

CRTE

Reading in the Digital Age



with Merritt Writing Program faculty Tom Hothem

The advent of computing devices like laptops, tablets, and mobile phones are profoundly changing how we read and digest texts. Researchers have found that students reading digital texts are doing “hyper-reading” as opposed to “close-reading.”

This workshop offers some preliminary thoughts and suggestions and strategies on how to help students read more effectively in the digital age.

Wed 2/16 1-2 COB 322

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Though the sign says that Tom Hothem is
providing this session,

it's really co-presented with

Mike Truong

(without whom Tom wouldn't have got
very far here).

Some Introductory Overarching Points:

1. We've associated reading with *paper* for well over 2,000 years.
2. The printing press ushered in an era of “monomediation” wherein texts were often shorn of visual accompaniments and words became more important than pictures.
3. The advent of computing has profoundly affected the ways in which we engage with texts, restoring multimediation in dynamic new ways.

Some Introductory Overarching Points:

4. Most of us now read considerably more on screen, in multimedia formats, than we do on paper.
5. In the Information Age, we're often more likely to "hyper-read" than to "close-read."
6. Concerns about fundamental changes in textual media are as old as writing itself, and recur throughout history.
7. Modern textual media usually reflect previous ways of working with texts (and thus provide cues for how to work with new media).

How do your students read?



How do your students read?

- Dependent on medium and message.
- Skimming for immediate purpose.
- Mono-media vs. multimedia
- Rote learning; information age
- externalization vs. internalization of thought

A “Timeless” Allegory from Plato’s *The Phaedrus*



The Myth of Thoth (Inventor of Writing, Among Other Things) From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“Thoth went to the king, Thamus, and exhibited his inventions, claiming that they ought to be made known to the Egyptians in general. Thamus inquired into the use of each of them, and as Thoth went through them expressed approval or disapproval, according as he judged Thoth’s claims to be well or ill founded.”



The Myth of Thoth

From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“When it came to writing, Thoth declared: ‘Here is an accomplishment, my lord the king, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom.’”



The Myth of Thoth

From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“Thoth, my paragon of inventors,’
replied the king, ‘the discoverer of
an art is not the best judge of the
good or harm which will accrue to
those who practice it. So it is in
this case; you, who are the father
of writing, have out of fondness
for your offspring attributed it to
quite the opposite of its real
function.’”



The Myth of Thoth

From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“Those who acquire [writing] will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources.”

“What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory.”

The Myth of Thoth

From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without the proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant.””

The Myth of Thoth

From Plato, *The Phaedrus*

“And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.””

Such Concerns about Media Echo Through the Ages

- **Permanence/Authority of the Written Word (low literacy rates; translation issues; advent of silent reading v. reading aloud)**
- **Advent of Printing Press & Authority of the Printed Word**
 - Some felt that “the easy availability of books would lead to intellectual laziness, making men ‘less studious’ and weakening their minds” (Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” par. 31).
- **“Flood” of Printed Matter Tantamount to Pollution**
 - “[A] flood of printer’s ink was a darkness that spread across the land ... darkening the minds of the people and their rulers, obliterating polite letters, and finally extinguishing all light, to leave the land in ancient night and ignorance” (Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print* 15-16).

Such Concerns about Media Echo Through the Ages

- **Things now said of the Internet were once said of novels (in the 18th Century).**
 - **Novels “pollute the heart in the recesses of the closet, inflame the passions at a distance from temptation, and teach all the malignity of vice in solitude.” (Vicesmus Knox)**
 - **Novels are a “mass of trash” whose “poison infects the mind” so as to promote “a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life.” (Thomas Jefferson)**
- **Recall that similar has been said of television.**

Some Contemporary Concerns

(many of which are genuine, though can be approached via the preceding context)

- Reading on-screen (particularly on Internet) encourages shorter attention span (and rewires our brains as such).
 - “[W]e ask the Internet to keep interrupting us, in ever more and different ways. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least diverting information we receive.” (Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* 116)
- Comprehension may decline as the number of links in a document increases.

Some Contemporary Concerns

(many of which are genuine, though can be approached via the preceding context)

- Reading on-screen entails distractions from other, competing programs (email, games, etc.).
- Because it is generally done in a targeted or impressionistic manner, reading on-screen tends to entail skimming (“fast reading”) instead of deep engagement (“slow reading”).
- Generational knowledge gap: “Educators envision a whole new pedagogy with the tools, but students see only the chance to extend long-established postures toward the screen.” (Bauerlein, “Online Literacy Is a Lesser Kind” par. 7).

Some Contemporary Concerns of Yours

- **Length of texts varies with format: Easy to lose one's place.**
- **Spatial negotiation between reading digitally and in hard copy.**
- **Harder to gauge bigger picture of material; book allows for full referentiality.**
- **annotating changes**

Information Age Theses, derived from the Myth of Thoth and Subsequent Panics

1. Reading *anything*—on screen or on paper—is a tricky business (that entails managing information).
2. In the Information Age, we love messages and disparage media.
3. But if we ignore the *medium* we risk missing the nuances of the *message*. (cf. McLuhan)
4. Knowledge is in both of these things, no matter the medium, and thus requires active, informed reading and writing to unlock it.

A Challenge Posed by “Haters”

“What we are seeing is a strange flattening of the act of reading. It equates handheld screens with *Madame Bovary*, as if they made the same cognitive demands and inculcated the same habits of attention. It casts peeking at a text message and plowing through *Middlemarch* as subsets of one general activity. And it treats those quick bursts of words and icons as fully sufficient to sustain the reading culture.” (Bauerlein, “Online Reading Is a Lesser Kind” par. 13)

The Potential of On-Screen Reading

- **In evolving with media (which is increasingly multidimensional), on-screen reading engages prevailing and emerging forms, genres, and subjects.**
- **The more media one engages, the more dimensions and kinds of knowledge there are available.**
- **“The ability to scan and browse is as important as the ability to read deeply and think attentively.” (Carr, “The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains” par. 24)**
- **“Web browsing also strengthens brain functions related to fast-paced problem solving, particularly when it requires finding patterns in a welter of data.” (Carr, “The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains” par. 20)**

The Potential of On-Screen Reading

- On-screen reading can be more contextually informed and indeed “deep.”
 - “[T]he superficiality [of blogs] masked considerable depth—greater depth, from one perspective, than the traditional media could offer. ... Online, a hyperlink to the original source transforms the experience ... [by adding] much greater context than anything on paper. Even a blogger’s chose pull quote, unlike a columnist’s, can be effortlessly checked against the original.” (Sullivan, “Why I Blog” par. 19)
- “The screen rewards, and nurtures, thinking in real time.” (Kelly, “Reading in a Whole New Way” par. 7)

The Potential of On-Screen Reading

- **“Screens provoke action instead of persuasion. Propaganda is less effective in a world of screens, because while misinformation travels fast, corrections do, too. On a screen it is often easier to correct a falsehood than to tell one in the first place; Wikipedia works so well because it removes an error in a single click. In books we find a revealed truth; on the screen we assemble our own truth from pieces.” (Kelly, “Reading in a Whole New Way” par. 8)**
- **“The rush to digitize the written record ... will not result in the information infotopia that the prophets conjure up but in one of a long series of information ecologies ... in which readers, writers, and producers of text have learned to survive.” (Grafton, “Future Reading” par. 4)**

The Potential of On-Screen Reading

... may lie in applying operations we've associated with paper to the new medium.

- Screenshots and .pdfs.
- Annotation tools in Acrobat and Preview