) are not available electronically through the NYU Libraries: you may have to scrounge a hard copy. If you notice any dead links on the syllabus or in Brightspace, please email me a.s.a.p., and I will try to help.

**Calendar of Class Meetings and Assignments**

(Any changes will be announced via Brightspace)

Fourteen Mondays

1.

January 24 Introductions

Readings: “Adventures of a Quire of Paper” (1779) with [Robbins, “Commodity Histories”](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486171) (2005) and Hulme, “[Following the (Unfollowable) Thing](ps://doi.org/10.1177/1474474016647370)” (2017).

2.

January 31 Paper Theory

Reading: Vismann, *Files* (2008)

3.

February 7 Paper Theory (misc.)

Readings: Latour, “[Visualization and Cognition](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/21-DRAWING-THINGS-TOGETHER-GB.pdf)”; Derrida, “Paper or Me”; Freud, “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad”; Turing, “[On Computable Numbers](https://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/Turing_Paper_1936.pdf)”

4.

February 14♥︎ Paper Art

Readings: Craig Dworkin, [*No Medium*](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3339578) (at least pp. 5-33); Rippon, “[’lighght’ and ‘covfefe’](DOI%2010.1215/00265667-8623742)” (2020). Your examples?

5.

February 28 Paperless Future 1

Robert Binkley, “New Tools for Men of Letters” (1935)

Walter Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” (1935)

H.G. Wells, “The Idea of a Permanent World Encyclopedia” (1937)

Vannevar Bush, “[As We May Think](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/)” (1945).

6.

March 7 Research, How To

Abbott, [*Digital Paper*](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3563035) (selections) plus your guided tours of special issues or edited collections, semester project “pitches” (details TBA)

Spring Break

7.

March 21 Paper Histories

David Henkin, *The Week: A History of the Unnatural Rhythms That Made Us Who We Are* (2021) (or [*The Postal Age*](https://doi-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.7208/9780226327228) or *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*)

8.

March 28 Computer Paper

Jacob Gaboury, Ch. 4, “[Object Paradigms: On the Origins of Object Orientation](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6676802)” (2021). Let’s also explore computer magazines from the 1960s-1980s contained in online collections (bring a laptop).

9.

April 4 Typographic Substance and Substrate

Mullaney, [“Semiotic Sovereignty”](http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/b9789004268784_008); “[The Moveable Typewriter”](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490728); Brideau, *The* [*Typographic Medium*](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6735556) at least pp. 25-48.

10.

April 11 Digitization

Readings: Paul Duguid, “Inheritance or Loss: A Brief Survey of Google Books” (2007); Bonnie Mak, “Archaeology of a Digitization” [JASIST](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.23061/epdf). Ryan Cordell, “’Q I-JTB The Raven’: Taking Dirty OCR Seriously.”

Optional (hard core): Gregg, [*Old Books and Digital Publishing*](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/lib/nyulibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6469481), 2020; and Marcum and Schonfeld, [*Along Came Google*](https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.nyu.edu/book/85778), 2021)

11.

April 18 Working with Paper

Bittell et al., ed. [Working with Paper: Gendered Practices in the History of Knowledge](https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.nyu.edu/book/66705/) (2019).

12.

April 25 Paperless Future 2

McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021

13.  
May 2 Bibliography

Cohen, “[Time and the Bibliographer](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26954244)” (2020)

Drucker, “[Distributed and Conditional Documents: Conceptualizing Bibliographical Alterities](https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:54623981)” (2014)

14.

May 9 Last day

Your works in progress and final thoughts

May 15 Papers due via email. Please, no stragglers.

**Highly Selective (to the point of almost random)  
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, Cathleen A. *From the Hand to the Machine: Nineteenth-Century American Paper and Mediums: Technologies, Materials, and Conservation*. Ann Arbor, MI: Legacy Press, 2010.

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.

Csiszar, Alex. *The Scientific Journal: Authorship and the Politics of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Coopersmith, Jonathan. *Faxed: The Rise and Fall of the Fax Machine*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015.

Day, Ronald E. *Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data*. Cambridge: MIT, 2014.

Duguid, Paul and John Seely Brown, [“The Social Life of Documents”](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/466/387)

Duncan, Dennis. *Index, a History of the: A Bookish Adventure*. London: Allen Lane, 2021.

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.

Fowler, Caroline. *The Art of Paper: From the Holy Land to the Americas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

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.

Henkin, David. *City Reading* [TK]

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. *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*. New York: Zone, 2012.

Kafka, Ben. “Paperwork: The State of the Discipline.” *Book History* 12 (2009) 340-353.

Kafka, Franz. *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings.* Ed. Stanley Corngold, et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

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.

Latour, Bruno and Adam Lowe, “The Migration of the Aura, or, How to Explore the Original through Its Facsimiles,” 275-298, Thomas Bartscerer and Roderick Coover, ed. *Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*. Chicago, 2011.

Lau, Estelle T. *Paper Families: Identity, Immigration Administration, and Chinese Exclusion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Lemov, Rebecca. *Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Lenoir, Timothy, ed. *Inscribing Science: Scientific Texts and the Materiality of Communication*. Stanford, 1998.

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.

McGill, Meredith, “Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau’s A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers” *American Literary History* (March 2007) doi:10.1093/alh/ajm018.

McHenry, Elizabeth. *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African American Literary Authorship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

McLaughlin, Kevin. *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

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.

Mullaney, Thomas. *The Chinese Typewriter: A History*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017.

Nishikawa, Kinohi. *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Pearson, Susan J. *The Birth Certificate: An American History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

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.

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).

Robertson, Craig. *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

Rosenberg, Daniel. “Early Modern Information Overload” *Journal of the History of Ideas*64 (January 2003) 1-9.

Round, Phillip H. *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663-1880*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Sellen, Abigail J. and Richard H. R. Harper. *The Myth of the Paperless Office*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.

Senchyne, Jonathan. *The Intimacy of Paper in Early Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

Sherman, William H. *Used* *Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England*(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Stamm, Michael. *Dead Tree Media: Manufacturing the Newspaper in Twentieth-Century North America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

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).

Vossoughian, Nader. “Standardization Reconsidered: *Normierung* in and after Ernst Neufert's *Bauentwurfslehre* (1936)” *Grey Room* 54 (2014) 34-55.

Warwick, Andrew. “A Mathematical World on Paper: The Material Culture and Practice-Ladenness of Mixed Mathematics, 114-175, *Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics*. Chicago: Chicago, 2003.

Weber, Max.” Bureaucratic Authority,” *Sociological Writings*. Ed.Wolf Heydebrand and trans. Martin Black with Lance W. Garmer. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Weld, Kristin. *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala.* Durham: Duke, 2014.

Wellmon, Chad. *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2015.

Yates, JoAnne. *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.