

Week 2

The Book as Technology

"Language is humanity's most spectacular open-source project, and the internet is making our language change faster and in more interesting ways than ever before." -- Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: New Rules of Language*

This quote, which I just read on Amazon while I was looking for a book, is a nice way of describing the key idea of this course--the connection between language and technology. By describing language as "humanity's most spectacular open-source project," Gretchen McCulloch makes the connection between language and the internet, which we will explore in Unit 2.

Open-source, as you may know, is a term that usually describes computer software. Open-source projects are created as large-scale collaborative projects, usually developed by people who volunteer their time and expertise to create something to be shared with the world for free. WordPress, the popular blogging and online publishing platform, is a great example of an open-source project. Today, one-third of all websites on the internet run on WordPress software.

We can think of the book itself as an open-source platform. While some of the specific tools and technologies for making books have been developed as proprietary inventions, in an attempt to create commercial businesses and make money, the book itself is an open-source platform that nobody owns. You don't need proprietary software to read a book; you just need access to the text and an ability to read. For centuries before the Internet, libraries served as the great public repositories of the world's knowledge and information. The original search engine was the card catalog.

Why is it useful or important to think of the book as a technology? That is, after all, the title of this course—what changes when we apply the lens of technology to our study of the book?

Consider how books are usually studied in college courses in rhetoric or literature. In most cases, we read them for the words on the page. Our goal is to understand them primarily as texts and to focus our energy on interpreting what they might mean as literary or

informational works. We don't really think that much about the book itself as an object—we dive into the words on the page.

When we say we are going to look at books as a technology, we are shifting our focus rather dramatically. Instead of studying the words on the page, we look at things like how the book was made, how and where it circulated, who read it and why and when.

Here, for example, is one line of thinking we might follow when we take the book as technology viewpoint. Once movable type and the printing press were established in the second half of the fifteenth century (1450-1500), which books got printed and circulated first, and why? Who decided what books to print and where to sell them to readers? Where were the first bookstores opened? Who shopped there? What did they buy? Who was reading the books that rolled off Gutenberg presses in that first century or two of printed books?

These questions take us in a very different direction than the traditional textual or literary analysis. They put more emphasis on readers and the social and historical context than on a close reading of the text on the page. We will find, I think, that we learn some very interesting things when we take this perspective and study the history of the book as a cultural artifact and a technology. After all, we are all training to be professional and technical writers—books and writing are the tools of our trade. Shouldn't we know something about how they work?

Starting with the idea that the book is a technology, then, how is the course organized? Where are we going?

Unit 1 focuses on the long history of the printed book. We will define this as the period from 1450 to 1980. The printed book develops alongside many of the other major innovations that made the modern world: science, medicine, and, later, electricity, the telegraph, and other modern telecommunication systems.

Since I started teaching this course in 2014, there has been an explosion of books and courses about the history of the book—so this course is actually part of a trend. Why do you think people are suddenly interested in studying the history of books and book making?

Let's start by putting Unit 1 in context by looking at the outline of the course as a whole. Here in Unit 1, our focus is on the technologies of printing and book making. We are looking at the making of what is often called print culture. Print culture is a shorthand way of describing the reading and writing practices that develop around the printed book. Print culture also includes things like how books are stored and archived in libraries; how books are used to support learning in schools and universities; and how people make use of them in personal and professional life.

Unit 2 focuses on the period from about 1980 to about 2010, to look at the Internet and the web and the rise of new digital forms of books. After 500+ years of gradual evolution, the book is suddenly reinvented almost overnight. Hypertext, the language of the internet, makes it easy to link from one text to another in a network or web of references. Print culture is suddenly not the only game in town, and we see people like Nicholas Carr worrying about how this new skimming-and-scanning mode of reading might be affecting our ability to focus and concentrate deeply. Your task in Unit 2 will be to explore some of these changes in reading, literacy, and learning and to present some of your findings in a web-based Case Study project.

Finally, Unit 3 looks at the present and future of the book, with an emphasis on new modes of mobile and digital writing. As writers and technical communicators, we need to think about how the medium of our work is changing. Is writing for the web the same as writing for the page? How do we design and organize texts for readers who will access our content on mobile phones? How can writers use new mediums and modalities to build their own audiences and platforms? How can digital and mobile platforms support open-access scholarship? As in Unit 2, you will choose a particular example and develop a case study around it that you can share in the form of a website, slide deck, video, or other format.

You'll notice that for each project, we will be using the tools and technologies parallel to the time period we are studying. For unit 1, we will use the scholarly essay, one of the foundational genres of print culture. For unit 2, we will use the tools of the web to study the web; and in unit 3, we will use mobile and other digital tools. So we are going to immerse ourselves in these technologies of literacy as we study them—you get both an academic view and an experiential view of the different modes of literacy!

I also want to emphasize that we will be taking an inquiry-based approach. You will have a lot of options in terms of what you can research and write about, but for all three units, the

goal is to identify a key question or set of questions that you want to address. Inquiry is about learning by asking good questions. So we are going to spend some time practicing how to define and develop good research and inquiry questions together as part of the process of developing Project 1. As with all three major projects in the course, we will develop Project 1 through a series of steps, breaking down the process of inquiry and research into short, manageable tasks.

For now, I hope this video has given you a road map of where we are going in the course and what you can expect in the coming weeks.