



# Syracuse University Project Advance

## Summer Reading & Viewing Assignment

Let's begin with a **thought experiment**: You're in a relationship for several months and you sense that it's beginning to unravel. You voice your concerns, but your partner's replies are curt and unsatisfying. "It's nothing." You go for a movie, then for food. *This is the time to talk about us*, you think. Food arrives. Before you can muster the strength to tell it like it is, your partner voices a similar concern, a dissatisfaction that is unknowingly your fault. Your fries are gone. The ice in your soda has melted. You fight back tears as your partner cracks a painful smile. You split the check, head for the door, and turn to wave. It's over.

Now let's **imagine such a scenario playing out in a different way**. You sense a tension in your relationship, but you can't seem to address it in person. One night, you return home to check your phone. You scroll through your Instagram feed, feverishly "liking" your friends' new pics. You discover that your significant other has posted a picture. Populated with friends, all of whom appear to be having the time of their lives, the photo caption reads "#single4lyfe." The post has 417 likes in 21 minutes. Crushed, you send a text to your partner indicating your relationship is over. Or, swap out the discovery of the Instagram post for a vague tweet about newly being single. Or, swap out the tweet for a handwritten note received in the mail.

We have more ways to communicate with each other than at any other time in human history. As students who communicate, we understand that **the content of what we communicate matters, but so do the forms we choose**. Each of these forms—these *modalities*—opens up new opportunities to connect with others, but each also comes with its own limitations. Our summer reading assignment begins an exploration of some of the ways we are able to learn about the people and places that make up our world. We are also interested in critically investigating the forms that this information takes. These assignments will allow you to grapple with a body of ideas on your own, before first semester gets underway.

**A heads-up:** The Summer Assignment constitutes all of the daily assignments scheduled during the first unit. **Doing this work now, before the semester begins, means there will be no daily homework for the first three weeks of class.** That will free you up to attend to other tasks that make the fall months so busy (e.g., college essays). As a culmination of the first unit, you'll create an informational text of your own based on what you learned in the Summer Assignment—a comic, OpDoc, or YouTube-style informational video. The project (which can be done individually or in a small group, and can be done straight or as a parody) asks you to attend to genre conventions and account for the strengths and weaknesses of the medium you've chosen to work with. You'll get specific directions in the fall, but it would be a good idea to **keep the project in the back of your mind as you make your way through the work described in this document.** The more thoughtfully you do the Summer Assignment, the better your Genre Project is likely to be.

## Part I: Theoretical Background

We'll get started by hearing from some prominent philosophers who have examined the relationship between medium and message. Their ideas will inform not only how we think about the example texts in part two of the Summer Assignment but also the first and second units of WRT 105.

1. **Form and Content, Take 1:** *Wired* magazine's patron saint, Marshall McLuhan was a media theorist who served as the head of the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto for much of the 1960s and '70s. McLuhan was a bona-fide celebrity in his day (he even made a brief appearance in Woody Allen's 1977 film *Annie Hall*), and some of his most famous phrases ("the medium is the message," "the global village") have entered the public lexicon. As a crash course in some of his ideas, watch [the first 25 minutes](#) of the 1967 television profile "This is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message." Then, read the introduction to and first chapter from Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. A professor of media studies at NYU for over 40 years, Postman's 1985 book builds upon McLuhan's ideas.

**The Assignment:** Select at least three specific passages from each text and write a brief response to each (a few sentences will do). The response may be an assessment of the point being made, an extension, a connection to another idea from our contemporary media environment, etc. Then, in a separate paragraph, step back and synthesize these two sources, saying where you think McLuhan's and Postman's ideas intersect and diverge.

2. **Form and Content, Take 2:** Noël Carroll, an American philosopher of art and film, has been publishing for more than 40 years. In his 1988 essay "The Specificity Thesis," Carroll challenges the idea that gives the essay its name—the assertion that a given medium of expression has specific inherent qualities that should inform how we understand and assess the work produced in that medium. (Look for a more complete explanation of this theory on the first page of his essay.) Though he's approaching the topic from a different angle, you should see Carroll as debating a proposition put forward in a different form by McLuhan and Postman.

**The Assignment:** Write a **focused summary** of Carroll's argument. A focused summary is one that captures the gist of a text. It should be comprehensive enough that it identifies the most critical points made in support of the claim (and any concessions made along the way), but not so detailed that it covers everything about how the points were handled. (A focused summary is generally a solid paragraph in length.) Then, in a separate paragraph, explain what you see as the relationship between McLuhan's and Postman's ideas on the one hand and Carroll's on the other. Though they're working with different media, all of these thinkers are discussing the relationship between form and content. Do your best to tease out the connections you see and to assess the arguments these authors are making.

3. **Form and Content, Take 3:** Syracuse alumnus Scott McCloud, an American cartoonist and comics theorist, has done as much as anyone to help people develop an appreciation and critical understanding of the work "sequential art" can do. (He's even been called "the Marshall McLuhan of comics"!) Though the piece we'll read is specifically about comics, the ideas McCloud offers and the issues he's raising are applicable to other forms of written and visual texts as well.

**The Assignment:** Read Chapter 4, "Time Frames," from his groundbreaking 1993 book *Understanding Comics*. Then, identify five key points and briefly explain why you think they're important, including the ways his ideas relate to the other theoretical texts, how McCloud's ideas can be applied to other media, and how they distinguish comics from other media.

## Part II: Informational Texts—A Survey

Now it's time to apply the ideas we considered in Part I. We'll work with four modalities designed to communicate information to a wide audience. Long-form journalism is one genre in the broader medium of printed text. Journalistic cartoons are representative of one genre within the broader medium of comics. The OpDocs and YouTube informational videos both work with the medium of film or video but have distinct genre conventions. Each of these modes of expression has its own strengths and limitations. As you're reading / watching them, consider these **overarching questions**:

- What are the **essential, defining characteristics** of this medium / this genre?
- What are the **strengths** of this medium / genre? What does it do especially?
- What are the **weaknesses** of this medium / genre? What aspects of this text might be presented more successfully through another medium?
- How is this medium / genre **similar to and different from the others** we're exploring? How does this genre **compare to others** we aren't working with?
- How do the ideas from the **theoretical background** portion of the unit inform your analysis of a specific text and the genre / medium it's working within?

Now, to the specifics:

1. **Long-Form Journalism**: As a genre of journalism, long-form is distinguished by the extended length of the piece (hence the name), a characteristic that allows the author to explore a topic in greater depth. We'll work with three examples from *Class Matters*, a series that appeared in *The New York Times*—“[Up From the Holler](#),” “[When the Joneses Wear Jeans](#),” and “[Fifteen Years on the Bottom Rung](#)”—and one that appeared in *The New Yorker*—“[Drop Dead, Detroit!](#)”.

**The Assignment:** Read the four articles and write a focused summary for each. (Again, a focused summary is one that captures the gist of the way the issue has been discussed and notes the main points used to explore it). Then, construct a separate essay map for “Fifteen Years...”, examining it from a compositional standpoint: *identify the kinds of evidence* the author uses; explain how different *kinds of evidence work together*; *track the claim* and how it *evolves*. Construct this map as a bulleted list. Follow the essay from beginning to end, but that doesn't mean you need to comment on each paragraph individually. Instead, look for patterns—how several paragraphs work with a specific kind of evidence, what's brought in next, how different kinds of evidence are used in conjunction with each other, etc. (Evidence may be in the form of *narration* [i.e., telling a story], *testimony* from people with knowledge of the subject, detailed *descriptions*, *statistics*, or *examples*.) Once you've completed focused summaries and the essay map, step back and write a brief assessment of long-form journalism in general, making use of the overarching questions above.

2. **Comics**: Joe Sacco is an award-winning journalist who works in the medium of comics. He often investigates areas involved in the throes of military conflicts (Gaza, Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, etc.). The selections we'll read are from his 2012 collaboration with essayist and social critic Chris Hedges, *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. Broadly speaking, the book explores ways larger economic forces have caused hardships in different parts of America. The first two pieces are set in Camden, New Jersey (though it could have been situated in any aging industrial town), and the third is set in Imokalee, Florida. All three are posted [here](#).

Brooke Gladstone has been a journalist at NPR for over three decades, and for much of the time she's covered the media itself. Since 2000, she has been co-host of *On the Media*, a weekly show focusing on issues related to journalism, the First Amendment, and technology.

Josh Neufeld is an author and comics artist whose work has explored topics ranging from New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to the cloistered world of Wall Street finance. In 2011 they teamed up to write *The Influencing Machine*, a critical look at the past, present, and future of the news media. We'll read two sections, "The Influencing Machine" and "I, Robot." Both are posted [here](#).

**The Assignment:** Read all five pieces (they're brief). Then, select one from each pair of authors to examine more closely. In each, focus on at least two specific moments and explain why you think they work especially well, using details from the text to support your position. To sharpen your analysis, pay special attention to the ways the portions you've zeroed in on were handled in this medium (as opposed to, say, long-form journalism or essay form) and keep in mind McCloud's ideas about comics as a medium. Finally, step back and write a brief assessment of this genre of journalism more broadly, making use of the overarching questions on the previous page.

3. Documentary Shorts: The name says it all. Short documentary films open windows into the world we live in. We'll work with several from the *New York Times*' OpDocs series. As a genre, they're op-ed (opinion) pieces in video form. Our selections all strive to give a strong impression of people and / or places.

The Assignment: Watch these seven OpDocs so that you have a strong grasp of the conventions particular to this kind of filmmaking: "[Lullaby](#)"; "[Hotel 22](#)"; "[Dismantling Detroit](#)"; "[Bodies on the Border](#)"; "[VHS v Communism](#)"; "[Slo-Mo](#)"; and "[Chinese on the Inside](#)". As you watch them, pay close attention to common features they share. Doing so is important work: it will develop your understanding of the elements to incorporate in your Genre Project, should you choose to make your own OpDoc. Once that's done, select three OpDocs to examine more closely. Identify two specific moments in each and explain why you think they work especially well, using details from the text to support your position. Pay special attention to elements you feel are handled differently in this medium as opposed to others. Finally, step back and write a brief assessment of the OpDoc as a genre of documentary film and of documentary filmmaking in general, making use of the overarching questions on the previous page.

4. YouTube Instructional Videos: The promise of the Internet is that it can make the world's libraries available to all. The web has the potential to transform how students of all ages learn. Enter YouTube channels specializing in instructional videos. They share a medium with OpDocs and, similarly, aim to inform, but, given their context and audience, they have features specific to their genre.

**The Assignment:** Watch at least two of the following *Crash Course* videos: "[Growth, Cities, and Immigration](#)"; "[Media Institution](#)"; "[Market Economy](#)"; and "[Social Mobility](#)". Also, watch at least two of the following four *School of Life* videos: "[Consumerism](#)"; "[Capitalism](#)"; "[Why We Look Down on Low Wage Earners](#)"; and "[What's Wrong With the Media](#)." In each of the four, identify at least two stylistic elements that are representative of the videos generally found on that channel. (Try not to have overlap in the elements you identify for a given channel, but there may be overlap across channels.) Finally, step back and consider YouTube Instructional Videos as a genre. First, note the similarities and differences of the videos found on these channels. Then, make use of the overarching questions on the previous page to write a brief assessment comparing this form of informational text to the others you worked with in the Summer Assignment.

### III. Looking Ahead: Documentary Films

In the semester's second unit we'll analyze documentary films. Below is a list of the titles you'll be able to choose from. While it's not a required component of the Summer Reading and Viewing assignment, it would be a good idea to spend a bit of your summer break watching as many of these as you're able to so that you're not scrambling to do so in early October, when the daily homework schedule picks up. You'll find many on streaming services, but if you're interested in one and can't access it, email me and I'll set you up with a copy.

#### The List:

*Anvil—The Story of Anvil* (2008)  
*Cartel Land* (2015)  
*Catfish* (2010)  
*Chicago 10* (2007)  
*Crip Camp* 2020)  
*Dark Days* (2000)  
*Detropia* (2012)  
*The Dog* (2013)  
*God Grew Tired of Us* (2006)  
*Grey Gardens* (1975)  
*Jesus Camp* (2006)

*Manufactured Landscapes* (2006)  
*Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004)  
*Murderball* (2005)  
*Paris is Burning* (1990)  
*The Queen of Versailles* (2012)  
*Salesman* (1968)  
*Spellbound* (2002)  
*Trekkies* (1997)  
*The Weather Underground* (2002)  
*When We Were Kings* (1996)  
*Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018)

A wee bit of research will help you narrow the list to the films you think you'll be most interested in. The best way to do this is to read the film *summaries* available at [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), [allmovie.com](http://allmovie.com), and, especially, [Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org). To get a sense of the visual style of a given film, watch *trailers*, many of which are available on YouTube.

#### Some tips:

- After watching a film, it would be wise to jot down your thoughts about it, especially with regards to the way the subject has been presented. Pay special attention to the way viewers have been invited to understand the people and places that populate the film. In regards to the former, think in terms of indirect characterization – what a character's actions, appearance, speech, and others' reactions reveal about him or her.
- Documentary films are very often a form of argument. Pay attention to the different ways viewers could understand the film's subject matter and which reading seems to be favored.
- Regardless of whether or not ambiguities remain at the end of the film, documentaries are very consciously constructed. Look out for the ways a film creates points of tension within scenes and how different portions of the film relate to each other. Pay attention, too, to cinematic elements—the McCloud piece will be valuable in this regard.

Don't feel as if you need to watch all of the films on our list, but try to get to at least a few. While this work is optional, the more you watch now, the easier time you'll have choosing and working with a topic mid-semester.

Questions? Email [paul.cierpial@berkleyschools.org](mailto:paul.cierpial@berkleyschools.org).

***This marks the start of an adventure! Enjoy this first leg of the journey!***