

Expository Writing 20: Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?

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Robert McCall, *The Prologue and the Promise*, 1993. EPCOT Center, Orlando, Florida

Course Overview

Course Description

“Is it o.k. to be a luddite?” This is the question that writer Thomas Pynchon asks us in a 1984 essay of the same name. “And come to think of it, what is a Luddite, anyway?”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the word has at least two meanings:

1. A member of an organized band of English mechanics and their friends, who (1811–16) set themselves to destroy manufacturing machinery in the midlands and north of England.
2. One who opposes the introduction of new technology, esp. into a place of work.

As the second definition suggests but doesn’t outright say, “luddite” is typically an *uncomplimentary* term for someone who is suspicious of technology and, by extension, of progress. This course will ask us to really consider the question Pynchon poses: is it okay to resist (or outright reject) technology? And what would it mean for us to do so?

We will approach these questions (and many more) from the perspective of cultural analysis, looking at how literature, film, and visual media reflect humanity’s ongoing relationship with—and struggles against—technology. We will read and write about world-altering tools and inventions that are difficult to ignore, but we will also explore the quotidian, the utopian, the obsolete, and the downright absurd, all the while looking for ways to understand technology through the stories we tell about it.

Course Objectives

Above all, this course is intended to develop your skills, confidence, and passion as a writer and communicator. Through each of the course units, we will look at and use academic, non-fictional, and creative writing both rigorously and critically. We will pay close attention to the arguments and styles encountered in our readings and use them as positive and (in some cases) negative examples for our own work. Our discussion in class will bolster our understanding of what it means to delineate and defend a debatable claim within the humanities, and we will complement these broader aims with attention to essay organization and writing style. With the help of brief writing assignments, in-class presentations and workshops, and one-on-one instructor conferences, this course will cultivate your creativity and empower you as a persuasive, engaging, and lucid writer and speaker.

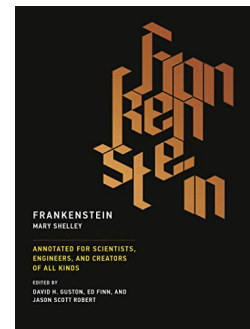
Your time in and outside of class will be centered on analysis and research, two central kinds of writing you will do in your time at Harvard (and beyond). However, these are not only modes of academic expression, they are also modes of thinking. You should leave this class with new and useful methods of reading and thinking about literature, film, theory, advertising, and the objects around you. In addition to two traditional units and essays, students will also transform their research papers into podcasts for diverse, wide-ranging listeners, exploring how different stories and audiences can spring from the same data.

Central Texts

A digital version of our longest reading, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is [available through HOLLIS](#). You can also find physical copies on Amazon or local bookstores, just be sure to get the following edition:

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, The MIT Press, 2017.

All other viewings and readings will be available on Canvas.



Unit Descriptions & Major Assignments

Unit 1 will approach questions and problems of technology through the analysis of fiction and film. It will focus on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the enduring questions about technology, invention, and responsibility it explores. We will also read Thomas Pynchon's essay "Is It O.K. To Be A Luddite?" and explore key questions underpinning an age-old tension between the "two cultures": (techno)science and the humanities. Throughout the course we will question this divide, reading thinkers and writers from a range of disciplines and backgrounds who attempt to reconcile this rift. We will analyze visual media like painting, photography, short fiction, and film to help us articulate the tensions—if, indeed, they exist—between art and science, technology and humanity.

Paper 1: Close Reading/Analysis

For Paper 1, you will closely read and engage with a single cultural artifact, developing an argument not only about what it says but also about how it says it. This essay will build a foundation for the rest of the course, and it will also give you the opportunity to perform a kind of scientific dissection. Just as you might dissect a frog in a biology class, for Expos 20 you will dissect writing and images.

In **Unit 2**, we will organize our reading and thinking around technological and cultural artifacts, setting the stage for your own self-selected research. The unit will be built around student research and the interests and questions you bring to the class. We will put to use the skills and ways of thinking developed in Unit 1 to combine close analysis of individual artworks with research into a specific topic or technology. For this essay, you will select a primary “text”—although this could be visual media, fiction, poetry, or something further afield—and conduct independent, interdisciplinary research about the cultural artifact you have chosen.

Paper 2: Multi-Source Research

For Paper 2, you will have a great deal of freedom to select a topic that excites, troubles, or challenges you. You will select a technology or idea—explored or expressed in a text, image, film, or other object—related to the course’s themes, conduct research on your chosen topic, and develop an argument based on what you find.

The **Capstone Unit** is focused on communicating beyond the university and the college classroom. It will be an opportunity to tell different stories and kinds of stories about the technology you’ve researched in Unit 2. We will listen and read about technologies in podcasts and other popular media (e.g. *Radiolab*, *Analog(ue)*, *Reply All*, *Wired*). In particular, *99% Invisible* (both podcast and website) will serve as our central model for telling stories about technology and how it interacts with our lives and our histories. As part of our reading/listening, you will write a response paper analyzing a podcast episode with attention to style, sound, and format.

Capstone Assignment: Podcast

The capstone assignment is a 5-7 minute podcast episode and a process reflection (2-3 pages) that describes the rhetorical, stylistic, and sound engineering choices you have made.

